Twilight Zone Reflections
Twilight Zone Reflections

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGINATION

Saul Traiger
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Philosophy is the field of study that seeks to understand our most central ideas, such as our ideas of identity, personhood, the mind, the nature of time, justice, as such ideas are used in everyday life. It also seeks to understand these ideas in circumstances that have not occurred in the course of anyone’s life, but that could occur. Philosophers use their imaginations to attempt to describe what might be the case, to explore how our ideas would take shape, “what we would say,” in those imagined circumstances. So philosophers are on the lookout for descriptions of possible worlds that challenge our understanding and put our ideas under stress. Those possible worlds, which include the actual world, can come to us from anywhere—from history; from the sciences, physical, social, and medical; from literature and film; and from television. Wherever we must try to figure out what we should say to make sense of what is the case, what we believe is the case, or what we are imagining, we are stress-testing our ideas. By this I mean that we are forcing ourselves to choose from among alternative ways we could describe what is taking place or what has taken place. Philosophy is the field that attempts to provide arguments for clarifying, organizing, and applying our ideas, and thereby it attempts to discover that one way of doing this is better than the alternatives.

When television was still young and shows were filmed and broadcast in black and white, Rod Serling, a World War II veteran and graduate of Antioch College, created The Twilight Zone, a series of half-hour episodes about the imagination. The term “The Twilight Zone” was his name for the imagination. In the lead-in to every episode, Serling describes it as a “fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as
vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow—between science and superstition. And it lies between the pit of man’s fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call “The Twilight Zone.” Each episode introduces the viewer to some area or aspect of the imagination. It is a possible destination, a place one can visit by applying our imaginations. In it, events take place, though it is often difficult for the viewer to describe what is happening. Typically, the characters we meet do not know that they are there, in the Twilight Zone, in some place other than what we think of as the actual world, and this leads to puzzlement, fear, anguish, and sometimes joy and elation, which we may share with them. In each episode, we, together with the characters in the story, must figure out how to make sense of what is taking place, in the thoughts and the actions and the circumstances. Our familiar ideas about the mind, about justice, about the nature and identity of persons can’t be applied in any straightforward way, because the circumstances described are not familiar circumstances. Understanding what is happening in an episode of The Twilight Zone requires us to expand or modify our ideas or come up with new ones that apply to the new and strange circumstances in which we find ourselves. When we do so, we become philosophers.

For the reader with little prior background in philosophy, this book can serve as an introduction to the field. One way to begin doing philosophy is to watch or re-watch episodes that I have tagged as related to a philosophical topic of interest to the reader. For example, someone interested in questions about the nature of the mind and whether machines can think could begin with “I Sing the Body Electric” or “The Lateness of the Hour.” Both episodes introduce us to possible worlds in which very lifelike robots appear to be just as intelligent as or more intelligent than humans. Does our idea of the mind or our idea of personhood extend to these beings? The essays on these episodes introduce these and other questions and provide suggestions for further reading. Episodes and topics can be explored along such threads or in any other way that is sparked by reflection on these questions. Episodes can be viewed and then read about, or read about and then watched. The goals are to reflect on the questions raised by visiting the Twilight Zone and to deepen the understanding of the ideas that have been put under stress by the visit.

Seasoned philosophers can use this book as a reference work, as a catalogue of possible worlds or thought experiments keyed to philosophical concepts, arguments, disputes, and texts. While the philosophical
connections I’ve made to the episodes reflect my interests and philosophical training, I have attempted to reach out to traditions, texts, and debates as broadly as possible. Still, there are philosophical traditions and texts that are not included here, particularly those broadly labeled as non-Western. It is my hope that others with different training and expertise will contribute to the philosophical literature in the effort to help others explore their philosophical imaginations through the thought experiments from *The Twilight Zone*.

Many of the essays assembled here were initially field-tested in the introductory courses in philosophy that I taught at Occidental College. I am indebted to the students who reflected on what they watched and read and then contributed to discussions in class and online that deepened our understanding. Among those students, one first-year student, Nancy Zhou, took the initiative to apply for and receive funding for summer research to work with me on this project. Her enthusiasm, suggestions, and encouragement for this project helped bring it to fruition. Finally, my friend and colleague Kory Schaff read an earlier version of this material and made invaluable suggestions.

At one time I thought that there were a small number of *Twilight Zone* episodes of philosophical interest, and I selected those for use in my courses. Later I decided to attempt a comprehensive survey, with the goal of writing about episodes I found philosophically compelling. I wondered: Could it be that many, even all episodes pack a philosophical punch? I decided to re-watch them all and to write about every episode that illustrated some philosophical theme. As I watched and re-watched and began to write, I sometimes thought: “This episode is just fluff. There’s nothing of philosophical interest here.” But then I thought further about the episode, and it turned out that for all 156 episodes, I discovered something of genuine philosophical interest. Whether or not I am right about this I leave to the reader.
Philosophy begins with questions. We could begin our introduction by just listing some of the questions which philosophers have typically asked, such as: “Why is there something, rather than nothing?” and “Is there a god?” and “Is the mind separate from the body?” and “What makes an action morally right or morally wrong?” But posed in this way, philosophical questions may be off-putting in their abstractness and distant from our ordinary concerns and circumstances. Philosophical questions may not arise from our everyday routine experiences. They often do arise when we are in, or imagine that we are in, circumstances different from the ordinary. This is where *The Twilight Zone* comes in.

Imagine that it is morning, and you are walking down a dusty road. You enter a small town, with a town square; the buildings house commercial and retail businesses with residential apartments on the second story. It sounds like quite an ordinary event, right? However, imagine that everything seems normal, except that you don’t see any people! All the physical objects are in their ordinary places, everything except the things we identify as people. You ask yourself the question that is the title of the very first episode of *The Twilight Zone*: “Where is everybody?” Imagine further that as you explore the town, you can’t answer this question. You simply can’t find anyone, even though there is evidence that people do exist. You find hot coffee on the stove in the local cafe, newly trimmed grass in the park, and fresh produce for sale in the market. How would you make sense of your experience?

You might begin to doubt that what you are seeing is real. In ordinary circumstances, you would not doubt that what you see—a small town—is just that. But that will not do. Perhaps you are dreaming, or you are
hooked up to a very real-seeming virtual reality interface. To escape these questions and resolve your doubt, you engage in philosophy. You must ask whether you know anything, and how you know it. How can you distinguish the way things appear from the way things are? You appear to be in a town by yourself. Is this something that you know or just that you believe? How do we distinguish belief from knowledge, not just in this imagined case but in general? If you can doubt the evidence of your senses in the imagined circumstances, you can also doubt the evidence of your senses in any circumstances, including the ones you are in right now.

Questions about belief and knowledge are central to a branch of philosophy called epistemology, and it is often described as the endeavor to answer the skeptic, the person who doubts that anyone knows anything. Centuries before The Twilight Zone and our imagined scenario, Enlightenment philosopher and scientist René Descartes used this method of doubt to attempt to determine what can be known. In addition to doubting the deliverances of our senses, Descartes also wondered whether we could distinguish dreams from waking experience and posited the possibility of deception from an all-powerful evil genius calling into question our everyday, scientific, and even mathematical knowledge.

Many Twilight Zone episodes help us explore the questions of epistemology. “Shadow Play” presents us with an unfortunate individual who believes that his tragic situation is in fact a dream that he is having repeatedly. He tries to argue that he is dreaming, which means that what he and others are experiencing is not real. How can we distinguish dreaming from waking experience?

In the ordinary, mundane world, we are not perplexed by these skeptical doubts. We may be tempted to dismiss them as the worries of those who suffer from forms of mental illness, where problems distinguishing reality from illusion are symptomatic. At least one major twentieth-century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, criticized philosophical problems, such as the problem of knowledge, as the product of a variety of mental illness suffered by philosophers. The solution of such problems appears when we are cured of asking those questions. But this dismissal depends on our having a grasp of how to distinguish mental illness from mental health in the first place, and this too belongs to the philosophical territory explored in The Twilight Zone. You can begin to see how philosophical questions can be self-propagating. It’s a philosophical question whether the question “Do we know anything?” is a legitimate philosophical question!
The Twilight Zone includes episodes that explore the relationship between philosophical questions about knowledge and mental illness. In “Twenty Two,” a patient in a psychiatric unit of a hospital is frightened by experiences she believes are real, experiences her doctor explains away as dreams and delusions. In “A World of Difference,” an actor is confused about what is real and what is imagined. He believes with certainty that he is the character he is playing in a film. His co-workers believe otherwise, but his certainty is ironclad. Many questions about knowledge and questions about mental illness hinge on the distinction between first-person and third-person access to information. The certainty of our beliefs is often a felt certainty, which we experience as the individual having that feeling of certainty. We sometimes reject the beliefs of others when those beliefs conflict with our self-certainty. Many episodes explore this tension in belief formation and belief maintenance (see “Five Characters in Search of an Exit,” and “The Encounter”).

Imagine again that you are entering that vacant town, and you attempt to take an inventory of what you know. As confused as you are, you surely know who you are, don’t you? But let’s imagine that you can’t recall anything about yourself, including your name, occupation, or residence. Surely, even in this state, you are aware that you are thinking and experiencing, even if you can’t be sure what to conclude about the thoughts and experiences you are having. Does that self-awareness amount to knowledge? What do you know? Descartes famously answered this question with “Cogito, ergo sum”—I think, therefore I exist. He granted that this might not be much, but it represented a starting point. It was something he knew with certainty, and it could be distinguished from the beliefs that he could still doubt. He could still doubt that there are physical things, including his body. He concluded that he knew that he existed as a thinking thing, and he did not rule out that he was more than a thinking thing.

Each of us may be certain that we exist as thinking things, but what is thinking, and what is the mind? When we are aware of ourselves thinking, are we aware of our brain? Even if our brain is responsible for thinking, one might not know one has a brain while one is thinking! It doesn’t seem that what we are aware of is our brain. We also believe that minds other than our own mind exist. What are our grounds for that belief? We don’t access the thinking of others the way we access our own. We’ve just introduced two problems in the area of philosophy known as metaphysics, which includes the mind/body problem and the problem of other minds. The first problem is to account for how minds are related to bodies. Is the
mind simply the brain, or is it something over and above the brain and physical body? The second is the question of whether any minds exist outside of our own mind, the mind to which we appear to have direct, introspective access. If you chat with a friend, a neighbor, or a family member, you believe that your conversation partner has a mind. What if your conversation partner is a computer? Imagine that you chat with a chatbot, and the chatbot holds a conversation as robust and nuanced as the ones you have with human partners. Does this mean that your computer has a mind?

*The Twilight Zone* aired when computers with a fraction of the computing power of today’s devices occupied whole floors of office space, where data was entered by making holes in cards and feeding them to the machine. Yet there are many *Twilight Zone* episodes in which artificially intelligent machines are present and humans are forced to come to grips with the questions in the philosophy of mind we’ve just raised. These questions are made more riveting than usual because they occur in the circumstances and conditions of ordinary life, where individuals confront loneliness (“The Lonely,” “The Lateness of the Hour”), the need for guidance and education (“I Sing the Body Electric,” “The Old Man in the Cave”), competition and compassion (“Steel,” “The Mighty Casey”), and our mortality (“In His Image,” “Uncle Simon”). Reflecting on whether machines can think in the rich context of possible human/machine experience helps us think through the ways in which conceptual change surrounding our notions of mind and thinking could bring about profound changes in our interactions with each other.

We are creatures who think and feel, but perhaps most fundamentally, we possess the capacity to decide and to carry out actions based on our decisions. The faculty that makes it possible for us to decide is called “the will.” The will is at work in every *Twilight Zone* episode, of course, but it figures most prominently where the very nature of the will is in question. In “Mr. Denton on Doomsday,” Al Denton is a former gunslinger in the Old West, but he is now the town drunk. Did he decide to become the sorry character we’re introduced to, or is his addiction the result of causes? Can he escape from his circumstances by the power of his will? Does he have free will, or are his actions determined by a confluence of causes? Do we have free will? What is the will, exactly, and how does it work? When, if ever, is it free, and when is it overwhelmed by external causes? These are basic philosophical questions and debates, crystallized in episodes like “A Passage for Trumpet”
and “The Last Flight,” where individuals reflect on the choices they have made and are put in a position to consider whether they actually made them or whether their actions resulted from their circumstances.

Intertwined with questions about the will are questions about assessing the choices we make when we exercise it. Of course, we can always ask whether our choices are good, in the sense of being prudent or smart or conducive to our own individual happiness or well-being. We can also ask whether our choices are those of which a judicious impartial spectator would approve. This is the subject of moral and political philosophy. Often The Twilight Zone compels us, as spectators, to judge the rightness or wrongness of the behavior observed. In “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” we watch as a power failure causes the residents of a cozy suburban neighborhood to descend into chaos and violence against each other. What we observe is not an ordinary power outage, however. There are other spectators, but they are not impartial. Now it becomes our task to assess the actions of both the residents of Maple Street and their observers. Doing so should help us sharpen our skills at assessing the rightness or wrongness of our own actions, adopting, to the extent that we can, the perspective of the judicious spectator of our choices and their consequences.

In addition to assessing our individual choices and actions, moral and political philosophy investigates the possibility of a shared “right” way of living collectively, which we call the just society. To philosophize about moral matters, we think up possible worlds that are different from the actual world and try to assess whether the imagined social organization is just or unjust and why. If we’ve chosen our possible worlds carefully, and we reason about them with care and precision, we can then apply our refined concept of justice to our policies, laws, and forms of government.

Imagine the possible world in which you’ve become disenchanted with life on earth, with continual war and strife between nations. With a group of like-minded others, you seek a better life on a distant planet; in this possible world, this is a live option, and you act on it. When you arrive on your new planet, how do you govern yourselves? Do you select a leader, or do you make decisions by consensus? How do you apportion responsibilities, and how do you reward and punish behavior? What is the likelihood that you will have escaped the problematic features of life on earth? These questions, familiar to philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and, more recently, John Rawls, are raised in “On Thursday We Leave for Home,” among others.
We’ve briefly introduced the major areas of philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology, and moral and political philosophy. (Metaphysics and epistemology are usually grouped together and are referred to as “M & E” for short. Similarly, the two topics of moral and political philosophy are referred to as “M & P.”) Some philosophical issues don’t fall comfortably into just one of these slots because they deal with matters that cut across them. One of them concerns death and the meaning of life. When we reflect on the sort of beings we are, it is uncontroversial that we are living things, organisms, which, however complex and adaptive, have individual lifespans that are finite. We are members of a species, and the species will endure much longer than its individual members but will also eventually become extinct. Confronting the fact that each of us will die naturally raises serious questions. Are we just living things, or are we more? Do we have souls that are housed in our bodies but are something more than those bodies? Is it possible to continue as a mind, a thinking thing, a soul, either without a body or in some other form in a digital computer or in some artificially synthesized replacement body? Does the living of a life lose its value when it comes to a natural end, or does its value consist in something—one’s mind, one’s soul, or, perhaps, one’s works, continuing beyond death? These questions, raised in *Twilight Zone* episodes like “A Short Drink from a Certain Fountain” and “Ninety Years Without Slumbering,” involve moral issues, issues about what is of value and how we ought to live that are inextricably linked with metaphysical issues about the nature and duration of the mind or person and epistemological questions about what we can know about life after death.

We noted above that philosophical questions can easily arise about philosophy itself. Such so-called meta-philosophical concerns come up when we think about the methods that philosophers employ. We’ve suggested that philosophical questions arise when we think about possible worlds, ways that the world could be—worlds where there are robots that appear to be intelligent (“Uncle Simon”), worlds in which we are visited by apparently friendly beings from other planets (“To Serve Man”), and worlds where we can time-travel to the past or the future (“Once Upon a Time”). We may well ask: Are there limits to these possible worlds or is anything possible? Is anything we imagine really possible? Can we imagine the impossible, or should we say that if we think we’re imagining something that’s impossible, that we’re really not imagining it at all? But how can we be wrong about what we’re imagining, and how can we think we’re imagining something and not imagine it?
These questions about the nature of possibility and the nature of imagination itself are found in several *Twilight Zone* episodes. Consider the actual person that you are, the person who had whatever you had for breakfast today, for example. There is a possible world in which you didn’t have breakfast this morning, and another in which you had breakfast, but ate something other than what you ate this morning. Those are different possible worlds, and the “you” in those worlds are possible, but not actual, versions of you. Today the collection of possible worlds is sometimes referred to as “the multiverse.” The episode “Mirror Image” asks us to imagine a world in which an individual, Millicent Barnes, who is waiting in a bus depot for the arrival of a bus is visited by an individual who is a possible version of Millicent Barnes. The visitor is a possible Millicent who seems to have crossed over from a possible world into the actual world. This appears to be the situation we observe in the bus depot. But are we observing something that is possible? How can there be two Millicent Barnes in the same bus depot at the same time? But how could it *not* be possible, if we are imagining it?

Such questions strike at the heart of philosophical inquiry. It may appear that we can imagine anything, but reflection on what is taking place in our imaginations is subject to our reflective scrutiny. Our considered judgments about what we imagine sometimes results in re-description. That shouldn’t be surprising, since the same thing can happen when we are observing actual events that take place in the world. Two sailboats on the horizon appear to be headed dangerously toward one another, but one passes safely in front of the other. What happened was not what, at the time, we thought we were seeing. In the case of the imagination, we don’t have the contrast between appearance and reality since we just have appearances. Yet we still have to figure out how to apply our concepts to them, to make sense of what we imagine. The benefit of reflection on possible worlds is a better handle on the concepts we use in the actual world.

Following our reflection on every episode of the original *Twilight Zone*, we close with a postscript that draws connections between our reflection on the possible worlds presented to us and pressing themes and issues in the actual world we live in today. Those include threats to our existence and well-being from nuclear weapons and climate change, challenges to working conditions and job security brought about by computers and robots, the ways in which commercial interests may influence our culture and values, and the role of social media in our attempts to develop and maintain just and thriving societies.
In this brief introduction to philosophy, we’ve used a very broad brush. We can engage in philosophical reflection about so many things, about aging, loneliness, diversity, the environment, beauty, education, miracles, marriage, religion, and responsibility, to name just a few that figure in *The Twilight Zone*. Each episode can serve as an entry point for your philosophical reflection about these issues and much more.
1.

"WHERE IS EVERYBODY?"

*Original air date: October 2, 1959*

Solipsism is the view that the thinking, perceiving individual is the only thing that exists, that the appearance of other persons and other physical things is just that—an appearance—an illusion constructed by the mind of the one thinking, conscious entity, oneself. The world, as it presents itself to most of us, does not suggest that solipsism is true. The world of physical objects and other people is salient and even intrusive. You may sometimes wish that your boss and your place of work do not exist when your alarm clock goes off in the morning and you have to get going, but you believe that they do, and you act accordingly.

The world as it appears to Mike Ferris is, or at least appears to be, a world of physical objects but a world absent other people. This creates special problems. First, many of the physical objects Mike seems to see are artifacts—hot coffee on the stove, a movie playing, buildings, stores, answering machines, and telephones. How could these things exist if there were no other people? Artifacts are the creations of people. Mike believes that he did not create these artifacts, so there must be other people who did. But where is everybody?

The second problem is that Mike doesn't know who he is, and that is related to the fact that one's own identity may have something to do with how one is viewed by others. Without anyone to talk to and without access to trusted memories, Mike has lost his sense of who he is. Does personhood require the existence of other persons or is it just knowledge
of one’s own personhood that requires other persons? To us, Mike appears to be a person—a thinking, reasoning creature, even as he is not sure that he is. Unfortunately, we can’t tell Mike that he is a person, because we’re not there, wherever “there” is.

The keys to Mike’s identity are revealed when he infers the kind of thing he is, when he realizes “I am Air Force!” In the kind of world he is experiencing, a world, after all, that is the product of his imagination, this is a start at figuring out who he is.

Mike’s nightmare world is revealed to be the collective hallucinations of the subject of a psychological experiment. Mike has been isolated in a room for weeks, fed and kept alive without any contact with others. He has a panic button, located below a small analog clock. When the isolation becomes unbearable, Mike presses the button as he strikes at the clock, breaking its glass cover. Thus, the reality is that Mike believed that he was alone when he was surrounded by others just a few feet away—a fact he was fully aware of when he entered the isolation chamber. But he came to believe that he was the last man on earth. We, in contrast, usually believe that we are surrounded by others. Could we—or you—be making the parallel mistake? Might you be the subject of a psychological study (perhaps being administered by a computer), one that induces in you the belief that you are surrounded by other people?

The episode introduces us to some of the central questions in epistemology and metaphysics. Epistemology is the sub-field of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge. Epistemologists study concepts such as knowledge, belief, and justification and attempt to understand how they are related. Some of the key epistemological questions in the episode concern what we know and how we know it. Is the world the way it appears to be, or might it be radically different? In fact, the world is radically different from the way it appears to Mike through most of the story, though his constructed world is based on the world he has experienced outside the box.

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with questions about existence and the connections among existing things. The issue of the nature of the self and the relationship between the individual and other persons is at the heart of this story. Is it possible for there to be just one person, or is it the case that persons only come in groups?

The method of philosophy is rational argument. Philosophers construct theories and systems, but those theories and systems are only worth our attention if the philosopher who advances the theory or
system can give us reasons for taking them seriously. An organized set of reasons for taking a position seriously is an argument. Most of The Twilight Zone episodes contain arguments. In most cases, however, the arguments are not stated explicitly. As you watch each episode and reflect on it, you should try to formulate a philosophical argument based on the story. In “Where Is Everybody,” for example, there is an implicit argument for solipsism: It is possible that the existence of other persons is the construction of one’s imagination. We can’t tell whether the other people and things we perceive are real or just the creations of our imagination; therefore, it is possible that other persons and other things are merely the products of our imagination, and the only thing that exists is one mind, namely one’s own. It’s up to us to examine arguments like this one, to determine whether they support their conclusions. When we do this, we’re doing philosophy.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: epistemology, solipsism, time
“ONE FOR THE ANGELS”

Original air date: October 9, 1959

Like “Where Is Everybody?” this episode stars the clock. When Lew Bookman receives a death sentence, or more properly a prosaic announcement that he will die at midnight, he becomes intensely aware of time. Here our hero is an elderly man who sells trinkets on the street—a pitchman, a neighborhood fixture adored by the children. But when death comes knocking, he's not ready, because he has never achieved the ultimate pitch—a pitch for the angels. He's also not ready because almost no one is. No matter how much we have lived, we love life, and we don't want to die. The mistake of the young is that they think that life is psychologically different for older people. In fact, we lock into a psychological age, often when we are young adults, and we typically feel ourselves to be that age throughout our lives. Just as few young persons are ready for death, so are few older folks.

Bookman's goal is to achieve something special during his life, and he must race against time, distracting Mr. Death until after midnight to achieve it. That act of distraction—the ultimate pitch—is also the crowning achievement. What is the special achievement? Why is it so important for Bookman to make the ultimate pitch? It's not self-serving. It is to save the life of another. He's an unlikely hero on the battlefield.

That death is not to be feared, that it is ordinary, that it is our shared destiny, is a theme in many Twilight Zone episodes, and the vehicle that conveys this idea is often the personification of death. In this episode, Mr. Death is a youthful, friendly, but apparently efficient professional man.
In “Nothing in the Dark,” it’s a compassionate young man played by a young Robert Redford.

The question of whether it is rational to fear death has been asked since ancient times. The Roman poet Lucretius, a member of the Epicurean School, argued that if death is the end of the person, and in death one does not have any experiences, then it is irrational to fear death. If death is nothing, then there is literally nothing to fear. In contrast, it is rational to fear trauma from an accident, since an accident may result in a state in which one experiences pain.

Lucretius’s argument is still widely discussed today, and philosophers have come up with interesting ways to challenge it. Fred Feldman distinguishes between things that are bad for you intrinsically, such as feelings of pain or discomfort, and things that are bad for you extrinsically, such as the loss of an opportunity that would have afforded you significant pleasure or happiness, had you been able to take it. We can say that it is bad or unfortunate for you that you weren’t able to take a vacation last summer, though it was not intrinsically bad. Feldman’s suggestion is that death can be bad for you in the same sense that it can be bad for you to miss a vacation. It is extrinsically bad. He concludes from this that it is rational to fear death when death is extrinsically bad.

Is death ever not extrinsically bad? Couldn’t one always lament the potential loss of opportunities to experience pleasure and happiness? To answer this, we have to note that what is extrinsically good or bad is relative to one’s current situation, and to what it is plausible for you to be able to expect for the future. If you are able to engage in activities that bring you happiness, then death is extrinsically bad for you, since it will bring about an end to those activities. If, however, you are in constant pain and unable to engage in any happy pursuit, then death may cease to be something to be feared, and it may instead become something you would welcome.

FURTHER READING


(Roriginally published around 55 B.C.)


Philosophical keywords: death, time
It’s difficult to watch the opening scene without feeling embarrassed and sad for Al Denton, the town drunk in the domain of gunslingers and cowboys in the Western United States of the nineteenth century. Serling’s description of Denton’s character captures the key issue: Denton would give an arm or a leg for a “second chance.” We’re placed in a network of causes and effects: a man without honor, without dignity, a pitiful, washed-out man subject to the ridicule of others. “Why, Al?” asks Miss Smith. Why does he drink when drinking is clearly killing him? He can’t answer, but it seems clear that there are causes. The determinist can very well cite this in support of their view. The more we learn about Al Denton, the more causes are uncovered, and ultimately, we know why Al Denton is a broken man who begs for drinks outside the town saloon.

Determinism is the view that every event has a cause. We might very well think that there are causal explanations of Denton’s past. A defender of free will, often referred to as a libertarian, will respond that Denton could have done otherwise. He could have left town or at least chosen other paths than wallowing in despair and booze. However, the more we learn about Al’s past, the more we can make sense of the idea that his alcoholic haze was caused by prior events as a famous gunslinger who was forced to face and eliminate ever younger adversaries. We can then speculate about what caused him to be a gunslinger and about the
causes of those causes. The defender of free will can respond that these are clearly causal \textit{influences} but not causal \textit{determinants} of Al’s current actions. Nevertheless, what precisely is the content of the claim that Al has free will? One alternative is that Al \textit{was} free at an earlier time but that now he’s trapped. The libertarian need not hold that all human \textit{actions} are free or even that all \textit{humans} are free. Addiction could be a cause of a \textit{loss} of free will. If it is something that we can lose, then free will is something we must be able to have.

What should we say about the night Fate steps in—Henry J. Fate? Is Mr. Fate a cause, or does Fate simply neutralize the causes, thereby creating conditions for a different outcome than the one that would be actualized if the “standard” causes were in place? Perhaps Fate is a stand-in for chance. What is chance, and how does it figure in human actions? Hume argued that we attribute outcomes to chance when we don’t understand what causes the outcome. Chances are really just hidden causes, the causes we don’t understand.

Causes and effects take place in time: Causes precede their effects. Time is again an important player in this episode. When Denton ingests the potion that gives him the ability to hit any target, he has just ten seconds before it wears off. His challenger has been given the same potion. At this crucial moment both gun fighters have the same causal powers. In this final gun battle, in which time always looms large, it appears that they both shoot at the same time and the simultaneous causes cancel out. If so, Henry J. Fate’s gift may be the temporary suspension of causes—and with it, Al Denton’s chance for redemption.

\textbf{FURTHER READING}


\textit{Philosophical keywords}: determinism, free will, time
“THE SIXTEEN-MILLIMETER SHRINE”

*Original air date: October 23, 1959*

“Picture of a woman, looking at a picture...”—Serling’s opening narration is about representation. The picture is a film—a sixteen-millimeter film being projected in the living room of Barbara Jean Trenton, a has-been Hollywood actress—a film in which she starred in almost thirty years earlier. What we’re looking at is a picture of someone looking at a picture, so that what is presented to us is a three-layered representation. This episode is about the nature of mental representation and the nature of time.

Like Al Denton in “Mr. Denton on Doomsday” and Lew Bookman in “One for the Angels,” Miss Trenton’s accomplishments are in the past. Unlike them, she’s fixated on that past and can’t deal with her place in the present. She drops back into it by way of its celluloid representation. A friend tries to bring her into the present, but she can’t accept the change in the world or in herself. She’s fixated on her youthful stardom. It’s not that she feels like a young person but that she demands that others see her as one. And that’s just not possible. Discussing “One for the Angels,” we described a common misconception of thinking that older people do not feel young. Though most older people do feel younger than their years, well-adjusted ones, unlike Miss Trenton, do not expect others to treat them as if they were young.

The special move in this episode is the merging of represented and representation or, put slightly differently, the two-way traffic from objects
in the world to objects represented on screen. Of course, that traffic really occurs. Objects in the world become representations in film through causal interactions with optical and audio recorders. Films, paintings, novels, and other representations causally interact with the minds of their viewers and indirectly bring about changes in the physical world. It’s the direct move from representation to object in this episode that grabs our attention.

The nature of representation is a hard philosophical problem. How does one thing represent another? Our thoughts can be about things, perhaps without being things themselves, some have thought. But films, photographs, paintings, records, CDs, and even mp3s and mp4s are things. If representations can be things, then there’s no metaphysical obstacle to free movement between representations and the objects they represent. Perhaps this is the “dimension of its own” possessed by wishes, which are a species of representations:

To the wishes that come true, to the strange, mystic strength of the human animal, who can take a wishful dream and give it a dimension of its own. —Rod Serling

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: death, representation, time
A forty-year-old executive on the fast track, Martin Sloan is impatient, tired, and unfulfilled. Stopping to get gas for his little sportscar, he finds himself just “walking distance” from Homewood, his childhood town. While the car is being serviced, we see Martin walk to Homewood through the mirror of a cigarette vending machine, through the looking glass.

The mile-and-a-half walk takes Martin to another place and another time. But this is not time travel through a time machine. It is time travel by way of memory and imagination or what is now referred to as “mental mind travel.” Serling represents the depth and thickness of Martin’s passionate memory of the smells, thoughts, and feelings of a childhood summer day in such a compelling way that we may find ourselves (mental) time-traveling to similar moments in our own childhoods.

Martin is drawn to his childhood home, and there he attempts to explain who he is to his parents as well as to his younger self. They are repulsed by the adult Martin, and their message is that he doesn’t belong in his past/their present. His father tells him that the adult Martin can’t stay, even though he seems to have achieved exactly that. “There’s no room,” Martin’s father tells him. Why? Martin and his father discuss the matter, and the answer is not that it is metaphysically impossible for the older Martin to exist simultaneously with his twenty-five-year-younger self but that it would be wrong to do so. Martin’s father’s advice
is firm: “There is no room for you here, no place.” It is the younger Martin Sloan’s summer. “Don’t make him share it.”

The metaphysics of time travel doesn’t seem to be the main concern, perhaps because what is being explored is memory and imagination, that we can dream of meeting and talking with younger versions of ourselves. Maybe we must also overlook that Martin returns from the past with a limp that he did not have before the visit to Homewood, a limp that results from an accident caused by the elder Martin’s attempt to talk to the younger Martin. Although we may not be able to time-travel to the past, we can (mental) time-travel to the past, and Martin’s example suggests that doing so is of enormous value in achieving self-knowledge and planning the future.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: memory, time travel
Walter Bedeker is a misogynist, a hypochondriac, and a self-centered fool. He's preoccupied by the inevitability of his death, even though he is clearly not ill. He laments: “Why does a man have to die? The world goes on for millions of years....Why does a man have to die almost the moment he's born?”

While Walter is bemoaning his mortality, someone named “Cad Wallader” appears—but says he’s already been there for “quite some time”—offering immortality in exchange for something “insignificant”—his soul. Wallader’s characterization of the soul is brilliantly deflationist and strategic. The deal is sealed, and Walter is granted immortality, though there is an “escape clause.” If he ever tires of living, Walter can “call upon” the devil, who promises to “furnish your demise.”

Immortality leads to a restructuring of Walter’s life. Instead of languishing in bed, Walter intentionally has life-threatening accidents, and he cleans up financially, securing lucrative insurance settlements after jumping in front of trains and buses.

As Bernard Williams argues in “Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” an immortal life will eventually become a meaningless life, and the possessor of immortality will eventually wish for death. Walter is bored—but not to death—by all this dangerous living. The argument is compelling. How long can the novelty of immortality last? For Walter,
boredom seems to arrive almost immediately. Is it inevitable for all of us? Would a virtuous person do better with the “gift” of immortality, or is it, as Serling speculates at the end of the episode, that we are all “condemned to die,” which is really “as it should be”?

Someone who is immortal is estranged from humanity. How could such an individual (or god) share concerns that for the rest of us are defined by the fact of our limited existence? Take certain limitations away, and the world simply doesn’t make sense. Walter isn’t just bored. He has no motivation, no reasons to act. There is almost nothing he desires, because nothing is at stake in any action he takes. Ultimately he has only one desire, the desire to bring his existence to a swift end.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: death, immortality, meaning of life, suicide
Loneliness—the cure is usually real interaction with other living and breathing human beings. Those others are not automobiles or other mechanical devices—such things cannot comfort someone who lacks the comfort of other persons. Corry is the convict of the future—banished to his own asteroid for fifty years for a murder he did not commit. His only companionship comes in the form of the visit of a supply crew four times a year, and only the captain of the crew is sympathetic to Corry’s condition.

On one of the quarterly supply missions, the captain, Alanbee, delivers a new machine. When asked by a crew member what’s in the box, he says, “I’m not quite sure, really. Maybe it’s just an illusion. Maybe it’s salvation. I don’t know.” That’s our hint as philosophers that there’s an issue out there. What is in the box? Is it just another machine for Corry to tinker with?

It is indeed a machine, a machine in the form of a woman named Alicia, and the manual says that the machine, the robot, is physiologically and psychologically just like a human being.” But is she? Is she even a “she”? We know that it is a robot, and in the end we see “her” innards—wires and other robot stuff. But externally and perhaps functionally—on the outside, at least—she is physiologically indistinguishable from a human being. One of the first things we see is that she can cry in response
to Corry’s unsympathetic treatment. That’s a start at making good on the manual’s claim to both her physiological and psychological indistinguishability from a human being.

In the landmark paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” Alan Turing argues that if a computer replaced a human being in a parlor game called “the imitation game” and played the game as well as a human would, we should attribute intelligence to the machine. This test for intelligence is now called the Turing Test (see “Steel”).

Alicia’s Turing Test is not the imitation game but rather her fully appropriate response to Corry’s mistreatment. He suddenly realizes that, whether it is a robot or not, he has hurt its—her—feelings, and he apologizes. This seems too quick in comparison to the tests for mentality proposed by Turing and others, but doesn’t Corry act just as we would act with another human being? Perhaps the quality—the reality of her response—was so striking that Corry could no longer deny that he was in the presence of a thinking, emoting other.

As Corry and Alicia interact, Alicia comes to share many of Corry’s beliefs and desires. Though he says that their relationship is bizarre, Corry declares his love for the machine: “I love Alicia—nothing else matters.” Alicia may be no ordinary companion, but Corry takes her to be one. Not only does he attribute beliefs and desires to her, he takes her to be a fully conscious entity. Corry believes that Alicia has beliefs, desires, and sensations. Does that make her a conscious and thinking thing, or is Corry confused?

Many people believe that machines, even computers, are incapable of intelligence because they are programmed. A popular view is that humans build computers and endow them with information. The computer can only use the information that has been put into it. It cannot form its own beliefs. Remember, however, that Corry interacts with Alicia over a significant period of time. If she did not have beliefs and other mental states, wouldn’t that become pretty obvious to Corry fairly quickly? Again, Alicia passes a much more stringent test than Turing’s.

When Corry is granted a pardon and is told that he can take only fifteen pounds of his stuff on the trip back to Earth, his inventory of his stuff doesn’t include Alicia. Clearly, she isn’t his “stuff”—she is another person with the right to board the ship. Leaving her behind would be murder. For Corry, there’s no way she can be left behind. She’s not a machine. “She’s a woman. She’s gentle and kind. She kept me alive.” A moment later, when Alicia’s non-woman innards are revealed after a flurry of Alanbee’s
bullets, Corry looks on in shock. Does he now believe that he has misapprehended Alicia for a woman, or is he in shock at her “death”?

“The Lonely” is a thought experiment. It presents a possible world in which an individual is a robot, yet appears to have beliefs, desires, hopes, fears as well as sensations and emotions. Were we to come across such a being, would we attribute actual beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears to such a being, and would we be correct in doing so? If not, why not? Do members of our species—or some living things—have a lock on consciousness and intentionality?

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: artificial intelligence, loneliness, robotics
“Make it quick and get back to your cage!” That’s the command Henry Bemis’s boss (also the bank’s president) barks out after berating him for reading on the job and, more generally, for his interest in poetry, fiction, and books generally, an interest Bemis tries unsuccessfully to share with his customers, his boss, and his wife. His wife sadistically hands him a book in which she has crossed out every word. Henry is condemned by his wife, and seemingly by all, as “a fool.”

As he enters the bank’s vault to escape his detractors and read in peace, Bemis carries a newspaper, and though we see a headline referring to the H-bomb, Bemis does not. Once inside the vault, we see the headline with the clear warning, but it is too late for everyone else on earth. Emerging from his safe haven, Henry realizes that he’s alive and that everyone else is dead. The environment is in tatters, but not unlivable, at least for a while. There’s food and a serviceable couch. He wonders if he can stand being alone. “Is this how it’s going to be?” he asks. Rooting around in the rubble, Henry finds a gun. “If it weren’t for the loneliness, if there were only something to do!” he cries. He raises the gun to his temple, but then sees that he is in front of the public library, with ready access to “books, books, all the books I want!” Bemis’s grounds for suicide have suddenly vanished. “There’s all the time I want. Time enough at last.”
Bemis has survived a culture that ridiculed his love of books and learning. That a world that condemns readers and intellectual discourse suffers a nuclear holocaust, leaving only its greatest reader unharmed in the bank vault, seems almost expected in this crass world of self-absorbed and uninformed people. Perhaps the trajectory of any such possible world is one where some global disaster is inevitable, caused by conflict or climate, our failure to secure peace, or our failure to collaborate to save the planet.

Although Henry Bemis survives, he survives alone, and his vulnerabilities become painfully apparent as his reading glasses fall from his face and shatter, just as he’s discovered the trove of books. As horrible as his contemporaries were to him, without other people, without the infrastructure required to manage his visual challenges, his ability to sustain his love of reading is threatened. Everyone else perishes in an instant. Henry Bemis’s demise is slower and more painful to witness.

Surviving an actual or possible nuclear catastrophe is broached in several *Twilight Zone* episodes, including “Third from the Sun,” “The Shelter,” and “One More Pallbearer,” all of which were prompted by the actual threat deriving from the Cold War in the decades after World War II. Distain for books and intellectual curiosity is highlighted in “The Obsolete Man” and “Number 12 Looks Just Like You.” It may be difficult to decide which possible world is worse, the world with nuclear war or the world without intellectual curiosity. Henry Bemis is in a possible world which has both.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: loneliness, time, war
In “Shadow Play,” Adam Grant dreams and can’t wake up. In this episode, Edward Hall is awake and is afraid to go to sleep, afraid because his dreams threaten his very existence. Though only thirty-five years old, Hall has a weak heart stressed by nightmares, nightmares that are not inert plays of the imagination but imaginings that, whether awake or asleep, are so scary that they are as if the horrible events he imagines were really happening. “The mind is everything,” Hall asserts.

Like “Shadow Play,” “Perchance to Dream” explores the issue of whether we can distinguish illusion from reality, dream from waking experience. While Hall acknowledges that his dreams are in fact different in character from his waking experiences, his problem is that his dreams and hallucinations causally affect his waking behavior. While we tend to think that our dreams are, at least to some extent, inert and controllable while our conscious experience involves choice and decision, in Hall’s case the tables are turned. As in “The Sixteen-Millimeter Shrine,” our mental representations, even in the form of dreams, can bring about changes in the physical world.

Some philosophers have offered an account of knowledge in terms of the causal relation between our beliefs and the world. On their view, called the causal theory of knowledge, knowledge is belief caused in the right way. You believe that grass is green, and that belief is due to, or caused by, your actual experience of green grass. Suppose you
believe that your horse, Iggie, will come in first in tomorrow’s race, and you believe this because the local tarot card reader told you so. If Iggie comes in first, however, you still don’t “know” that, because you didn’t acquire the belief by a reliable process. You are just lucky that the belief is true. Edward Hall has true beliefs in his dreams—even that he is dreaming and many of those beliefs are caused in the right way—by the advice of his doctor for example, when he cites his doctor’s advice in the dream. But do we want to claim that he has knowledge while he is dreaming? So, this episode may cast some doubt on the causal account of knowledge. On that account, many of the beliefs Edward has in his dream would count as knowledge. If you think that one can know while dreaming, then you might not find this to be a telling objection to a causal theory of knowledge.

The question of whether one can hold beliefs while dreaming is a significant philosophical question. Norman Malcolm argues that there is an important difference between dreaming that you believe that \( p \) and believing that \( p \) while dreaming, to borrow his terminology. Malcolm argues that when you dream and represent yourself as having beliefs, you are not actually having beliefs but only dreaming that you are. Malcolm concludes that you can’t be deceived while you are dreaming, because during sleep you don’t hold any beliefs at all, which means that it’s not possible to have beliefs that are wrong. Malcolm argues that this result reveals a fatal flaw in Descartes’ dream argument. That argument turns on the possibility of holding beliefs while dreaming (see “Shadow Play”).

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: dreaming, epistemology, skepticism
One might think that this episode is about retribution. A Nazi submarine captain is punished for sinking a civilian British ship, the *Queen of Glasgow*, which has been separated from its convoy. But there's more to it than that.

The punishment is that the captain, Karl Lanzer (played by a Palestinian-born Jew!), finds himself as a passenger on that very ship when it is attacked. He finds this baffling, not because it is logically impossible but because he appears not to know who he is and why he is where he is. The other passengers are puzzled too, both by his behavior and by his German accent and birthplace. (He seems to remember that he was born in Frankfurt and that he has not been in England very long.) The ship will be attacked, and as the moment of attack comes closer, Lanzer begins to grasp the inevitable tragic outcome.

The point is not that Lanzer is punished but that the form of his punishment is to occupy the place of those who suffer at his hand. As punishment or retribution, this has no effect. The deed is done. The ship is sunk. People suffer and die. And of course, it is impossible for Lanzer to be both a U-boat commander and a civilian passenger on a ship at the same time.

What is possible is for Lanzer, the commander, to imagine what it would have been like to be a passenger on the *Queen of Glasgow* and to imagine it repeatedly. Once the possibility of such imagining is introduced...
to him by a U-boat sailor who questions the attack, this is exactly what happens. In this exercise of the imagination, the act of attacking the ship is revealed to be morally wrong, even as an act of war. It is this shift of perspective, from aggressor to victim, that provides clarity about the moral status of the act.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: justice, personal identity, sympathy
This is a difficult story to describe and to assess. The difficulty of description may be central to the point being made. Three pilots test an experimental spacecraft but disappear from radar for a full twenty-four hours during the flight and crash on their return. All three survive with minor injuries, and the damaged plane is shrouded in a hanger. “But the shrouds that cover mysteries are not always made of a tarplin....”

The aircraft is drawn from real life. The Boeing X-20 Dyna-Soar was an experimental jet spacecraft, a predecessor of the Space Shuttle. The episode draws on esoteric Air Force experimental flights that competed with NASA’s space program. The experimental and uncertain nature of test flights with craft of this sort is a matter of fact, and it is an important element in the story. (In fact, the X-20 never flew, though prototypes of it were flown by Neil Armstrong and a few others.)

The actual X-20 was designed to hold only one person, but importantly here three pilot this craft, and three return. But on their return, it turns out that only two returned—and then only one—and then no one returned. And this fact about their actual non-existence is experienced through the eyes of the pilots themselves.

In this and other episodes, Serling explores the idea that space travel can radically change the metaphysical framework, altering it to such a degree that it’s not clear we can consistently describe the situation. In
ordinary circumstances, those who undertake actions, like flying an aircraft, undergo the consequences of such actions. Something happens to them, and even when we don’t know what happens to them, we know at least that we don’t know. But in this episode, these metaphysical constraints are violated. Three leave, and not only do none return, but the fact of the flight itself is erased from the collective memory of mankind. At the same time, in some sense the three did return, only to realize that they “don’t belong.”

We’ve had a half a century of space travel since this episode aired, and we have found that our ordinary metaphysics works just fine for it. Space travel, at our speeds and distances at least, doesn’t fundamentally change the nature of things. But maybe it will, and we just haven’t gone fast enough, or far enough.

In this episode, as in “Where Am I?” the telephone booth is a central character. In both, it is the instrument of desperate calls for metaphysical help (see “A Thing About Machines” and “Time Enough at Last”).

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: epistemology, ontology, space, time
“WHAT YOU NEED”

Original air date: December 25, 1959

This is a study in what philosophers call moral psychology. What does someone need? It depends, of course, on what one wants, and the relevant facts matter too. If I want to buy groceries, I need a mode of transportation and a store that stocks groceries. Like “Caesar and Me,” this is a case study of the down and out.

We can bump the question up a level and ask what does one—anyone—really need? That depends, of course, on what one wants and, more importantly, on what one should want. What one really needs are the things that make a good life possible. To know what we really need, we need knowledge of what constitutes a good life. “What You Need” addresses all of this.

Another kind, elderly, good and wise street peddler appears, though here what’s being offered are not trinkets that one probably does not need but things one really does need (see “One for the Angels”). The peddler sees the future and provides the means toward the actualization of that future. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that the peddler sees a possible future for an individual and provides the means to actualize that future state. The peddler is compassionate and wise, and so the possible future he helps actualize are futures that are typically good for the individuals in question.
Another way of characterizing the peddler’s special talent is to say that he has insight into how others should live. That insight is not simply a matter of understanding what will help others accomplish their goals; it is about what will help them live a good life. At the risk of oversimplifying matters, the peddler has insight into what is good or bad about the individuals he helps, and his purpose is to support the good and to hinder the bad. That requires the peddler to understand individuals in their relation to the other individuals who may benefit or be harmed by their actions. His work is helping others to lead a good life, where that is a life that supports the happiness of others as well as their own happiness. When he encounters someone whose actions would harm others, the form his help takes is to inhibit those actions.

The peddler seems not to be out for his own gain or glory. He is humble and clearly derives satisfaction from helping others. He doesn’t even want to be paid. But that doesn’t mean that he has no self-interest. What someone needs is relative to the needs of others, and the peddler is among those others. The peddler ultimately confronts the moral dilemma that arises from the conflict between his self-interest and that of Renard. What (for Mr. Renard) is “needed” is not what Mr. Renard thinks he wants or needs but what the peddler needs.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: egoism, justice, moral psychology, sympathy
“THE FOUR OF US ARE DYING”

Original air date: January 1, 1960

Serling is quite good at describing losers. In “What You Need” Mr. Fred Renard is described as “a sour man, a friendless man, a lonely man, a grasping, compulsive nervous man. This is a man who has lived thirty-six undistinguished, meaningless, pointless, failure-laden years....” In “The Four of Us Are Dying,” he begins the episode thus: “His name is Arch Hammer....This is a cheap man, a nickel and dime man, with a cheapness that goes past the suit and the shirt, a cheapness of mind, a cheapness of taste, a tawdry little shine on the seat of his conscience and a dark-roomed squint at a world whose sunlight has never gotten through to him.” Hammer is also thirty-six. But Serling’s interest in him rests on his special talent. He can take on the appearance of other persons. Maybe he can even become those other persons.

Is Hammer the same undistinguished person throughout the episode, or is he four people, Arch Hammer and the three persons whose appearance he borrows? What changes is simply his outward appearance, and if we judge the identity of others by that appearance, then he is simply incorrectly judged to be someone other than himself by various others. If he really “becomes” each person whose appearance he takes on, what happens to the others? How would we decide? Is this a case of the fission of one person into two or just a case of mistaken identities? Tracking personhood through this episode is a deep and difficult philosophical
problem. It is the philosophical problem of personal identity: What makes someone the same person at two different times?

Hammer achieves the changes in appearance by concentration, and he selects his appearance to fit his circumstances. He takes on the lives of those who are more successful than he is, and he can jump into their lives when they are not around, filling in or extending the identities of others. This gets him romance, but it also gets him into hot water, when the person he takes on has liabilities he doesn’t know about. Taking on someone else’s identity is a risky business, as Hammer quickly finds out. Does Hammer really become the person whose appearance he takes on, or is he just misidentified by others while still being Hammer?

We speak of “identity theft” when someone’s credentials, such as their driver’s license and credit cards, are stolen and used by the thief. The person hasn’t been stolen, only their credentials. It’s a financial but perhaps not a metaphysical problem. It appears that Hammer is engaged in a super-charged version of the crime of identity theft.

Hammer’s power of concentration fails him just when he needs it most, to escape the person he has inhabited for another. Perhaps this hints at a resolution to the question of the origin of personal identity. Is personhood founded in the continuity of our consciousness or in the external identification of us by others? Serling’s answer appears to be the latter. The power of other-identification trumps the first-person perspective. You are who other people take you to be.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: personal identity
This is one of several episodes about the terror of nuclear war, and the second in the first fourteen episodes. In contrast to “Time Enough at Last,” where Henry Bemis is oblivious to the coming peril, this episode is about middle-class suburban folk who must confront the fact that the nuclear option is going to be exercised tomorrow! These same folks happen to be defense workers, which explains their access to the terrible news in advance of the general population. They also have special plans for an escape, which include a spaceship to take them away from the impending doom.

The kicker here is that their destination is Earth. So, their starting point is not our earth but some far-off planet just like ours, with suburban neighborhoods, family games of bridge, living rooms, stairways, and the threat of nuclear war. Their hope for survival will take them to a place that contains the conditions for the same kind of disaster to strike. Maybe on Earth they will have more time, but that may be of little comfort when they arrive to the same initial conditions that brought them to flee their world.

Sympathy is central to fiction, and in this case our sympathy is with the people we take to be earthlings like us. Our horror is the horror of having to tell one’s child that the world as they know it is about to end, that the likelihood of surviving the next couple of days is almost nil, that there’s no need to clear the dishes and straighten up the house. Victims
of nuclear disasters like Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and Fukushima have had such experiences, and the fact that they didn’t have to climb into a flying saucer does not diminish their anguish and suffering.

We may still ask: Should inhabitants of a world like ours seek refuge in our world? Our world, at the moment, may not face imminent obliteration, though it may face a slower but also deadly decline from climate change. Are the refugees just buying a little time, or will we use the time we have to eliminate or at least reduce the threat of global nuclear war?

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: death, fate of the earth, justice, sympathy, war
This is the lifeboat dilemma with a twist. The standard version is as follows: You're on a lifeboat with others. There's a limited supply of water, not enough for everyone to survive until rescued. Some are hurt, others not. How do you justly allocate essential resources under this extreme scarcity?

The twist is that the lifeboat is an uncharted asteroid on which the first manned spaceship from earth has crash-landed. Eight landed, three survived, but the asteroid is hot and dry, and there is limited water. The survivors include one very injured astronaut, the captain, and two other astronauts. Should they, as Colonel Donlin insists, “operate by the book,” or are these extraordinary circumstances—they aren't even on earth—that call for extraordinary measures. One crew member agrees with the colonel. The other, named “Corey,” thinks that what goes is anything that will enable them (him) to survive.

The first moral test is whether water should be given to the dying astronaut. Corey argues that it’s his water. It belongs to the survivors and is just wasted on the dying. The captain asks Corey to adopt the point of view of the dying astronaut. Corey is not convinced. On his view, the circumstances trump all abstract moral reasoning.

The surviving astronauts believe that they are on an asteroid, that they are far from earth; Corey, at any rate, believes that the circumstances
are such game-changers that he is under no obligation to care about the welfare of his compatriots. Even from a purely self-interested standpoint, this is a questionable move. Corey may be more likely to survive by remaining part of a team of individuals who look out for each other.

The twist to the story is that this first manned space vehicle did not land on an asteroid at all but in Death Valley, ninety-five miles from Reno, Nevada. When Corey discovers that he’s made a bad inductive inference, a faulty generalization from past experience, we see the moral weight fall, as he begins to comprehend the nature and scope of his wrongdoing.

Does location matter to morality? Do the moral rules bend with a change of place? This episode presents an argument for the invariance of moral rules across space. New locations may present new challenges, but so do familiar locations, as we learn at the end here. Maybe the truly moral point of view is what Nagel calls “the view from nowhere.”

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: induction, justice
Ostensibly, this is about two persons: Nan Adams, on a road trip to Los Angeles from the East Coast, and a hitchhiker looking for a ride. The problem for Nan is that the hitchhiker keeps reappearing throughout her journey. He’s always ahead of her, and always in need of a ride. Her drive becomes torturous. At every bend in the road, at every glance out the window or in the mirror, she anticipates the appearance of this man she finds “drab” and “a little mousy” thumbing for a lift.

What is Nan afraid of? Is she afraid of the man, the hitchhiker? Is hitchhiking something she condemns? Is it wrong to give a lift to a stranger? Is it dangerous? We don’t know. Nan is gripped by the oddness of the recurrent hitchhiker. She describes her fear, a “fear just about as vague as its object. Maybe it isn’t a fear—just a sense of disquiet. A feeling that things are just a little wrong. It’s vague because that’s what that hitchhiker is. He’s vague.”

Philosophers have investigated vagueness. How can an object, such as a hitchhiker, have the property of vagueness? If the hitchhiker is a determinate thing, then it would seem that all his properties, such as his height, weight, eye color, and anything else we could enumerate, are determinate. It’s also not clear how vagueness could be a property. What is it, exactly? Perhaps vagueness is not a property of the hitchhiker but a feature of Nan, namely her inability to understand the hitchhiker.
Things are more than a little wrong. Things are very wrong, but Nan doesn’t know that, and neither do we. As the episode opens, Nan is getting her tire changed, following a high-speed blowout. She died in the accident. The oddness of her experience, her road trip, are clues to her real condition. The vagueness of her fear diminishes and crystallizes into an acute fear of the very condition she unknowingly occupies.

Were we to experience our own death, it might be like Nan’s confrontation with a hitchhiker. Hitchhiking is a lonely, uncertain exercise in vulnerability. Who wants to pick someone up who needs a ride? Embracing the hitchhiker into one’s vehicle is acknowledging a shared goal, taking on a form of solidarity and trust. Nan is repulsed until she understands the inevitability of her union with the hitchhiker.

Arriving in Tucson, it takes just a phone call home to learn that she died six days earlier in Pennsylvania, when her tire blew out. Her fear is released, and she finds the hitchhiker in the car with her, because she’s clearly going his way.

Death comes in many forms, and at different times. In “Nothing in the Dark” death convinces an elderly shut-in that it’s time to go and that death is not to be feared. Here death is silent and interacts with someone already dead. This road trip doesn’t take place in our United States but somewhere else—the Twilight Zone—the imagination. Here’s the sleight of hand. What we’re imagining is indistinguishable from Pennsylvania, Tucson, and all the other stops on this road trip. We don’t make the switch until Nan does. When we do, we reinterpret time and place to have a very different metaphysical status. Along with Nan, we accept the new interpretation of where Nan is and what’s happened to her, because it makes sense of the oddness and vagueness of her recent experience.

A key feature of the odd nature of Nan’s experience is what Friedrich Nietzsche theorized as the eternal recurrence, here represented by the hitchhiker. Some events recur: The sun rises each day. But others don’t: We pass a hitchhiker once, maybe twice, but not again and again during the same trip. Perhaps we’ll know we’re dead when our expectations about time, space, and causation are no longer met. An eternal recurrence is not a feature of ordinary experience, but when experienced, according to Nietzsche, it is something we should, like Nan, accept and affirm.
FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, eternal recurrence, time, vagueness
“THE FEVER”

*Original air date: January 29, 1960*

“The Fever” is a story about moral principles, about reasoning on the basis of one’s principles and then breaking them. It is about good and bad reasoning.

Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Gibbs, a conservative midwestern couple, find themselves in Las Vegas, lured, seemingly against their will, by the gaming industry. Mr. Franklin is opposed to gambling in all of its forms. He sees it as a moral wrong, not simply a petty vice, and as he immodestly asserts, “If there’s one thing I know, it’s morality.”

Though Mr. Gibbs is brittle and out of place on the casino floor, Mrs. Gibbs is not. She takes in the excitement of the moment, seeking out the laughter and emotions of those around them. She wants a piece of the action, but Franklin scolds her and grudgingly grants her wish to play a nickel slot once.

Brittle things break, however, and principles are violated. While Mrs. Gibbs can play one pull of the slot machine and walk away, Mr. Gibbs cannot. Once he plays a dollar (someone else’s dollar) and wins a few dollars, he can’t stop. He falls prey to the Gambler’s Fallacy: Regularities must fall, and the exception is bound to occur. By that reasoning, we should expect that the next loaf of bread we ingest will not provide nourishment, that the sun will not rise tomorrow.
Perhaps Mr. Gibbs’s principles served him well until the moment of temptation. Had he possessed an adequate capacity for logical inference, his reasoning faculty could have stepped in and made the necessary corrections. Instead, Gibbs endows the primitive slot machine, the “one-armed bandit,” with intelligence, will, and a purpose at total odds with his own. Guess who wins.

As Serling sums it up: Mr. Franklin Gibbs “lost his reason, his money, and his life.” Aristotle argued that the virtuous person uses reason to act in moderation; we should neither abstain nor over-indulge. But such principles often fall short on the casino floor. What we need to remember is that the logic we employed to get to that floor still applies once we are on it.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: induction, logical fallacies, reason, vice
There are consequences of our actions, though of course, since effects come after causes, we don’t experience those effects at the time they are caused. For contiguous effects, we don’t have to wait long. But other effects are long in coming. Some of the effects of our actions may not even occur in our lifetime.

Flight Lieutenant Decker of the Royal Flying Corps is lost in flight during World War I but lands at a U.S. Air Force base only to find that the year is now 1959. Decker learns that his combat partner, Air Vice Marshal Alexander Mackaye, is alive and was a war hero in both World War I and World War II. But Decker believes that due to his own cowardice, Mackaye had died in flight in 1917. Decker could have saved him but didn’t. Decker “lingered in the clouds” rather than engaging when needed in the battle in France. That Decker is “lost in time” as well as space, as Serling puts it, is obvious from the fact that Decker’s aircraft and clothes are ancient—thirty years out of date. Decker must come to grips with the fact that it is 1959, not 1917.

If Decker’s story is true, then Mackaye can’t be alive. But he is alive, and he’s on his way to the base. This is what philosophers call “ontological confusion,” when we don’t know what exists and how existing things are related. Is Mackaye alive or dead? But confusion leads to clarity. If Mackaye is alive, then the only way this could be true is if Decker really did commit an act of bravery in 1917 that saved him. Decker realizes that
the purpose of his time travel experience is to give him the insight that acting courageously in combat was required of him. He escapes the base and returns to the air—and to the dogfight in 1917. When Mackaye shows up at the base, he confirms the facts presented by Decker. Decker did indeed save his life.

This is a story about the consequences of our actions, about cowardice and bravery. And it’s about time-traveling to those distance consequences, or at least to a time when we can assess the significance of our actions, both their utility and their moral status from a perspective quite different than that of a frightened pilot who does not want to die. We have the remarkable ability, at times, to transcend our momentary fears and concerns and lay out the possible consequences of our actions before us—if not seeing the future, then imagining it. A powerfully imagined plausible future is as good as knowledge of the future. Presented as an actual case of time travel, time travel in this sense is what we do when we craft our decisions based on our insight into the future, projected from the present. What really happened to Decker is that in an extraordinary moment of intense reflection, he saw the consequences of cowardice and of bravery—and chose bravery.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: determinism, free will, responsibility, time travel
“He is come to open // The purple testament of bleeding war” (Richard III).

War is hell, but imagine that you could predict who would live and who would die in combat. Lieutenant Fitzgerald acquires that ability, first in combat with fellow soldiers and then before particular engagements. He knows not just the general truth that not all will return, but the particulars of who will live and who will die. But he can’t act on that knowledge, even when he sees that his own death is next on offer.

This thought experiment gives voice to a key truth, that every death is horrible. Imagining a specific death or knowing that one will occur contrasts with our comfort in generalities, in reviewing the statistics that are nameless and faceless. (This distinction, between imagining and knowing, was also central to “The Last Flight.”)

Early in the episode Fitzgerald reflects on his most recent engagement, where four men died under his command. Fitzgerald is upset, and his commanding officer wonders whether there was something special about the four that would explain why Fitzgerald is more upset than after previous losses of a greater magnitude. Stated this way, the commanding officer’s question seems crude. Each life is special, but this time Fitzgerald’s special gift made him appreciate it all the more.

Perhaps if we had Fitzgerald’s gift, the ability to see who will die, we would be more reluctant, as Fitzgerald was, to send soldiers to their
certain deaths. Absent that gift, we possess and can and, when possible, should exercise our moral imagination to the same effect.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, war
Three astronauts, lost in space, sometime in the future, land on a planet that looks a lot like earth. There are barns, dogs, and people—but nothing moves. The upshot: They’ve arrived at a cemetery, and though they don’t know it, it’s their final resting place.

When the mystery is revealed by an automaton caretaker who looks like a human, we learn that what is special about this cemetery is that people are frozen into the moment they cherish the most. Why does this cemetery on a distant planet exist, and what is its relation to earth? The caretaker, aware that the people of earth have essentially destroyed their planet in a nuclear war, points out that the mission of a cemetery could not be achieved on earth: “peace, everlasting peace—you couldn’t have that on earth, could you?” The astronauts, having realized that they are to be placed in the cemetery, ask, “Why us?” “The caretaker replies: “Because you are men, and while there are men, there can be no peace.”

So what can we say, other than that this is a dark portrait of the future of humanity? We will destroy our planet, get lost in space, and be reduced to a static representation of our hopes and dreams. Perhaps this is a vision of our loss, the loss not only of our home, our planet, but the loss of our way, of our dynamic relationship to nature and to others. The astronauts find a planet that at first appears like our own but ultimately is revealed to be devoid of both life and society. If this is our future, it is one without
value, a life not worth living. We may run, but we can’t hide or escape what we’ve done to ourselves and our planet.

When this episode aired, there was little by way of philosophical treatment of issues related to the environment, though moral and political theorizing about the trade-offs of short- and long-term goals and interests can be found in the works of John Stuart Mill and even earlier thinkers. Now we have an entire sub-field of ethics called “Environmental Ethics,” where philosophers weigh in on questions about our obligations to future generations and to the sustainability of our natural environment.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: death, fate of the earth
Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, deals in part with skepticism, the worry that nobody knows anything. Metaphysics concerns what exists and the relationships that hold between the things that exist.

Metaphysical issues include the problem of other minds, the mind-body problem, the problem of personal identity. We can ask whether minds and bodies are distinct substances, and if so, how they are related. We may wonder whether machines can have minds. We can explore the conditions for personhood and the issue of what makes any object the same object at two different times. The question of identity also arises when we think about modal notions, such as the notions of possibility and impossibility. We often distinguish between what is actual and what is possible. That you are now reading this text is actual. You are actually reading it. But you might not have. You might have read something else instead or might have done any of a number of other things. We’ve noted that philosophers describe possibilities in terms of possible worlds. To say that you might have taken Introduction to Geology means that there’s a possible world in which you take Introduction to Geology instead of Introduction to Philosophy. There is also a possible world in which you take both.

There are also possible worlds in which you don’t exist. Just imagine that your biological parents never met, or one of their parents never met! There are also possible worlds in which you exist but where the world is
different from the actual world. For example, there are possible worlds in which you exist but where the university you attend doesn’t exist. In such a possible world, you would not be a student at that university. There are also possible worlds in which you exist, in which everything else that exists in the actual world also exists, but some things are different. For example, there is a possible world in which on Wednesday, March 7, 2007, everyone who, in the actual world, is wearing hiking boots is wearing sneakers instead, and everyone who is wearing sneakers in the actual world is wearing hiking boots. There are also possible worlds containing objects and persons and other entities that don’t exist in the actual world. Five-headed philosophers are possible, but there aren’t any in the actual world. Because they are possible, there are possible worlds that contain them.

As metaphysicians, what should we say about possible worlds? What are they? Do they exist? Do the things in possible worlds exist? If so, how are they related to things that exist in the actual world? What’s the difference between existing in the actual world and existing in a possible world?

Ordinarily, we tend to think about possibilities in isolation. We might say something like: “It’s possible that it will rain tonight.” Now suppose that it does rain tonight. Then “it is raining tonight” is part of what happens in the actual world. As part of the actual world, it is caused by other things in the actual world, and it has effects on other things, also in the actual world. Suppose the fact that it rains tonight means that the square dance in the quad is cancelled. Then, in the actual world, the evening rain caused the cancellation of the square dance. It’s also possible that it won’t rain tonight. Still, supposing that it does rain, we can imagine what would happen if it didn’t rain. The dance might go ahead as planned. We can also think of further consequences: Ignat and Mathilda meet, dance together, fall in love, and decide to spend the rest of their lives together.

Some philosophers believe that all possible worlds exist. By saying this, they are not saying that all possible worlds are actual. Rather, they hold that the possible events, persons, and things in other possible worlds really exist as possibilities. Even if it doesn’t rain tonight, the fact of rain was really possible, and therefore real, even if not actualized. The possibility of rain tonight exists. Five-headed philosophers are really possible, no matter how unlikely. So they are real possibilities. That doesn’t mean they are likely, just that they are possible. Philosophers who believe that possible worlds are real are called modal realists.
Let’s see what a modal realist would say about those other possible worlds that include you. In the actual world, you walk into class on Wednesday, March 7, with your backpack. But we can imagine that you forgot the backpack. So there’s a possible world in which you walk into class on March 7 without your backpack. Now notice how we have described the situation: We said that there’s a possible world in which you walk into class without your backpack. If other possible worlds exist, then there appear to be two of you: the you who, in the actual world, walks into class as usual with the backpack, and the you who walks into class without the backpack. Which one is really you? The modal realist says that they are both you—they are you in different possible worlds. But how could this be? How could it be true of you that you walk into the room with your backpack and that you walk into the room without your backpack at the same time? This looks like a blatant contradiction.

The modal realist replies that it would only be a contradiction if you had the backpack and didn’t have the backpack in the same possible world. But in the actual world you simply have the backpack. Could the possible you who doesn’t have the backpack, the “you” in another possible world—let’s call this figure your “counterpart”—cross over into the actual world and coexist with you in it? If that happened, then the actual world and another possible world would overlap. That’s what “Mirror Image” is all about. Can two possible worlds overlap? Could you run into a counterpart in a bus station—or anywhere else? Suppose it isn’t possible. But “Mirror Image” depicts this situation. So “Mirror Image” depicts something that isn’t possible. But how can we tell a story that makes sense but is impossible? Suppose it is possible, and the episode depicts a real possibility. Then there is a possible world in which you exist and a possible you from another possible world—your counterpart—exist in a converged world. But then both you and your counterpart are actual, existing persons—but are they the same or different persons? It seems that they can’t be the same, but they can’t be different, either.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords**: metaphysics, ontology, personal identity, possible worlds
To the extent that there is a moral fabric among humanity, it is indeed fragile, and in this episode that fabric is intentionally torn asunder by conquerors from outside humanity.

The fabric, the moral structure that makes it possible for Maple Streets to exist, requires a form of conformity, an implicit agreement to share standards of behavior, to act and not act in certain ways. That conformity, that uniformity must coexist with the natural diversity within the species, the diversity of how we look, act, think, and behave.

When technology fails on Maple Street, following a flash of light in the sky, the residents look for an explanation. Tommy, a child, provides it. Invaders from space have turned off the power and have inserted a family, people who look “just like us” into Maple Street. As ludicrous as the suggestion seems, it is powerful, and the community starts looking for differences in each other, differences that would account for the loss of power. When the neighbors, acting like a mob, focus on another neighbor, Les Goodman, whose car started by itself, Charlie says, “Maybe under normal circumstances we could let it go by, but these aren’t normal circumstances.” What Charlie doesn’t get is that it is precisely abnormal circumstances where we need to be guided by principles of respect and autonomy, where we have to safeguard the freedom of expression, even
when we find such expression odd or different. Les Goodman is no less a good man because he takes late-night walks under the stars while his neighbors are asleep in bed, or that his car works when others do not. In these stressful circumstances, however, it really doesn’t matter what is true of Les Goodman. Anything can and will be used against him in the court of public opinion on Maple Street.

As some of the residents of Maple Street appreciate on more than one occasion, they are themselves the monsters. The threat comes from within. No bomb or invading army is required to destroy and conquer. This fact would be obvious to any intelligent alien, and it is easily leveraged. It is cold comfort that we are unlikely to be discovered by such intelligent aliens. The conditions of our undoing are already in place, and we don’t need the manipulation of our technology from outside to stimulate our monstrous behavior.

One might object that this dark story does not reflect the dimension of human goodness, of our humanity and the powerful disposition we have to pull together and help each other in times of crisis. Certainly, those dispositions could kick in, and in part they do, even on Maple Street. There is some level of cool-headed cooperation at the start, but it devolves into mob action in short order. The question isn’t whether on balance our tendencies are toward good or ill. The real question is how easily that balance is shifted.

Another objection is that the circumstances that befall the residents of Maple Street are extreme, even though they are viewed as trivial by the invaders. As Steve Brand points out almost immediately, what happens isn’t just a power failure. There is a widespread but still selective failure of a variety of technologies, which seem orchestrated to feed on the developing fear and suspicion of the residents. The moral fabric of Maple Street is stressed, but given the close to omnipotent interference from above, we don’t learn much about that fabric as it functions in the wide range of likely circumstances.

The invaders may have had a heavy hand in manipulating the technology on Maple Street to achieve the desired effects, but they had a much less rich technological playing field in which to engineer changes than they would have if the setting were sixty years or so later than the original air date of this episode. The advances in digital technology make the rapid spread of opinion possible in a way that could scarcely be imagined in 1960. The invaders in 2020s would be more likely to post on social media than to stop and start automobile engines. The worry is that digital
media and social networking have made the heavy-handed manipulation by outsiders unnecessary.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* diversity, fate of the earth, justice, responsibility
Rod Serling asserts at the start of this episode that there is a fine line between “that which we assume to be real” and that “manufactured inside of a mind.” Like “Where Is Everybody,” the main character attempts to connect to reality by pleading with the telephone operator. While Mike Ferris didn’t know who or where he was, Arthur Curtis, believed by everyone else to be Gerry Raigan, pleads with the operator to verify his identity by providing his home phone number. She can’t find it, and no one believes that he is who he thinks he is, Arthur Curtis, who is the character Gerry Raigan is playing in a movie. Later in the episode Curtis calls the operator again, this time to get the phone number of the firm he believes employs him. No luck.

Ludwig Wittgenstein explored the question of the difference between a mistake and mental illness. You can be mistaken about where you left your car. But certain things are so firm for us that to question them can’t be a matter of making a mistake. Such mistakes typically include being wrong about your name, your family, and where you live. These are the kinds of mistakes Gerry Raigan appears to make. But from his perspective, everyone else is making mistakes about him.

Whether something is a mistake or a sign of mental illness has to do with the place of what we’re mistaken about in what philosophers call the epistemic order, in which beliefs are placed in relation to other beliefs.
Where you left the car is only loosely connected to your other beliefs. You can be wrong about that without being wrong about a lot of other things. Not so with your name. If you’ve got that wrong, then you have a lot of other things wrong. The episode may help us think about the structure of knowledge and belief and the limitation of the kind of subjective certainty Gerry Raigan possesses. That certainty seems to ground his beliefs, but the narrowness of his web of belief and his inability to get any agreement from those around him should put him on alert. Further, while everyone else has a theory about why Gerry has the false beliefs he has, he has little or no theory about why everyone other than himself is radically deluded.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords:* epistemology, mental illness, possible worlds, skepticism
“LONG LIVE WALTER JAMESON”

Original air date: March 18, 1960

“It’s death that gives this world its point.” So asserts Walter Jameson, and he should know. Somehow, thousands of years ago, he achieved the ability to not age. This is a reversal of the belief that led him to seek immortality in the first place. “Only if a man lived forever would there be any point in living at all.” Jameson is granted limited immortality. He’s not a superman. He could succumb to an accident or possibly an illness. But he hasn’t. He’s been lucky.

The gift of immortality is deeply problematic. Inevitably, one grows tired of living. It seems that the shortness of life is what makes it precious and worth holding on to. Nor does longevity provide wisdom: “You just go on living, that’s all,” he attests.

This episode overlaps thematically with “Escape Clause” and, like that episode, relates to Bernard Williams’s “The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality.” Williams argues that any human life must eventually become tedious and without value to its holder. But what this episode adds is an observation about the problem of immortality in the context of humans as social beings. Walter Jameson outlives other people, but his condition also leads him to treat others differently than he might otherwise.

It’s odd that it took a few thousand years for a jilted former wife to get majorly annoyed at Walter’s behavior, but when it happens it shows that
our greatest challenges are found in our relationships with others. Walter is immune from aging but not from the consequences of his obligations to mere mortals. Jameson’s conditional immortality contrasts with that of Walter Bedeker in “Escape Clause.” It is not obvious which form of immortality is preferable. What is clear is that mortality is preferable to immortality of both varieties.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: death, immortality, meaning of life
“PEOPLE ARE ALIKE ALL OVER”

*Original air date: March 25, 1960*

If intelligence is a natural kind, and humans are just instances of that kind, we can expect that intelligence on other planets, if it exists, will be like ours, that people are alike all over. This is the initial speculation of Warren Marcusson, an astronaut, as he reassures his partner, Samuel A. Conrad, a biologist, that there is nothing to fear as they embark on a journey to Mars. Serling sizes them up as follows: “A species of flimsy little two-legged animal with extremely small heads, whose name is Man.”

There are many ways of thinking about sameness and difference. A key idea is that we may all be fundamentally the same in spite of our differences. Here on earth, we speak different languages, have different preferences for food, and earn our livings in a wide variety of ways. Yet we all nurture our young, form rules that constrain our conduct with others, celebrate achievements, and mourn losses. That’s on the positive side. On the negative side, we deride the weak, are fearful of those who are different, and seek to fulfill our self-interest at the expense of others.

What can we expect of those we meet on distant planets? Will they be like us? If they are biological entities, then they will be products of evolution, and though their specific evolutionary pressures may be different, the overall outlines of the forces at work will be the same. Still, we simply do not know whether our higher cognitive processes are traits that were selected for through evolution or just by-products of other evolutionary
forces. We can’t have much confidence that the traits we listed, positive and negative, will be found elsewhere in the universe.

In this *Twilight Zone* episode, Conrad, the crew member who survives the landing, finds intelligence on Mars. They appear to be just like us, and Conrad is even romantically attracted to one of them, just as we are attracted to members of our own species. It even appears that Conrad converses with them in English, though they assure him that they are conversing in their language.

Conrad, the scientist, infers Martian similarity of motives, intentions, and interests with those of humans from their appearance and their behavior. Those inferences are selective. As we noted, there are features of human beings that we approve of, and there are features and tendencies that we condemn. The Martians are acutely aware of this, while Conrad is not, at least not in this context. The Martians, like the Kanamits in “To Serve Man,” present the evidence about their interests, motives, and intentions to Conrad in such a way that he will selectively infer that they are benevolent. Like the Kanamits, these Martians are vastly more intelligent and more powerful than humans. Their treatment of their human visitors is of a piece with our treatment of nonhuman animals. This is another way in which people are alike all over.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, evolution, sympathy
Serling refers to the execution of an unrepentant murderer as “a necktie party,” but the characterization belies the seriousness of the subject of this episode, which is justice. “Execution” paints a stark contrast: a changing world, transformed by technology from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, and justice, which, the episode suggests, doesn’t change. The invariance of justice over time is illustrated through time travel. Two time travelers—one traveling forward in time, the other back in time—can’t escape the justice they are due even though they’ve each traversed the better part of a century.

The first time traveler is a cowboy, launched into the future at the moment before he is hanged. He arrives in a future that is bewildering, in the New York City of the 1960s, with its neon signs, swarms of people, tall buildings, horseless carriages, TVs, jukeboxes, and telephone booths. Yes, another telephone booth, and another victim trapped inside (see “Where Is Everybody?”).

But not everything has changed. A person who is morally bankrupt in the 1800s will be morally bankrupt in the 1900s. In fact, it’s even worse than that. The character flaws that contributed to the cowboy’s demise in his own time have disastrous consequences when he tries to cope with the unfamiliar technology of the twentieth century.
The second time traveler doesn’t have the luxury of testing the waters of the previous century. He arrives at the time and place of the execution of the cowboy and replaces him. Although each criminal is punished for a crime they didn’t commit, the punishment each receives in fact fits the crime they did commit, and on the assumption that capital punishment is ever morally justified, a philosophical issue that is not broached in this episode, justice is done for the two evildoers, though each is displaced by eighty-odd years. Justice, virtue, and vice are invariant across time, culture, and technology.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: justice, punishment, time travel, vice
“If you wish hard enough, it will come true.” Henry, a kid who idolizes Bollie Jackson, a has-been prize-fighter, issues the Big Tall Wish, and in so doing changes the outcome of Bollie’s latest fight from a loss to a win. But the desired outcome of the wish requires Bollie’s buy-in. When Henry tells Bollie that he won the fight because Henry wished it, Bollie tells him that wishes don’t come true, and the win is undone.

Serling concludes that Bollie “shares the most common ailment of all men, the strange and perverse disinclination to believe in a miracle.” The story would be trivial if we read it as admonishing us not to believe in miracles where a miracle is understood as a violation of the laws of nature. As Hume argued, what has to be explained is the widespread belief in miracles, given that miracles so characterized are events for which there isn’t evidence. In this story, a miracle is not a violation of the laws of nature but simply something unlikely, a win for an aged fighter who just broke four knuckles. Henry believes in Bollie against the odds. He has hope, but Bollie has lost it. Without hope, without thinking that he could win, Bollie doesn’t have a chance.

Put differently, mental states can bring about physical states. A trivial case: You form the intention to raise your hand, and then you raise it. A nontrivial case: You form the intention to win the fight against a formidable opponent, and you win. Clearly the intention alone isn’t a sufficient
cause, but it may be necessary. Again, without hope, Bollie doesn’t have a chance.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* mental causation, miracles
One way to try to get a handle on the nature of the good, and of evil, is to reflect on our desires and their possible fulfillment. We think of what philosophers call “the good” as the state in which our desires are fulfilled, and evil as the state in which our desires are thwarted. In Christianity, the first is heaven, the second, hell.

The good, of course, can’t just be the fulfillment of what someone desires; it is the fulfillment of what someone ought to desire. We notoriously fail to appreciate this distinction, and that’s what “A Nice Place to Visit” is all about. The main character, Rocky, is a crook, and he dies while committing a crime. But he finds himself immediately served by Pip, who says, “My job is to see that you get what you want, whatever it is.” And that’s what happens. Rocky wants to gamble, to be accompanied by admirers, and to belittle others. He gets to fulfill all of these desires, without end.

Rocky is initially surprised at his luck. How did he wind up in heaven? He even checks his past at the Hall of Records. The fact that there’s nothing in his past that redeems him is puzzling. But Rocky is not subject to intense self-reflection, and he goes back to winning and womanizing, until boredom sets in. He telephones Pip on a special line (the dial can only dial “PIP”) and tells him that there must be some mistake. He really should be in “the other place.” Pip responds: “Whatever gave you the
idea that you were in heaven, Mr. Valentine? This is the other place!” As
Serling closes it out: “Now he has everything he ever wanted, and he's
going to have to live with it, for eternity, in the Twilight Zone.”

Some sixty years later, a television show appeared with a similar
theme. The Good Place seems to be heaven to its residents, but as they
become more steeped in moral philosophy, they discover that they are
in the same boat as Rocky. If being somewhere where all your desires
are satisfied isn't the good place, what is? Unfortunately, Rocky doesn’t
have the tools to begin to answer that question. Another episode that
trades on confusion about heaven and hell is “The Hunt,” where Hyder
Simpson has a simple but effective test for whether he’s at the gates of
the good place.

FURTHER READING

Williams, Bernard. “The Makropulous Case: Reflections on the Tedium of

Philosophical keywords: afterlife, death, justice, vice
Miss Foley’s nightmare as a child wasn’t a dream, it was the actual murder of her mother, witnessed by her as a ten-year-old and then suppressed in memory. Her mother’s murderer knows that she doesn’t remember the murder but suspects that this could change. Miss Foley doesn’t know it, but he’s been lurking in the background ever since.

The return of memory is represented through Miss Foley’s confrontation with her ten-year-old self—“Markie.” The grown-up Miss Foley doesn’t recognize the child waiting at her apartment door as herself. We’re not prepared to believe that we could meet an earlier stage of ourselves or that it is even possible (See “Walking Distance”). Markie seems to know a lot about Miss Foley’s beliefs, desires, and past history, though. She takes control and forces Miss Foley to think and remember, something Miss Foley does not want to do.

How do we talk to ourselves, and how does memory force its way to the surface, when obscured by the scars of traumatic experiences at the time the memories are formed? As represented here, remembering is the act of holding such a conversation. The younger version of the self provides the first-person testimony, thereby verifying the information being remembered. However, Markie doesn’t provide the memories. She just demands that Miss Foley recall the past, and then confirms the correctness of the memory.
Miss Foley’s initial failure to recognize Markie as herself amounts to her failing to take ownership of her memories. When Markie tells Miss Foley her name, she tells the little girl “That’s a very pretty name.” Markie replies: “Is that all you’ve got to say?” Only later do we, and Miss Foley, discover that “Markie” was Miss Foley’s nickname, that Markie is Miss Foley.

Why does Markie appear when she does? Memories are part of the landscape of the imagination. Earlier that day, Miss Foley saw the man who in fact murdered her mother, though she did not recognize him as that man. Markie’s job is to encourage what cognitive scientists call the “spread of activation” of memory, to encourage the train of thought that leads from some features of the visual representation of that man, all the way to the memory of that same man killing her mother years ago. At one point Markie’s goal is partially achieved. Miss Foley forms the mental representation of the events surrounding her mother’s death, but she doesn’t recognize what she imagines as memories, as the actual record of past events. Ultimately, she actually remembers, and that takes place in the form of being told by herself—that is, by Markie.

When does something that we imagine become a memory? What cognitive processes are at work, and how do our emotions sometimes block and sometimes allow clarity about our personal past? How do we know when we are remembering and when we are merely imagining? In Miss Foley’s case, the distinction is ultimately a matter of life and death.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: dreaming, memory, personal identity
“A STOP AT WILLOUGHBY”

Original air date: May 6, 1960

Can life be bad enough that death looks inviting? Or could death be good enough that life pales in comparison? In “A Stop at Willoughby” we experience a confrontation with the attraction of death from both the inside and the outside. From the outside, we see Williams, an advertising executive trapped in a life of obligations to a despotic and stupid boss, a materialistic and unloving wife, and a world where he certainly cannot relax and live life in “full measure.” There appears to be no way out. There is no breathing space, no alternative lifestyle or even alternative values. The values of middle-class 1960s America are as artificial and stultifying as those of the fascist society depicted in “Eye of the Beholder.” Williams is on the train of success—as measured by others—and there’s no jumping off. Or is there?

From the inside, we see the internal world of the imagination—the Twilight Zone—that Williams escapes to. On the real train, the train from Manhattan to Westport, Connecticut, there is external peace and serenity. Everyone is sleeping or relaxing, and the conductor treats Williams like a person, rather than as a means to some material end. It is a place where Williams can be at peace and contemplate a life that can be valued, a life that can be experienced in “full measure.” As he nods off, Williams enters the world of the nineteenth century, with horse-pulled carts, children returning from the fishing hole, and folks gathering in the town square,
listening to live music performed at a gazebo. It’s just a glimpse, but it is a glimpse of what’s missing—peace and serenity in the town of Willoughby.

On waking, Williams is puzzled that he came up with the name “Willoughby” for his imagined town. Is the name appropriated from a real town? The answer turns out to be negative, but we don’t imagine things out of nowhere, and the puzzle of the origin of the town’s name remains, until the end. When that mystery is solved, in the final shot, we know what Willoughby really was in Williams’s imagination—a representation of death itself—a generous and compelling representation of a place far better than Westport or Manhattan or any place in between. From the inside the choice to go to “Willoughby” seems perfectly rational. From the outside—from the perspective of his wife, his employer, even of the benevolent conductor, it is inexplicable. If suicide can be a rational choice in some circumstances, it may very well be the case that we have to try to see that choice from the perspective of the individual who is making that choice, since from our perspective, the contemplation of such a choice will always put the individual in an extraordinary context, a context far removed from typical rational deliberation about what is best. From our perspective, we can always discount that extraordinary perspective and plead with the contemplator of suicide to consider alternatives. From the inside, the deeply problematic context is not extraordinary, and that’s the problem.

FURTHER READING


**Philosophical keywords**: death, loneliness, meaning of life, suicide
“The Chaser” echoes a theme found in “Escape Clause” and “A Nice Place to Visit,” which is that getting what you want can be the worst thing that can happen to you. In “Escape Clause” it is immortality. In “A Nice Place to Visit” it’s easy money and luxury. In “The Chaser” it is love. Mr. Roger Shackleforth is in love with Leila, but Leila loves him not. Roger visits Professor A. Daemon, who deals in “ointments, salves, powders, sovereign remedies, nectars, lotus blossoms, toxins, tonics, anti-toxins decoctions, concoctions and potions...all guaranteed.” The Professor offers Roger a lethal toxin, his “glove cleaner,” also called “the eradicator.” But Roger wants a love potion, and that’s what he gets. Glove Cleaner goes for a thousand dollars. The love potion is only a dollar. If prices reflect market demand, this is a powerful commentary on love and death. A potion that eliminates people is in much greater demand than a love potion.

The love potion works, and Leila loves, adores, and worships Roger. They marry, but six months in, Leila is driving Roger crazy. It’s not that he no longer loves her. What is it? It’s hard to say, but total devotion can just be too much for someone at the receiving end. The attractive spark in Leila had something to do with her independence and her lack of interest in Roger. When she lives only for Roger, he just wants to squirm out of her embrace.
Roger returns to the professor for the glove cleaner. He forks over a thousand bucks. Maybe he would have paid that much for the love potion, but he doesn’t hesitate to use all his savings for this next remedy. Is it that when we get what we want we no longer want it, or is it that we didn’t know what we wanted in the first place? One question we can ask about emotions is how we know what emotions we’re having. Can a person be wrong about what emotion they are experiencing? For example, can someone think they are angry when they are not, or are we incorrigible about our emotions? Many philosophers have thought that we are incorrigible about our sensations. They claim that it doesn’t make sense for someone to correct you about whether you are in pain. If you believe you are in pain, then you are in pain, though you may be wrong about its cause. Could the same be said for emotions? Could someone convince you that you are not angry or that you’re not in love? Annette Baier suggests that we may rely on the judgment of others to understand our own emotions. This insight may help us understand Roger’s predicament. Leila’s emotions are both transparent and immutable. Nothing Roger could do would change how she feels about him. This may be why Roger no longer loves her. Leila cannot provide any information about Roger’s own emotions. Her total infatuation turns out to be something quite different from what one requires from their beloved.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: desire, love
Joey is a down-on-his-luck jazz trumpeter. He can’t get a gig because he is not dependable. He’s not dependable because he is an alcoholic. But addiction and jazz are intertwined. For Joey, booze fuels his flights of musical expression, in the rare moments when he can keep it together. Rejected even by peers who care about him deeply and only wish him the best, he’s hit rock bottom. He sells his horn for eight bucks and steps in front of a fast-moving car. And, as Joey puts it, for once in his life he was successful. This appears to be a rational act. Joey evaluates his life and decides it is not worth living.

Philosophers and in particular bioethicists can disagree about whether such decisions about the viability of one’s own life can be rational. Hume argued that taking one’s own life is permissible if it is not a violation of one’s duty to God, to society, or to oneself. He further argued that it is never a violation of one’s duty to God, and in some cases, where one is terminally ill and in extreme pain, it is neither a violation of one’s duty to society nor to oneself. In such cases, suicide is permissible and a rational choice. Kant held that suicide is never morally permissible because one has a perfect duty to continue to live, regardless of the circumstances.

To cloud the picture, as happens in other episodes (“Mr. Bevis,” “Escape Clause,” “A Nice Place to Visit,” and “One for the Angels”) there’s an angel or a devil lurking, stepping in to redirect the causal order or to
suspend it, providing another possible future for the troubled character. For Joey, it’s Gabe—Gabriel, who, of course, also blows a mean horn. They talk, play the horn, and Joey gets a second chance, a pivot back into life, with a perspective on what he would have lost, and what he’s missed while living.

This is a classic morality play, familiar to many from the feature film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, about the choice to live and the value of life. Gabe says that Joey can go back, “but no more stepping off curbs. You take what you’ve got and you live with it.” Gabe is wise, but his advice is straightforward and simple, though inaccessible until Joey stepped off the curb. One wonders whether Williams in “A Stop at Willoughby” would have acted differently if he had had the advice of someone like Gabe. It is not clear what a guardian angel could have said to Williams to change his mind. It’s unlikely that Williams would have been moved by the guardian angel’s advice to Joey.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: desire, free will, meaning of life, moral luck, rationality, suicide
Mr. Bevis is a hippie before there were hippies. He loves zither music, plays with the poor kids on the street, and places no value on getting ahead, maintaining regular employment, or even paying the rent on time. Under the best of circumstances, Mr. Bevis just gets by. But on this day, Mr. Bevis’s car is totaled, he is fired from his job, and he is evicted from his apartment. But all is not lost—Mr. Bevis’s guardian angel appears, prepared to improve Mr. Bevis’s lot in life.

One’s lot in life is a package deal. Even a guardian angel can’t fix one thing without changing another. Mr. Bevis’s job can be restored, his car fixed, and his apartment restored, but at a price. Mr. Bevis will have to give up what makes him who he is—his love of zither music, his relationship to the neighborhood kids, his lack of interest in his boring job. The reason Mr. Bevis has to give up these things has nothing to do with his interests. The guardian angel doesn’t mess with Mr. Bevis’s mind, his concerns, his interests, his likes and dislikes. He can only change Mr. Bevis’s material conditions. The guardian angel can change Mr. Bevis’s clothes and his car and pay his rent. The changes in his material conditions transform “The Old Bevis” into “The New Bevis.” The New Bevis is treated differently by others, even though, on the inside, nothing for Mr. Bevis has changed.
The changes brought by the guardian angel don’t make Mr. Bevis a happier person. In fact, they send things in the opposite direction. When Mr. Bevis complains about his new circumstances, the guardian angel doesn’t approve. He says, wryly, as a square to a hippie: “Frankly, Mr. Bevis, I don’t dig you.” He doesn’t understand Mr. Bevis’s apparent lack of ambition, drive, and self-concern. He doesn’t see the pure appreciation of life that Mr. Bevis has when he interacts with the neighborhood kids, builds model ships, and listens to zither music.

There’s an important conception of the good captured in this episode and of a virtuous life. Beware of guardian angels offering a better life.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: possible worlds, virtue, well-being
Marcia appears to be the most ordinary of persons in the most ordinary of places, a department store. Yet Marcia is the consummate shopper: she knows what she wants and is in the process of taking steps to get it. Even at this stage, before anything unusual happens, there are issues for the philosopher: What is it to have beliefs and desires? How do we go about figuring out what someone believes and desires? We make these attributions so easily—but how do we do it? This isn’t the epistemological question of how we know that others have beliefs and desires but rather the question of how we come to even have beliefs about the contents of other persons’ beliefs and desires. Of course, we can still raise the question of whether our beliefs constitute knowledge: At the end of the episode, do you still think it was correct to attribute the beliefs and desires you attributed to Marcia?

Before long Marcia finds herself on a floor of the department store with the very item she wants, and we begin to see that, as she puts it, something is odd. Marcia wants a thimble for her mother. But does she, really? What has to be the case for someone to want to buy a thimble for their mother? Doesn’t one have to have a mother to want to buy the thimble for? We’ve assumed, and Marcia has believed, that she has a mother. This episode and others explore the idea that a being could have beliefs, desires, and memories that are somehow packaged into it but don’t arise from that individual’s natural history. The episode suggests that we might very well take such individuals to be persons. Marcia looks
like your average department store shopper. But is she really a person? To answer that question, we need a theory of personal identity.

Marcia discovers that she is a mannequin. Is this really possible? Could you really come to believe that you are a mannequin? The problem of other minds suggests that everyone other than you could be a mannequin, but how could you, from your first-person perspective, or Marcia, from hers, be a mannequin? When Marcia remembers that she is a mannequin, what exactly is she remembering? Does she remember what it’s like to stand, statue-like, not moving? But how could one remember that? Do mannequins have consciousness, a consciousness others are completely unaware of? Are they standing on their pedestals longing to “climb off” and move around?

We can apply the problem of other minds here as well. Just as we can look at other people and consider the possibility that they are really mannequins, where by “mannequin” we mean beings who do not think, we can look at mannequins and consider the possibility that they are really persons, that is, thinking, remembering, even conscious beings. So, I can imagine being a mannequin, if mannequins think, and that’s certainly the scenario in “The After Hours.”

Thinking and being a person, however, are not the same thing. It’s still not clear that Marcia or the other mannequins are persons. Marcia’s belief about her mother turns out to be a false belief. Mannequins don’t have mothers, and Marcia is a mannequin. Therefore, Marcia has no mother. Marcia does have a past, however, and the crucial moment in the episode is the moment when she correctly remembers that past. So, combining the insight we just had that Marcia, in her mannequin state, could still be a thinking thing with a mental life with the observation that she can remember her mannequin mental life, it follows that she is a person. Of course, her life is very different from that of most persons. But she’s a person nonetheless.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: consciousness, epistemology, intentionality, other minds, personal identity, skepticism
This episode, whose title recalls the well-known poem “Casey at the Bat” by Ernest Thayer, anticipates what would amount to an impressive achievement in artificial intelligence and robotics: the development and implementation of a robotic major league pitcher. This machine, “Casey,” looks like a human but is still a special-purpose machine designed to pitch competitively, to figure out the best pitch under the circumstances, and to deliver it. It really is intelligent, goal-driven, and beautifully coupled to its environment.

Once Casey is signed to the struggling Zephyrs, their fortunes reverse. Casey delivers, and his humanoid opponents can’t get on base. But an injury and subsequent hospitalization reveal, first to his physicians and then to the baseball commissioner, that Casey is no ordinary pitcher. He doesn’t have a pulse because he doesn’t have a heart.

Implausibly, all Casey needs is a heart, or the functional equivalent thereof, to be allowed back on the field. But installing the robotic heart has an unanticipated consequence: Casey now has feelings, and with those feelings comes sympathy for his opponents. He simply cannot endure the thought that he is responsible for their failure. Casey switches careers from professional baseball to social work!

The episode nicely introduces questions about the relationship between cognition and affect, reason and passion. Without emotions,
Casey is truly a machine. He simply executes the task of pitching. He does what he is told and executes better than any human. Once he has emotions, he can consider how he ought to employ his talents, and matters are no longer so clear.

The distinctions as they are made here are fairly crude, and their application is questionable. Could a being devoid of feelings really pitch as well as or better than his major league counterparts? Figuring out how to pitch requires some understanding of the beliefs and desires of the batter and so requires some possession of what cognitive scientists call “theory of mind” on the part of the pitcher. Could Casey possess theory of mind in the absence of any affective states of his own?

Serling’s own interests may be more centered on the nature of sport. Baseball is portrayed as a wholesome American sporting activity for players and spectators alike. But the affect-endowed Casey finds the game intolerable: To play it requires discounting the negative effects that one’s own successful play has on half the players on the field, one’s opponents. What does it say about us, if we never give the concerns of our opponents a moment’s thought, if we have no sympathy for them at all, if our success means their failure? Would someone with a heart really wish to engage in such activity?

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: artificial intelligence, robotics, sympathy
“A WORLD OF HIS OWN”

*Original air date: July 1, 1960*

In this episode Serling provides a comedic romp through the metaphysics of fictional discourse. The setting is the home of Mr. Gregory West, “one of America’s most noted playwrights.” Mr. West is being poured a drink by his mistress, his beautiful, adoring, and younger companion. When his wife returns, she spies the two of them through the window and prepares to confront them. But when she enters the house, the mistress is gone, and the wife is ontologically confused (on ontological confusion, see “The Last Flight”). She saw the mistress in the arms of Mr. West, but where is she now? The house is searched, and Mr. West is interrogated. Ultimately, she succeeds in getting West to admit to the existence of Mary, his mistress.

But here’s the rub: West claims that Mary is one of his fictional characters. He thought her up. But he did such a good job thinking her up that she came to life. Not only did Mr. West see her, but so did Mrs. West. So where did Mary go? She was created by an act of Mr. West’s imagination, and so she can be instantaneously eliminated by another act of his imagination.

Mrs. West, finding this to be nuts, attempts to call the psychiatrist. She’s right. We don’t think that people come into existence just by virtue of someone imagining them. Mr. West thinks that when he imagines his characters in sufficient detail, they actually come to life. But that isn’t how
things work. A well-imagined character can fascinate and preoccupy us in literature, but that doesn’t bring the character to life in anything more than a metaphorical sense. Fictional characters may have causal powers. For example, a fable with moral content may bring it about that I reform my ways and stop stealing or lying. But that doesn’t make the characters in the story into existing persons.

The description of a fictional character as actually existing seems incoherent. If a character, say Mary, is fictional, then she doesn’t exist. If she exists, then she’s not fictional. How do we know whether something actually exists? An adequate test, at least in this context, is intersubjective agreement or mutual recognition. When Mr. and Mrs. West both see Mary at the same time, then Mary exists. Mrs. West still thinks Mr. West is nuts, on good philosophical grounds, until he demonstrates that he can bring characters in and out of existence by the mere power of his imagination.

This conceptual confusion is cleared up when we learn that Mrs. West is also a fictional character. She can, and eventually does, go out of existence as easily as Mary does. The collaborative verification of Mary’s existence turns out, like everything in this story, to be a figment of Mr. West’s imagination. But what of Mr. West? In a confrontation with Mr. West’s creator—Rod Serling—Mr. West reveals that Serling is himself merely a character in Mr. West’s fiction.

This story can be seen as a fun-filled version of Descartes’ Evil Genius thought experiment, an argument for skepticism. Mr. West is the evil genius, and we are in the epistemic position of Mary, Mrs. West, Rod Serling, and the red-eyed elephant in the room. While great fun is had by all—namely, Mr. West—there is a chilling aspect as well. It’s no fun to be ontologically confused when the object you’re confused about is yourself. Other episodes reveal this as well: “Walking Distance,” “The Lonely,” “The Hitch Hiker,” and “The Sixteen-Millimeter Shrine,” to name a few.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: epistemology, fictional inexistence, intentionality, mental illness, ontological confusion, representation, skepticism, solipsism
Captain Embry crashes his World War II prop plane in the desert. The rest of the crew is gone, and Embry doesn’t know what has happened. He hallucinates, sees and understands technology of the future, and concludes that “there’s not a single thing that’s real.” Like “Where Is Everybody?” this is the case of an extended illusion, brought on by military experience. In this case, Embry, who was responsible for the ship and its crew in 1943, relives the horror of the crash that killed his crew. He survived because he wasn’t on that mission.

So there’s Embry in bed in the psych ward, and Embry with the downed plane King 9 in the desert. We know which is real, and which is the illusion. But Embry’s hallucinations are causally related to the real, to the downed aircraft and the fate of his crew members. The point is driven home in the final moments, when Embry’s clothes are brought into his room and there is sand from the desert in his shoes.

The observation that the illusory builds on the real is noted in other episodes. For example, it is emphasized in “Shadow Play” when the lead character tries to convince everyone else that what they think they are experiencing is just a dream. He does that by showing how the experiences they are having are constructed and rearranged from the contents of his imagination, which draw on his actual experiences of the world.

Why is this philosophically or otherwise important? These examples count against the view that the products of the imagination are mere
imaginings, pure products of unfettered thought. They are instead grounded in experience, not just by being constructed out of what we’ve sensed and perceived but more thickly, from rich experiences and matters we’ve thought through and understood. Appreciating that there is knowledge embedded in the thoughts of the victims of trauma is critical for helping those victims recover from Post-traumatic stress disorder and other enduring effects, as argued in Freedman 2006.

The sand in Embry’s shoes symbolizes this. He isn’t just a soldier who has “lost it.” Rather, he’s retained it, and that’s what haunts him and causes him to construct an imagined world that’s too close to the actual one.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: dreaming, epistemology, illusion, skepticism, war
What do we desire, and what is of value? This episode begins with those questions. An elderly lady brings a used wine bottle to an antique shop claiming it is an heirloom. But the item is something no one desires—it is a piece of junk. Mr. Arthur Castle, who co-owns the shop with his wife, takes pity on the old lady and goes along with the subterfuge, assigns it a value, and hands her a few bucks. What we learn is that Mr. and Mrs. Castle are themselves near bankruptcy, possessing little of lasting value. Or so it seems.

Like Al Denton in “Mr. Denton on Doomsday,” Arthur Castle finds himself stuck in a world he didn’t choose but rather a world he inherited. Unlike Al Denton, he is not so self-absorbed that he can’t have compassion for the misery of others. This is a story about choice, about the compatibility of choice in a world of causes and effects, about free will and determinism.

The bottle contains a genie who can guarantee four wishes; he appears when the bottle falls (it doesn’t break) and is uncorked. To figure out what we desire, we need only reflect on what we wish for. And what we wish for is that to which we assign great value.

After a fairly trivial test wish is fulfilled by the genie and the Castles come to grips with the scope of the possibilities before them, they need to figure out what they desire—what they value. The solution is
easy: They ask for and receive a million dollars, in fives and tens, right on the floor of their shop.

But choices have consequences. A wish fulfilled in a possible world gets fleshed out. After taxes and after giving away some of their windfall, all they have left is five dollars! The genie critiques their choice. After all, they could have asked for a million dollars after taxes. But the genie warns: “No matter what you wish for, you must be prepared for the consequences.”

The Castles think they can consequence-proof their wish, and so Mr. Castle comes up with wish number three: “I want to be the head of a foreign country who can’t be voted out of office, a contemporary country, a country in this century.” The result is so disastrous that he retreats to his old life in wish four: “I wish I were back where it all started. I wish to be Arthur Castle again!”

The genie laments that although he can grant any wish, happiness rarely accrues to the wish-maker. The Castles’ wishes fit a pattern. If the wishes that can be fulfilled have consequences, then we need to be prepared for them. But we can’t be prepared for the consequences of extravagant wishes, since they fall far outside the scope of our knowledge and practical experience. The fulfilled wishes that have the best chance of making us happy are those that we bring about without the help of a genie in a bottle.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: desire, determinism, free will, moral luck
A two-bit criminal is commissioned to make a hit, to commit murder on behalf of his gang. In advance of the hit, he is confronted by his conscience, represented by his alter ego in a mirror. His alter ego critiques his life, his past choices, and his immediate plans to commit a murder. Like “The Mirror,” this episode is all about reflection on character, motivation, and the possibility of self-improvement.

The episode poses this question: When faced with a critical choice, can a person defy their character and will themselves in a new direction? Can one decide to give up a life of petty crime fueled by fear, incompetence, and self-loathing? Can one turn over a new leaf and go straight, find a job and a mate, as Jackie resolves to do? Here the question isn’t whether one can sustain the change of character. The question is simply whether one can initiate such a change.

This is an empirical question, and we can look to the run of human behavior for the answer. It seems clear that people sometimes, even if rarely, execute a 180-degree change in direction or something close to that. The philosophical question is how a genuine 180 is done. An alternative view is that we can make a distinction between apparent and real 180s, and every 180 is just apparent, not real. In “Nervous Man in a Four Dollar Room” the method of achieving meaningful character
change appears to be an argument between Jackie and his conscience. His conscience, arguing for clean living and honest relationships, wins the argument, and the change takes place. But we don’t really see how it happens. At the pitch of the argument Jackie collapses. He wakes up as a new man. Was it the force of the reasoning displayed in the mirror, or is there another explanation?

Can reason, by itself, motivate one to act? Clearly it is not reason that has placed Jackie in his life of petty crime. The motivation for that comes from his fear of those who have power over him and his desire to win their approval. Jackie’s conscience begins to gain traction only when it introduces competing desires, the desire for love, friendship, and achievement. Hume wrote: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” Our passions, our feelings, motivate us to act, and reason can serve as an instrument to help activate one passion and subdue another.

Like Al Denton in “Mr. Denton on Doomsday,” Jackie seems to be the product of prior causes, propelled to deliver a hit for the mob. Yet his conversation with himself delivers an alternative plan of action. As he comes to understand his passions, what he really wants, he can achieve freedom from his nervous life in a four-dollar room.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: character, free will, love, reason
“A THING ABOUT MACHINES”

Original air date: October 28, 1960

Bartlett Finchley drives an expensive car and lives in an elegant house. He’s clearly very wealthy. But his first interaction is with the TV repairman, who he thinks is ripping him off. The repairman accuses Finchley of mistreating his electronics, of kicking his foot through the TV, and worse. The repairman asks: “What is it with you and machines?”

Borrowing a question from Alan Turing, we can ask: What are the machines about which Finchley is so concerned? They are a varied lot, with varied behavioral repertoires. Some, such as the typewriter and the TV, produce linguistic output. But none are digital computers. Despite his enormous wealth, Finchley is outraged at the cost of repairing the TV. Even the cabinet in which the TV lives is ornate beyond belief. Finchley is also no spendthrift. He clearly lives well in someplace not unlike Beverly Hills.

Finchley thinks his machines are out to get him. The clock strikes the hour and won’t stop. Finchley smashes it to smithereens. So far the machines are no match for this Luddite. They have no agency and must endure the effects of his wrath. But Finchley thinks they do have agency. The typewriter, the TV, and other appliances appear to issue the command “Get out of here, Finchley!”

It appears that Finchley is mentally ill, and he consumes a lot of alcohol. Forced out of the house by his electric razor (no kidding!), he
is confronted by his angry car. The end is not pretty, witnessing these events from Finchley’s perspective.

There’s a point here and a counterpoint. The point is that attributing beliefs, desires, goals, and plans to these machines, as Finchley does, is something only a mentally ill person would do. The counterpoint is that we get to see the behavior of the machines, real or imagined, from Finchley’s perspective, and from that perspective, we see behaviors that could easily be interpreted as guided by intention and purpose.

We can also be more charitable to poor Finchley. His frustration with machines, though extreme, is something we’ve all felt to some degree. It’s not uncommon for someone to say something like “My computer refuses to cooperate with me.” Our attributions of thoughts and motives to our machines, unlike Finchley’s, are usually just a figure of speech.

While interacting with machines of all types has played an increasingly large part in our lives, we’ve been slow to recognize that the success or failure of such interactions is under our control. We’ve designed and built our machines, and we can design and build them with the user in mind. That goes not just for machines but for any artifacts. When we open unfamiliar doors, the doors could be designed to make it obvious whether we should push the door or pull it. Such features are called “affordances,” and we’ve figured out how to design artifacts to have them, thereby reducing the frustration of pulling when we should be pushing. Perhaps advances in the field of human-computer interaction, where such user-oriented designs are developed, will help most of us, though perhaps not the Bartlett Finchleys of the world.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords:** artificial intelligence, other minds, robotics
The howling man is the devil, and he's howling because he's been caught and contained, at great effort, by Brother Jerome, the head of a religious order in Eastern Europe between the two world wars. A visiting American, David Ellington, is alarmed by the howling sound issuing from a closed cell in the abbey. Although Brother Jerome warns Ellington to ignore the howling man and, when pressed, explains why, Ellington is tricked into releasing him.

Is this all a reset of Adam and Eve's Fall from Grace? Is Ellington responsible for the existence of evil through his choice to free the devil, just as the first couple released him through their free act? If this were all “The Howling Man” offered, it would not be particularly interesting. But there is more.

Brother Jerome tries to explain the situation to Ellington: The howling man is the devil, and he's been caught. Releasing him means releasing evil. Ellington finds this ludicrous, and he concludes that Brother Jerome is a madman, a lunatic leader of a misguided cult. However, once he sees the consequences of his actions, Ellington, now properly horrified, resolves to recapture the devil, and he eventually does. But now he must warn his housekeeper not to release the devil, just as he had been warned by Brother Jerome. The problem is clear: anyone who claims to
have captured the devil, to have eliminated human-caused evil, sometimes called “non-natural evil,” will appear insane to others.

The idea that evil is the sort of thing that can be captured, contained, and conquered is one answer to what philosophers call the problem of evil. How can we make sense of the existence of evil if there is an all-powerful and all-good god? If God is wholly good and can do anything, why would it allow evil in the first place? An often-proposed answer is that evil is a human creation, one that comes packaged with our free will. So it is up to us to keep it locked up. Rather than rehashing a biblical fable, “The Howling Man” offers an indictment of this solution to the problem of evil. The very idea of evil as something we can capture, contain, release, and conquer is incoherent, as the attempted explanations first by Brother Jerome, and then by David Ellington, clearly illustrate.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: problem of evil, responsibility, vice
“THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER”

*Original air date*: November 11, 1960

The notoriety of this story in *The Twilight Zone* corpus is surely due to the way it hits us over the head with the truth expressed in the episode’s title at a crucial moment. But that truth is easily misunderstood, and the power of the fable may be missed if it is taken as the claim that judgments of beauty and deformity are subjective. If we were merely confronted with the difference of our own, individual aesthetic judgment from that of someone else, the powerful punch from “no change” would not have the force that it does.

Repulsion from difference, and the witnessing of that repulsion by the one who is different, is described by the patient in Room 307, Miss Janet Tyler. Beauty, Hume says, “is nothing but a form that produces pleasure.” Deformity produces pain. Note that ugliness is deformity, that is, failure to conform to the structural features that produce pleasure. But deformity doesn’t just fail to produce pleasure. It produces pain, the sort of pain Miss Tyler describes when she recalls the childhood memory of another child screaming when that child looked at her.

Even the childhood repulsion to “deformity” is an acquired point of view, a learned stance based on what is taken to be the norm, or standard, by which deviation is judged and felt. While the child should not be blamed for a visceral pained reaction to another person, we should try to assess the moral status of the society in which such reactions are learned.
A child responds to deformity or ugliness by screaming. How do the adults respond? In the world Miss Tyler inhabits, society is committed to trying to make her “normal” through plastic surgery. The alternative is segregation into “a ghetto designed for freaks.” In Miss Tyler’s world, the state quite literally “makes ugliness a crime.” Living with difference isn’t tolerated. If surgical “correction” doesn’t work, segregation is the only option. This isn’t a state that is just intolerant of difference, it is a state that celebrates “glorious conformity” and disallows deformity. Miss Tyler will be banished to the north, to live among her kind.

Is acceptance of difference impossible? Miss Tyler’s doctor’s expression of sympathy is heretical. It will not be tolerated. What’s clearly needed is a state that not only tolerates but embraces difference, a state in which beauty is not in the eye of the beholder.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: beauty, justice, moral luck, oppression, sympathy
Superstition—the willingness to believe based on factors other than those we would typically find relevant—is an ailment suffered by Don, an up-and-coming office manager. As he and his wife, Pat, sit at a booth in a diner, Don is immediately fixated by a napkin holder on the table featuring a “Mystic Seer,” who, for a penny, produces a printed “prediction” to any yes/no question posed to it. At first Don appears to be just amused by the seer’s “predictions.” But after the Mystic Seer answers, “It has been decided in your favor” to the question of whether Don will get a hoped-for promotion, he is moved to get real evidence—a call to his office—to ask about the promotion. When the seer’s prediction is confirmed, Don buys in whole hog and becomes immobilized by the seer—who tells him that leaving the dinner before 3 p.m. may be dangerous to his health. Then at 3 p.m., attempting to defy the predictions of the seer, another prediction comes true, and Don is hooked.

Pat, Don’s concerned wife, asks him how the “gizmo” could have predicted the future. This suggests that if something can predict the future, then there is an explanation, a mechanism or causal explanation that is responsible for the correctness of the prediction. But ultimately, she drops any attempt to convince Don that his beliefs are not justified. A different strategy, a different kind of argument, is ultimately effective.
What is Pat’s argument? She argues that the belief that the seer can predict the future is itself a cause—indeed, a “bad” cause—of Don’s behavior. Beliefs can be causes, and believing that a napkin holder can predict your future—even if it is possible that it can—is a dangerous thing. This is a significant observation for someone who endorses determinism (see “Mr. Denton on Doomsday”). Although it looks like Pat is saying that buying into determinism would be bad for one’s mental health, she’s really just saying that if determinism were true and if one also had access to the predictions one could make if one knew all of the initial conditions and all of the relevant causal laws in any situation, then that would be a bad thing. To put it positively: It is important that we have the sense that we are free, whether we really are or not.

Notice that Pat’s argument doesn’t depend on positing the truth of determinism. She’s worried about any device that is taken to predict the future, and that could be a complete science, a mystic seer, or a direct line to God. Again, to say that events are “predetermined” or “known in advance” is subtly different from saying that every event is determined. Events can be causally determined without being known in advance (though they would be knowable). And events could be known in advance (by a god or a seer or a napkin holder) without those events being (causally) determined.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: fatalism, free will, metaphysics, superstition
Technology can be marvelous. Cars whisk us to our destinations; washing machines clean our clothes. In this episode we see technology in spades: Jana’s father has created a smart house that still goes beyond our wildest dreams. Robotic servants and a fully controlled environment allow the family to live “retired from the world.” But Jana thinks she is an “insulated freak.” What Dr. Loren takes to be liberating, his daughter takes to be imprisoning.

Dr. Loren values his robots not merely for their convenience but as his marvelously complex creations. He even attributes life to them, though Jana quickly corrects him. He says: “I’ve given each one of them a memory of his own, haven’t I?... And all of them can recount to you in detail everything that’s happened to them since their early childhood, and they had no childhood.” Do Dr. Loren’s robots have memory? Are they persons?

When we attempt to give an analysis of personal identity, we quickly discover that memory must have something to do with it. A person at time \( t_2 \) who has absolutely no memory of the person with the same body at \( t_1 \) does not seem to qualify as the same person. So, it looks like a necessary condition for being the same person at \( t_1 \) and \( t_2 \) is that the person at \( t_2 \) has the memories of what happened to the person at \( t_1 \). But this can’t be enough: I remember my brother’s fifth birthday party, but that doesn’t make me the same person as my brother! Clearly, it’s our
first-person memories that matter. As Locke argued, I must have direct memories of my past, though this requirement must be characterized in a way that doesn't presuppose personal identity.

The episode brings an important wrinkle into the memory requirement for personal identity: Dr. Loren's robots have beliefs—memories—of their past. But are they really memories? Isn't it the case that instead of memories Loren's robots have false beliefs, if they have beliefs at all? The things they seem to remember didn't really happen. They don't have actual memories. The robots seem to remember childhoods they never experienced. They are not the same person as the person they remember. There was no such person.

Are the robotic servants persons at all? Clearly, they are wrong about the extent of their personhood. But perhaps they are persons from the moment they are switched on by Dr. Loren. Whether they are persons would seem to depend at least in part on whether they can actually remember what happens to them over time. There's good reason to doubt that this is the case: They appear to believe that they had a childhood, but they also stand by and accept that they are robots when Dr. Loren describes them as such.

Jana disapproves of her parents' lifestyle and delivers the ultimatum: unplug the servants or I'm leaving. The Lorens clearly love their daughter more than they value the comforts provided by the servants. When push comes to shove, the servants go and Jana stays. Alone with her parents, Jana quickly becomes suspicious about her own case. She looks in the family photo album and finds no pictures of herself as a child. She is horrified to learn that she too is a robot—a robotic daughter—a machine. Her father tries to comfort her, to convince her that it doesn't matter. Aren't the apparent memories as good as real ones? Apparently not!

Jana's anguish over the discovery of her origins is extraordinary. She seems to realize that the discovery changes everything. She is neither a feeling thing nor a person. But paradoxically she does feel intense disappointment at her discovery. She is depicted as feeling intensely bad about not feeling anything. More important, it seems that she's realized that she isn't a person. Not only does she have a false past, she has a false future as well. She can't have hopes and dreams. She can't escape the world her father has created. She may be a thinking thing at any moment, but is she a person? She remembers things that have happened over the last several days, at least. She believes correctly that they never go out, that her mother loves to be massaged, that she herself is terribly unhappy.
Jana does seem to meet Locke's first-person memory requirement for personhood, even if her personhood doesn’t extend as far as she, and we, originally thought it did.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: artificial intelligence, consciousness, memory, personal identity, robotics
Booth Templeton is a distinguished and accomplished actor. But he is also an aging actor, confronting a new world order, the order of the young. “Some of us are young. Some of us are old.” So says the new, young director, who does not defer to Templeton’s age and stature. Rather than submit to the new order, Templeton, retreats into the past—the same place thirty years prior, a past he remembers fondly.

The problem with time travel is that it takes you back to the past—not the past as you remember it but the past as it was. This distinction is at the heart of Templeton’s troubles. Templeton attempts to converse with his long-deceased wife and best friend, but how could he? What kind of relationship can he have with a wife who is now thirty years younger than him? The characters from his past send him packing—back to the present. Templeton discovers that the actual past is not even a nice place to visit. It’s also clear that you can’t live there, and that’s the lesson Booth Templeton learns from his brief visit.

Templeton’s relatively brief experience with time travel is best understood as an extended episode of his imagination, as Martin Sloan’s time travel is characterized in our discussion of “Walking Distance.” Perhaps mental time travel is the only kind of time travel that we can experience. Such journeys of the imagination enable us to engage with former acquaintances, friends, and lovers who are no longer available in the
present. Templeton’s wife and his best friend are long dead, but Templeton accesses them through memory and interacts with them via the imagination. Templeton’s journey helps explain why the past is important to us. Remembering those who matter to us is not simply a matter of having warm thoughts about what has transpired. Our relationships to persons to whom we no longer have access can influence our future actions, just as our relationship to our contemporaries can. Templeton’s journey to the past is important not simply because of the liveliness of his imagination but because of the way his relationships to those he remembers helps him navigate the present.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: memory, time travel
Even small-time crooks need to be able to predict the future. This story begins with a married couple despairing over their meager haul from the robbery of a curio shop. Lamenting that the stolen items are mostly worthless junk, they see the need to do a better job of predicting the value of their future heists. The one item that stands out from their latest robbery is a camera—a most unusual camera.

The stolen camera is unusual in two respects. First, it develops pictures instantly, at a time before the wide availability of Polaroid products such as the SX-70. But more remarkably, it takes pictures of something that hasn’t yet happened but will soon (in five minutes) happen. It takes pictures of an imminent future event.

Predicting the future is central to human nature. We believe that bread nourishes, that the sun will rise tomorrow, and that rhubarb is usually a purge, to use Hume’s examples. Were we unable to make predictions, we would be limited to the narrow sphere of our current sensory awareness and our memories of our sensory states. We would be unable to act. But our inductive inferences, even at their best, are limited. It’s not that we can’t make highly specific predictions—I can predict that this piece of bread will nourish me. Rather, such specific predictions are ones that follow from generalizations, like the generalization that bread nourishes. Hume argued that all such generalizations are themselves founded on our belief that the future will resemble the past, and it is this belief
that cannot be justified. We may be unable to fully justify our inductive inferences, but that doesn’t stop us from making them. The unusual camera illuminates this point: The predictions made by the unusual camera are predictions of one-off, novel events. We don’t know how either we or the camera make successful predications.

In a singular out of character moment, one of the crooks realizes that the technology in his hands might be of use to science, and he vows to donate the camera to science for the benefit of humanity. But that plan vanishes when he realizes that it can also be used to predict the outcome of horse races, and in a flash, they are off to the races.

“A Most Unusual Camera” is about predicting the future, which scientists, ordinary people, and criminals do. It is also about technology and ethics. Extending our ability to predict the future might very well benefit humanity, when that technology finds itself in the right hands.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: causation, induction, time, vice
“The Night of the Meek” is a Christmas miracle story. It is about sympathy and support for the meek: the poor, the young, the old, the homeless, and the disabled. We see the meek in these forms, contrasted with the non-meek—the wealthy department store patrons dragging their privileged children—one is named “Percival Smithers”—telling Santa what they fully expect to get for Christmas.

This episode contains two explicit references to philosophy. The first occurs early in the episode, when Henry Corwin (played by Art Carney), a poor, aging, alcoholic, takes a break from his temporary gig as a department store Santa during the Christmas season and downs shots of whiskey at a local bar. As he drinks in his Santa garb, two kids notice him from outside, pressing their noses to the windows, waving wildly to get his attention. Corwin asks the bartender, “Why do you suppose there isn’t really a Santa Claus?... Why isn’t there a real Santa Claus for kids like that?” The bartender responds: “What am I supposed to be, some kind of philosopher?” Leibniz asked similar questions: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is the world the way it is, and not some other way? And Leibniz had answers. He was a philosopher.

The second comes when Corwin is sacked after returning drunk following his break from his Santa gig. In response to his employer’s outrage, Corwin is at first contrite but then points out that Christmas is not about how well others meet our performance expectations but rather...
about how we understand, sympathize with, and respond to the plight of others, particularly the meek. Someone should tell the outraged mother of Percival Smithers that Christmas is about “patience and love, charity, compassion.” Corwin’s boss dismisses this with sarcasm: “How philosophical, Mr. Corwin!”

Corwin is hip to the fact that something is seriously wrong with Christmas. Santa doesn’t exist. Instead, there are only fake Santas, hired drunks like Corwin himself, unable to meet the needs and hopes of those most in need. Corwin’s eloquent observations are dismissed, derisively classified as “philosophy.”

In the Twilight Zone, that is, in the imagination, things can go differently. We get to imagine that Corwin acquires the resources to begin to fulfill the needs and reduce the suffering of the children and the elderly in the dark streets of this American city on Christmas Eve. The hope rests in the fact that what we can imagine is possible.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: altruism, diversity, justice, miracles, moral luck, sympathy, virtue
When things get tough, we tend to hope for something miraculous to happen, for some bit of magic that will forestall some dreaded outcome. Of course, hoping that something will be the case is a form of imagining it to be the case, and so is something that takes place in the Twilight Zone, that is, in the imagination.

Things are really tough for Luis Gallegos, who is not only a poor Mexican in a town in the Western United States populated by tough, unsympathetic white pioneers, but he has just accidentally killed a white girl and has been tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by hanging, probably all in the same day. And it’s worse than that: A surly, disgusting resident named Sykes, who has provided the rope for the hanging, taunts Luis about his impending execution. Other episodes featuring hangings are “Execution,” “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and “I Am the Night—Color Me Black.”

Luis accepts his sentence, but his father hopes for a miracle, and Sykes exploits this vulnerability, selling him some “magic dust” that will save the day and spare his son. And, to the surprise of everyone present, Luis is spared, after his father spreads the dust. The dust is spread, the hangman’s rope breaks, and Luis survives. Is this a miracle, or just a post hoc or coincidental occurrence?

What is special is not the breaking of the rope but what happens next. The victim’s family has the authority to order the execution to continue
or to pardon Luis. The mother says: “We leave it like this. One victim is enough.” Serling concludes: “In any quest for magic ... first check the human heart.” As in so many episodes, the final outcome is the result of natural, not supernatural, causes. The victim’s parents overcome what Erin Kelly calls our “retributive sentiments.” They may have recognized that Luis was not in a position to have avoided the accident under the conditions in which it occurred, and therefore, that further punishment was not appropriate.

Following on the heels of “The Night of the Meek,” it bears mention that Serling’s characters and themes exhibit cultural and ethnic diversity that was far less present in television and film than we are accustomed to today. “Dust” portrays, particularly through the character of Sykes, the brutal racism toward the native Mexicans whose land, in what became the American Southwest, was taken from them. Similarly, “The Night of the Meek” reveals the poverty of those unable to provide for themselves, the poor and the elderly of the inner city. Even the suburbs, the sanitized, seemingly uniform community of white residents, turns out to crack with the slightest suspicion of a loss of security in “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street.”

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, justice, punishment, responsibility, sympathy.
“BACK THERE”

*Original air date*: January 13, 1961

It’s April 14, 1961, Washington D.C., at the Potomac Club. During a game of cards, a group of well-heeled club members discusses the metaphysics of time travel. One argues that if time travel were possible, one could prevent a financial disaster that we know occurred in the past from taking place. Another disagrees: If an event has taken place in the past, then it can’t be altered or be prevented from happening. It is this second claim that the episode sets out to defend—with a qualification.

Mr. Peter Corrigan is a participant in this debate, and when he leaves the table, he inexplicably finds that he has time-traveled to April 14, 1865, mere hours before the assassination of Abraham Lincoln’s at Ford’s Theatre. He attempts to prevent the assassination—wouldn’t you?—but he fails, as he must. Yet on Corrigan’s reappearance in the present, we discover that something that is the case, the great wealth of one of his fellow club members, is causally linked to his attempt to prevent Lincoln’s assassination. The conclusion: “In the matter of time travel, gentlemen, some things can be changed; some things can’t.”

So what can be changed and what can’t when you time-travel to the past? The short answer is that you cannot bring it about that *not-p* when it is true that *p*, but you can bring it about that *p* when it is true that *p*, where “*p*” stands for any declarative sentence. You cannot change the past. When Corrigan travels back in time it is true both that Lincoln was
assassinated in 1865 and that his club colleague is wealthy. Corrigan’s being prevented from changing the past only precludes him from changing those things that will alter the truths about the past. The difference is subtle but important.

Of course, the short answer raises questions that don’t have short answers. How can Corrigan be a contributing cause in the acquisition of his colleague’s long-deceased ancestor’s wealth? Corrigan (the cause) comes into existence after the accumulation of wealth (the effect). So we have to tolerate causes occurring after their effects.

If we must adhere to the requirement that the past can’t be altered, must we also adhere to the requirement that causes must occur prior to their effects? “Back There” does not explicitly address this, but it suggests that there is a difference between these two principles. Violating the first is unthinkable. Violating the second is thinkable, when we imagine the story of Corrigan and his interactions with his nineteenth-century and his twentieth-century compatriots.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: causation, metaphysics, time travel
“THE WHOLE TRUTH”

Original air date: January 20, 1961

Opening an episode entitled “The Whole Truth” with a scene (in fact, it’s the only scene of the entire episode) at a used car dealership is hilarious, and what ensues does not disappoint. A young couple, “just browsing” for dependable but inexpensive transportation, is harangued by Harvey Hunnicut, the salesman and owner of this disreputable establishment. We begin with what may be a normal state of affairs at such an establishment: customers at risk in their interaction with a salesperson who will say anything, true or not, to close a sale.

We are then thrown into a thought experiment. Suppose that an individual found herself, temporarily at least, unable to deliberately assert falsehoods, that the only assertions that individual could make were propositions that are true. In two areas of life, at a minimum, such a modification in assertability conditions would have profound consequences: selling used cars and governing nations. “The Whole Truth” explores this possibility and its consequences for auto sales and politics to comedic effect. But it raises the issue of the role of falsehood and its relatives, such as dissembling, exaggerating, and withholding, in the much wider sphere of human discourse and action.

One widely held view is that we can only make sense of the behavior of human agents by assuming that what they assert is both what they take to be true and is true. In the philosophy of language, this is known as the principle of charity, that our interpretations of the claims
of others typically are and should be charitable. That people generally assert the truth has to do with the fact that people are goal-directed and self-interested. If your French friend asks you why you are dialing 911, you could say, “In the United States, that’s how you activate the Emergency Management System,” and it is both true and true that you believe it. If either of these assumptions fail, disaster lurks ahead.

But if we largely utter true statements, what’s the point of a thought experiment that constrains us to do what we generally do anyway? The rub is that while we generally are truth tellers, we are not always truth tellers, and that has to do with the fact that it doesn’t always serve our goals to let others know what we take to be true or what is in fact true. Plato championed the idea of the “noble lie” in the Republic. The lies told when selling used cars (or pretty much anything, for that matter) may not be noble. Whether they can be noble when employed in politics is certainly open to debate.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: epistemology, honesty, intentionality, other minds, truth
A poor woman living in a rustic shack in some lonely hollow, in a place that looks very much like Appalachia in the eastern United States, faces off against the invaders—miniature creatures who have crash-landed their flying saucer into the attic of her dwelling. What follows is truly terrifying, as she wordlessly and valiantly fends off their high-tech assault.

We identify with the woman, not with the invaders. She may be poor and from an isolated rural place, but we believe that she is on our planet, and the invaders are clearly from elsewhere. And she is our size. The invaders are small. They’re like insects, pests that won’t leave us alone. They swarm around her, and she swats back in defense.

As we watch the invasion, we form judgments about what is happening, and we have affective responses to those judged happenings, only to discover, in the end, that our judgments were incorrect and so our feelings were misplaced. Even our judgments of size were wrong and those clearly figured into our emotional responses and expectations!

If we can be so wrong about the invaders, as we discover we are at the end of the episode, what accounts for our false beliefs until the very end? Philosophers and cognitive scientists have come to appreciate the influence that emotions play in what were previously thought to be judgments made by “pure” reason, and that how we describe the world that we are observing almost always takes place in clusters, frameworks, or
stereotypes that often are helpful but sometimes lead us to make significant errors. Seeing the invaders as pests, as small, places them in a framework that makes it improbable that they are who they actually turn out to be in the end.

In “The Midnight Sun” Serling refers to the “poles of our fears”—the extremes that induce fear: when it gets too hot or too cold, or when something is too large or too small. What we take to be the extremes are relative to our everyday judgments. This point is borne out well in this episode, and in others, including “The Fear” and “Stopover in a Quiet Town.”

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords:* metaphysics, ontology, war
The philosophical examination of an aspect of the human condition is often carried out by taking some feature of that condition and imaging its absence and then thinking about how that adjustment—the human condition minus some feature—would make a meaningful difference. Contemplating this difference-making gives us some insight into the feature under examination. Many *Twilight Zone* episodes can be described as taking this approach to philosophical examination. Take a feature of human existence, modify it, and watch what happens. What happens takes place in “the Twilight Zone, a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination.”

The ordinary feature of human existence under scrutiny in this episode is that we don’t hear what other people are thinking unless they “speak their minds” and express their thoughts in overt speech. We don’t hear what is thought but isn’t spoken. That doesn’t mean we can’t know what someone is thinking without their verbal report. But if we do know what someone is thinking when they don’t report their thoughts, our knowledge is based on nonverbal factors, such as their behavior and the environment in which they act. It’s also the case that verbal reports don’t always give us accurate information about what someone is thinking. Both of these wrinkles are noted in this episode.
The episode supposes what is not the case: Hector B. Poole, a bank employee on his way to work, undergoes a transformation such that he can now hear what people are thinking, both when they are not speaking and when what they are thinking differs from what they report to be thinking. So our question is this: How would the ability to hear what people are thinking change things, and how does this shed light on the fact that we do not have direct access to the thoughts of others?

One thing Hector notices right away is that verbal reports often don’t line up with what a person is thinking. The dictates of politeness lead to dissembling and to claims that at best do not cohere with our beliefs (see “The Whole Truth”). The incongruities of thought and talk confronting Hector in his most casual interactions in public are disturbing and disorienting. Hector looks sick almost as soon as he is struck with his new cognitive abilities. Others speculate that he is mentally ill. What seems like a cognitive enhancement might really be a disability.

At the bank where he works, among colleagues of various ranks, Hector encounters new challenges, not the least of which is grappling with the inappropriate thoughts of his male colleagues toward women. It is worth noting that Serling highlighted this unfortunately pervasive feature of the workplace in the early 1960s. Hector is so outraged by the sexism of his male counterpart that he douses him with a cup of water.

What Hector’s new ability makes most clear, however, is that we often act without thinking and think without acting. Hector “hears” what people don’t say out loud, what a founder of behaviorism, James Watson, called subvocal speech, but he doesn’t hear what they aren’t thinking to themselves. In a brief but important scene, Hector sees a bank customer fondling her cash while beaming with pleasure at her treasure. Hector gets close to her, but no thought is projected. Maybe the lights are on, but no one’s home, or maybe she’s thinking but not talking to herself. Is that a possible mental state? The scenario raises the question.

We can also think without acting, or, more precisely, think without intending to act. That’s what happens when Hector “overhears” his colleague, Mr. Smithers, planning a theft. As the end of the work week approaches, Smithers, a trusted and underappreciated employee of long standing, plans to abscond with cash from the bank’s vault and retire to Bermuda. Hector picks up on the plan and informs the bank president. But the plan never materializes. Smithers fantasizes about robbing the bank, but he never forms the intention to carry out the plan. Hector has access to the thoughts of others, but not the thinker’s attitude toward
the thought. He can’t tell whether Smithers is merely imagining that \( p \), hoping that \( p \), or intending to make it true that \( p \), where \( p \) is “I will rob the bank and escape to Bermuda.”

So how do we, without Hector’s powers, figure out what others are thinking, and, just as important, how do we figure out what another mind’s attitudes are toward their thoughts, for we can’t know what they will do with a proposition \( p \) that’s in their head, unless we know whether they believe that \( p \), hope that \( p \), fear that \( p \), merely imagine that \( p \)? We make such attributions all the time, even without Hector’s access. Hector knows what is said without it being said. But just as we know what is said when someone utters a proposition aloud, we don’t know what they mean until we interpret that proposition. To interpret a proposition, we have to see how it fits in with other propositions and with their behavior. Had Hector observed Mr. Smithers’s behavior over several days, he would have realized that he was fantasizing a theft, rather than actually planning one.

We can imagine other possible scenarios. Hector might have obtained greater powers. For example, Hector might have obtained the power to immediately know not only what someone is thinking to him- or herself but how to interpret that content and what attitude the thinker holds toward that content (belief, hope, etc.). That Hector’s power is more limited is precisely what sheds light on our own condition.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, epistemology, intentionality, other minds, responsibility
Miss Liz Powell has a problem. She has a recurring dream, but she finds it “difficult to decide which is reality, and which is nightmare.” Does she dream that she wakes up from her hospital bed, knocks a water glass to the floor, leaves her room, takes the elevator to the basement of the hospital, and proceeds to Room 22, which is the morgue, where the door opens and a nurse beckons her in, with the welcome, “Room for one more, honey,” or does she actually wake up and experience this sequence of events? The problem is exacerbated by her location: Her “dreams” occur in the psychiatric ward of a hospital, where she is being treated for a “nervous breakdown.” Her insistence that the nightly events are real is dismissed by her psychiatrist and her agent as a symptom of her illness.

One way to distinguish dreams from reality is to check how the purported dreams cohere or fail to cohere with the purported reality. If the consensus has it that some proposition $p$ is true, then check whether the purported dream claim coheres or fails to cohere with $p$. For example, if you dream that you jumped out a window and flew like a bird, the claim that you actually did so will not cohere with what your epistemic community, the community of other belief holders of which you are a member, claims to know. Therefore, what you claim to have experienced was a dream (see “Shadow Play”).

Using this test, it turns out that Miss Powell’s claims do cohere with many of the facts as they are understood by others. It takes the psychiatrist
a while to appreciate this, but he knows that there is a morgue in the basement of the hospital, that it is numbered Room 22. Both claims cohere with Miss Powell’s description of the sequence of events she claims to experience each night. Further, the claim that Miss Powell actually visited the entrance to Room 22 adds additional coherence to the set of beliefs held by the psychiatrist and others, since the truth of that claim helps explain how Miss Powell can hold the beliefs she holds.

The dramatic peak of the episode occurs only after Miss Powell has recovered and is on her way to Florida for further relaxation and decompression. And this dramatic climax trades on the question of the relationship of what Miss Powell thinks she is experiencing to the public truths about what is transpiring in the world. Finding coherence among the experiences, claims, and overt facts is challenging and confusing. Since any belief we hold can, in principle, be challenged, we’re left wondering what to hold on to and what is in need of revision.

Another dimension of this episode has to do with the fact that the individual reporting the supposedly aberrant events is a woman, a woman we meet in the psych ward of a hospital, towered over by the authoritarian psychiatrist and then by the patient’s handler in the outside world. He is her agent, and she is a dancer. He characterizes her as a “strip-tease dancer,” and she corrects him. The person with the contested view of what is real is a female, and the possessors of the truth are males. The males are powerful, dominating figures—the psychiatrist and the dancer’s agent. Both the psychiatrist and the agent belittle her every claim, but she fights back and rebuts every belittlement. Look closely at Miss Powell’s interactions and it is clear: She doesn’t suffer the fools who are in control, and that’s not because she’s crazy. She isn’t.

Recent work in epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, has introduced the idea of epistemic injustice, of the systematic discounting of the testimony of members of marginalized groups. When we discount the testimony of a group, we may wind up failing to gain knowledge related to their concerns and interests, and we may treat them inappropriately, based on our false beliefs.

As we’ve already noted, Liz Powell is a member of two groups that historically have been marginalized: women and patients under psychiatric care. The episode accurately depicts the injustice of the treatment of Miss Powell by the dominating groups, males and physicians. Their interactions with Miss Powell exhibit the two kinds of epistemic injustice Miranda Fricker introduced in her pioneering work *Epistemic Injustice*. 

“TWENTY TWO”
According to Fricker, testimonial injustice can occur when one discounts the testimony of another based on socially inculcated stereotypes, as when one fails to believe the testimony of another because the person is a woman. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when we fail to understand and make sense of members of a marginalized group because we lack the resources to form a coherent picture of their behavior and practices. This form of injustice is prevalent when the group in power, theorizing about the other group, fails to take the practices and conditions of other groups as important and worthy of study or simply does not have enough experience to form an adequate understanding of that group. Liz Powell is subject to both forms of injustice.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, dreaming, epistemology, feminism, skepticism
The possibility and nature of time travel is a frequent theme in *The Twilight Zone*. It is front and center in this one. Inexplicably, a commercial jetliner, a Boeing 707 en route from London to New York, gains speed—too much speed—and finds itself not over New York in 1961 but New York during the Mesozoic Era, a mere 100 million years or so prior. The pilots know this when they get below the clouds and see the dinosaurs. There’s no airport, of course, and so they head back up, to gain speed and inexplicably try to get “back” to 1961. They get close but not close enough, and the episode ends with them undertaking a third attempt, with little prospect of hitting their target time.

In this, as in all time travel scenarios, there are two ways to track the passage of time: There is what David Lewis calls “personal time,” the time span as the crew and passengers on Flight 33 (and we) experience it, and there is what Lewis calls “external time,” the time span from some point on the flight to the location in time at which they have arrived. In the normal case, personal time and external time are the same. The passengers and crew endure a six-hour journey from London and arrive in New York six hours after departure. But in this case, they arrive in New York 100 million years or so before they leave London. Time has passed in these two seemingly irreconcilable ways. In this case, where the crew travels back in time, it is even problematic to say that time has “passed.”
Arriving in New York 100 million years ago, the occupants of Flight 33 inhabit a time before their species existed and before Boeing 707s were built. So at the point at time to which they have traveled, there are no humans—but there are humans—and there are no airplanes—but there is an airplane. The aircraft continues to function. It continues to burn fuel, and the crew monitors the remaining fuel. The occupants of the plane still wear their twentieth-century clothes. Everything inside the aircraft remains as it was. But the crew has lost contact with their ground communication counterparts, because those counterparts do not exist and will not exist anytime soon.

Typically emphasized in time travel scenarios are interpersonal relationships and the consequences of time travel for those relationships. In contrast, “The Odyssey of Flight 33” is not about that at all. Instead, what we come to appreciate is the role that the environment, including the state of technology, where it exists, plays for the time traveler. Flight 33 simply can’t land in most of the past, since the past is not set up for the technology of jet travel. Without airports, or even with airports but without runways of sufficient length, there is no place to land, and Flight 33 is doomed, unless it can return to the narrow temporal window in which the airborne technology meshes with that on the ground.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* time, time travel
We are often advised to know our limitations and to plan our actions in light of them. It’s not a good idea to plan to pull an all-nighter to write a paper when you typically have trouble staying up until midnight, and it’s also unwise to think that you can read, understand, and craft polished prose about Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* over a span of ten hours, even if you can manage to stay awake and focused for that interval.

More positively, knowing your limitations entails that you have some sense of what you are capable of doing with the resources that you accurately assess to be at your disposal. Looking at the sign indicating that the ski run below you is a black diamond or “experts only” run, you may assess that you have the requisite skill and possess the appropriate equipment to safely descend. Much of our sense of our own well-being is caught up in the accuracy of our self-assessments of our own physical and mental capacities.

Knowing your limitations and your powers doesn’t tell you what you ought to do, except insofar as you ought not attempt to do what you can’t do. As we attribute to Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*: “Ought” implies “can.” But among the vast variety of actions that you can undertake, what ought you to do? And what happens when you discover that you can do much more than you thought you could do? That is the question raised in “Mr. Dingle, the Strong.” Of course, the relevant question isn’t what you would do but what the average person would do, and is that
what one ought to do? This last question is a philosophical question, a question in moral theory.

Before he acquires new powers, Mr. Dingle does indeed know his limitations. He cowers when bullied by his acquaintances at the local bar. The visiting aliens choose Mr. Dingle as the subject of their experiment for just this reason. He's the weakest person they have found, and he knows that he is weak. They give him additional strength, making him three hundred times stronger than the average human. They want to know what happens when the weakest human discovers that he has become the strongest. It's important that the aliens’ experiment does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in a society filled with individuals who seek to satisfy their own desires above those of anyone else.

Mr. Dingle does not use his new powers for good but merely switches places with his tormentors and does unto them what they have done unto him. It is a lethal combination of egotism, machismo, and revenge gone wild. The aliens who gave Dingle his powers are disappointed but not surprised. Clearly their hope is to see the gift of additional physical strength harnessed for the public good. Dingle's actions, though not laudable, are unsurprising in the context of the values of the society of which he is a member. As they abort the failed experiment, they look forward to trying again on another planet, one in which there are only women! There's a chance that they'll have better luck.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords:** egoism, feminism, folk psychology, rationality, vice
“STATIC”

Original air date: March 10, 1961

What distinguishes memory from imagination? Certainly, our memories inform our imagination. When we imagine what might have been, in contrast to what was, we go beyond our memories to paint a picture of alternative states of affairs. That’s what happens to Ed Lindsay, a longtime resident of a boarding house, who long ago was in love with Vinnie Broun, another resident. They planned to marry but never did. Now, prompted by an old radio, a 1935 console retrieved from storage, he remembers his promise-filled youth and the sounds on the radio that he and Vinnie listened to at the time. But he does more than remember. He imagines that he is hearing live broadcasts of Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra playing “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You” and other radio shows that graced the airways in decades long past.

When Ed attempts to share the broadcasts with others, there is just static. The radio only “works” when he’s alone. So is Ed making a mistake, or is he exhibiting a form of mental illness? In our discussion of “A World of Difference” we introduced Wittgenstein’s observation that when someone violates shared norms and background assumptions, we may not be able to explain their behavior in terms of making mistakes. Mistakes presuppose a shared framework. The shared framework for the folks Ed is trying to convince is one in which Tommy Dorsey is dead and live broadcasts of his music ceased long ago. Ed is not simply making a
mistake. Like Gerry Raigan in “A World of Difference,” he is suffering from some sort of mental illness.

Another source of static between Ed and his fellow residents is the “new” medium of television. The episode opens with the residents glued to the TV. Ed erupts with a furious rebuttal of the medium. As he switches the channels, it doesn’t matter what’s on the little screen; the residents are mesmerized by all of it. It becomes clear only later that what Ed really objects to is the intrusiveness of television in contrast to radio. TV is just there to passively watch, while radio requires the active participation of the listener’s imagination. Serling describes Ed’s preferred medium as “a strange and wonderful time machine called a radio.” Of course, in this episode, TV is the new technology, and radio is outdated. But Ed is on to something about the difference in the modalities of the two media. Serling is using television to critique television, presaging our recognition that the although the medium may not be the message, we ignore the relationship between different modes of the presentation of information and the different modes of cognition at our peril.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: loneliness, memory, mental illness, time travel
There’s a long tradition in the history of philosophy of arguing for the necessary existence of what Aristotle called a prime mover. If there are things that move, and there are, then there are other things that made them move. And the things that made things move must themselves move, and so must be moved by other moving things. This is an infinite regress, unless it can be stopped by a prime or first mover, a mover that is not itself moved by another and must exist in order for anything to move.

Another way of characterizing a prime mover is as something non-physical that can move a physical thing. If you hold that your mind is not a physical thing, then you are a prime mover. When you raise your hand to answer a question in class, you have formed the intention to raise your hand and then raised it. You prime-moved it. While we can, within limits, directly prime-move parts of our bodies, we can’t directly move other objects. We can raise a glass by raising our arm when we are holding a glass. In Meditation 6 of his Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes remarked on the close connection of mind and body. Though he took mind and body to be completely distinct substances, he emphasized and attempted to explain the special relationship a mind has to its associated body and to it alone. This episode has us imagine a possible world in which there is a person who is a prime mover in this extended sense: He can directly move objects outside his body the way we can move some parts of our bodies.
The issue raised here is similar in some respects to that of “Mr. Dingle, the Strong.” There we imagined someone possessing a power not normally possessed. In that case it was sheer physical strength. And we saw that not only could such powers be abused but it was all but certain that they would be abused. In “The Prime Mover” the possible world we imagine is one where the difference in the possession of a power is not just a matter of degree but one of scope. If someone had the power to directly move not just parts of their own body but other objects as well, how would and should such a power be used?

Mr. Dingle used his newfound strength for himself. Here, it’s Jimbo Cobb who has the power, but he serves simply as the agent of his friend, Ace Larsen, in the exercise of his special talent. He’s a prime mover in the service of another. Jimbo knows that Ace is using Jimbo’s powers in the service of his gambling addiction, but he accedes to Ace’s demands for as long as he can. As Rod Serling puts it: “Some people possess talent; others are possessed by it.” Here the person possessed by it is not the person who possesses it. Jimbo’s inability, or unwillingness, to challenge the bad decisions that Ace makes shows that even a prime mover can make the wrong moves. It’s one thing to possess a power and quite another to act on it from the right reasons. In fact, if Ace is calling the shots, then Jimbo isn’t really the prime mover—Ace is.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: God, mental causation, metaphysics, vice
Billy, a five-year-old boy, is given a toy telephone by his adoring grandmother on his birthday, a few days before she dies. She tells him that the phone is for the exclusive communication between the two of them. After her death, Billy takes himself to hold conversations with her and, somewhat disturbingly, takes her to command his death, presumably so that he can join her.

As Serling notes, there are at least two ways to interpret what happens, either as true communication between the living and the dead or as the consequence of Billy's young and overwrought imagination. Which explanatory stance one adopts, Serling points out, depends on one's frame of reference. If we could easily land on the second of these two possible interpretations, that would be well and good. But we can't simply dismiss Billy's perspective, because when his mother picks up the phone, she too hears Billy's deceased grandmother's voice on the line. Later, Billy's father converses with—nay, pleads with—Billy's grandmother to release her hold on the child.

We tend to think of the products of the imagination, and particularly the products of overwrought imaginations, in an individualistic way. An imagined state of affairs is the mental state of an individual. An individual can describe what she imagines to another, but if that induces the imagined state in another, there are still two sets of imagined events or things, not one. That's a key difference between imagination and perception.
Two or more individuals can perceive the same apple, but we can’t imagine the same apple. There are two, possibly very similar, imagined apples.

Yet individualism about the imagination can’t be right. When we read and discuss a novel or a play, we can discuss what happens to the individuals in the novel, and when we do so, we are different individuals imagining the same object, just as when we look at an apple we are different individuals perceiving the same object. Although two perceptions of an apple take place from slightly different points of view and are framed with differing background information, we still speak of perceiving the same apple. So too for two individuals discussing the character Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Billy picks up the toy phone, and when his parents do so later, they share a story, and they imagine the same individual, Billy’s grandmother, who is at the center of that story. The imagined individual, who was, until recently, an individual who existed not just in the imagination but was the dominating force in Billy’s family, is shared by the surviving members of the family as saliently as the actual grandmother was. Billy and his parents now have to come to grips with that individual, and doing so is more challenging than it was when the individual was not “merely” imagined but was alive in the world.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: afterlife, death, immortality, metaphysics, other minds
Many time travel episodes are about traveling to the past. This one is about traveling to the future and then returning to the point in time from which one traveled, that is, back to the past. If you go to the future and discover that $p$, while $p$ seems unlikely to occur from the perspective of the past that you inhabit, can you go back to the past and try to make it the case that $p$? This episode suggests that you can (see “Back There”).

It’s 1847 in what is now the desert of New Mexico, and Christian Horn and his family are en route from Ohio to California by wagon train. It doesn’t look like they are going to make it. Supplies are low, and one of their children, the eldest boy, is deathly ill. Christian asks the others to wait as he advances alone, “a hundred yards over the rim,” just beyond a sand dune. When he does, he arrives in the late 1950s desert, one with electrical wires, a road, trucks, and a roadside cafe.

Time travel can be disorienting both for the time traveler and for the people he or she encounters. When Christian is met by Joe, in front of Joe’s diner, Christian has already had an almost fatal encounter with a monster—a large truck—and his appearance and demeanor are shockingly strange to Joe. But Joe realizes that Christian is hurt, disoriented, and in need of help, and he sees past Christian’s strangeness and offers help. This is yet another form of diversity celebrated in The Twilight Zone. How would you deal with a stranger in need who appears from another time?

The virtue of providing hospitality for strangers who are on a journey is called xenia in ancient Greek thought and is perhaps the central virtue
celebrated in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Mary Lou and Joe possess the virtue of *xenia*, unquestioningly aiding a traveler in need who is a stranger to both their place and their time.

Although Joe’s kind and caring disposition kicks in as he attends to Christian, even calling in his doctor, he maintains that Christian is not rational. The doctor disagrees, noting, “He’s suffering a delusion of some kind, but it’s a delusion of the purist form.” That’s based on the clarity of Christian’s description of his life on the wagon train. The problem is not Christian’s rationality but everyone else’s. Christian has the steadfast resolve to get his family safely to California. It’s those confronted by Christian who seem lost, unfocused, and unable to understand what is going on.

Christian’s resolve is strengthened by what he learns from the future, namely that he and his family will make it, that his son will survive and flourish. If the wagon train will arrive in California, then Christian (and or other causes) will make it happen. Christian makes this inference from effects to causes, and while it doesn’t provide a logical guarantee, it does provide further reasons for pushing west, reasons he did not have before he peered over the rim. That comes from a vision of the future—of what is possible for his children and for others—and he forges ahead because of that vision.

Before visiting the future, Christian faced skeptical travelers who questioned the wisdom of continuing the journey. Does Christian travel forward in time, where he is encouraged to form the resolve in the past to forge ahead, or does he stay put in 1847 and make a straightforward inference about the future about the effect of staying the course? It’s not clear how he could acquire the evidence needed for such an inference without undertaking time travel. But does he really need to know that they’ll make it and that his son will become a physician, or does he just need to imagine it in the right way?

Christian also gains the unique perspective of being able to understand the significance of their westward struggle. He says, using the past tense to refer to the future: “There were people like us. We made it happen.”

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: causation, diversity, rationality, reason, time travel, xenia
What, if anything, has lasting or intrinsic value? Suppose your strategy is to steal something of great value and hold on to it for a hundred years, with the hope of cashing in when the heat is off. Is that a good strategy? That’s the strategy in this episode, with a little help from technology that suspends the aging process in the bodies of the thieves for one hundred years so that they can cash in the stolen items without getting caught. Will something of great value now have great value in a hundred years? Is there anything that has great value now that is guaranteed to have great value in a hundred years?

There are lots of ways of thinking about value and about whether there anything is intrinsically valuable. Some things are valuable as a means to some end that we desire or value. A vessel that floats is valuable if we desire to cross a body of water. If we don’t wish to travel over water, the vessel may lose its value. Values like this are called instrumental or extrinsic values.

Are there any physical objects or types of objects or substances that have intrinsic value, or are all “things” merely valuable as a means for achieving some end, for accomplishing some goal? That may depend on what we include among our objects. Do they include living things? Persons? We may well think that human lives or, more generally, some varieties of conscious experience have intrinsic value. If we think that
there are no things—physical things—with intrinsic value, then we could use that position to craft an argument that persons are not physical things if we are committed to the intrinsic value of persons.

“The Rip Van Winkle Caper” provides grounds for thinking there is intrinsic value and that the objects that have it might not be what are most valuable or precious within one’s own culture. Even what has been regarded as most valuable over different cultures and several millennia may not have intrinsic value. The argument for intrinsic value is presented as a recipe: Take some candidate for intrinsic value and imagine a possible world in which it is valueless. If the description of that possible world is coherent, then the object in question does not have intrinsic value. The problem with this argument is that it can eliminate intrinsic value candidates, but it can’t show that anything has intrinsic value. However, the episode provides at least a hint of a candidate for intrinsic value. As the last two survivors of the caper attempt to walk through the desert, and survive to cash in, we see quite plainly that their survival, their existence as persons, is a precondition for anything else having value.

“The Rip Van Winkle Caper” is also a case of time travel. As is often noted, any enduring existence is a case of time travel, just a mundane case. In the episode, the four thieves attempt to partake in a non-mundane case of time travel, by suspending their life processes for a long interval, and then re-emerging on the scene after that interval. They travel to a point in time that they wouldn’t be able to reach by ordinary means. This method is different from the typically imagined time machine, but it has the advantage of being a non-hand-waving procedure: We know, in outline at least, how they manage to skip to the future. Unlike the typical time-travel scenario, their trip in time, like our mundane time travel, is only in one direction. Serling explores this possibility again in “The Long Morrow.”

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: desire, time, time travel, value, vice
We place bets on events that are probable, not on events that are either certain or impossible, and what we are willing to wager depends on our judgments of the degree of probability that the outcome will obtain and on the utility or value of the outcome obtaining or not obtaining. The study of how we should determine probabilities, in both games of chance as well as in science and common life, is referred to by philosophers as inductive logic. The study of applying probabilities with judgments of utility or value is called decision theory.

In “The Silence” a wager is proposed from one member of an exclusive men’s club to another: If the young and very talkative Mr. Tennyson will be silent for a full year, the older and annoyed Archie Taylor will pay Tennyson half a million dollars. If Tennyson speaks even one word before the year is up, the bet is off. The conditions of the bet include Tennyson living out the year in a glass-enclosed room that will record any utterance issuing from him.

Is it rational for Taylor to issue the bet? He believes that Tennyson will not last a year, or even a few weeks, in silence. If he’s right about that, his costs amount only to supplying the room and board in the club for the period Tennyson remains silent. If Tennyson is silent for the year, it will cost Taylor half a million dollars. But Taylor thinks that this outcome is extremely unlikely, given Tennyson’s proclivity for conversation.
Tennyson aside, it’s an interesting empirical question whether a typical human agent, given a large enough payout, could be induced to refrain not only from speech but from normal proximate interaction for such a prolonged period. No institutional review board would grant permission to run such an experiment, of course, and although the informal setting of the club lacks such ethical oversight, the issue of the moral standing of Taylor’s proposal is at least raised by other members of the club.

Gambling can take place only against a background of trust. Bets are made when both parties are confident that they will be paid off if they win the bet. In “The Silence” the context is a men’s club, an establishment of wealthy men who believe of themselves and the other members of the club that they are honorable and forthright. Tennyson demands that Taylor place a certified check in escrow, to be handed over to him should he win the bet. Taylor rejects that condition, citing the club’s traditions and the traditions of class and privilege more generally as the appropriate trust mechanism. There are several philosophical takeaways about practical reasoning in this strange episode, not the least of which has to do with appreciating the shifting grounds of trust. A men’s club in the 1960s may very well be the last refuge of a scoundrel.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: probability, rationality, trust, vice, virtue
In our discussion of “Where Is Everybody?” we considered the possibility that the world is radically different from the way it appears to be. “Shadow Play” raises a related skeptical problem, a problem generated by what philosophers call the dream argument. The most famous formulation of the dream argument occurs in René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). In that work, Descartes writes:

At the same time I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness
from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream. (Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation I)

As Descartes presents the argument, one can easily imagine that the experiences had while awake could have occurred in a dream, since in dreams one can have experiences that are indistinguishable from those one has when awake. In “Shadow Play” Adam Grant dreams that he has just been convicted of murder in the first degree and is sentenced to death. In his dream he tries to convince those around him that they are all in a dream. But the dream is so realistic that the other characters dismiss his claim that it is a dream. Adam Grant, then, presents the dream argument, and the other characters attempt to refute the argument.

If we look closely at Descartes’ argument, we see that Descartes isn’t claiming that we are dreaming, just that it is possible that we are. And if it is possible, then we don’t know that the ordinary beliefs we have when we think we are awake are true. If it is possible that you are really in bed right now, dreaming, rather than sitting in front of your computer, then you don’t know that you are sitting in front of your computer, even if you are strongly inclined to think that you are. By the same token, Adam Grant tries to convince the others in his dream that they are characters in his dream rather than real people by arguing that it is possible. Still, he has limited success until almost the end of the episode (for an objection to Descartes’ argument, see “Perchance to Dream”).

You might think that if Grant was in fact dreaming, it should have been possible for him either to wake up and in so doing escape the dream or to act differently than he did, by running to the door when being sentenced. Instead, his behavior seems too constrained for a dream. Notice that the concern is that Grant’s behavior is too much like what it would be in real life. If he realizes it’s a dream, he should be unconstrained and perhaps fly around the courtroom. Wouldn’t that convince others that it was a dream? But notice that Descartes points out that many of our dreams are just like our waking experiences, and so this dream of Grant’s is in fact one of those. It can be a dream and not involve weird events and experiences. Further, if there were weird events, such as Grant flying around the room, would that prove that it was a dream? Perhaps reality is like that. We think such things happen only in dreams, but if we can’t tell the difference, then we don’t know whether our waking experience is more coherent and less weird than our dreaming experience.
FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: dreaming, epistemology, skepticism
In “The Night of the Meek” we noted that Leibniz asked two fundamental questions: (1) Why is there something rather than nothing? and (2) Why is it this way and not some other way? Leibniz argues that if the actual world is the product of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being, a being who selected this world for actualization from among all the possible worlds, then the answer to the two questions is that this is the best of all possible worlds. God chose it because it was the best, and God would only choose the best.

Mr. Archibald Beechcroft, like many of us, has had moments when this world appears to be far from the best: in crowded elevators, subways, and streets, when someone spills coffee. Of course, there are many weightier things Beechcroft could cite as evidence that this world leaves much to be desired, such as famine, natural disasters, and the wide variety of human-inflicted assaults on individuals, groups, and the environment. But Beechcroft is nothing if not supremely annoyed by the little things that affect him directly and by other people generally.

One way to make sense of why things are the way they are and not some other way is to imagine that one had the power to change things. If it were up to Beechcroft, there would be no crowded elevators or subway cars, no assistants who spill coffee. So, let’s give Beechcroft the power that might otherwise belong to the benevolent omnipotent creator and see how it goes. Beechcroft gets to occupy God’s position, at least insofar as
he has the power to craft a world that is the best of all possible worlds for himself, and we can sit back and observe the consequences.

Every Twilight Zone episode—indeed, every work of fiction—presents a possible world. And many works of fiction present a possible world in which there are other possible worlds, that is, possible worlds within the possible world. In most stories, as in most human events in the actual world, the selection of a possible world results in an action—taking a fork in the road. What makes Beechcroft’s case special and thus godlike is that possible worlds are actualized by mere thought. Just as God, as typically conceived in western religions, wouldn’t need any matter to bring about the existence of matter in any conceivable configuration, so Beechcroft finds himself able to actualize any changes in matter by his mere thought.

Once he is given the power to change anything, Beechcroft attempts to improve on the actual world. If Leibniz is right—if the world is already the product of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good god—then Beechcroft will fail. It already is the best of all possible worlds. But that’s unintuitive for Beechcroft and perhaps for the rest of us. Beechcroft’s first act is to eliminate all of humanity save himself. But as we saw in “The Man in the Bottle,” our choices have consequences. Beechcroft learns that pretty quickly and tries again. Beechcroft’s dilemma confronts any engineer. Leibniz describes God’s task as balancing the simplicity of the means with the richness of the effects. The worlds Beechcroft actualizes turn out to be worse than the world about which he so bitterly complained.

Beechcroft’s failure to engineer a better world may have something to do with his basic principles and his fundamental values. Early in the episode he provides his analysis of perfection. A perfect world is a world in which Beechcroft is the only person. All ills come from the imposition of evil by others. While the case for this analysis can be made, it ignores a fact that Beechcroft himself woefully ignores, namely the positive effect other people have on his life, even when they are responsible for some of Beechcroft’s discomfort.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: God, mental causation, ontology, possible worlds, problem of evil
How do we and, more philosophically, how ought we assess the character and motives of others, particularly in the face of potential threats to our well-being? How should we interpret the actions, claims, and even appearance of others as either menacing or not?

“Will the Real Martian Please Stand Up?” puts eleven people in a diner, a restaurant, with the possibility that one of them arrived on an unidentified flying object. The assumption that a being from outer space is a threat and is among them—an assumption questioned at least once in the episode—raises the question of how one might make the appropriate identification. What kind of investigation would enable them to discover which one of them is the real Martian?

Contrast the situation to that of the earthlings in “To Serve Man.” There, the alien beings arrive with full disclosure: They announce their arrival. They look like aliens. And they profess their intention to serve human beings. We know who the aliens are, and we think we know their intentions. In “The Real Martian” we don’t know who the aliens are, but we think we know their intentions.

Everyone in the diner is a suspect since a human appearance is no guarantee of non-Martianhood. Everything hangs on what they say, how they act, their stations in life, and their relationships to others. There are
two couples, a drunk, two state troopers, a single woman, a single man, and the diner’s cook.

As in “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” the human interactions under stress here are ugly. It doesn’t take much for well-established beliefs about others that support trust to be undermined. One member of a long-married couple questions almost immediately whether the person sitting across the table is their partner! The drunk is dismissed as a drunk, even though his observations of what is going on are the most coherent and compelling of the group. The affluent male insults everyone as he sows seeds of suspicion. Distrust must have been smoldering just under the surface before the presence of the Martians was suggested.

The capacity to distrust, however, is limited, as this episode chillingly reveals. One can’t distrust everything, at least not everything at once. If Martians were really out to manipulate and control humans and if they possess both a good understanding of human psychology and the means to exploit that understanding, we wouldn’t stand much of a chance. We distrust what we should trust and trust what we should distrust.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, fate of the earth, other minds, sympathy, vice, war
“THE OBSOLETE MAN”

Original air date: June 2, 1961

“The Obsolete Man” shows us a possible future way in which society is organized and people are governed. Where people attempt to live together and, as Hume noted, there are limited but not extremely scarce resources, we may enact rules that constrain behavior, and thus we confront questions of rights and justice.

We don’t know the details of the circumstances of human existence in the episode, or even what day-to-day life is like in the society envisioned in “The Obsolete Man.” Romney Wordsworth is charged with his crime in an austere courtroom, and then later we see him in his abode, overflowing with books and hand-made furniture, which is clearly unlike that of the average citizen. But Wordsworth is not found guilty of hoarding material possessions, nor of depriving others of resources that are their due. Rather, he is judged to be “obsolete.” This isn’t about distributive justice. It is about adherence to the values of a state committed to an extreme version of what Mary Midgely calls “moral isolationism.” This is a state that condemns anyone whose values it does not endorse, while rejecting the idea that anyone can question those values.

Wordsworth is obsolete because he is a librarian in a society that has eliminated books. Wordsworth is also judged obsolete because he believes in God, and “the State has proved that there is no God.” No backstory is provided to account for how this state arose, perhaps because no history
or set of conditions could justify it. We are just front and center to a brutal form of governmental control, one in which a great deal of human freedom has been eliminated and conformity to the values of the state is required. Wordsworth is not free to hold or express beliefs about religion, and he is not free to identify with the profession of his choice. It’s not just that there is no work for librarians. Identifying oneself as a librarian is punishable by death.

Serling introduces the episode as depicting “not a new world, but just an extension of what began in the old one.” He claims that in such a world technological advances provide “a more sophisticated approach to the destruction of human freedom” than did its historical antecedents. It’s not clear what those advances are in the episode, in comparison to those used, for example, in Nazi Germany. Perhaps it is the highly individualized attention given to the manner of Wordsworth’s execution. Perhaps these “advances” are also the state’s Achilles’ heel, as Wordsworth turns it against his accuser. It’s unclear, however, whether the outcome represents the start of a revolution or is merely a lone cry for justice.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: freedom, God, justice, ontology, rights
Serling summarizes the episode with the simple description that it is a love story in the Twilight Zone. And that it is, but a love story set in conditions hardly conducive to the fostering of love or of anything short of hatred and hostility between two individuals from opposing countries in the immediate aftermath of war.

When soldiers from opposing armies meet on the battlefield, how they should act is governed by their relationship to the armed forces of the country of which they are a member, which typically requires them to attempt to kill or at least disarm and imprison the members of the opposing force. Interactions between opposing forces are not completely outside of considerations of justice, however. Philosophers from Aristotle forward have theorized about whether there are just wars and what determines the constraints of conduct in war.

Not only is the war depicted in this episode over, but the outcome of the war is the obliteration of the countries that were at war. Just two soldiers remain, a male and a female, dressed, as far as we can tell, in the tattered uniforms of their opposed forces. The presence of the female combatant is a noteworthy anticipation of future changes in gender roles. They meet in the burned-out wreckage of an unnamed city. The clothes on their back, virtually their only possessions, play a central role as reminders for them, and for us, of their prior allegiances, which are in flux.
The “two” begin by trying to kill each other. They end up as friends, maybe ultimately lovers. Their path, from hatred to distrust, to partial trust, and then peaceful coexistence, is slow and halting, and the argument for this profound change is based on their mutual recognition that the grounds for conflict have disappeared. The two are no longer soldiers or even citizens of different countries. They are survivors on the same planet, on the same ruined urban landscape, with no one to protect and no one to attack. The obviousness of this fact extinguishes the conditions for conflict.

“Two” represents one possible path to world peace, though clearly at a price that no one would be willing to pay. Peace is not simply the absence of war; it is the absence of war among nations. Perhaps this is acknowledged in describing this as a love story, rather than as a story about the possibility of world peace.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: love, sympathy, war
Is there a possible world in which something happens that could not happen? The answer is clearly no, since possible worlds contain events that are possible, and compossible (possible at the same time) with other events. But there are possible worlds in which something happens that the occupants of that world believe could not have happened. In such a possible world, the occupants are wrong. They have a false belief. This is what “The Arrival” is about.

In “The Arrival,” a commercial airliner lands at an airport without passengers or crew. In a possible world very much like our world, events like this don’t happen, and perhaps we can say that they can’t happen, which is to say that they are not compossible with other events governed by natural laws. Does the episode provide a representation of an impossible event? No, it does not. It represents the appearance of such an event, along with the representation of the explanatory difficulty that such an appearance presents to investigators on the scene. As one says: “It is simply not within the realm of possibility.” But another replies: “There must be, there has to be, an explanation.”

If everything that happens is caused to happen, then the disappearance of a plane—or its appearance—has a cause, and the discovery of that cause obviously constitutes a “causal” explanation of the event. But does every event have a cause? Descartes thought so; indeed, he thought that the principle that every event has a cause is logically necessary. He then used
that principle as a premise in his argument for the existence of God. Hume argues, in contrast, that the claim that there are uncaused events is not contradictory, and so the claim that all events have causes is not logically necessary. If you take Descartes’ position, and the position of Bengston in our story, who asserts that “there has to be an explanation,” then Grant Scheckly’s problem in “The Arrival” presupposes Descartes’ position that it is a matter of logical necessity that there is a cause of the airplane’s arrival. On Hume’s position, what has happened is very strange and cries out for an explanation, but it’s not a matter of logical necessity that there be one. It could be an uncaused event.

The impossibility of the arrival of the empty plane is a placeholder in the imagination of Scheckly, an investigator for the Federal Aviation Agency, for an actual unsolved disappearance almost twenty years prior. His failure to solve that mystery has led him to imagine the mystery presented here as a representation of the general problem of explanation. Haunted by the disappearance of a plane, Scheckly now imagines, and is haunted by, the appearance of another.

In 2014, Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 went missing in flight. It has never been found, though several years later some parts were recovered. So, something like Scheckly’s problem has surfaced in the real world, at least for a significant period of time. Like Scheckly and his fellow investigators, we were convinced that there is an explanation, even when we didn’t have any evidence, and that there was a cause. We can hypothesize about those causes, and we can seek them out, but whether there is a logical guarantee that there is a correct explanation, waiting for us to discover it, requires argument, not just a strong expectation.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: causation, explanation
In the late summer of 2001, almost seventy years after its original airing, students in an Introduction to Philosophy course watched this episode on the afternoon of the same day in which, hours before, the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., were attacked by terrorists who had hijacked fully fueled commercial airliners and flew them into their targets. On that day, September 11, 2001, we were beyond the terror of possible attack, and we confronted the aftermath of an actual attack on our cities, on thousands of human beings, on organizations and businesses, and on symbols of power, commerce, and achievement. In contrast, “The Shelter” is about the possibility of attack and our response to such threats. But it is certainly relevant to us post–September 11 because life has changed. The threat of such attacks is more salient than it ever was before, and we have erected new shelters in response.

“The Shelter” opens with a suburban celebration; a group of families is in the middle of a surprise birthday party for a well-loved resident, the local family doctor. The only thing the residents seem not to like about their doctor is that he has constructed a bomb shelter in his basement. They view this act as odd. There is no palpable threat, so it is irrational to prepare for it. When the party is interrupted by an announcement of unidentified flying objects headed toward the United States, everyone scrambles to back to their respective homes. But only the physician and his family are prepared. No one else has a shelter. The shelter becomes
the scarce resource that everyone needs, and now the neighbors claw and
fight their way in. The doctor protects his territory in response. When
asked why he can’t take up the concern he had for them just a few min-
utes earlier, he says, “That was a thousand years ago.” The neighbors turn
on the doctor, and he turns on them in turn, and they also turn on each
other, finding ethnic differences that have suddenly become salient in
the grab for resources.

Following 9/11, one concern was and still is to try find a morally
appropriate response, to find our shelter, our security, our peace. In “The
Shelter,” reasoning, or at least moral reasoning, has been thrown out the
window. The emphasis is on survival at any cost. We, in contrast, have
time to reason and reflect and to attempt to figure out the morally appro-
priate responses that are open to us. But determining what is morally
appropriate is a complicated matter. First, as philosophers, we need to
come to grips with the issues in moral theory. How do we know what is
right or wrong in even the most mundane cases? What justifies our beliefs
about such things? If we believe that it is wrong to take an innocent life,
for example, we are faced with further philosophical questions: What
makes a life innocent in the first place? What is a life? Is it morally wrong
to take nonhuman lives?

When making moral assessments of the actions of others, it is impor-
tant to distinguish between explaining actions and justifying actions.
Clearly a terrorist acts out of a sense of outrage over the actions of the
targeted country. The terrorist has beliefs and reasons in support of those
beliefs. We may come to understand the causes of the terrorist’s beliefs
and the conditions that lead to extreme acts of terrorism. But such expla-
nations do not count as justifications. They do not show that the terrorist
was morally justified in acting as he or she did.

To demonstrate that an action is morally wrong or morally correct, we
need a standard that may fall outside the standards and values used by the
person whose actions we are judging. It doesn’t follow from the fact that
different groups—different countries, interest groups, even companies—
may have different sets of values that we can’t make the appropriate moral
judgments from the outside. Understanding the terrorist’s own justifica-
tion does not resolve the moral issue. It just tells us why he or she thinks
they are justified, not whether they are justified. And the existence of
different sets of values certainly cannot show that each set is morally
appropriate, because those of the terrorist will conflict with those of oth-
ers, particularly those of their targets, for example.
“The Shelter” does not supply a moral standard by which we can judge the rightness or wrongness of actions. It takes a well-developed philosophical theory to do that. But “The Shelter” does suggest what happens when we abandon moral reasoning and act out of brutish self-interest, when, for whatever reason, we drop our regard for other persons as individuals and treat them instead as means to our own ends. The results are found not only in the Twilight Zone, but sadly, in lower Manhattan, Washington, D.C., and in many other places, before and since.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords:* diversity, justice, responsibility, sympathy, vice, virtue, war
Is sympathy called for in response to the opening scene when we realize that the passersby are Confederate soldiers at the close of the U.S. Civil War in April 1865, and the house they are passing contains an ailing Confederate woman, Lavinia, whose husband was killed in that war? If that’s the way it seems, it is quickly corrected by Serling’s introduction, which refers to the location as “a strange province that knows neither North nor South.”

Our conviction that we are in the deep South is heightened, however, by the ailing Lavinia, who is understandably embittered by the outcome of a war that Southerners were told they would win in a month. Watching the Confederate soldiers pass by is too much for her. She wallows in anger against and disdain for the enemy.

We learn that the soldiers on the road are not just the soldiers of the South but Union soldiers as well, and when Lavinia’s husband returns, and we know that he died, we figure out that the road represents the casualties of war, and everyone is heading to the end of the road. So, it’s not a road in a place, north or south. It’s the road we’re all on, sooner or later.

Abraham Lincoln appears, himself too a casualty of the war, but he consoles Lavinia, quoting Shakespeare: “Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange, that men should fear, seeing that
death, a necessary end, will come when it will come” (*Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene 2). Lincoln’s act of consolation with a Southern widow suggests that the tragedy of war is simply the loss of human life.

It is true that death is inevitable, and that even though it is, it may be difficult to accept it and difficult not to fear it, as we step on the road. But against the background of the cause of all these premature deaths, the war itself, it’s hard not to side with Lavinia and resist its call. Our sympathies may rest with Lavina after all.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: death, justice, sympathy, war
It is hard to get much distance from Shakespeare's puzzle about our posture toward death (see “The Passersby”), but this episode is not about the general fear of death. Rather it is about the fear of not achieving immortality through one's works, of dying without having become the best at what one does best, and thus it is about how one should lead one's life. Should one live in pursuit of singular achievement in a field, regardless of how narrow, or should one aim for balance and appreciation of life’s many pleasures and resources? Is the relentless pursuit of excellence in some endeavor (any endeavor?) the highest imperative? How should a life be ordered, our purposes and goals prioritized?

“A Game of Pool” doesn’t try to answer these big questions completely, but it does examine the consequences of organizing one's life around the singular pursuit of greatness. Jesse Cardiff is an expert pool player, but he stands in the shadow of Fats Brown—the best pool player ever, if now deceased. How do you demonstrate that you are better than the legend? In the Twilight Zone that’s accomplished by recalling the deceased from their resting place and having them respond to the challenge, in this case, of a game of pool.

The game between Jesse and Fats is fascinating, both in terms of the exquisite skill and love of the game revealed by both players but also by what is shown about the character of each and their attitude toward the game and the craft they love. Fats is confident and cool, Jesse nervous
and uncool. But Fats is also worldly, while Jesse is narrow, and Fats, who remains the legend that Jesse must beat, counsels Jesse that there’s more to the world than pool, that there are places to see and people to love, and that being the best pool player isn’t worth it if everything else is sacrificed to attain it. Perhaps the message Fats delivers to Jesse (and to us) is that greatness of character isn’t a matter of having a singular talent. It’s a package deal. Fats has the package. Jesse does not.

Yet Jesse’s total engagement captures something important about the pursuit of attainment, namely the thrill of achievement, the sheer joy of the execution of a shot or a movement of the body in the service of making a great shot. There’s something there that is part of what human greatness is all about. It is what Herbert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly try to articulate in All Things Shining, their insightful investigation into the act of finding meaning in Western culture. When Fats describes pool as “geometry in its most precise form,” we witness shining as only human beings can do it.

Jesse comes to grips with his predecessors via confrontation. But that is also the result of a narrowness in his view. Relinquishing responsibility for being the best is something that Fats Brown is happy to do. Rising to the top isn’t just about being the best; it also means shouldering the responsibility for being the best.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* afterlife, character, death, meaning of life, obligation, personal identity, purpose
“THE MIRROR”

Original air date: October 20, 1961

“The Mirror” is a rather heavy-handed warning about the tendency of revolutions to lead to tyranny and fascism. Airing within two years of Castro’s rise to power in Cuba, Serling is unapologetic about this episode’s presentation of a fictional version of Castro, a new cigar-smoking populist leader of a small Central American country. If Serling was predicting Castro’s quick demise, he was spectacularly wrong.

As a commentary on the political developments in Cuba in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, “The Mirror” may be flawed in ways that go beyond failing as a prediction of Castro’s regime. It presents a revolutionary leader in his first hours in power as a paranoid, delusional monster whose grip on himself is as tenuous as his grip on the nation he now leads. He possesses a mirror that reflects the intentions of others—or at least their intentions as he interprets them. And when he eventually looks at himself in the mirror, the reflection of himself is a self that is out to get him, and he promptly self-destructs.

That the episode does not accurately predict the fate of Castro doesn’t tell us very much. The history of Cuba is one case, and the events shown in “The Mirror” are another. The question is whether the possible world in “The Mirror” depicts a pattern likely to be actualized. The history of revolutionary governments in Central and South America since the late 1950s shows some striking similarities to the sequence of events depicted in the episode. That said, even Serling falls victim to Hollywood’s inability
to convincingly portray the non-Anglo characters in this story. Among the actors playing Latino characters, only one is a Latino. All of the others are Anglo-Americans/Europeans, and it shows, fake beards and all. The portrayal of extreme behavior, both by the new dictator and by his pathetic henchmen, is a cartoonish portrayal of political acts as self-serving and parochial. Real revolutions are more complicated.

More philosophically and less topically, “The Mirror” does have something important to say about the role of reflection in our practical reasoning, of which political reasoning is a part. The new leader, Clemente, begins to reflect from the very beginning of his ascent to power. He reflects on his anticipation of this moment and on what he would do and feel. The outgoing leader reflects on the real motivation of the new leader, which is the same for both of them, and on the pervasive fear that will serve as the real motivator of behavior. Reflection—looking in the mirror—reveals the true motivations of the crowd, of the lieutenants, and of one’s own self.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: character, justice, reason, reflection, vice, war
“THE GRAVE”

*Original air date:* October 27, 1961

This is a western with a metaphysical twist. Can someone who is dead commit murder? Can Pinto Sykes, a recently deceased gunslinger, cause the death of Conny Miller, a bounty hunter who had tried, but failed, to bring about Sykes’s demise? When Miller visits Sykes’s grave, Miller winds up dead. But is his death due to natural causes or to unnatural causes? That’s the question, and of course, Serling just leaves it open, concluding: “You take this with a grain of salt or a shovelful of earth, as shadow or substance, we leave it up to you. And for any further research, check under ‘G,’ for ‘ghosts’ . . . in the Twilight Zone.” “Shadows” are non-natural causes, “substances” natural ones.

To turn this into a controversy that is of some philosophical interest, we must refine this shadow/substance distinction. If all we’re asking is whether there are ghosts who can pull flesh-and-blood human creatures down and kill them in graveyards, then we’re not doing philosophy. But philosophers have made the distinction between natural and non-natural substances and causes, and we don’t have to invoke the possibility of ghosts and other shadow phenomena to engage with these questions.

When we describe the events that occur in the world, many of them fall easily within the domain of natural causes and effects: the decline of sea otter populations results in the explosion of the sea urchin population, which leads to the decline of kelp forests. These causes and effects are all natural, that is, they occur in nature and can be explained
by theories in biology and ecology. Other natural effects include the decline in the otter population from hunting. But when we seek to explain the cause of the overhunting of sea otters by explaining the role of such factors as greed and shortsightedness, we at least appear to leave the realm of the natural. When we include cognitive and affective features of human agents, we appear to move beyond “substance” and move into the “shadows.” What kind of natural phenomena correspond to our beliefs and desires, and by what mechanisms do they bring about their effects? These are lasting philosophical questions.

When probing the cause of Conny’s death, we have at our disposal a wealth of facts about Conny’s relationship to Sykes. On the one hand, Conny appears to be a tough guy. He’s been on the trail of Sykes for years, determined to hunt him down. But the townsfolk grow tired of waiting for Conny to do the job, and so they do it themselves. When Conny appears, they question his toughness and resolve. They taunt him and dare him to visit Sykes’s grave. With all this context, there’s no need to appeal to the shadowy occult to explain his death. One quite plausible explanation, an explanation that will appeal to beliefs and desires, is suicide.

One view, called naturalism, is that the natural/non-natural distinction collapses, that all apparently non-natural phenomena are natural. Affective and cognitive states are just states of the organism; they are just states for which we lack the kinds of robust scientific explanations we have for other natural things, such as the eating habits of sea otters and sea urchins. We don’t have the detailed understanding of those organisms that have beliefs and desires, and so when we find ourselves appealing to such features of human agents to explain their behavior, such appeals are placeholders for more complete all-natural explanations that we may be able to supply in the fullness of time.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: afterlife, causation, death, justice, metaphysics
We characterized “The Mind and the Matter” as grappling with Leibniz’s answer to the questions “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and “Why is it this way rather than some other way?” Leibniz’s answer was that the actual world is one of the possible worlds an all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good god considered, and it is the world he/she/it created, indeed the world he/she/it had to create. “It’s a Good Life” presents us with an all-powerful and all-knowing god, but the answer to the question “Why is it this way rather than some other way?” is far less interesting, because the god whose will provides the answer to that question lacks one of the three supreme attributes of Leibniz’s god. This god is not wholly good. And this god has taken human form, the form of a six-year-old boy, Anthony Fremont, in Peaksville, Ohio. The world is the way it is because that’s the way Anthony wants it to be.

There is no doubt that Anthony is God, though it’s unclear who ran the show prior to Anthony coming on the scene. Whether he is part of a succession of gods or just the same god who created things prior to his appearance to us, Anthony is in total control, and what happens is what he wills to happen, or at least what he does in response to the willed action of the few human agents that remain. Anthony has wiped out everything except the rural hamlet of Peaksville. Perhaps some of the cosmos is intact, even if civilization has been reduced to this small portion of the American Midwest, but we can only speculate.
Anthony is all-powerful. He creates and destroys species at will. He can create anything he can imagine. He dictates the behavior of all people. They do what he tells them to do. Anthony is all-knowing. When individuals harbor beliefs and desires that Anthony doesn’t approve of, they can’t keep their thoughts from him. He knows and lets them know that he knows. They also know that Anthony is a vengeful god.

Anthony is not Leibniz’s god, because he is far from being wholly good. The title of this episode, however, suggests that life under Anthony is good. This characterization may be no more puzzling than Leibniz’s characterization of our world as the best of all possible worlds. If our world is the best world, or even a good world, and it’s the creation of a being who could have created the world differently, then such a being has a lot of explaining to do about the presence of disease, famine, earthquakes, floods, and other natural “evils,” even if other evils can be attributed to the free will of human agents.

Unfortunately, Anthony doesn’t offer explanations, and his creations are on thin ice when they question why things are the way they are. They have no doubt about their obligations to Anthony. They must love him unconditionally, praise him and his acts, and they must offer their thanks for all that he has given them, which includes Anthony’s killing of spouses, his destruction of livestock and crops, and his complete control over the options available to them. Still “It’s a good life” or “It’s the best of all possible worlds.”

If Anthony is a representation of the Judeo-Christian god, then we have a solution to the problem of evil. The problem of evil is the problem of reconciling the existence of evil with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good god. “It’s a Good Life” shows how the tyranny of an Anthony explains why we would have to say that our god is wholly good, precisely because the god who demands our praise as wholly good is not wholly good.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: evil, God, problem of evil
“DEATHS-HEAD REVISITED”

Original air date: November 10, 1961

Many *Twilight Zone* episodes provide fodder for philosophical reflection precisely because they invite us to exercise our concepts and attempt to apply them to possible cases and worlds where the strangeness of the circumstances makes doing so a real challenge, one that may have a philosophical payout. There are possible worlds, however, that don’t need to be invented, that are found by exercising our memory, rather than our imagination. Some historical events are so strange, so unusual, and so puzzling that it is just as difficult to make sense of what happened in the real world as it can be to imagine what we would say about a possible world. We cannot, however, reflect on the actual world, the historical past, without at the same time thinking about other possible worlds and in particular about how the actual world could have or, more pointedly, should have been different. It is that exercise in reflection that takes place in “Deaths-Head Revisited,” an episode that first aired roughly a mere fifteen years after the end of World War II and the atrocities it revisits.

A Herr Schmidt returns first to the town of Dachau, in Bavaria, near Munich, after the war, and visits the infamous concentration camp, one of many that enslaved and exterminated Jews, Romani, and others viewed as undesirables in Nazi Germany. But Herr Schmidt is here not to visit but to recall his role as Kapitän Lutze, a former SS officer who ran the camp and ordered the torture and mass murder of its detainees. This premise is, of course, about as unrealistic as the portrayal of any monster or alien in any
episode. It’s hardly plausible that an officer of the SS who made it out of Germany alive at the end of the war and who then found refuge in South America, would risk a trip back to Germany, much less to a concentration camp. It is much more plausible, then, to take the portrayal of Herr Lutze’s travel as a trip of his conscience and his reflections on the moral status of what he did. As Serling says in his introduction, Dachau doesn’t just exist in Bavaria but also in “one of the populated areas of the Twilight Zone,” in this case, in the imagination of Kapitan Lutze.

Could a former SS officer revisit Dachau in his imagination, recalling the things he had done, while retaining his equanimity, or would his reflection on his past actions bring their absolute wrongness into such powerful relief, that ultimately, even someone as monstrous as Herr Lutze would recoil from his own past behavior? Perhaps the episode is only claiming that this could happen and that the possibility that Lutze’s reflection could lead to his insanity is enough to demonstrate that extreme immoral behavior can be unsustainable, even for a Kapitän Lutze. If that is the claim, it is a positive, even uplifting one. Demonstrating that it is true, of course, would require much more heavy philosophical lifting.

If one sets out the basic historical facts, as this episode does, that 10 million people were tortured and killed in the camps, “burned in furnaces, shoveled into the earth,” then Alfred Becker, a reimagined victim serving as Lutz’s interlocutor, presenting these facts and the images as they live on in Lutze’s memory and that of others, addresses Lutze’s attempt to disavow any responsibility for them. Once Lutze begins to confront these facts, it becomes impossible for him to end his imaginary visit to Dachau. This is his form of insanity. He is now a prisoner of the very place he imprisoned and murdered others.

One line of ethical theorizing ties morality to rational self-interest. Morally good behavior is the behavior of a rational agent. A properly reasoning self-interested agent would infer that certain forms of behavior further their self-interest and other forms of behavior hinder their self-interest. Actions falling into the first group are good, the second bad. Someone who exhibits systematically immoral behavior is irrational. This approach makes sense where individual actions don’t align with laws and customs within social groups and governments. But what do we say about mass immorality—is it mass irrationality?

Another approach to understanding morality in terms of rationality is to hold that it is irrational to have certain kinds of desires. Bernard Gert writes: “A rational man not only cannot desire evil, he must also
desire to avoid it” (49). This seems to help us understand Kapitän Lutze’s breakdown, until we cash out Gert’s conception of evil as “personal evil.” Clearly Kapitän Lutze has always sought to avoid his own pain, his own hunger, his own isolation. At the same time, he sought to inflict pain, hunger, isolation, and more on countless others.

Lutze’s irrationality emerges from his reflection on the past, but not by the realization that his behavior was at odds with his self-interest. In fact, adherence to Nazi principles and directives probably was motivated by narrow self-interest. There’s something going on in his reflection that is not captured by morality as rational self-interest, even though Lutze’s descent into irrationality results from coming to grips with his immorality. Perhaps we have to explain the former in terms of the latter, rather than the other way around.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: justice, responsibility, time, vice
There’s a Tom Lehrer song called “We Will All Go Together When We Go.” Lehrer manages to humorously describe the end of the world in a nuclear meltdown. Serling’s “The Midnight Sun” was written at about the same time—the early ’60s, a time when we were preoccupied by the possibility of a global death sentence from nuclear weapons. We all die, but we normally do so in succession. What’s the difference between the prospect of our successive individual deaths and the prospect of our coordinated simultaneous demise?

In “The Midnight Sun” we see two New York City residents holding on to life and suffering the consequences of a change in the earth’s orbit that brings it ever closer to the sun. This is global warming with a vengeance. There was no warning, and there is no escape. Residents are fleeing the city, but there’s no place on the planet where one can find relief from the sun. Everyone, everything, will perish, and soon. Of course, this is an accurate prediction for all of us—individually and collectively. Everyone will die, and it seems ever more certain, not that life on earth will end—since that is indeed certain—but that it will end sooner than we might think. Though it was not intended as such, this episode could serve as the poster child for our very real but relatively recent concerns about global warming.

Just as it is common to fear one’s own death, we may share a common fear, or dread, of the extinction of all life on our planet, or at the very
least, we may share the belief that an apocalypse of the kind represented in “The Midnight Sun” would be a bad thing. It would be bad because it would bring about the kind of suffering that is portrayed here and the pure futility of trying to survive what can’t be survived. Serling describes the predicament as representing “the poles of our fear.” We could be wiped out by the planet burning up or by the planet freezing up, by the lack of water or by too much water, or by one or more of any other pair of extremes.

Among first responders and other health care professionals, the prescription “First, do no harm” is well known. As a principle in moral theory, Annette Baier refers to it as the “Person-Affecting Principle.” Recognizing “The Midnight Sun” as a representation of the likely harm to persons in future generations, the question naturally arises: Are we first doing no harm to these future persons? Are there yet-unborn selves whose plight will be something like that of Norma Smith and her neighbor, Mrs. Bronson? Are we harming them, and are we able to avoid such harm?

The question of whether we have obligations such as the obligation to do no harm to future generations is a rich and thorny one in philosophy. We can make sense of obligations to actual persons, but does it make sense to talk about obligations to persons who don’t exist? First, it’s not certain that there will be future persons, but if there are, we don’t know who those persons will be, how many of them there will be, what they will be like, what they will want, and what they can reasonably expect us to have done for them. Second, as Baier points out, which persons will exist in the future depends on contingent features of the present over which we may have no control, and no understanding of how those features will affect the existence and conditions of future persons. An accidental throwing of a switch causing a major power outage in a city may lead to a spike in the birth rate nine months later, resulting in the existence of future persons who would not have come into existence had that mistake not been made. How can we assess our obligations under conditions that are so radically contingent?

To show that we have obligations to future generations will require that we respond to such difficulties and show that despite the difference between actual and future persons, we can specify, within limits, the ways in which our lives should be lived to minimize their suffering.

“The Midnight Sun” introduces another philosophical problem, one that Samuel Scheffler explains as making sense of our desire that there be future generations, that the meaningfulness of our lives is caught up
with our hope and expectations for the “afterlife,” where that term refers not to any heavenly existence but to the continued earthly existence of regular folks after our death. In “The Midnight Sun” we see suffering and pain, but the most disturbing feature of the lives of Norma and her fellow sufferers may well be the palpable sense that this is the end Tom Lehrer described. And it isn’t funny.

FURTHER READING AND LISTENING


Philosophical keywords: fate of the earth, meaning of life, responsibility
Like “The Passersby,” “Still Valley” is set late in the U.S. Civil War, as the South is losing the war. It is in this context that the episode addresses the ethics of war and warfare. There are two large questions about the moral status of war. The first is: Are there ethical grounds for engaging in war? The second is: If the answer to the first question is affirmative, what are the limits to what is permissible for participants in a war? These two questions about the moral status of war and warfare are referred to, respectively, as *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bellum*—when a country can fight a war, and how a country can fight a war. “Still Valley” concerns the second question, raised from the perspective of the losing side. In desperate circumstances, are there limits to what actions soldiers in battle can take to defend themselves and advance their military goals?

War provides the opportunity to engage in morally allowable, and even in many instances morally required behaviors that in civilian life are morally impermissible. If killing individuals who are not immediately threatening you is permissible in war, but not outside of war, what is impermissible in war? What are the moral rules of warfare since they clearly not are the same as those of everyday life?

A quick review of the history of conflict between nation-states easily generates a list of morally questionable military practices, including torture, espionage, attacks on civilians, the use of chemical and
biological agents, and the use of nuclear weapons, to name just a few familiar modalities of modern warfare. “Still Valley” does not investigate the moral status of a particular military practice or strategy. Instead, it asks a more basic question: Does the context of war justify doing evil, or put another way, cutting a deal with the devil?

Two Confederate soldiers are scouts checking the advance of their Union adversaries. Their mission is dangerous, and one of them questions whether they are required to take the risk. At this stage of the war, he is really questioning whether he is required to continue to fight this war at all. His main concern is his own survival. Is this a morally permissible stance for an active-duty soldier?

Sergeant Joseph Paradine, the other soldier, does not question his role in the army, and he heads down to the valley where the Union troops may be located. He arrives to find the Union soldiers frozen in place, the result of spell put on them by a book of black magic, the work of the devil. Paradine has been given the book and has the power to neutralize the Union soldiers wherever he finds them. Should he do “the devil’s work”?

The argument ensues. Paradine is tempted to get “in league with the devil,” but he resists the temptation when he realizes that to do so means rejecting God, that is, rejecting the moral order that has guided his life to this point. Essentially, what he realizes is that he shouldn’t do what is morally wrong, which in this context is not a trivial truth. The circumstances of war do not excuse all behavior that we otherwise would find morally repugnant. In this case it doesn’t excuse the slaughter of a defenseless enemy. Even the horrific, desperate circumstances of war can’t justify stepping outside of our considered moral judgments.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: justice, war
New York City is sometimes described as a jungle, where that's understood as a dense, dark, and foreboding place. “The Jungle” takes place entirely in the jungle of New York City, but the city itself is not represented as dark and foreboding. Rather, two of its inhabitants, Alan and Doris Richards, have just returned from Africa. They have brought the jungle with them, at least in the sense that their trip has affected them deeply, as trips to far-off places often do.

The Richardses aren’t harking back to a luxurious vacation but are reflecting on the consequences of their travel to a remote and unfamiliar culture and on the consequences of their encounter with that culture. Mr. Richards and his company plan to build a hydroelectric project that will have a substantial and, to the “natives,” unwelcome impact. Those indigenous people have let their position be known to the Richardses, and it is Mrs. Richards who lives in fear of the consequences, not just for the indigenous people but for the Richardses themselves.

To guard against those consequences, Mrs. Richards has amassed a collection of items that are supposed to ward off evil, including a human finger and a lion’s tooth. She’s heeded the concerns of the local residents that the hydroelectric project would amount to “wounding the land—making it bleed.” She begs Alan to abandon the project. He rejects the concerns of “ignorant witch doctors.”

While he dismisses witchcraft in discussion with his wife, he defends it in his boardroom meeting with his New York City colleagues. When
they dismiss the possibility as handily as he did with his wife, Mr. Richards exposes their own commitments to a variety of superstitions, from carrying a rabbit’s foot to the fact that their building doesn’t have a thirteenth floor.

What follows is a demonstration of the African shamans’ reach. It is swift, and it is devastating. Serling concludes: “Some superstitions, kept alive by the night of ignorance, have their own special power.” Serling would have appreciated this account of superstition from David Hume’s essay “Superstition and Enthusiasm”:

The mind of man is subject to certain unaccountable terrors and apprehensions, proceeding either from the unhappy situation of private or public affairs, from ill health, from a gloomy and melancholy disposition, or from the concurrence of all these circumstances. In such a state of mind, infinite unknown evils are dreaded from unknown agents; and where real objects of terror are wanting, the soul, active to its own prejudice, and fostering its predominant inclination, finds imaginary ones, to whose power and malevolence it sets no limits. As these enemies are entirely invisible and unknown, the methods taken to appease them are equally unaccountable, and consist in ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents, or in any practice, however absurd or frivolous, which either folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity. Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of superstition.

In “The Jungle,” the ignorance that fuels superstition is the ignorance of the “civilized” Westerners, who think that the disruption of the way of life of a distant and remote culture will not have significant consequences. When Mr. Richards mocks his colleagues’ superstitions, he makes it clear that their actions are as self-interested and capricious, as ill planned as those of the “natives” whose interests, values, and knowledge they have dismissed. The witchcraft that will do them in is of their own devising, and whether it arrives in the form of a vicious lion in one’s bedroom or in some other, more likely form, is immaterial. As Hume says, it’s all traceable to our “weakness, fear [and] ignorance.”

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, superstition
Time travel might be of interest not only to those who wish to change the past or revisit it, but to those who just don’t like the circumstances in which they find themselves, and hope to discover something better in another time, just as someone might, more prosaically, look to move from one city to another in search of a change of scene. Like “The Rip Van Winkle Caper,” where the principal characters seek refuge in the future, here we find Mulligan, a small-time janitor, at his wit’s end with the frenetic pace of the New York City of the 1890s. He lucks into a way out—a time-travel helmet.

This episode is a comedy, featuring Buster Keaton doing silent slapstick comedy in the style of the old silent films in which he was featured. If there’s a philosophical point in this lighthearted episode, it is that one shouldn’t underestimate the challenge of the strangeness of cultural displacement that one would experience even with relatively modest time displacements. In this episode, one character is displaced seventy years into the future, and another, met by the first during his time travel, is displaced seventy years into the past, when the first character returns to his temporal origin. Both characters long to time-travel, the first to the future and the second to the past. But both discover that where they time-travel to is not what they hoped for, and each longs to return to their original time.
What is surprisingly different and uncomfortable about these two time shifts? For Mulligan (Keaton), the future, the 1960s is, surprisingly to him, more frenetic than the 1890s. This is largely due to technology. It was hard to cross the street when there were horses and buggies, but now there are cars—lots of them—and it’s even harder. For the second character, the 1890s may be quaint, which is what he hoped for, but the limits of technology in the 1890s will make it impossible for him to carry out his scientific work.

The pace of technological change in the twentieth century, and its significance for the cultural context in United States and many other countries, is clearly represented here, in the slapstick gags that display the ways in which a time traveler would reveal their inability to cope with those changes.

Many *Twilight Zone* episodes that trade in time travel can be interpreted not strictly as positing actual time travel but instead presenting what cognitive scientists now call mental time travel, which is simply the ability to imaginatively project oneself into other times and places. Martin’s time travel to his past in “Walking Distance” can be understood as his mental time travel to his childhood, combining memories of his family and events with imagined events in which Martin’s adult self participates. “Once Upon a Time” can’t really be interpreted as a case of mental time travel, since the time travel is to a future that Mulligan can’t plausibly imagine. Serling’s closing advice, that one should stay in one’s own backyard, might be correct about actual time travel, but this comedy suggests that time travel, at least in some cases, might increase one’s appreciation of the present.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: time travel
In discussions about the nature of knowledge, skepticism looms large: How do we know we are not dreaming? How do we know we are not being deceived by an evil genius? (On this, see “A World of His Own.”) In raising these skeptical worries, we are acutely aware that it doesn’t seem as if there’s an evil genius or that we are in bed dreaming. It might be inappropriate, then, to think of “Five Characters in Search of an Exit” as simply raising another skeptical nightmare, because it doesn’t seem as if we’re in a cylinder. So what’s the epistemic bite? (Remember, epistemic comes from epistemology, which means “theory of knowledge.”)

Five characters find themselves in what appears to be a very large cylindrical container. Judgments of size are fallible (see “The Invaders”). Four are resigned to their fate. They don’t know why they are there, but they are no longer trying to find out why they are there or what’s outside the cylinder. One of the five, the Major, has just arrived. How did he get there? That’s one of the things they don’t know. The Major asks: “What’s going on here? Where are we? What are we? Who are we?” Clearly there is knowledge the major lacks, knowledge that we ordinarily think we have. But it also seems that the Major and the other four characters possess some knowledge. It’s a worthwhile exercise to consider what they do know. If we can attribute knowledge to the characters, then perhaps this
is a case of local skepticism. If so, what kind of knowledge do they lack, and do we possess it?

Solipsism, powerfully represented in “Where Is Everybody?,” is the view that nothing exists outside of an individual’s mind. It is the position that Descartes tentatively holds in the first two of his six Meditations. Once he establishes that he exists as a thinking thing, his first bit of knowledge, he considers what else he knows. He argues that the beliefs he has about the things outside him—a piece of wax, the people on the street below—are arrived at by means of inferences from the immediate contents of his mind, and those inferences can be challenged. “Five Characters” is about a cylinder containing five interacting characters, and so it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with solipsism. The characters know that they are not alone. Each of them knows that there are four other individuals in the cylinder. Yet the cylinder represents the limit of their collective experience and their ignorance of what exists in the outside world. Their failed attempts to climb out of the cylinder mirror Descartes’ attempts to establish the existence of things and people outside his cylinder, that is, outside the confines of his mind or self.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords:* epistemology, skepticism, solipsism
This is one of several episodes set close to the end of a war, in this case, the end of World War II in the Pacific theater. In contrast to the beginning of a war, when no one knows which side will prevail and each side is prepared to attack their opponents, at the close of the war there may be clarity about the outcome but little idea about when fighting will end. When the enemy is all but beaten, is one obligated to engage as one has engaged earlier, or does morality require that one take the changed circumstances into account and perhaps even show sympathy for a weakened and compromised enemy? “A Quality of Mercy” is about whether *jus in bellum*, how one ought to behave in war, includes the quality of mercy toward an almost defeated enemy. This is the question of *ex jus bellum*, how to end a war, which is a somewhat different question from how to treat the defeated enemy when a war has ended, or *jus post bellum*.

A small platoon of U.S. soldiers has a group of twenty to thirty Japanese soldiers pinned in a cave. Should they attack the enemy in the cave, who are wounded and of little threat to the Americans, or should they simply go around the cave and advance without attacking the current target? There are at least two different questions here. There is the question of strategy and tactics: What is the best tactical move? But there is a moral question: What are they obligated to do? They are still fighting the Japanese enemy, and their obligation as soldiers has been to kill and
capture the enemy. Surely this is their obligation still, or so argues their new, young commanding officer, Lieutenant Katell. His inferiors argue that the right thing to do is to avoid the cave. They argue that further killing, at this point in the conflict, is wrong.

Who is right? This is where possible worlds can help. There is a possible world in which the tables are turned, and it’s the Americans pinned in the cave and the Japanese are poised to attack them. If, in that world Katell is a Japanese officer, but still somehow Katell, the American officer, what should he propose to do? This is the possible world presented in the episode, and it’s clearly confusing—for Katell, for his fellow combatants, and for us. How can Katell be a Japanese soldier and somehow feel that he is a displaced American soldier? We can’t answer those questions, but we don’t have to. What matters is that after switching back to being an American soldier, Katell now has “a quality of mercy,” which is an understanding of what it feels like to be on the other side of the fence. He heard his Japanese superior using the very arguments he used to command his American troops to attack the cave, and he no longer buys it. Even soldiers in war need to adapt their actions to the context in which conflict takes place. Now he hears the call for death with an understanding of what such actions will entail—in the context of the imminent defeat of the enemy—and he recoils from them.

Killing in war is still killing, though killing in proximity of the end of war is different from killing at the beginning or middle of war. Moral theory is not comfortable with such sliding scales. This episode suggests that moral theory addressing the morality of war still has some work to do.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: justice, vice, virtue, war
Death is the dark unknown, and to Wanda Dunn, an aged woman living alone in an all-but-abandoned building, it is the all-encompassing object of her fear. Wanda is each of us, though we may very well feel that we can distance ourselves from her. We may not be as old or as alone, and we may not have her wrinkles. It’s tempting to think that Wanda is crazy to be so afraid of death. After all, she is old, and death comes to those who are old. As we follow Wanda’s journey through this episode, this is probably a temptation we’re being told to resist. Wanda is each of us. We all share her predicament. We all occupy her dark and crumpling apartment, and we occupy it as she does, alone.

Wanda fears death, but why? She ultimately gets an explanation from Death itself. She fears death because death is unknown. Once death is revealed as an unthreatening, kind, and attractive companion, there’s no longer anything to fear. Wanda doesn’t seem to be worried about the pain of death but rather the loss of life itself. She wants to live. The fact that she’s old doesn’t matter. People don’t lose the desire to live simply because they’ve lived a long life.

Though Wanda is on the lookout for “Mr. Death,” she lets him in the front door. Mr. Death appears as a wounded soldier in need of help. Though she realizes that she’s risking everything to help him, she feels compelled to do so. She can’t resist his call for help. We can interpret this
as a representation of the inevitability of death. We can’t avoid it; we even run headlong toward it.

There’s a third agent in this story, the demolition expert, the contractor who has come to tear down the old, worn-out building in which Wanda is holed up. He attempts to convince Wanda that the old must be moved aside to make room for the new. The principle, he argues, applies to buildings and it applies to people.

Death appears as a person in need of help. Death needs our help. How could that be the case, when we are bound to die no matter what we do? Death is the endpoint of life, and dying is therefore part of life. When death appears as the unthreatening, kind companion, this signals that the person who is dying needs to participate in the manner of death. Wanda can go kicking and screaming, and that’s what she seems prepared to do. But with her acquiescence, with her acceptance, death is transformed into a peaceful, wonderful experience, the final experience in life. Wanda doesn’t even sense the change. Mr. Death has her look in the mirror to see that her reflection isn’t there. Of course, not all deaths are like this, but what we’re exploring is the possibility of such a death.

“Nothing in the Dark” ends with the emergence into the light from the darkness. This represents a view well articulated by Plato, and later it is a central theme in Christianity: Life is a struggle for understanding, an understanding that is only possible when one leaves this “vale of tears” and escapes the shackles of the body. There’s nothing to fear in death if we are bound for a better place. However, we have to ask ourselves whether what is depicted here really is possible. Wanda, postmortem, still has a body, even as she peers down on her inert body. Is this a real possibility, or have we left both the real world and the Twilight Zone behind?

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: death, immortality
The possibility of nuclear war and, with it, the complete annihilation of life on our planet loomed larger in the popular imagination of the early 1960s than it does now. In the United States, a civilian infrastructure for dealing with nuclear war was part of the fabric of the culture. Schools and other public buildings had signage, sporting three yellow triangles inside a black circle, advertising that they were serving as nuclear fallout shelters. This possibility, our fear of it, and our possible responses to it figure in several episodes of *The Twilight Zone*. In addition to “One More Pallbearer,” fallout shelters, both planned and accidental, feature prominently in “The Shelter” and “Time Enough at Last.”

Like “The Shelter,” this episode explores the moral dimension of this extreme condition. How ought we to act when we find out that guaranteed mutual destruction is imminent? Do the extreme circumstances change the moral equation? We touched on that topic when we considered “I Shot an Arrow into the Air” and suggested a negative answer. Moral principles should cover all circumstances. Extreme circumstances do provide a test for moral theories, but they do so precisely because what is right or wrong must apply in those circumstances as they do in all others.

Paul Radin, an extremely wealthy and powerful businessperson, summons three of his childhood mentors to his personal fallout shelter. There he has installed an impressive multimedia presentation running a simulation of an impending nuclear attack. Announcements of the attack
are made over loudspeakers. A large television monitor is ready to provide video of what’s happening above ground. Radin’s plan is to trick his three visitors into thinking that they are under nuclear attack. Radin is sure that they will beg him to let them ride out the attack in his shelter, and in this position of power, he will extract revenge for perceived slights and indignities he believes he suffered at their hands in his formative years. This is a bizarrely elaborate plan of revenge, but Radin has vast resources—and an even larger grudge.

Radin is certain that his guests will wish to remain safely underground, since doing otherwise means certain death. He fails to make sense of their commitments to their loved ones and their need to be with the people who mean most to them at this critical time. He fails to see that even with the utilitarian scales pushed completely in his favor, his guests will weigh what matters quite differently. It simply doesn’t make sense to him that someone would sacrifice their future existence to play out their last few minutes in the company of people they care about.

The episode is a study of moral bankruptcy, which is arguably a kind of mental illness. Radin is not a rational agent, even though he is extremely intelligent. His lack of insight into the moral motivation of others is so complete that his elaborate plan fails since it depends on motivating his guests to act as he wishes. Radin isn’t simply immoral; his irrationality takes him outside the space of moral reasoning altogether.

At the end of the episode, Radin hallucinates an actual nuclear Armageddon, where he is the lone survivor. The doomsday result is a metaphor for the shattering of his life: He really is alone, since he can’t even comprehend the nature and power of sympathy, a precondition for moral engagement with others. It is the end of his world, and for someone without meaningful connections to others, it is the end of the whole world.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* fate of the earth, rationality, revenge, sympathy
Can you step into someone else’s shoes, and in doing so, become that person? In “Dead Man’s Shoes,” this seems to be what happens, and the ambiguity surrounding what really happens is a feature of the story, not a bug. Of course, the mechanism of the transfer of personhood really doesn’t matter. Possible worlds, like the actual world, are never presented with every detail spelled out.

Dane, a thug, is killed by another thug, and his body is unceremoniously dumped near some trash cans on a city street. Nathan, a transient, discovers Dane’s body and steals Dane’s Italian loafers. That is, Nathan steps into Dane’s shoes. When he does, he seems to become Dane, though he clearly doesn’t appear to be Dane to others, since his body is that of Nathan, not Dane. At the very least, he seems to take on Dane’s interests and dispositions, including the disposition to drink tequila on the rocks and to physically abuse Dane’s girlfriend. Ultimately, he seeks revenge on behalf of Dane.

Nathan, in Dane’s shoes, never claims to be Dane. When he’s not wearing Dane’s shoes, it isn’t clear that he knows who he is or how or why he is where he is. In Dane’s shoes, he is focused on finding Dane’s killer and extracting revenge, as Dane would have done, had he survived the attempt on his life. Again, from the perspective of others, Nathan is not Dane, even when he’s wearing Dane’s shoes. Dane is dead, and at least some people know that.
It is part of the fabric of human interaction that one person’s project or projects can become the project or projects of other persons. It’s a commonplace that a person’s project can be taken on by another person after the death of that person. If a person survived the death of their body, then they would, by virtue of being the same person as the person who suffered the death of their body, wish to continue their projects and further the interests they had before bodily death, all things being equal. While surviving your death might make it more likely that your projects are attended to, if what is important is that those projects stay on the books, survival is not required. One simply needs the continued existence of someone who identifies with those projects and interests to continue them.

Derek Parfit explored these issues in his 1971 paper and in much subsequent work. As we’ve seen in several episodes, the problem of personal identity is not easily resolved. Parfit argues that there are cases where there is no determinate answer to the question of whether a person at one time is the same person at another time, and further, that it doesn’t matter to what we care about when thinking about survival. If what we care about is whether our projects continue, then identity isn’t important. If, at your death, fission occurs and you split into two individuals who share your past and your beliefs, desires, and projects, it doesn’t matter if there’s no way to determine which one of them is you. Neither has to be you, as long as at least one of them continues to carry out your projects.

Parfit’s position is well represented in “Dead Man’s Shoes.” Nathan isn’t Dane, but that doesn’t matter. Somehow, he has enough continuity with Dane to carry forth on Dane’s behalf.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: afterlife, death, personal identity
There are any number of circumstances in which one might confuse heaven and hell, including when one is in the latter but thinks they are in the former. For example, in “A Nice Place to Visit,” Rocky thinks he is in heaven for quite a while before he puts in a request to go to “the other place.” The request is denied because he is already in the other place. Ontological confusion also occurs in “The Hunt,” when Hyder Simpson, accompanied by his hunting dog Rip, believes that they have arrived at the entrance to heaven, when they are instead at the gates of hell.

It might seem counterintuitive that anyone could confuse heaven and hell, since we understand them to have incompatible properties. Heaven, if it exists, is occupied by good people, hell by bad people. In heaven, everyone is happy; in hell, everyone is unhappy. But the idea that we could be confused about which is which just mirrors our confusion about good and bad in this world. For example, a plentiful supply of fossil fuels throughout the twentieth century appeared to be a wonderful thing. We had an inexpensive supply of energy to support the rise of the industry, raising the standard of living for many. But the good of that energy supply appears to be outstripped by the long-term negative effects it has had on our environment. The good turned out to be bad, at least on balance. And there are plenty of examples of human actions, on the individual,
group, and even global scale that have at one time appeared to be good, while on reflection turned out to be very bad. So, our assessments of the goodness or badness of actions or states of affairs, whether natural or human-induced, are fallible. We are susceptible to shortsightedness, deception, biases, both cognitive and moral, and various limitations on our judgment and predictive powers.

When Hyder Simpson and Rip appear in the afterlife, Hyder doesn’t know where he is, and that’s understandable, since it’s not clear that heaven and hell have a location. When he guesses that he is at the gates of heaven, the gatekeeper doesn’t correct him. Rip growls, sensing that something is not right. When Hyder learns that the membership rules exclude Rip, he refuses to enter. He doesn’t doubt that this is heaven. But he also knows that it’s not for him. He is confused at the injustice of his dog’s exclusion. As he puts it: “Dog has a right to have a man around, just as man has a right to have a dog around.”

In the decades since this episode aired, there has been an explosion of interest in animal rights. Tom Regan’s 1983 book *The Case for Animal Rights* was among the first, and many have followed. The interest in animal rights resulted in part from work on the problem of consciousness in the philosophy of mind. It had long been argued, by Descartes and others, that nonhuman animals cannot think. But denying conscious states to nonhuman animals, such as states of pain and other perceptual states, is much harder to maintain. And if other animals feel pain, what is the moral status of inflicting such pain? There may be a big gap between avoiding the infliction of unnecessary pain on nonhuman animals and ensuring their right to a place in heaven, but it’s a start.

Contemporary philosophers and other theorists, including cognitive ethologists, have argued, against Descartes, that some nonhuman animals have cognition as well as consciousness, reviving and furthering the anti-Cartesian position of Montaigne and Hume. In life, Rip was a hunting dog, with responsibility for flushing out raccoons so that Hyder could shoot them. Which hunter—nonhuman animal or human animal—has the more impressive skill set? Rip is no less impressive in the afterlife. He was suspicious at the gates of hell, growling at the gatekeeper, while Hyder was almost duped by the gatekeeper, and was prepared to walk right in. As the representative from heaven puts it: “A man—he’ll walk into hell with both eyes open. But even the devil can’t fool a dog.”
FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: afterlife, animal cognition, animal rights, death
Is there a moral requirement to historical accuracy, when we create works in historical settings, or is historical accuracy valuable for its aesthetic contribution, for making the fictional account more compelling to its audience? “Showdown with Rance McGrew” attempts to make the case for the moral requirement. Creators of fictional works ought to portray their subjects in settings and circumstances that represent the settings and circumstances of the historical periods that are represented in those works.

There are several puzzles and questions that arise in attempting to formulate this moral prescription. Works of fiction are, by their nature, narratives in which false claims may be advanced. They are not historical works, and they aren’t or more accurately cannot be constrained to only make claims that are true or accurate. Fiction is fully unconstrained, one might argue. Anything goes! So how could truth be required?

To respond to this challenge, the first thing we should note is that the prescription we are considering, if it applies, applies only to fiction that is set in a historical setting and to fiction that refers to historical persons, places, or events. The requirement also does not specify that historical settings, persons, and events must be set out only in representations that correspond to historical facts. Historical fiction is not history. It is still fiction, and the fiction writer has license to invent circumstances, events, and narratives that are novel.
So how is the historical accuracy requirement to be met? What counts as a violation of it? “Showdown with Rance McGrew” may not provide a complete answer, but it does provide some guidance. McGrew is an actor in formulaic westerns—American cowboy movies, set in a tiny outpost with a dusty main street for shootouts, a bar for brawls, and lots of cowboys with attitude. McGrew plays a tough U.S. marshal, out to get the outlaw Jesse James. But as we observe the filming of this western, we can tell that almost everything is wrong. McGrew is dressed like a cowboy, but he is just a Hollywood pretty boy, and he knows little about the culture and values his character is supposed to represent. From his general demeanor to the way he holsters his gun and the way he drinks whiskey, McGrew is a fraud.

We can only imagine how Jesse James and other real gunslingers would react if they only knew how they were being represented in these flicks. And right on cue, Jesse James appears on set and critiques McGrew’s performance. But he does it in the context of the Old West. McGrew is still acting, but his surroundings have suddenly become the authentic Old West, and in it, McGrew looks terribly out of place. Jesse James complains not only of McGrew’s character but about the details of the storyline and the choreography of the action scenes. The original storyline has Jesse James attempting to shoot McGrew in the back. The real Jesse James complains that this deviation from what he would have done is unacceptable, and he’s there to do something about it.

Even if we’re not motivated to historical accuracy by the possibility of correction from the returning dead, imagining their disapproval does serve a function. Just as we are obligated to carry out the conditions of a will, and that is an obligation to someone who is dead, perhaps we are also obligated not to misrepresent the important characteristics and events of deceased individuals or even whole countries or cultures. We still have license to make things up. But we can make things up within the constraints of truth.

Telling the truth within fiction has another, related purpose. Successful fictional accounts are framed within the conceptual and belief structure that the author shares with the audience or reader. “Showdown with Rance McGrew” makes this point at the very start of the episode. Two cowboys emerge from the saloon and look down the dusty main street. One says: “He ain’t here yet.” The other says: “He’ll be along.” The first: “He knows he’s going to get shot.” We expect someone to appear on a horse coming down the street. What appears is a Ford Thunderbird.
convertible coupe with the top down and the radio blaring jazz. We had been anticipating a scene from a western. What we got was a scene from a movie set, of the talent arriving for the filming of a western. What we see is historically inaccurate for the Old West. It is historically accurate for 1960. So, a writer of fiction must pay attention to the expectations of the readers or viewers and align with their beliefs.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* fictional inexistence, truth
“KICK THE CAN”

Original air date: February 9, 1962

How should we live in old age if we achieve it? How should we evaluate our life when we are old, and in evaluating it how should we take into account the arc of existence that includes the infirmities and limitations that come with age? How should we care for our elderly parents and others? These are just some of the practical and philosophical questions raised in “Kick the Can.”

“Static” opened with the rather depressing sight of the elderly residents of a boarding house passively glued to the communal television set. One resident, however, rejects this lifestyle. “Kick the Can” is about an older crowd, not at a boarding house but at Sunnyvale Rest, a senior living facility with a full-time nurse and physician in residence. Like “Static,” “Kick the Can” features a resident who doesn’t fit in, a resident who is not content to bask in the tranquility and calm his setting provides.

The malcontent in “Kick the Can” is Charles Whitley, who, at the start, believes that his son is coming to rescue him from Sunnyvale Rest. Charles fully expects to move in with his son and young family. But the son quickly disabuses Charles of that plan, and Charles slinks back to Sunnyvale. For the record, Charles seems quite healthy and alert. Charles's son and, later, his caregivers seem to systematically underestimate his abilities. The more Charles exerts his desire for independence, the more they question his competency. A picture emerges of Charles, and others like him, as victims of a particularly distasteful form of discrimination.
This discrimination—age discrimination—does seem justified, particularly as we survey the scene of Sunnyvale Rest at the start of the episode and witness its residents, a motley assemblage of individuals, hunched over, moving stiffly, or not at all. It is correct to classify these individuals as a group, a group with disabilities or special needs. The question is how we ought to care for this group. Is the care we see in the episode appropriate? Is it required? Is it just?

How we ought to apportion resources for the more senior members of our population is a pressing issue of distributive justice, one taken up in groundbreaking work by Norman Daniels in the 1980s. In the many countries where the percentage of the population that falls into this category has risen, the question of the fair allocation of resources to all segments of the population has only become more urgent.

Though it prompts reflection on such issues, “Kick the Can” does not raise these macro-level concerns directly. Instead, it focuses on the psychology of the elderly, their self-conceptions, and the relationship between their self-conceptions and their psychological and physical health. Almost as soon as Charles realizes that his son has not come to save him from Sunnyvale Rest, he is buoyed by a new discovery. He sees a group of kids across the road playing Kick the Can. That sparks his memory of his own childhood as well as of his childhood imagination. He remembers the “magic” of play, the pure joy of running, shouting, and interacting with others, of engagement in a communal activity. Charles says to his friend Ben: “Maybe Kick the Can is the greatest magic of all.” Magic just means excitement, interest, and intense feeling—the magic of a first kiss, which Charles also recalls. He imagines playing Kick the Can, and although others tell him that playing such games is incompatible with being an old person, he refuses to accept such objections. Because he can imagine playing the game, playing it is a possibility for him. He asserts: “I can’t play ‘Kick the Can’ alone!” So he seeks and eventually finds collaborators among his equally elderly co-residents, convincing them that it is a possibility for them by getting them to remember their active youth and then imagine engaging in it now.

Engaging in action, whether it is taking a walk, making coffee, or playing a game, requires some awareness of one’s sense of self. One takes oneself to be capable of the actions to be undertaken, and sometimes that includes awareness of one’s identity as a member of a class. As this episode reminds us, an overemphasis on the fact that one is a member of the class of elderly people can itself be debilitating. Being old is a state of one’s
body; it is also a state of mind. As Charles realizes: “Maybe the fountain of youth isn’t a fountain at all. Maybe it’s a way of looking at things, a way of thinking.”

The faculty that needs to be cultivated and renewed is the faculty of the imagination, which Serling refers to as “the fifth dimension” in the opening for this and other episodes. Charles succeeds in sparking his imagination and that of his fellow residents, except for that of his good friend, Ben, who realizes, too late, that he has been left out of their game. Serling notes: “Childhood, maturity, and old age are curiously intertwined and not separate.” Ben’s imaginative limitations reveal that Sunnyvale Rest, and anywhere we find the elderly is “a dying place for those who have grown too stiff in their thinking to visit the Twilight Zone.”

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: death, loneliness, memory, mind-body problem, mortality, time
Mr. Fitzgerald Fortune, a theater critic, has invited friends and colleagues from the world of the theater to celebrate the birthday of his wife, Esther. Such gatherings are unlikely to give rise to moral dilemmas or to raise questions about what moral principles to appeal to in considering how we ought to act in such circumstances. Birthday party attendees gather to celebrate the anniversary of a birth and to celebrate a life.

We quickly learn that this is no ordinary birthday party because Fitzgerald Fortune is no ordinary husband and friend. He is a selfish, egotistical control freak who gets pleasure from inflicting psychological pain on others. His goal for this gathering is simply to increase his own happiness, which depends on increasing the misery of everyone else.

This party is unusual in another respect. The room in which it takes place contains a player piano that has special causal powers. When it plays, it causes one of the individuals listening to it to reveal their emotions to the others present. Described in this way, it might not seem like something out of the ordinary. One might hear a sad piece coming from the piano and, as a result, feel sadness and show it. This piano does much more. It causes the individual to reveal deeply held and guarded feelings, emotions to which the individual might not have conscious access. These emotions are manifested by the individual’s actions and assertions, actions and assertions that would not, without the presence of the special piano, be revealed.
Just by suggesting a novel way in which our emotions might be elicited and comprehended, by ourselves and others, the episode raises questions about our access to our own emotions and, more fundamentally, about what our emotions are. Is our access to them different from our access to our beliefs, and how does dredging up our emotions differ from recalling or reflecting on our beliefs? To what extent can our emotions be transparent to others, and what are the mechanisms by which they can be revealed? These questions have been of interest to philosophers like Hume, who saw the foundation of morals in human sentiments, as well as to psychologists since Freud and cognitive scientists interested in the relationship between affect and cognition.

How does this special tool for uncovering emotions serve Mr. Fitzgerald Fortune’s purposes? He is delighted to use it to embarrass and undermine his “friends,” causing them to reveal emotions that they normally keep hidden. As long as there is an asymmetry in the use of the piano, where only the emotions of those other than Mr. Fortune are revealed, his purposes are served.

The piano is an equal-opportunity emotion revealer, as Mr. Fortune discovers late in the game. Fortune himself is forced to spill the beans, displaying his own fears and hang-ups in front of the others. His self-revelations don’t prompt others to sympathize with him but to retreat in horror. This suggests that Mr. Fortune would be more fortunate without the emotion-revealing piano. After all, the piano doesn’t really reveal things about the emotions of others that Fortune doesn’t already know, such as that his wife detests him, that his colleague is in love with his wife, and that their friend is lonely. The emotion-revealing piano just makes it easier for him to embarrass and humiliate others. His success at being a jerk depends on the asymmetry of the access to emotions. He is better at keeping his emotions bottled up, until the special piano comes along. The opacity of the emotions, then, may serve the purposes of the ethical egoist, who becomes an expert at decoding the emotions of others while concealing his own.

“A Penny for Your Thoughts” serves as a companion episode to this one. Each explores an aspect of the problem of other minds. “A Penny for Your Thoughts” explores the possible world in which someone has direct access to the thoughts of others, while “A Piano in the House” is the possible world in which there is direct access to the emotions of others. In both cases, those who gain direct access to other minds, either their thoughts or their emotions, get more than they bargained for.
FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: desire, egoism, loneliness, other minds, self-knowledge, sympathy, vice
Jeff Myrtlebank succumbs to the flu as a young man in rural Kentucky, or thereabouts, in the 1920s. His family physician, Dr. Bolton, declares him dead, and his family administers last rites at their country church. During the service, Jeff climbs out of the coffin and declares himself alive. There doesn’t appear to be anything “last” about the last rites of Jeff Myrtlebank.

This scenario raises several metaphysical questions. What is death, and what is the death of a person? Can a person survive death, and if so, in what way? Could one survive death by reversing the process, by becoming alive after being dead, or by existing as a person while being dead? All of these questions are, at root, about the relationship of persons to their bodies.

Jeff appears to be the same person who was declared dead. He appears to remember past events, and he recognizes family, friends, and acquaintances from his hometown. Others are less sure, and doubts are raised as people notice differences between the old Jeff and the new one. The new Jeff seems more self-assured, and he is a better fist-fighter than he used to be. There is some speculation that Jeff is not the same person before and after his ascendancy, but that explanation doesn’t get much traction. Jeff has changed, but who wouldn’t have? But he’s still Jeff Myrtlebank.
The most straightforward explanation of the phenomenon of Jeff Myrtlebank’s ascendance from the coffin, and one that is carefully considered in the episode, is that he didn’t die in the first place. In response to challenges from the townsfolk, Dr. Bolton lays out the evidence he adduced to conclude that Jeff was dead. First, Jeff had no pulse. Second, Dr. Bolton administered what he called “the pin test.” He stabbed Jeff with a pin. There was no response. Then he held up a mirror to his lips: “If there’s any life left in a man at all, his breath will fog up a mirror.” Jeff didn’t fog a mirror. In contemporary terms, Dr. Bolton used cardiopulmonary and neurogenic criteria to declare Jeff Myrtlebank’s death.

Dr. Bolton’s determination of death followed the state of science of the time. Death, as a state of the human body, is an empirical matter, though what constitutes an answer to it is a function of the scientific theories of the time. However, the question of what constitutes the death of a human being is less clear than it was for Dr. Bolton. One definition is that it is the irreversible ending of all brain function, where the functions of the brain include both higher functions, such as perception and cognition, and basic functions, such as the neurological regulation of respiration and circulation. Some challenge this interpretation, citing cases where higher-level brain functions have ceased but basic life support functions remain. In these debates, the central distinction may be between a living organism, and an organism that supports personhood.

Philosophical questions often arise by reflecting on scientific practice and theory, and as we’ve emphasized, philosophical reflection can take place by asking about how our concepts and definitions would apply in possible, or imagined, cases. In this episode we have the application of the medical definition of death from the 1920s, and we can appreciate its shortcomings. Just as Jeff Myrtlebank is classified as dead when he isn’t, and he is justifiably bothered by that fact when he realizes that he was about to be buried alive, so too have we had to consider our possible Jeff Myrtlebanks, including individuals with conditions such as locked-in syndrome, individuals who appear to have lost all sensory and cognitive function when what they have really lost is their ability to communicate with others. Such patients demonstrate that the problem of other minds is not “just” a philosophical exercise.

We don’t know what caused Jeff Myrtlebank to emerge from the coffin days after he is declared dead. The episode offers several competing hypotheses, the implausibility of each heightened by its setting in rural America in the 1920s. We have moved from a cardiopulmonary definition
of death to a brain-based definition. Yet exactly how we should characterize death remains open to debate, in large measure because that characterization, as the episode shows and as Michael Green and Daniel Wikler argue, hinges on our philosophical understanding of personhood. To make sense of death we must make sense of the relationship of personhood to the physiological processes of the human body.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* death, epistemology, other minds, personal identity
If a race of creatures from space showed up on our doorstep, what should we do? What do we normally do when we are confronted by individuals or groups we don’t know? What should they do? How should they treat us? There are many questions we can ask about such interactions, questions about how we could understand and characterize such creatures, and related questions about how we ought to act (and how they ought to act) in our interactions with them.

“To Serve Man” raises at least two questions. First, if we were visited by intelligent creatures from another planet, how would we or even could we figure out what they believe and desire? Second, if we were powerless against such creatures, due to their vastly superior intelligence and strength, would they still be morally obligated to treat us justly? The first is a question of the philosophy of mind. The second is a question of moral theory.

What kinds of things have beliefs, desires, plans, and goals? Clearly, most humans, from a certain stage of cognitive development on, have beliefs and desires. Rocks, pumpkins, and sandy beaches do not. So some living things have them, and some do not. Do living things other than humans have them? What about dogs, cats, or dolphins? Are there non-living things that possess beliefs and desires? What should we say about artificial intelligence? Do computers with AI possess beliefs when they are powered up? What should we say about aliens, if we visited them
The aliens in “To Serve Man” have visited us, arriving by flying saucer. That they are intelligent beings equipped with beliefs and desires and other mental states seems clear, since their technology is far superior to ours, and they’ve used that technology to travel to earth. They have also adapted their technology for the purpose of communicating with us in our natural languages. That these beings, the Kanamits, can engage in open-ended conversations with us provides strong support for the attribution of mental states to them. As Daniel Dennett argues, when the only viable strategy for predicting the behavior of a system is to attribute beliefs and desires to that system, to take what he calls “the intentional stance,” toward them, we should take such systems to possess beliefs and desires. The Kanamits pass the Turing Test (see “The Lonely,” “Steel,” and “I Sing the Body Electric”).

What are the Kanamits thinking? They claim that they are here to lend a hand, to alleviate world hunger, and to improve our quality of life. They also set up an exchange program, so that earthlings can visit their planet and more Kanamits can visit earth. Other than interpreting their avowals and their behavior, the only thing to go on is a copy of a book in their language, which American central intelligence agents attempt to translate.

Early in the twentieth century, philosophers became increasingly interested in the nature of language. The spur to study language came in large part from advancements in logic. Logicians developed precise formal accounts of inference and reasoning that provided insight into the structure of language. Drawing on these formal theories, some philosophers argued that all human languages share the same logical structure. The differences in languages are a matter of “surface grammar” rather than of “depth grammar.” That led to the investigation into the nature of meaning. How do words, sentences, and languages acquire and transmit meaning? One way to investigate this is to think about translation. What makes a word or sentence in one language such that it expresses the same meaning as a word or sentence in another language?

In the second half of the twentieth century, philosopher and logician Willard Van Orman Quine sharpened the question by introducing what he called the problem of radical translation. How would we translate a language that is completely isolated from our own, where there has been no cultural contact, no shared vocabulary, and no prior
attempt to understand what any words or utterances mean in the target language? How should we begin to formulate hypotheses about what count as words, phrases, and sentences in another language, and then how could we decide between competing interpretations of those words, phrases, and sentences? Radical translation is the task faced by the U.S. government intelligence officers when they attempt to translate the Kanamit book. They first translate the book’s title as “To Serve Man.” What the translators fail to appreciate at the time is that there are competing hypotheses about that title means.

This brings us to our second question. Given their vastly superior strength and intellect, what can we demand of the Kanamits in terms of how they treat us? David Hume introduced a thought experiment that hardly differs from that of “To Serve Man.” He wrote:

Were there a species of creatures, intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment...

Just replace “men” with “Kanamits” and consider the creatures intermingled with the Kanamits to be human beings. Hume draws the following conclusion, about what “we,” the Kanamits would be required to do:

... the necessary consequence, I think, is, that we should be bound, by the laws of humanity, to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them, nor could they possess any right or property, exclusive of such arbitrary lords. Our intercourse with them could not be called society, which supposes a degree of equality; but absolute command on the one side, and servile obedience on the other. Whatever we covet, they must instantly resign: Our permission is the only tenure, by which they hold their possessions: Our compassion and kindness the only check, by which they curb our lawless will: And as no inconvenience ever results from the exercise of a power, so firmly established in nature, the restraints of justice and property, being totally useless, would never have place in so unequal a confederacy.
Hume distinguishes between kindness and compassion, which we would hope that the Kanimit would exhibit, from the demands of justice, which, Hume says, would be “totally useless” to the Kanimit, since we humans would be powerless to object to any way in which they treat us. As Serling concludes, the evolution of man could take us “from dust to dessert, the metamorphosis from being the ruler of a planet to an ingredient in someone’s soup.”

Returning to our actual relationships to other creatures, on Hume’s view the creatures who are not members of our society, such as cows, pigs, chickens, and fish, are subject to our “lawless will,” since it there is nothing that can bind us to such creatures by a law or convention of justice, though “The Hunt” may suggest a different relationship, at least between humans and dogs. We might very well bind each other through laws governing how we treat such creatures, but that is a different matter altogether. That prospect wouldn’t come as much comfort to Mr. Chambers, as he is headed to the slaughterhouse.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: fate of the earth, intentionality, justice, oppression, other minds, representation, trust, truth
A fugitive is a person on the run, someone escaping conditions in their own culture or country uncomfortable enough to make the effort to uproot and adjust to an unfamiliar, and often unfriendly, place worth the considerable risks. A fugitive is not just a refugee but a refugee whose home culture or government has an interest in their return. Very often, though not always, a fugitive is at the margins of both the society left behind and the society entered. A fugitive’s success depends on not being noticed, on fitting into the new turf. That can be difficult when the adopted culture is not diverse and the fugitive looks, acts, or speaks differently from others.

There is diversity in every society, even in the America of the 1960s as it is represented in *The Twilight Zone*. The fugitive in “The Fugitive” appears as an older white adult male, Ben, playing softball with a group of white children. Among the children, only one, Jenny, is female, and she is also the only one who is clearly physically disabled. She wears a brace on her right leg. Like Ben, Jenny is trying to fit in, despite being the only girl and in spite of the physical challenges and discrimination she faces. The others may take for granted what Ben and Jenny deeply appreciate, that they are exactly where they want to be.

Ben appears to be a human, but he’s really a being from another planet, the king or chief executive of his home planet. When Ben grew tired of ruling, he escaped to Earth. He is the fugitive, tailed by two
human-looking underlings who wish to return him to his throne, not because he is a bad ruler but because he is such a good one! But how do we judge his goodness, and as a being from another planet, what is it morally permissible for Ben to do? What should he do, here on earth, in light of the demands placed on him by both earthlings and members of his home planet? Do our moral judgments extend to the possible acts of alien creatures such as Ben, or are they localized to our patch of the galaxy? Is morality truly universal, or is it relative?

Some philosophers approach the question of the relativity of morals by comparing moral codes found in different human cultures. If what is moral is what one ought to do, rather than just what one does, then morality should provide guidance, particularly to fugitives, as they travel between cultures, which suggests that morality isn’t relative, that there a standard outside of the moral practices and codes of individual cultures to guide the actions of fugitives, refugees, and even tourists. If changing cultures ever requires changing one’s moral prescriptions, then morality is relative, though how relative may depend on the kind of moral prescriptions in play.

“The Fugitive” is an exercise in cross-planetary morality, suggesting that even where one visits not merely another culture, but another world, there are moral principles that apply both where one has been and where one arrives. After playing softball with Jenny and the neighborhood boys, everyone must settle on a new game. In picking roles for the “Find the Martian” game they agree to play, Ben looks out for Jenny and helps to make sure that she is included, in spite of the fact that the others want to exclude her because she is “a dame with a brace.” Later, Jenny, who knows Ben has special powers, asks him to cure her leg. He hesitates: “Oh, Jenny, I mustn’t do it.” We don’t know why he can’t. It turns out not to be a moral “can’t” but a prudential “can’t.” When circumstances change, Ben can, and he does. Ben juggles his obligations across planets, using moral principles that apply to both.

The actions of Ben and his followers are ultimately morally praiseworthy by the norms we share with them, in contrast with the behavior of the Kanamits, in “To Serve Man.” We are appalled at the Kanamits’ treatment of us, even though it may be that their behavior is consistent with our treatment of other creatures. It may well be that there are surprising consequences for the cross-planetary application of our moral principles. Happily, there are no such surprises in “The Fugitive.” The only surprise is the metaphysical solution to Jenny’s goal of traveling to Ben’s planet.
with him, a solution that introduces the problem of fission in personal identity, a problem explored in “In His Image.”

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, moral relativism, personal identity
“LITTLE GIRL LOST”

*Original air date: March 16, 1962*

You know you’re in the Twilight Zone when you witness a set of parents discover that their daughter is missing—and they don’t call the police. They call a physicist. Oddly, that turns out to be a good move, because Bettina, their daughter, has wandered away from three-dimensional space and is stuck in “a fourth dimension.” She is followed by her dog, of course.

The value of *The Twilight Zone* in philosophical inquiry comes from its rich fund of exercises in the philosophical imagination. These exercises put stress on our concepts; they force us to attempt to apply them in new and unusual ways that ordinary experience simply does not permit. A seemingly minimal constraint on the stories we tell is that the possible states of affairs they contain must really be possible. For example, if we described a ball as being completely blue on its exterior surface and completely white on its exterior surface, we would not be describing a possible state of affairs. Our attempt at the description of a possible world would fail, since our attempted description is inconsistent.

Some inconsistencies are obvious, such as ones involving an all blue and all white ball, while other inconsistencies are only revealed by an analysis of a set of propositions. Examples of a non-obvious inconsistency include some descriptions of time travel. We hinted at the inconsistency in “Walking Distance,” where Martin Sloan doesn’t have a limp at time $t$ and does have a limp when he returns to time $t$ after time-traveling to
the past and causing the accident to his childhood self that results in the limp.

We can distinguish between logical possibility and physical possibility. A physically possible state of affairs is one that is logically possible but is also consistent with the laws of nature. To describe Bettina as lost in another dimension is to propose what is logically possible, that space has, either fewer or more than, three dimensions, but it is not consistent with our best physical theories, which take space to be three dimensional, or space-time, which includes a dimension for time, to be four dimensional.

This episode is inconsistent with our best physical theory. But it’s logically possible that our physics could be wrong, and it’s possible that space has more than three dimensions, and that a little girl and her dog could enter that dimension through “a gap opening” to that dimension. The difficulty is that we really can’t do more than postulate this possibility. We lack the resources to represent the possibility in ordinary experience, since our representational resources in ordinary experience are spatially three dimensional.

“Little Girl Lost” doesn’t just announce that Bettina is lost in the fourth (spatial) dimension. It attempts to show this to us, and this is problematic in several ways. The first problem is that her parents, in their home, can still hear Bettina and the dog. So sound travels across the dimensions, which we can represent in our space, but not in the posited extra dimension. If it did, we would be able to follow it. The second problem has to do with the hole or gap through which Bettina has passed to enter the special dimension, discovered by the physicist friend. What can we say about a hole? Does a hole have a size? Is it in space, or is it in the absence of space? Is it in our three-dimensional space or in the fourth spatial dimension or both? When Bettina’s father places his upper body through the hole, how can he be half in the fourth dimension and half out of it? When he sees Bettina and the dog, they are represented as being in three dimensions. They have height, width, and distance from him. The fourth dimension is just a foggy three-dimensional space, at least as it is represented. And how could it be otherwise? Finally, it isn’t clear how an extra dimension would be incompatible with the first three dimensions. In contemporary physics, space and time are represented as the four-dimensional space-time. Representing the location of objects is a matter of assigning values in each of the four dimensions. While an $n$-dimensional space-time has $n$ dimensions, it’s not clear what it would mean for an object to have just one of the $n$ dimensions.
FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: metaphysics, perception, space, sympathy, time travel
As Serling notes, David Gurney has lost something he didn’t even know he had—his identity. A special feature of David Gurney’s circumstances is that he hasn’t lost his sense of who he is, or more neutrally, his belief that he is David Andrew Gurney, his crystal-clear sense of himself as David Gurney. The problem is that his belief about himself clashes with the beliefs others have about him. He claims to know who he is, but no one else does. It’s not that they hold beliefs about who he is. It’s just that they don’t believe that he is David Gurney. As the psychiatrist says to him after he’s hospitalized: “You see, this man you think you are, he doesn’t really exist, except in your mind.” The individual who claims to be David Gurney also knows who other people are, and claims that they know him, which others also deny. They also deny that they are who David Gurney says they are.

In what sense, then, has the person who claims to be David Gurney lost anything? Everything about him seems the same to himself. What has changed is his relationship to others. It’s like property. Suppose that your car sits in your garage, but, unbeknownst to you, you’ve just defaulted on your auto loan, and the bank is about to show up to repossess it. Nothing about the car has changed. What has changed are the beliefs about the car and attitudes toward it that others hold, which lead them to act in ways that they collectively approve of. If you’re left out of the loop and don’t realize that you’ve defaulted on the loan, you will find what is about to happen very puzzling.
We readily acknowledge that the possession of property has to do with what actions we can and can’t take and how we evaluate the appropriateness of the actions of others, but the extent to which this is true of our identity is obscured by our sense that identity is something internal, something that doesn’t depend on conventions or agreements about how we name, identify, and ascribe properties to things. As David Gurney says, as he pushes back against everyone else’s denial of his identity claim: “They can’t get inside my mind.”

Yet, as we’ve already noted, the disparity in identity claims is not limited to those made about the individual who claims to be David Gurney. When David attempts to establish his identity by phoning his best friend and then his mom, he reaches the people he recognizes as his best friend and his mom, but they don’t recognize him.

The incompatibility of David Gurney’s beliefs about his identity and the beliefs of others is maintained when he wakes up at the end of the episode, though his beliefs about identity are completely reversed. He now fails to recognize other people, including his wife, while his wife (and, presumably, other people) now identify him as David Gurney. (No one else seems particularly bothered that Gurney has a grasp of some facts that it would be hard for a total stranger to have, such as knowing the bartender’s name.)

While the episode ends here, we can compare the difficulties David Gurney had when no one acknowledged his identity to the ones he will have when everyone recognizes him but he doesn’t recognize anyone else. If he returns to the bank where he works, it will seem to him that no one belongs there. If he returns to his neighborhood bar, Sam the bartender won’t be behind the bar, even though the person behind the bar will claim to be Sam. Now the fact that David Gurney will be correctly identified by others will be as inexplicable to David Gurney as their failure to identify him was in the first scenario. So, it appears that David Gurney has not regained his identity, even when the beliefs of others about him match his beliefs about himself. He won’t regain his identity until his beliefs about others also match their beliefs about themselves.

**FURTHER READING**


_Philosophical keywords:_ epistemology, memory, metaphysics, other minds, personal identity
Peter Craig is no god. But he has discovered a race of people on a planet who are so much smaller than he is, that David Hume might have described them like this: “though rational, [they are] possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they [are] incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment” (for the full quote, see “To Serve Man”). A consequence of Hume’s view is that Peter Craig is not bound by the rules of justice in his treatment of the little people, since the conditions of justice are lacking. But Hume would say that Craig ought to be charitable and treat the little people “gently.” However, if the conditions of justice don’t apply in cases like these, then treatment of those subjugated to such authority will depend on the arbitrary will of the subjugator. As we see, the little people under Peter Craig’s thumb are unlucky.

If Peter Craig is not bound by the rules of justice in his treatment of these little people, then neither is God bound by justice in his/her/its treatment of us. God is not required to be just in its treatment of us. How does this square with the idea that God is morally perfect? For one thing, it doesn’t prohibit God from creating the rules of justice that we are bound to in our treatment of each other, and it doesn’t prevent God from tracking our adherence to those rules in the ultimate judgment of our worth. In The Monadology, Leibniz says that there will be “no good
deed without its reward” and “no evil deed without punishment.” This can be the case even though the ultimate one who judges is immune from the application of those standards to Himself.

Leibniz offers a further description of God as a being who is not just an engineer but also a legislator. This characterization may be apt insofar as God lays down the moral law. Yet Leibniz also describes the relationship we have to God as a social relationship, and this is less compelling if God is not bound to obey the rules of justice, as we are. In fact, the more we reflect on the differences between an absolute deity and ourselves, the harder it is to make sense of the idea that we jointly occupy a social space with such a being.

When we respect the property rights of others, we don’t do so because we love them and wish to treat them gently. Rather, it’s because others are capable of making their displeasure with our failure to respect their claims known to us. Hume’s point is that we can’t make our displeasure known to God or any other being vastly more powerful than ourselves, and there would be no point in trying, in part because such a being would have no interest in our property to begin with. Yet, as the case of Peter Craig demonstrates, a god could make our lives miserable, as Craig does with the little people he’s found. The only argument against such despotic tendencies is to appeal to the deity’s moral sense, its compassion. But can one feel sympathy for beings with whom one is not in a social relationship? Peter Craig doesn’t have the affective repertoire to pull that off. Perhaps he would have been served by reasoning about the possible case in which he is a little person in relation to others.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: God, problem of evil, sympathy, vice, virtue
Can the pursuit of a world devoid of evil be itself an act of evil? Yes, because were the pursuit to be successful, it would result in the elimination of that pursuit. In a possible world in which an evil person or group can bring about the end of evil, that individual or group will also meet its end.

In order to eliminate something, one first needs to identify the thing to be eliminated. To eliminate the pests eating the tomatoes in your garden, you must know what the pests are and only then take appropriate measures. Things can go wrong. You might misidentify the pest and do harm to a beneficial insect, for example, or correctly identify the pest and still inflict collateral damage to other organisms, including yourself.

In “Four O’Clock,” Oliver Crangle attempts to eliminate evil. However, it is clear to everyone other than Oliver Crangle that he has failed to identify evil, though the failure is not due to a lack of effort on his part. Crangle has amassed a database of information about people in his community. He explains his practice to an FBI agent, describing how he works each entry: “I compile them, investigate them, analyze them, categorize them, and I judge them.”

Despite his apparently voluminous and exhaustive research, Crangle gets it wrong. He identifies individuals as evil who are not. This is immediately clear in his first telephone call, where he “reports” someone as a communist. Crangle appears to be modeled on U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, accusing...
others of subversion, espionage, and treason through intimidation, fear, and hearsay based on an indefensible political agenda grounded by an extreme ideology. But Crangle casts a wider net than McCarthy ever did. He accuses a physician of malpractice based on a single data point in his possession.

The first problem is that Crangle makes incorrect moral judgments because he makes incorrect empirical judgments. Malpractice can, in some cases, be a moral wrong in addition to a legal wrong, but only when one has committed it. Even if being a member of a certain political group could be a moral wrong, judging someone as morally wrong for membership in that group requires sufficient evidence that the individual is in fact a member of that group and that the group’s actions are morally wrong.

A second problem has to do with the way Crangle compiles, investigates, analyzes, categorizes, and judges. He carries out these activities in complete isolation from other investigators. His only companion, a fitting one, is his parrot. Although he compiles information that is publicly available, there is no check on Crangle’s research and the conclusions he draws from them. Although he is challenged during his accusatory phone calls, he rejects them outright and issues his claims and associated threats. Were Crangle to take these critiques seriously, everyone would be better off.

Crangle’s isolation is the root of a third problem, and that has to do with the actions Crangle takes in response to his moral judgments. It’s one thing to determine that someone has transgressed morality or the law. It’s another to determine what to do about it. As Thomas Scanlon notes, these are two dimensions of our notion of blame. Our responses to moral transgressions are just as open to moral evaluation as the actions to which they respond. Crangle’s initial responses to perceived moral wrongs are acts of threat and intimidation. Since he is acting alone, he doesn’t get the benefit of wise council about appropriate responses or cooperation in carrying them out. Ultimately, Crangle decides that all evildoers should get the same punishment. His choice, which he claims he will carry out by a mere act of his will at four o’clock, is to reduce all evildoers to two feet in stature. This is perhaps something God could do, but not something a just god would do.

A just response to an evil act takes into account the nature of the act to which it responds. Crangle’s single response to all evil acts cannot be just. Categorizing acts as evil or wrong doesn’t tell us much. Is something wrong because it has done someone else harm, or can an act be wrong where no harm results? Just as there are many varieties of goodness,
there are different “bads,” and no single response to all of them could make sense. And what is the goal of punishment? Is it to prevent harm, to extract revenge, to seek retribution, or something else? These are questions that occupy moral philosophers, particularly those interested in the relationship between morality and the law.

“Four O’Clock” shows us that exacting justice is not a solo affair, that someone who thinks that they occupy the position of judge, jury, and jailer is seriously misguided. Of course, anyone who thinks that they can play all three of these roles alone is also mistaken, unless one is omnipotent and omniscient. Crangle’s illness amounts to his delusion that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and without evil. He’s in for a surprise.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: evil, God, morality, truth, vice
There is a charming disconnect in the person of Somerset Frisby, a good ole boy country bumpkin and owner of a rural gas station and general store, who possesses both a remarkable intellectual curiosity and claimed expertise and experience over a vast swath of human knowledge and history. To anyone who will listen, Frisby expounds on his role in key historical events as well as on his expertise and accomplishments in such fields as meteorology, mathematics, and engineering. What is charming and admirable is that Frisby’s geographical and socioeconomic isolation are not barriers to his interests. His mind reaches effortlessly beyond the confines of Pitchville Flats. It is said that Immanuel Kant, who lived in the eighteenth century, never traveled further than one hundred miles from his birthplace in Königsberg, Prussia, but his opinions and interests extended to the furthest reaches of the planet.

The similarity of Frisby and Kant ends here, as we notice that Frisby’s testimony does not withstand the scrutiny of his peers. Like Frisby, his patrons and friends seek knowledge, and what they lack the experience and education Frisby claims to have, they make up for with their ability to assess the plausibility of Frisby’s testimony.

How should we assess the testimony of others? When should we accept it and when should it be challenged? Surprisingly, this important question in epistemology was rarely taken up in the history of philosophy,
though it is currently a major focus in the field. Frisby’s customers reject his knowledge claims when they notice that he makes conflicting claims that can’t all be true. This is a starting point for considering when to find testimony credible and when to reject it. Assessing testimony also has something to do with assessing the character and motives of the testifier.

The creatures who arrive from another planet encounter Frisby but lack the most rudimentary tools for assessing his claims. On their planet, every claim made is true, and so they have no need to distinguish credible from non-credible testimony. Since Frisby claims to be the greatest human expert on just about everything, they count themselves lucky to have found him, and they plan to take him back to their planet.

Frisby faces a dilemma. How can he convince the aliens that his claims have been fabrications? There are two problems. First, the aliens claim to not understand what it is for a claim to be false. Second, even were they to possess the distinction between truth and falsehood, they would come face to face with the liar paradox: Suppose Frisby claims that everything he says is a lie. Is the claim “Frisby’s claims are lies,” true or false? If it is true, then, as a claim of Frisby’s, it is a lie, and so it is false. If “Frisby’s claims are lies” is false, it is true.

If the aliens lack the distinction between truth and falsehood, then they will be spared the Liar paradox. But they still will face the consequence of believing Frisby and acting on that belief. But could aliens who arrive on our planet, capable of communicating with us and interacting with us, really lack the ability to understand the concept of falsehood? Notice that when Frisby begins to speculate about how he will be treated on their planet, the aliens try to put him at ease, assuring him that his speculation is incorrect, that is, that his belief about how he will be treated is false. It seems that the aliens must have the concept of falsehood after all.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: epistemology, testimony, truth
In *The Twilight Zone* one can often shop for items not usually thought to be available for purchase. In a later episode, “I Sing the Body Electric,” a family shops for a replacement grandmother. In “The Trade-Ins” an aging couple shops for replacements for their aging bodies. The difficulty they face is not metaphysical but economic: The Holts simply cannot afford to buy two replacement bodies. They have the cash for just one transformation.

After he almost loses all his money trying to double his savings in a card game, Mr. Holt agrees with his wife’s plan: He will get a new body. She will wait until some unspecified future time for her transformation.

When Mr. Holt comes out of the transformation, sporting a new, young, sprightly body, is he still Mr. Holt, or is the resulting person someone else? Every indication is that he is still Mr. Holt: He recognizes his wife and talks of their plans; though he has lost his accent, the operation was a success. If we have any doubt that the old Mr. Holt is waiting in the wings and that this is an imposter, that doubt is set aside when we see Mr. Holt’s inert former body being wheeled out of the operating room.

What makes it plausible to think that Mr. Holt survived the shedding of his old body? The philosophical question is the genetic one: Could one
survive a change from one body to another? If you traded in your body for a new one, would you still exist? Mr. Holt gets a young, vibrant body, but that thought experiment doesn’t make it easy to infer that Mr. Holt survives, since he seems, at least outwardly, so different from his former, elderly self. To aid our intuitions here, it might help to consider a range of possibilities:

1. Mr. Holt gets his body overhauled. It isn’t a completely new body but has lots of new parts replacing the old parts.
2. Mr. Holt gets a new body, but it looks just like his old body. (For the purposes of the story, we can imagine that while it looks like his old body, it no longer has the illnesses that made him want a new body in the first place.)
3. Mr. Holt gets a new body that looks something like his old body, but it’s clearly a younger model. Perhaps it’s based on Mr. Holt’s body as a younger man.
4. Mr. Holt gets the young body as shown in the episode, but with this difference: They placed his original brain in that new body. Thus he has a new “shell” body but his original “core” body.
5. Mr. Holt gets the young body as shown in the episode, presumably with a new brain as well. His memory, beliefs, desires, etc. have been transferred from his old brain to the new one. This is the scenario presented in the episode.

If you think Mr. Holt doesn’t survive in Case 5, what do you think of Case 1? Do individuals who have heart transplants retain their identity? As you consider this range of options, try to articulate the principles you’re using to guide your judgments of identity and think about whether those principles give you plausible judgments in other possible cases.

There is another philosophical theme in this episode, one less metaphysically charged but still noteworthy. The Holts are motivated to trade in their bodies in response to the challenges of aging. Their ordeal leads Mr. Holt to realign his path, as he quotes from Robert Browning:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be.
The last of life,
for which the first was made.
FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: afterlife, death, love, memory, personal identity
Philosophy attempts to come up with and to answer our most basic questions. Those questions can include questions about philosophy itself, including the question of whether the questions of philosophy really are basic questions. Is philosophy constrained by our social, cultural, historical, and economic circumstances, or can philosophical inquiry transcend or bypass such contexts? Are the philosophical questions raised by such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein really fundamental questions, or do they depend on assumptions and influences of the conditions under which they were formulated, such as prior beliefs, cultural practices, and even language? Asked positively: Are there philosophical questions that can be raised and apply to all cultures and historical periods and can be formulated in any natural language? In contrast, Hegel and José Ortega y Gasset emphasized the dependence of philosophy itself on history and culture.

Whether philosophical questions are truly universal or instead are culturally relative is raised in “The Gift,” when Serling, describing the location of story as forty miles south of the Rio Grande, in Mexico, adds, “But any place—and all places—can be...the Twilight Zone.” Serling’s claim is that our ability to engage the imagination to consider possible worlds is not constrained by the details of the setting or location for that engagement. Any actual time or place can be used to construct a possible
world that can serve as the basis for our philosophical investigation. Of course, this is just a claim and not an argument. But the use of Mexico as the setting, a setting that would have been unfamiliar to most U.S. television viewers in the early 1960s, is at least the beginning of an argument.

The imaginative exercise in “The Gift” asks us to consider how we would act if confronted by a being clearly unlike us, a being from another planet or realm, a creature bearing gifts. The exercise is similar in some respects to that of “To Serve Man,” where visitors from another planet also arrive with gifts, and after some initial skepticism, we place our trust in them. In “The Gift” we fear and then quickly destroy the visiting stranger and its gift. The difference in the two cases is that in the former, the aliens’ gifts were just lures to attract and deceive us, while the gift in “The Gift” was sincere and significant.

Perhaps the conclusion we should draw is that we are not particularly good at distinguishing threatening actors from benefactors, particularly when they come from beyond the stars. This may be a particularly good example of a feature of human nature that really is universal and is not historically or culturally bound. The fear-fueled reactions of the rural Mexican townsfolk are not the result of their occurrence in Mexico or in a rural area; they may be the typical responses of human beings anywhere.

Could more appropriate responses be learned and mastered over time? The question is raised in “The Gift” when the visitor draws the explicit parallel of his treatment to the treatment of Jesus. He says that it’s taken a few thousand years for people to come to grips with Jesus’s visit among people, and so it is not surprising that the visitor too is met with a hostile reception. Maybe we can learn to curb our emotions and more accurately assess threats and benefits, or maybe we can learn to have the appropriate emotions in response to novel interactions.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: diversity, sympathy
98.

“THE DUMMY”

*Original air date: May 4, 1962*

The form of comedy practiced by ventriloquists was popular through the 1960s, a holdover from the vaudeville era. The ventriloquist appears with a prop, their dummy, usually a large doll, placed on their lap or on a chair next to them, and the movements of the dummy are clearly carried out by the ventriloquist, to whom the dummy is joined. The audience knows that the dummy is a dummy, a lifeless hunk of wood, screws, and wires in appropriately sized clothes. The illusion is that a dialogue takes place, a dialogue between the ventriloquist and the dummy. The illusion is the skillful artistic creation of the ventriloquist, who does all of the speaking, but some of that speaking appears to come from the dummy rather than from the ventriloquist. Again, the audience knows that the appearance of a dialogue between the dummy and the ventriloquist is a mere appearance or illusion, but it is an illusion where important features correspond to the actual features of “real” dialogues, and it is for this reason that the ventriloquist’s act engages the audience. David Goldblatt and Garry L. Hagberg call it “illusion without deception” (xi). Like any work of fiction, the fiction must have some things in common with reality.

This fact alone makes ventriloquism fertile ground for philosophical reflection on the nature of language and communication. The ventriloquist must understand the nature of real dialogue in order to create the illusion of it occurring between a human speaker and an inanimate object. Clearly, controlling the mouth of the dummy is important as well
as making it appear that the ventriloquist’s voice is coming from the dummy when it speaks and making sure that the ventriloquist’s mouth does not appear to move when the dummy speaks. But that’s not all that’s needed: The ventriloquist must also put the appropriate words into the mouth of the dummy. The ventriloquist creates a dialogue that is, in important respects, just like one might have with a real person.

In the opening gag between Jerry, the ventriloquist, and Willy, the dummy, Jerry plays with the fact that he’s talking to a doll, noting that when he expresses his superstitions he knocks on wood, and then he demonstrates by knocking on Willy’s head. Willy responds by claiming that he would be a better ventriloquist than Jerry. And then Willy demonstrates it: they switch roles. Willy appears to be projecting his voice onto Jerry. The audience knows who is really speaking but is titillated by the idea that the control can be reversed.

The ventriloquist’s act, then, is all about distinguishing imagination from reality and also about infusing reality with the imagination. To find the ventriloquist’s act compelling, we accept that the ventriloquist is not merely talking to themselves. We buy into the appearance, without being deceived—or at least by being willingly deceived. The ventriloquist creates the deception and so knows that it is a deception. But can this condition fail? Can the ventriloquist be deceived by his own deception? That’s what happens to Jerry.

Perhaps it is more appropriate to call what the ventriloquist creates a representation rather than an illusion. A painting of a landscape is a representation of a landscape. It’s possible, though unlikely, that someone, even its creator, could mistake the representation for the thing represented. But the representation created by a ventriloquist is different. It is not a static object but a dynamic object responding to input from its environment, though it requires a persistent connection to its creator to so respond. And it also represents what it is not, that is, an autonomous person independent of the person whose lap it occupies. Willy is an active, dynamic representation of a person who is independent of Jerry. And as matters proceed, it is Jerry who is deceived.

Jerry asks: “How can you be real when you’re made of wood?” Willy replies: “You made me real.” Willy is the creation of Jerry. Willy’s thoughts are really Jerry’s thoughts. Whatever claims the dummy makes are really the claims of the ventriloquist. The problem is that they are not under Jerry’s control. That can be true for anyone; we often find ourselves thinking of things, spontaneously imagining things that we haven’t willed to
Imagine. In Jerry’s case, these imaginings are not spontaneous but recurring and persistent—and very scary. Jerry takes a creation of his own mind for something outside of him.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords:** epistemology, illusion, other minds
The term *fancy* was used in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy as the name of the faculty of imagination, and what one fancied is what one imagined. Although the term is rarely used that way anymore, it is used in a related sense to refer to what one desires. You might be asked whether you fancy a hot fudge sundae as you pass an ice cream parlor. Perhaps you weren’t thinking about ice cream, but the question might prompt you to imagine a hot fudge sundae, and then to either desire one or not, and then to respond appropriately. “Young Man’s Fancy” is about what we would describe as a not-very-young man, Alex Walker, who both imagines and desires. His ice cream parlor is his childhood home.

Alex apparently had a wonderful childhood, and he has wonderful memories of it, which are fueled by remaining in the home in which he was raised by his loving mother. Now, a year after his mother’s death and mere minutes after his wedding, he has agreed to sell the home and begin married life elsewhere.

The problem is that this new plan is not what Alex fancies. What he fancies is to be a child again, to be coddled and pampered by his mother, to delight in the toys in his toy chest, and to bask in the shelter of his home, away from adults and their demands.

The episode explores the way that belief, memory, and imagination shape how we perceive the world. Alex and his new wife, Virginia, enter
the same house at the same time, but what they see is radically different. Virginia sees an aging, antiquated home filled with outdated artifacts, like a grandfather clock that doesn't work (but then does seem to work) and an old-fashioned telephone, probably from the 1930s or 1940s. Alex sees the same objects, but seeing them sparks his memory and his imagination. The thought of selling the house and its contents, of making a radical break from the past, suddenly becomes unbearable to him.

We confront these two incompatible perceptions of the same house and, with it, two ultimately incompatible persons with different memories and, as a result, different fancies. It’s the same house to us, but to Alex and Virginia, they might as well be two different houses, since the connection of what they see to their memories, imaginations, and desires differs so radically. Although our view is outside the perspective of the two interested parties, we can’t say who sees this world correctly. There is an argument for some form of relativity here.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: desire, love, marriage, memory, ontology, personal identity, time
For sale: An electronic data-processing system in the shape of a woman capable of giving loving supervision to your children. That's the offer from a business called Facsimile Ltd. It fits the bill for a family of five, reduced to four by the death of the mother. This is the early 1960s, and a family without a mother is considered incomplete, so something must be done. At Facsimile Ltd. the kids get to choose the parts—the eyes, ears, hair, and other body parts. They are thrown into a hopper and sent to the factory where “Grandma” is assembled.

The title “I Sing the Body Electric” is from a Walt Whitman poem of the same name. In that poem Whitman celebrates the human body—all human bodies. Whitman critiques mind/body dualism:

And if the body does not do as much as the Soul?
And if the body were not the Soul, what is the Soul?

It’s not a simple matter to see how the story and the poem align. One connection may be that Grandma is somehow the sum of her bodily parts. Her eyes—chosen by the boy because they are the same color as his marbles—form an essential part of Grandma’s character. But Grandma is also an electronic data-processing system who will survive her own bodily dismantling. Will she still be Grandma without a body, or with a different body?
When Grandma appears at her new suburban home, she earns the loving appellation when she demonstrates that she can essentially do what amounts to magic. The younger two children accept Grandma immediately. The older child, still reeling from her mother’s death, is the skeptic. She says “You make believe, father, that’s what you do. You make believe that she’s real. But she’s just an old machine.” The machine responds with a declaration of love for the child who rejects her. A moment later Grandma proves her love by readily putting her “life” on the line for the child.

Grandma celebrates the ways in which she is not human. She can’t die. She can’t leave the family. She’s not a living thing. “That’s my job,” she says. “To live forever!”

When the children are grown-up and headed off to college, Grandma leaves. She describes what will happen. Her mind, her soul, will continue to exist, even when her body is disassembled. She’ll go into a room of voices with the other machines. Grandma is describing her immortality. Does she become a disembodied mind in the room of voices, or is it just that her bodily shell is removed and her core computer is networked to other computers to enable high-speed transfers of data?

Grandma’s description of her future disembodied state is at odds with a key theme of the episode, namely that what is essential to her personhood and acceptance by the family is her physical presence. It is with the force of her body that she saves the older child. Whitman’s lines suggest that Grandma can’t still be grandma as an abstract data set. Turing held out the hope that if the mind is a digital computer, it could be preserved beyond the death of the biological body. Perhaps that’s the vision articulated by Grandma as she parts from the family.

At the end of the episode Grandma says that if she’s really lucky, someday she’ll get the best gift of all, the gift of life. But what would life give her that she doesn’t already have? Maybe there’s still a burden in being different, even when different appears to be better.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords:** artificial intelligence, consciousness, death, intentionality, other minds, personal identity, robotics
How should one lead a life? What makes a life a good life? What does it take to live well, to achieve well-being, for some interval in one’s life or, better yet, for the duration of one’s life? At this level of generality, we would expect answers to this question to also be quite general and abstract, and philosophers have provided us with such answers. But “Cavender Is Coming” approaches the problem from the bottom up, by raising the question in the form of a task for Cavender, an angel trying to earn his wings: Take a particular life that is being led and make it better.

This episode bears a striking resemblance to “Mr. Bevis,” in which a guardian angel is dispatched to improve the lot of one Mr. Bevis. This time the subject is Agnes Grep, and the angel is Cavender. Both Bevis and Agnes are quirky, off-beat characters, subject to frequent job changes and unusual interests. Neither is fast-tracked on career or social ladders, but both appear to be closely connected to their neighbors and to individuals who work in their neighborhoods. Both guardian angels are mature males, with conventional values and expectations for others.

The two episodes introduce questions about well-being and what constitutes a good life. Against the standards of middle-class America in the 1960s, Bevis and Grep, from the perspective of their angelic handlers, appear ripe for improvement. Their handlers’ strategy is simply to elevate the social and economic rank of their respective charges. Grep is suddenly hobnobbing with the rich at the Morgan Mansion. But she finds herself in such settings without context and without preparation
and, more significantly, without any connection to the people with whom she now intermingles.

The efforts of the guardian angels fail to achieve the goal of elevating the happiness of their charges, in large measure because, drawing on a distinction made by Shelly Kagan, they can make changes to someone’s life but they can’t change who the person is. Grep’s life is changed when Cavender alters her social connections, but that doesn’t alter Grep’s likes and dislikes, proclivities and values. The interests and values of her new associates don’t resonate with her, and she can’t take an interest in their interests, and she doesn’t see how she can help them or participate in their lives the way she could with her associates in her prior setting.

Both “Mr. Bevis” and “Cavender Is Coming” demonstrate the pitfalls of attempting to assess happiness and the quality of life from the outside. Both angels fail to “get” their charges. Their conventional conceptions of the good life simply do not apply to the mortals they are trying to help, who are really early hippies. That the angels can perform miracles, and do, doesn’t make their jobs any easier.

That said, it would be a mistake to take these episodes as arguing for hedonism or other views that take well-being to be based on self-satisfaction. Rather, they make the case that the two mortals, Mr. Bevis and Ms. Grep, are models of individuals who have already achieved well-being before their guardian angels appear to try to help them. Bevis and Grep are not self-promoters. They are, however, tuned into the needs and cares of the children, caregivers, and modest merchants in their modest neighborhoods and dwellings. Both struggle with managing their own finances and jobs, but that’s not because they are incompetent but rather because it is not their focus. Instead, they derive pleasure from the interactions with and support they provide to others, regardless of their social status. They treat others as ends in themselves, rather than merely as means to their own end, to use Kant’s famous phrase.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: miracles, well-being
If philosophy is the love (philos) of wisdom (sophia), it is also about the acquisition of wisdom through education. If the goal of education is the acquisition of wisdom or (on a lesser plane) knowledge, how can we best achieve that goal, and what is the value of achieving it? These are questions of epistemology and moral theory, respectively, and they are raised from the perspective of Professor Ellis Fowler, an educator, in “The Changing of the Guard.”

Professor Ellis finds himself at the end of a long career of teaching literature to impressionable young men at the Rock Spring School for Boys, a private preparatory school nestled in rural Vermont. His classes have been small and intimate. We catch a glimpse of his teaching style and manner. He is both stern and kind, demanding and understanding. He reads a poem by A. E. Housman, the subject of which is the attempt to impart wisdom to someone “of one and twenty,” which mirrors what Professor Ellis is attempting to do, to impart wisdom to his nine pupils. Those same nine pupils struggle to concentrate on the lesson and bolt for the door as soon as Professor Ellis dismisses them.

This is not just the end of a class or a term but, as Ellis soon learns, the end of his teaching career. The headmaster informs him that his contract will not be renewed, that after fifty years it is time for him to retire. “Youth must be served,” he says. It is time for a “changing of the guard.” This sudden and unexpected change in his life, his removal from
the classroom, causes Ellis to undertake serious reflection on his career. What is the purpose and value of his life without teaching, and what, if anything, was the purpose and value of his career? He concludes: “I gave them nothing... I left no imprint on anybody.”

Professor Ellis isn’t thinking clearly. He is surrounded by the haze of disappointment, loss, and lack of purpose. What is the value of introducing students to poetry, fiction, and the humanities more generally? What impact has his teaching had? What difference did it make? He reads the inscription below a statue of Horace Mann, who wrote: “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” Ellis is ashamed, because he believes that he has not had any such victories.

Professor Ellis has made a difference, as he learns when searching his memory; he imagines encounters with many of his former students, students who have won victories for humanity and who single out Professor Ellis for helping them acquire the wisdom required for achieving those victories. It may be difficult to know when education has imparted wisdom and when that wisdom has been deployed to win some victory for humanity. The value of education is in cultivating individuals who can make a difference in the lives of others.

Making a difference doesn’t necessarily make things better. Hitler made a difference. So there’s much more to be said about the content of education, about what is taught and how it is taught. In “The Changing of the Guard” that content is represented in Professor Ellis himself, by the texts he chooses for his students; by his love of learning and his compassion for his students, for his love of music and art; and by his devotion to the well-being of the members of the intellectual community of Rock Spring School.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: death, education, responsibility
Alan Talbot checks his watch, kills a religious fanatic in the subway, and arrives late to an appointment with his girlfriend. Just another day in New York, or is something unusual happening? The next thing we see is Alan visiting his significant other, with no hint that he has just killed a human being. Alan has a problem with memory and with time. He seems to have lost track of both. This is a hint that we are already dealing with the issue of personal identity.

Alan asks his significant other whether she knows enough about him to be in a serious relationship. She rattles off his life history. One almost gets the idea that she knows more about Alan than he does. They set off to explore his past, visiting his town and family. But things are not as Alan remembers them. Some things are right, but much is not. Many of Alan’s beliefs appear to be temporally misplaced. Things go from bad to worse. Alan’s web of beliefs seems radically unconnected to the actual world. Some hypotheses about what’s gone wrong are advanced. None are remotely plausible. What’s going on?

A solution to the puzzle begins to appear when we literally get under Alan’s skin. Like Alicia in “The Lonely” he’s not a flesh and blood human being, at least not entirely. He has a prosthetic arm, and that’s news to him. Is he all machine, or is it just the arm? We already knew that he seemed to be controlled by voices he heard. We get more evidence: Alan puts a flame to his hand, and he feels no pain. If Alan is a robot, his
circumstances are very different from those of Alicia or Grandma in “I Sing the Body Electric” or Jana in “The Lateness of the Hour.” He is situated as a human being and is taken to be one by everyone around him—everyone except Walter.

Walter is Alan’s twin, his doppelgänger. When they meet, Alan’s first question is “Are you real?” Alan next asks: “Who am I?” and Walter says, “You are nobody.” Walter elaborates: “You are a machine. I built you.” Alan is an artificial Walter, a duplicate, qualitatively similar, but clearly a separate individual who came to “life” in Walter’s basement a week ago. Once animated, Alan attacked his maker and took off.

It seems possible that this is a case of fission (see “Dead Man’s Shoes”). In fission cases we have two individuals who have the same causal continuity to a shared past personal history. At the moment of fission they are in the same cognitive state, but over time—in this case quite quickly—due to differences in their bodily position and perceptual circumstances, they diverge. If Alan started out as a duplicate of Walter, he has certainly emerged as his “own person” when he meets his maker. How successful is Walter at convincing Alan that he isn’t a person? Is Walter right, or Alan? Put yourself in Walter’s shoes: If you created a robotic version of yourself, how would you convince it that it was not you? Answering this question can take you a long way toward understanding the problem of personal identity.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: artificial intelligence, personal identity, robotics
It is not uncommon for individuals who have survived multi-casualty events, such as wars, terrorist attacks, hurricanes, floods, and other disasters, natural and human-induced, to struggle with their good fortune in the midst of so much bad fortune for others. This phenomenon, widely labeled “survivor’s guilt,” is the subject of “The Thirty-Fathom Grave.”

Chief Boatswain’s Mate Bell, a petty officer on a U.S. Navy vessel, is subject to a broad range of affective and cognitive impairments whose onset appears to coincide with the discovery that their ship is directly over the wreck of a U.S. Navy submarine. The sub sank twenty years earlier, during World War II. Bell was the sole survivor. Bell’s symptoms and his subsequent behavior, including his eventual suicide, have something to do with his belief that he is somehow to blame for the sinking of the sub and his intense sense that he is being drawn to join his long-lost crew members.

There are several complications in the story that encourage us to think that Bell’s deceased crew members really are communicating with him and are drawing him to their “thirty-fathom grave.” What is philosophically interesting is not whether one can be literally haunted by the dead. Rather, what is of interest is that memories, beliefs, and feelings about incidents that occurred many years in the past can have a powerful effect on one’s beliefs, feelings, and well-being in the present. If anyone suffers from intense survivor’s guilt, Bell does.
What exactly is survivor’s guilt? First, it is important to be clear about the fact that there is a difference between having guilt and being guilty. Having guilt is a psychological state or a cluster of psychological states. It is typically taken to be a *feeling*, but it’s clearly more than just a feeling. It is a feeling associated with an assessment of one’s responsibility for the existence of some problematic state of affairs. For example, suppose you invite some friends over for dinner but fail to plan the menu properly, and there isn’t enough food to satisfy your guests. You may feel guilty that they leave hungry. You are responsible and can only blame yourself for the situation. You feel guilty and are guilty. In this case being guilty need not be a moral or assessment, though we most frequently speak of being guilty in moral and legal contexts. Changing the example slightly, suppose that you are not in charge of the dinner, but your housemate is, and she invites you to the dinner for her friends. Suppose now that the failure to have enough food on hand is hers and the guests leave hungry. In this case you may feel guilty for the sorry situation, though you are not guilty. You may not be responsible for the unfortunate state of affairs, even if you believe that you share some culpability because you might have intervened in such a way as to change the outcome.

A person experiences survivor’s guilt when they have survived an event in which others have not survived and where the surviving individual believes that they bear some or all the responsibility for the death of some or all those who didn’t survive. Here too, feeling guilty does not require being guilty. In fact, those with survivor’s guilt are seldom responsible for the tragedy that has occurred. Thus, survivor’s guilt is often due to false belief or lack of insight on the part of the survivor about the survivor themselves.

An individual with survivor’s guilt often has a false belief about themselves. So is the survivor self-deceived? As philosophers have traditionally understood it, a person is self-deceived when they believe something that they already believe to be false. If Ignat is trying to lose weight, and, offered a doughnut, thinks, “Oh, one little doughnut can’t hurt,” it is plausible to say that he is deceiving himself. So self-deception isn’t just having a false belief about oneself. It also seems to involve having a conflicting true belief that is being suppressed.

“The Thirty-Fathom Grave” brings out the complexity of the survivor’s condition. Chief Boatswain’s Mate Bell’s feelings of guilt and associated beliefs about his responsibility are triggered by his proximity to the sunken submarine where his crewmates perished. While there is no
rational basis for the beliefs and feelings that torture Bell and lead to his own tragic end, we are well positioned to understand the causal factors at work that lead to that end. Unfortunately, those entrusted with his well-being are not so positioned. It can be difficult enough to understand a person’s motives for action, but the difficulty is even greater when the person’s motivation depends on false interpretations of their past actions and their role in past events.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, moral luck, rationality, self-deception, suicide, war
Philip Redfield misses a turn and winds up in the town of Peaceful Valley. Serling describes Redfield’s experience as one many of us have had when we’ve made a wrong turn and find ourselves in some isolated small town, seemingly disconnected from the rest of the world. Serling notes: “You’ve seen them. Little towns, tucked away far from the main roads. You’ve seen them, but have you thought about them? What do the people in these places do? Why do they stay?” The question seems odd. Would the same question arise for someone visiting a large city? Why do people stay anywhere? Serling seems to think that there is some sort of instability to small-town life, and at least as an observation about the mid- to late twentieth century in the United States, the observation is apt. Small-town life is increasingly rare, as people flock to the big cities.

Peaceful Valley is different. Its residents aren’t going anywhere, and Philip Redfield, having stumbled upon it, isn’t going anywhere either. What makes it different is that Peaceful Valley safeguards a powerful technology, developed by a scientist and inventor who visited 104 years earlier and entrusted his invention to Peaceful Valley’s surviving residents on his death. As keepers of this powerful technology who have witnessed the harnessing of atomic energy, they are keenly aware of the potential destructive power in their possession. They have decided to keep it secret from the world at large until such time as the world at large can be trusted to use it for good, rather than for ill.
As an outsider, when Redfield discovers what Peaceful Valley is all about, he is highly critical of the town’s decisions and policies. Is the decision to withhold potentially life-saving and life-enhancing technology morally defensible? More generally, do those of us who possess the means to alleviate pain and suffering elsewhere have a moral obligation to do so, or is it morally permissible to keep our resources to ourselves? Even more generally, are we first residents of towns, states, and countries and only secondly citizens of the world, or are there ways in which we, as inhabitants of Earth, incur obligations to other inhabitants, regardless of where on Earth they are?

Redfield advocates passionately for cosmopolitanism, the view that we are under a moral obligation to help other human beings regardless of their location and political alliances. Part of the force of his argument derives from the special conditions of Peaceful Valley itself. They ought to help others globally because they can. It is wrong, Redfield argues, to allow people to starve when sharing the town’s technology could alleviate suffering. Peaceful Valley, like all technologically and economically advantaged societies, is obligated to do what it can to help others, both inside and outside their borders.

The objection Redfield raises is not just that Peaceful Valley is unwilling to share; he objects to the measures they take to protect their secret. Redfield himself, because he knows too much, has become their prisoner, and when he attempts to engage with others, he notices that their complacency is the result of engineered ignorance and an insular, comfortable lifestyle. Redfield knows what the residents do not, that they are not free. Is this limitation on freedom warranted? The leadership believes that granting individual freedom would lead to moral transgressions that would ultimately undermine their society, and perhaps all societies. And they think they can prove it.

The leaders release Redfield, and he proceeds to steal their secret technology and flee Peaceful Valley, killing the leaders in the process using their technology. But the leaders have staged the event—they are not killed, and Redfield is quickly recaptured. They argue that Redfield’s acts prove that they must protect their technology. It will be used for ill as soon as it is in the hands of outsiders.

Are the leaders right about this? Redfield has killed and stolen—but solely in the name of releasing the technology for the benefit of the world outside of Peaceful Valley. Redfield recognizes his act as severe one, but he defends it as morally appropriate and says that he would do it again.
The leaders, however, have demonstrated that others will find their technology irresistible, and there’s no guarantee that it will be used for good.

The philosophical debates surrounding cosmopolitanism encompass much more than questions about our obligation to provide aid to those less fortunate. K. Anthony Appiah argues that we should balance our concerns with our local circumstances with our engagement with others in other cultures and societies. To what extent is a life of well-being furthered by embracing cosmopolitan opportunities? Although Peaceful Valley is peaceful, its peaceful state, as the title suggests, may be a kind of death. The well-being of its residents is a narrow variety of well-being, one that by its very nature can’t participate in or contribute to the well-being of others. Indeed, it can’t even understand the world outside its boundaries. What right, then, does it have to claim to be the protector of that world?

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: cosmopolitanism, freedom, obligation, responsibility, well-being
In introductory philosophy classes, it is common for students to push back against the idea that there might be absolute truths about what’s right and wrong or about anything else. How could a truth be anything more than something that someone claims to be true, simply their opinion? A standard reply to such relativism is to point to our assessment of the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany, to the wrongs of Adolf Hitler and his followers. Here we note that we’re calling attention as much to the universality of our Nazism-condemning opinions as we are to the absolute falsehood of theirs.

An astute student might respond: If Hitler’s beliefs are false, how do we account for the fact of the grip they had on so many people, people who acted on them and even died for them. How do we explain that those beliefs continue to be held and promoted by individuals and groups? How can something that is so wrong seem so right to anyone and to so many? “He’s Alive” attempts to respond to this question. The “He” in the title is Adolf Hitler, but what is alive is actually not Hitler but his ideology.

Peter Vollmer is an angry young man in the grip of Hitler’s legacy, leading a small group of similarly angry young men who fear minorities, including Jews, African Americans, and Catholics, who (as they believe) are “selling out” the Protestant white majority. Yet when Vollmer speaks on a street corner, he doesn’t quite believe what he’s saying, and those who are listening, including blacks, Jews, and Catholics, challenge him
and ultimately physically overpower him and his cronies. In this opening scene, we see the instability of Vollmer’s views. Those listening to him take him to be a raving lunatic, and we sense that even Vollmer himself can’t really deliver his hateful speech with conviction.

So how can we make sense of how someone like Vollmer continues to espouse and act on propositions that appear to himself and others to be both false and repugnant? Put differently: How could someone possibly succeed in attracting followers to such abhorrent views?

The answer comes to Vollmer in a dream in which Hitler provides advice. The key, Hitler notes, is to communicate with individuals who are like Vollmer, that is, with people who are frustrated and angry, who already despise and distrust anyone who doesn’t look and act like them. Such individuals are likely to respond to Vollmer’s message of hate. Vollmer shares this in common with other human beings, that we seek the affirmation of others and thrive on the admiration of others, which we can achieve by argument and evidence but which we can also achieve by tapping into the beliefs and prejudices that people already hold. Laurence Thomas puts it well:

> From a purely psychological point of view, nothing lends more credibility to a view that a person holds—even a quite warped view—than the person’s realization that there are others similarly situated holding essentially the very same view. Formal arguments, proof, and evidence typically pale in comparison to the significance that a human being attaches to the reality that there are others who think like her or him. (Thomas 2012, 61)

Thomas cites Hume’s account of sympathy to explain the spread of credibility. Here credibility is not simply the adoption of a belief or set of beliefs of another. It is a kind of fellow feeling that spreads among individuals who already share at least some beliefs. Sympathy is the psychological mechanism by which the emotions experienced by one person are felt by others, under certain conditions. Initially, those who listen to Vollmer’s rants are not sympathetic. They don’t feel the anger and outrage that Vollmer attempts to project. Later, Vollmer attracts an audience of individuals who are already inclined to share his belief that the white Protestant majority is being marginalized at the expense of minorities. Vollmer learns how to project his anger and outrage, and it is mirrored back to him by his audience via sympathy, which further ratchets up his emotions.

The mechanism of sympathy, together with our need to affiliate with others, may explain how the sort of evil that Vollmer peddles can get a
foothold. But how can we overcome it? How can good win out over evil? “He’s Alive” doesn’t answer this question. It has a much more modest goal, namely, to warn us that Hitler is alive, that he is reborn as a “1963 Führer right off the assembly line”—an assembly line that continues to operate today.

We began by noting that an argument against relativism is the condemnation of the behavior of a Hitler, but we wound up admitting that there are tendencies in human nature that inevitably lead to new Hitlers. So how do we defend the claim that our judgments of the wrongness of such behavior are not relative?

One approach to answering this question comes from Hume. While the mechanism of sympathy, by itself, can lead to our approving of hateful acts, such as those of Vollmer, they can also lead to our approval of acts that we classify as good. The key move is to figure out what acts we would approve of independent of our special interests and circumstances, that is, from what Hume calls the general point of view. Vollmer’s audience does not have a general point of view. Their sympathetic responses stem from their circumstances and special interests. They take in Vollmer’s claims from the perspective of their own (skewed) sense of marginalization and mistreatment. Were they to drop such baggage, Vollmer’s claims would reveal themselves as unworthy of their support.

A different approach is due to Kant. Kant rejects the idea that morality depends on our sentiments or inclinations. The way to determine what is wrong or right is to rely on reason rather than sympathy and sentiment. The question Kant thinks we should reflect on through reasoning is the question of whether the maxim or rule that Vollmer is appealing to could be universalized into a law that would apply to everyone. If reflection shows that such a law would be incoherent, then the maxim is to be rejected. This is a version of Kant’s categorical imperative, and it is easy to appreciate how directly it addresses the question of the universality of our moral judgments. Philosophers continue to debate the Humean and Kantian approaches today, though there are other important theories as well.

Through Hume or Kant’s moral theory we may be able to recognize Vollmer’s speech as wrong. But what should we do about it? “He’s Alive” also raises the question of whether we should tolerate hate speech. We may agree that “we simply can’t let it happen again.” We must not repeat the horror that Nazism brought to the world. But it is also noted: “You can never kill an idea with a bullet.” Our dilemma is figuring out the morally correct way to deal with the inevitable recurrence of Peter Vollmers.
FURTHER READING


**Philosophical keywords:** morality, relativism, sympathy
We can put the imagination to use in philosophy when we use it to generate and reflect on possible worlds that test or stretch our familiar concepts from the actual world. In the actual world (at least at this writing) you can’t buy an artificially intelligent “grandmother” or caregiver for your children. But thanks to “I Sing the Body Electric” we can reflect on what we would say and do if we could. In the actual world we can’t, by mere thought, fashion the world to be the way we (think) we want it to be. But in “The Mind and the Matter” Archibald Beechcroft can do just that, and we can reflect on what we would say and do if this possibility were actualized. Some exercises in the imagination work better than others for testing the application of our concepts. Compare the thought experiments in the two episodes just mentioned. In “I Sing the Body Electric” we are asked to imagine an intelligent, but robotic caregiver. Based on our current understanding of the world, we can make sense of how such a state of affairs might come about. We would need engineers and computer scientists with greater facility than they currently have, but we can at least imagine a future like the one depicted. In “The Mind and the Matter” we are asked to imagine someone possessing a godlike ability to bring about significant changes just by willing them. But we really can’t begin to imagine, based on our current knowledge, how such an ability could come about. We can stipulate that someone like Beechcroft could
suddenly have it, but it would still be inexplicable how that ability came to be. When what we imagine is purely stipulative and not based on what is actual, the philosophical pull of such possible worlds is less compelling and perhaps less instructive than it is when the possibilities have an explanatory relationship to the current state of our understanding of the world, that is, when what is possible is related to what is actual.

There is a third case, where we attempt to imagine something but what we’ve attempted to imagine turns out to be impossible. In that case we’ve failed to come up with a possible world. In such cases, it may seem that we have imagined something, but we really haven’t, because we can’t coherently describe what we think is possible. To take a simple case. Can we imagine walking into a room where there is an object in the middle of the room that is both a cube and a sphere at the same time? Can we imagine that possible world? It seems not. Our concepts of cubes and squares can’t accommodate an object being both spherical and cubical (see “Little Girl Lost”).

Some Twilight Zone episodes are instances of this third case, where something is depicted or presented that is not possible. In such cases, it may seem that something possible has been described, but when we attempt to spell out the possible world, we wind up with an incoherent description. An example of this is found in “Mirror Image” where Millicent Barnes is confronted by her counterpart from another possible world. Such a situation is impossible, because it entails, for example, that Millicent is in two different locations at the same time. Another example is in “Walking Distance,” where Martin Sloan travels back in time and changes his childhood in such a way that he has an injury as a child that results in a limp that persists into adulthood. The episode then represents Martin as both having a limp and not having a limp at the same time, which, of course, is not possible.

“Mute” may appear to present a possible world. A small group of individuals is convinced that communication through language is flawed and that there is another form of communication that is telepathic rather than linguistic. They commit to eliminating language from their communication, though they realize that as language users they are already “tainted.” They decide to raise an infant to adulthood with telepathic communication replacing speech and language. The child, Ilse, is home-schooled and never spoken to. We meet her when she is twelve years old and, through a fire that devastates the community that raised her, she is thrust into the world of those who communicate through language.
Ilse struggles to adapt to a world in which she is expected to learn and communicate through language, and eventually she does. Is Ilse's adaptation possible? Could a child raised to the age of twelve without language learn English or any other natural language? This is an empirical question, but one for which we have limited data. Although they use Ilse as their experimental subject, her parents are aware that doing so is morally problematic. From the case of Genie, a well-known case of an abused child raised without exposure to language, we know that it may be extraordinarily difficult, or even impossible, to acquire a language after a childhood without language.

The problem with the way Ilse is represented is that she is presented as having an internal private language in which she talks to herself. She is mute, but she understands what is said around her, and she is aware of her own beliefs and desires, as well as the beliefs and desires of others. Ilse can think, reason, and understand what others say almost the moment she is exposed to language. The only thing she can't do, or won't do, is talk. She is mute.

If the way “Mute” presents the case of Ilse is possible, it is at least an example of a possible world that we can’t easily access based on our scientific knowledge of cognitive development and language acquisition. At best we might allow the stipulation that Ilse has thought and cognition even though she has not had the linguistic and other behavioral experiences routinely had by all children. Yet is this even possible? How can Ilse both lack language and have it? How can she formulate sentences which she speaks to herself if she’s never had any exposure to language?

Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that there can’t be a private language, that we can’t formulate thoughts privately without language and then somehow communicate them publicly. That’s not to say that we can’t think to ourselves. But when we do, we do so in language. What has come to be known as the private language argument suggests that without public criteria for the correctness of language use, we simply can’t talk to ourselves. We can’t even think.

We are not told much about Ilse’s nonlinguistic education and her isolation from language. Since she was raised by individuals who possessed language, perhaps they unintentionally exhibited linguistic behavior in some of their interactions with her. There is a brief scene in which Ilse’s father teaches her by showing her pictures of objects, which suggests that imagistic representation was stressed. Later, when she is confronted
with language, she objects: “The boat isn’t words.” But neither is a boat a picture of a boat.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: intentionality, language, representation, thought
Setting a spaceship safely down on a newly discovered planet is fraught with danger, even in the technologically advanced future of 1997 (as represented in 1963, when this episode aired), the year in which Space Cruiser E89 is traveling around the galaxy, searching for sources of food for an overpopulated Earth. This spaceship has three astronauts, and while there is a captain of the ship, there is disagreement from the start about how to proceed. Should they land, or is it too dangerous?

“Death Ship,” like “The Passersby,” “The Hunt,” “The Last Rites of Jeff Myrtlebank,” “A Nice Place to Visit,” and “The Hitch Hiker,” explores philosophical questions about the nature of death by adopting the perspective of individuals who are dead and imagining what it would be like to be dead. It also treats other questions that we face in the more prosaic circumstances as living creatures, namely, how to explain things that have happened, how to predict what will happen, and how to choose among alternative actions based on those explanations. Sometimes we seek explanations and make choices based on those explanations by ourselves. At other times we do so as members of a group or team. Group explanation and group choice of action require coordination and agreement. The challenge of such coordination and agreement is as much the subject of “Death Ship” as the phenomenon of death itself.

The three crew members of E89 disagree about whether to land on the alien planet after spotting a possible sign of intelligent life on the planet’s
surface. Captain Ross, the leader of the group, is cautious. The other two are in favor of landing and exploring. On landing, they discover the wreckage of a ship that appears identical to E89, and when they investigate further, they discover the bodies of three crew members whose bodies are qualitatively identical to their own. They are of course freaked out by this state of affairs, and they begin to try to explain it and then to figure out what they should do.

Between them, they come up with three theories: (1) they crashed and are dead, and they are somehow seeing their crashed craft and their dead bodies; (2) they are seeing their possible future—they may crash if they land, but if they don’t land, they won’t crash; and (3) the crashed craft and its contents are an illusion. They are alive, but aliens on the planet are deceiving them, perhaps with the goal of scaring them away. They consider each theory and argue for or against it on philosophical grounds, and they also argue about the possible consequences they would face should one of the theories turn out to be true.

If they crashed and died, then it seems that they continue to exist but in living, qualitatively identical bodies to their former bodies. Captain Ross supports this view when he points to the bodies in the crashed ship and says: “Those are not our bodies. These are our bodies!” Ross is claiming that the bodies they are looking at are not them, which suggests that they didn’t die. Their personhood is intact and is related to their bodies, which have also continued to exist over time. It’s difficult to make sense of how they could be dead, since they seem to have what we have when we endure as persons over time.

There are other puzzles about describing the situation. Lieutenant Carter asks Ross: “How can there be two of me dead, two of you, two of Mason?” Someone could be qualitatively identical to you, but that would still not make that person you. This suggests two other possibilities that may at least be coherently stated, that either they are imagining a possible future state of themselves or they only appear to be seeing their crashed ship and bodies.

There are yet further complications. Lieutenants Carter and Mason each escape into imagined scenarios where they are back on earth with their families. Captain Ross wrestles them back to reality. He suggests that this fits with the theory that their experiences on the planet are illusions. They have the same status as Carter and Mason’s flights of imagination. Perhaps the epistemological situation of these astronauts is like that of Mike Ferris in “Where Is Everybody?”
The vigorous debate about which of these theories is correct is an impressive set of applications of the principles of logic. In several cases one of the astronauts challenges another by pointing out that his current claim is inconsistent with a claim he made earlier. In another challenge, Captain Ross is asked why he claims to be certain that the illusion theory is correct. The answer, that attempting to leave the planet will prove that he is correct, is not a good answer, and that is duly noted by the others. The debate is rigorous and spirited but also analytical and probing. Maybe the astronauts majored in philosophy.

The decorum of studied argument vanishes when Captain Ross makes a unilateral decision that the Lieutenants Carter and Mason reject. Here the failure to agree is worse than fatal; it leads to an infinite loop or eternal recurrence. Their failure to agree results in no resolution of the question of whether to land on the alien planet.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: afterlife, death, epistemology, eternal recurrence, explanation, love, personal identity
“Jess-Belle” is, as Serling notes in his opening narration, a familiar love triangle. Jess-Belle and Ellwyn are both in love with Billy-Ben, who is alternatively attracted to each but ultimately must make a choice. Is the selection of a lover or mate a matter of choice? If our choices are based on beliefs and reasons, will Billy-Ben rely on them? “Jess-Belle” explores the irrationality of the phenomenon of love and attraction. Love, like witchcraft, is deeply mysterious and largely inaccessible to human understanding. Choosing a lover is not a matter of rational choice.

In the opening scene, we are confronted by the fact of Billy-Ben and Ellwyn’s mutual attraction. We only know that they are mesmerized by each other. We don’t know why, and we don’t learn why. We learn that Jess-Belle is Billy-Ben’s jilted lover, and the intensity of her anguish matches the intensity of the attraction between the Billy-Ben and Ellwyn. Jess-Belle quickly uses witchcraft to remedy the situation, causing Billy-Ben’s attraction to revert back to her. Suddenly and to everyone else, inexplicably, Billy-Ben is heads over heels in love with Jess-Belle and acts on it, in violation of a host of social norms.

The interjection of witchcraft into these relationships makes the point that love, or at least attraction of the kind we witness here, is no less an irrational attraction than one caused by a witch’s spell. Just as Billy-Ben is attracted to Ellwyn, as he presumably earlier was to Jess-Belle, thanks to
witchcraft, he is again attracted to Jess-Belle. The attraction in all these cases is direct and results not from any sort of reasoning or analysis of the good character of the beloved. Billy-Ben can no better explain why he was attracted to Ellwyn than he can now explain why he favors Jess-Belle.

Perhaps there are other kinds of romantic attraction than the kind on display in “Jess-Belle.” Two people may meet at a library or coffee house and engage in meaningful dialogue about important matters, where such conversation leads each to the appreciation of the beliefs, interests, and character of the other, and this may lead result in romance and love. Here one could reconstruct the reasons for the eventual attraction. This variety of attraction is part of a long tradition in philosophy. G. E. Moore argues for its importance in accounting for the nature of love in *Principia Ethica*. More strongly, Richard Posner argues that sexuality can be explained in terms of rational choice.

We can fit this kind of intellect-directed love in accounts of other things we take to be virtues, such as courage, honor, and honesty. We can describe the good-making features of such virtues and our approval of them in the same way that we could describe the good-making features of someone we love. But when asked to describe what it is that draws one to the visceral attraction between Billy- Ben and Ellwyn, or latter Billy-Ben and Jess-Belle, we come up empty-handed. When Jess-Belle speculates that Billy-Ben prefers Ellwyn because she wears pretty clothes and comes from a family of means, Billy-Ben denies it. He tries to describe the difference in his attraction to Ellwyn, but all he can say is that he loves her “in a quiet way.” When Jess-Belle wins Billy-Ben back through witchcraft, Ellwyn sees the futility of attempting to win him back. She says, “I won’t get the chance. Jess-Belle bewitched him.” We often say that someone who is in love is “bewitched,” which means that just as we don’t and maybe can’t know how witchcraft works, if it does, we also don’t know how love and attraction works.

Martha Nussbaum highlights the difficulty of coming up with a clear understanding of the nature of love, when we take seriously the kind of non-intellect-based love on display in “Jess-Belle.” If love is a sentiment or feeling, which can’t be adequately described or explained, then what sense can we make of Billy-Ben’s claim to *know* that he loves Ellwyn? If, thanks to witchcraft, he is suddenly caused to switch to loving Jess-Belle, how can he claim to know that? Does the consciousness of the feeling of being in love with someone constitute an incorrigible belief or certain knowledge?
As a sentiment or feeling of attraction toward another person, this form of love is a kind of sentience rather than a form of sapience or wisdom. There is a tradition in philosophy that marries sentience and sapience by treating our sensations as foundational bits of knowledge. Descartes argues in Meditation 2 of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* that although I may not know that there is a piece of wax in front of me, because it may be an illusion, I know that I am having a sensation or experience of wax-like features. Stripping away the conceptual superstructure of Billy-Ben’s understanding of the love he feels, what he directly and immediately knows is that he is forcefully attracted to his love interest.

The idea that sensations, perceptual or emotional, can constitute immediate, certain knowledge has come under attack since the work of Wittgenstein, Quine, and Wilfrid Sellars. These philosophers argue that knowledge requires sapience, or the mastering of concepts, and the mere presence of feelings, mere sentience, doesn’t put one in the space of reasons in which knowledge functions. This insight is hinted at in “Jess-Belle,” when the story moves from the initial romantic attractions to the consequences of those attractions.

As “Jess-Belle” shows, love can’t be just a matter of attraction. It matters how that attraction is achieved. Jess-Belle gets Billy-Ben, but at what cost? Witchcraft, or its secular counterpart, unreasoned attraction, may not be the best way to attract a partner. Jess-Belle has to pay for the power that she has. She is punished for it, ultimately realizing that “torment comes from buying something and finding out that the price is dear.”

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords**: death, epistemology, evil, free will, justice, love, vice, virtue
Philosophers attempt to make sense of the human condition, and doing that entails making sense of how humans typically function. This requires specifying what the functions are that humans carry out and how the conditions in which they find themselves play a role in influencing those functions. Even casual observation reveals that although we can identify and classify functions that are shared with other organisms and others that may be uniquely human, there is significant diversity among individuals in the extent to which any of these functions is present. Vision, for example, is typically present in human beings, and it plays an important role in a wide variety of human activities and pursuits, though it can be completely absent from some humans and visual acuity can vary widely. We can determine a range of normal vision by using tests of visual acuity to sample populations.

Can we do the same for mental health? Is there a benchmark for behavior that would enable us to characterize the way humans behave as normal, in the way that we can characterize vision as normal? One difficulty is that human behavior encompasses a much wider variety of human functioning than something like vision, or other physiologically based functions, and so it is less clear what we would be trying to describe and benchmark. There are as many types of behavior as there are ways of describing what people do. Are there typical behaviors for each of these types? Is there typical and atypical hunting behavior, grooming behavior,
speaking behavior, and shopping behavior? Do extreme atypical behaviors of these types count as mental illness?

A second, related problem is that our characterizations of types of human behavior and their ranges relies on beliefs and values that we have prior to coming up with these characterizations, and those beliefs and values themselves represent behaviors that we already presuppose as normal. In short, how we understand mental health depends on what we think constitutes normal human behavior in various contexts that we take to be relevant to one’s mental health. Michael Foucault sheds considerable light on this under-appreciated aspect of our understanding of mental health in *Madness and Civilization*, in which he shows how our understanding of mental illness has changed from the end of the sixteenth century to the present. These two complicated philosophical dimensions of our understanding of mental illness are brought to the fore in “Miniature.”

Charley Parkes is described by his boss as a “square peg,” and he is promptly fired for just that, his failure to fit into the culture of the office where he works. He is never late, and he gets his work done. But he is fired because he just doesn’t fit in, which, in the early 1960s in the United States, counted as a fully adequate basis for dismissal. Nothing suggests that Charley’s unusual personality prevents anyone from doing their job. It seems merely that they don’t *like* his personality. Charley’s boss also notes that Charley, a grown adult, still lives with his mother. While the boss acknowledges that this is irrelevant to Charley’s work at the firm, he thinks this is odd and says so. We soon learn that Charley has lost jobs in the past and that he has few friends and no romance in his life. This is a source of concern for Charley’s family, and they seek remedies, by presenting opportunities for both employment and romance. They are supportive and loving and wish only the best for Charley.

Perhaps to escape from the stress of meeting the expectations of others, Charley becomes obsessed with a miniature display of the interior of a nineteenth-century house, complete with a resident doll in the miniature house, seated at a harpsichord. Charley experiences first auditory and then visual illusions. He hears Mozart’s Piano Sonata in A major and then sees that it emanates from the “doll” playing the harpsichord in the parlor room of the miniature house on display.

Is this the description of someone who is mentally ill? Charley has a flat affect. He is a loner, and he may have certain other traits that several decades later than the period represented in the episode might be
characterized as obsessive-compulsive or borderline personality disorder. Yet Charley’s behavior in the early 1960s, before the antiwar, civil rights, and feminist movements, is very much out of step with what was considered normal. Even before he begins to experience hallucinations, Charley is marked as a serious problem.

Unusual or abnormal behavior is called out when it creates conflict. Charley doesn’t work as a member of “the team” at work. Attempts to put him on other teams by those who care about him create other conflicts, and Charley ultimately takes matters into his own hands by finding a team that he does fit into—the world of the miniature house. That this isn’t a workable solution follows from the simple fact that the larger society to which Charley belongs is inescapable. His beliefs about the miniature house and its contents conflict with the beliefs of everyone else. As his psychiatrist explains, intersubjective agreement is the test for what exists. As long as Charley makes claims about the existence of things that others don’t acknowledge, the conflicts will remain.

Charley figures this out and learns how to withhold his claims about the reality of the experiences that he has that are not shared by others. He learns how to not make waves and ultimately gets himself sprung from the psych ward just long enough to return to full-bore engagement with his miniature world, leaving “the real world” behind. Whether this is understood as psychosis or suicide hardly matters. It is the outcome of all the well-meaning interventions of his family and caregivers. As his psychiatrist said, the important thing is to figure out not what Charley saw but why he saw it. It appears that no one came up with the answer to that important question.

Mental illness—it used to be referred to as “madness”—has long been the subject of philosophical reflection. In epistemology, it has functioned to provide a way of considering whether it is possible to know anything. Descartes implicitly raises this in Meditation 1 of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, when he argues that because he has sometimes been deceived by his senses, it is possible that he is always deceived by his senses. This possibility would put him in the same league as Charley, who lacks the ability to distinguish his hallucinations as hallucinations. But Descartes quickly rejects this possibility, in a striking passage:

> And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain persons, devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of
black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are mad, and I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.

Descartes doesn’t explain why he rejects the possibility that he is “mad,” though perhaps it is simply that he finds himself in agreement with others about what is real, which, as Charley’s psychiatrist suggests, provides the touchstone for distinguishing hallucinations from reality. But by the end of Meditation 1, Descartes has provided further arguments that remove whatever grounds he had for distinguishing illusions from what is real. The extreme or hyperbolic doubt of everything removes the touchstone of our agreement with others, since even that agreement may itself be an illusion. Descartes, like Charley, is engaged in a solitary endeavor.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: epistemology, illusion, loneliness, mental illness, suicide
How would someone who is bent on spreading evil use the newspaper publishing business to achieve their goal? We don’t have to look far for answers to this question now, when traditional newspapers have been surpassed by new Internet-based publications and both are now widely disseminated via social media. In its current forms, political commentary is often substituted for news, often with the intention of misinforming the public and, perhaps more disturbingly, doing so with the aim of manipulating public opinion and public action. “Printer’s Devil” anticipates this trend by imagining how the devil himself could thrive in the newspaper publishing business. It is a cautionary tale that we would have been well served by heeding long ago.

A prescription that is unlikely to appear in any code of ethics for journalists is the following: Publish reports only of events that have occurred in the past. Do not report an event that has not occurred, and do not cause events to occur by reporting them. Perhaps the reason the first part of this prescription is never stated is that it is already covered by the standard prescription to “seek the truth and report it,” as the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists puts it. The second part of the prescription might be excluded on the grounds that one can’t cause an event to occur simply by publishing a report that it has occurred.
The rub is that in this fanciful episode Mr. Smith is a journalist who, by virtue of being the devil, *can* make events occur by reporting them as having occurred. Significantly for the comparison to the current state of news and social media, Mr. Smith is depicted as a master of the news publishing technology of the time, the linotype machine. Mr. Smith takes news copy that is submitted to the paper’s editorial office and turns it into blocks of metal type that are laid out in pages that then go to the press, producing hard-copy newsprint. What is special is that he’s modified the machine so that it causes the events he writes about on it to take place. With the short delay from linotype production to printing and distribution, when the paper hits the street, what is reported has happened.

While we can imagine a devil with these incredible journalistic capabilities, we certainly don’t have to worry about one making things happen so directly. But that doesn’t mean that it is inappropriate to consider this thought experiment and to consider what the mastery of publishing technology, which today is light-years beyond the linotype machine, means for the possibility of influencing or manipulating events through technology. This isn’t merely possible, but sadly it is actual. During the 2016 presidential race in the United States, bad actors, including agents of foreign governments, created “news stories” and published them on such social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Those “stories” were designed to bring about political events, such as rallies and meetings, which they did, and those events were then further reported by other media outlets. So journalism as practiced by some has taken a page from Mr. Smith’s playbook.

Aside from questions about the ethics of journalism and the appropriate standards for the reporting of news, “Printer’s Devil” presents a philosophical puzzle about the rationality of making a deal with the devil. The puzzle is presented by the devil himself, Mr. Smith. First, he points out that it is irrational to believe in the existence of the devil. As he says to Douglas Winter, the editor of his newspaper, “As a sophisticated twentieth-century man, you know that the devil does not exist.” However, Mr. Smith claims that if Winter is reluctant to sign the deal presented by Mr. Smith, that can only be because Winter believes that Mr. Smith *is* the devil. If Winter is worried that by signing the agreement, he is bargaining away his soul to the devil, that worry should be allayed by realizing that the devil doesn’t exist. It simply can’t hurt to sign the document. What Mr. Smith doesn’t say is that on his argument signing can’t *help* either!
Mr. Smith’s argument bears some resemblance to the argument known as Pascal’s wager. Pascal argued that believing in God is the only rational thing to do. If you don’t believe in God, and God exists, then you will go to hell and suffer eternally. If you don’t believe in God and he does not exist, you’ll lead a finite life that may be a bit better than otherwise because of your atheism. If you believe in God and God exists, you can secure eternal life in heaven. If you believe in God and God does not exist, then you were wrong, but little harm can come from that false belief. If you calculate the expected utility of the two choices—belief or disbelief, where expected utility is the product of the probability of an event and its utility—then the choice to believe will always have a higher expected utility than the choice not to believe.

In “Escape Clause,” the devil, who goes by the name “Cadwallader,” convinces a mortal, Walter Bedeker, that trading the soul for an immortal life of excellent health is a great deal, because the soul is insignificant. It’s hardly anything. Mr. Smith uses the same strategy, and that’s not surprising. When one attempts to strike a bargain, it’s always a good idea to devalue what the other person is going to have to give up and inflate the value of what the other person going to gain and what you are giving up. Mr. Smith goes even further and denies that the soul even exists! Winter doesn’t catch the inconsistency of Smith’s position. He’s trying to get Winter to sign over something that he claims Winter doesn’t even have.

Mr. Smith, the devil, leers at women and treats them as objects. His behavior is beyond creepy. While Winter is clueless about the difficulties that result from his hiring Mr. Smith, Jackie Benson, Winter’s girlfriend, is suspicious from the start, and it is she who mounts the challenge to Smith’s legitimacy and authority. When Mr. Smith physically abuses her, she slaps him in the face. Jackie Benson is the real hero of this story.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: evil, freedom of speech, personal identity, suicide
“NO TIME LIKE THE PAST”

*Original air date*: March 7, 1963

“No Time Like the Past” is another of many episodes addressing the possibility of time travel and the philosophical issues raised by it.

The episode begins with an argument about the risks associated with time-traveling to the past. Paul Driscoll argues that there are risks associated with existing in the present, such as the risks of nuclear war and environmental pollution. He argues that such risks either didn’t exist in the past or were significantly below present levels. In terms of minimizing such risks, traveling to the past is preferable to staying put.

It’s true that time travel to a past (or future) with more favorable environmental conditions would lower the health risks associated with new exposure to such hazards, but it wouldn’t eliminate the effects of exposure from the period prior to time traveling. Further, traveling to the past means traveling to a time when medical treatment for environmental exposure of the sort Driscoll describes is either far less advanced or nonexistent. Driscoll seems to overlook these and other risks unique to the time traveler.

Motivated by the desire to escape from problematic features of the age into which he was born, Driscoll chooses to “visit” three moments in the past that have great historical significance: the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, Hitler’s rise to power in the Berlin of 1939, and the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. In each case, Driscoll attempts to alter the course of history. In Berlin, for example, he rents a room with a clear view
of Hitler giving a speech in the city square below. He prepares his long gun with a scope and takes aim. But he is interrupted, and the chance to kill Hitler is missed.

These three scenarios illustrate what Lewis calls a paradox of time travel. On the one hand, when Driscoll is in Berlin and has all the conditions set for killing Hitler, it certainly seems possible for him to do so. Even when he fails to take aim and shoot, we would like to say that had he not been interrupted by the house staff of the hotel, he would have been able to shoot Hitler.

While shooting Hitler would be possible if Driscoll were a normal inhabitant of 1939, he is not, and we need to take that into account when considering what it is possible for him, as a time traveler from the future, to do. Suppose Driscoll could kill Hitler in 1939. Then it would be true in 1964 that Hitler was killed by a sniper, Driscoll, in 1939. But it would also be true that Hitler was not killed by a sniper in 1939, and that he consolidated power in Germany and was largely responsible for World War II. Since this contradiction follows from the assumption that Hitler is killed by Driscoll time traveling to 1939 to assassinate him, the assumption must be rejected.

Driscoll’s attempted interference in the sinking of the *Lusitania* also illustrates the incoherence of changing the past. Just before the torpedo is directed to the *Lusitania*, Driscoll tries to convince the captain to make a one-degree change in the direction of the ship. But Driscoll can’t provide any reason to make the change that is acceptable to the captain. Even the weak suggestion that nothing would be lost by making such a small correction is not convincing. Why take action when there is no reason to do so?

After three forays to the past fail to bring about the desired changes, Driscoll lowers his sights and claims that he just wishes to travel to an earlier time when life was less taxing and less dangerous. He plans to live merely as a spectator, rather than as an actor. He chooses Homeville, Indiana, in July of 1881 as his destination in space and time. The question now is this: Can one retire to the past the way one can retire to a country retreat?

One difficulty Driscoll faces in Homeville is that political events and political opinions are all around him. He realizes that he has arrived just as U.S. President James A. Garfield is about to be shot. The knowledge of the inevitability of the outcome of this assassination attempt weighs heavily on him. Though he doesn’t attempt to prevent it, he somehow
feels responsible for letting it happen, even though he now knows that it’s logically impossible for him to influence the outcome.

When Driscoll realizes that children will perish in a school fire in Homeville, he attempts desperately to prevent it, and in doing so appears instead to cause it. This is confusing, given the conclusion we (and Driscoll) have reached earlier, namely that it is impossible for a time traveler to influence the past. If Driscoll causes the fire, then Driscoll, an adult male in 1964, is the cause of a fire that occurred several decades before his birth, and so this requires backward causation, where the effect occurs before the cause. It would follow from this that before Driscoll time-travels to Homeville, no fire had occurred. But then it also requires that the fire has occurred, since if Driscoll caused it, the fire did take place in 1881. Again, there is no coherent description of Driscoll causing anything to happen while he time-travels to the past.

So how do we read this scene in Homeville? One reading is to say that it reveals an incoherence in the story or, even worse, a blatant contradiction, where the author both explicitly claims that changing the past is possible and that it is not possible. A more charitable reading is that Driscoll only appears to cause the fire. Perhaps he thinks he caused it, and perhaps we are seeing the event from his perspective. Since that perspective can’t be accurate, what we witness is Driscoll’s mistaken view of what happened. If Driscoll could remind himself that he cannot bring about changes to events in the past, he could take comfort in knowing that he was not the cause of the terrible school fire.

Many puzzles about time travel and causation remain. Driscoll and Abigail fall in love. If this is right, then clearly his presence has caused changes in her emotions, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. More mundanely, every conversation Driscoll has in Homeville involves some causal interaction with others. If this engaged participation in the life of the past can’t occur, it’s not clear how one could visit the past. Perhaps one could only visit it while being causally inert, outside some sort of protective causal bubble looking in.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: epistemology, time travel
Works of fiction, including episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, are, or appear to be, representations of possible worlds. Insofar as they succeed in representing what is possible, they do represent possible worlds. In their simplest form, a work of fiction represents a single possible world that differs from the actual world. The differences often involve individuals who don’t exist in the actual world but are posited as existing in the possible world that is represented. The work of fiction can also include objects that don’t exist in the actual world and events that haven’t occurred in the actual world. In several episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, including “The Parallel,” more than one possible world is represented, and this raises a special metaphysical problem, namely: Can there be one story “about” two possible worlds, or are we stuck with two stories, which can’t be brought together?

The first possible world described in “The Parallel” is the world of early 1960s astronaut Robert Gaines, who is set to take off on a rocket and orbit the earth. Robert Gaines is a fictional character, of course, who undergoes events similar to events in the actual world. In 1964, in the actual world, NASA had begun a successful series of manned spacecraft flights, including flights that involved a spacecraft orbiting the earth before returning to earth in a “splashdown.” These early flights were by no means routine. They involved the use of new technology for the first time and produced data about spaceflight and the effect of spaceflight on human passengers.
“The Parallel” borrows much of the scientific and historical context from the actual world and contributes a set of fictional characters who negotiate a world that is very similar to our own.

The episode trades on the limits of the audience’s understanding of space travel, particularly at the time. In flight, communication is lost between astronaut Gaines and mission control on the ground. Suddenly and inexplicably, Gaines is back on earth, in a military hospital, with no idea of what transpired since losing contact.

What we and Gaines very slowly come to appreciate is that Gaines has left what is represented as the actual world and is now an occupant of a different possible world, one very similar to the actual world he was in when he left the ground—clearly different in what might seem minor respects but different, nonetheless. In his “home” world, his house did not have a picket fence around the yard. But in the world he now occupies, it has a picket fence. In his home world, he drank coffee with sugar. In his new world, he does not take sugar in his coffee. In his home world, John F. Kennedy is president of the United States. In his new world, it is someone else. More significantly, when Gaines and his wife kiss, we can tell that she realizes immediately that she is kissing someone other than the man to whom she is married. The daughter also detects that something is off. She exclaims, “Daddy, you’re different!” As she later clarifies, what she means is that it isn’t daddy at all but someone else.

So our story now has two stories: There’s the possible world in which Robert Gaines takes off in a spacecraft and loses contact with mission control. In that world, JFK is president. Let’s call that world “world-1.” There’s a possible world in which Robert Gaines lands a spaceship after experiencing a blackout. In that world, JFK is not president. Let’s call that world “world-2.” In world-2, Gaines is identified by others as Robert Gaines, though his wife and daughter soon have their doubts. In world-2 Robert Gaines identifies his co-workers and his family as the individuals he’s known before the flight.

The two stories are connected by containing the same individual, Robert Gaines, who is represented as existing in both worlds. Robert Gaines travels from world-1 to world-2. No one else travels across the two worlds. The person who he takes to be his wife in world-2 is not his wife; she’s back in world-1. And he is not the husband of the world-2 wife. We don’t know where her husband is, our Robert Gaines’s counterpart, but her husband, wherever he is, is not our Robert Gaines, that is, someone who is an astronaut while JFK is president.
Can these two possible worlds be unified in this way? Of course, there are incongruities, and many of these are discovered by Robert Gaines, and he is alarmed by them. Yet they are explained away as his confusions, perhaps as temporary mental illness as the result of his outer space travel. In world-2, everyone else is in agreement about who is president, for example. If he is right about who is president, then everyone else is wrong. The temptation to attribute mental illness to Gaines indicates that there is a problem of coherence, but the incoherence is at a higher level.

It is true of Robert Gaines in world-1 that JFK is his president at time $t$. If Gaines were to travel to another possible world, as the episode suggests, one in which JFK is not president at time $t$, then it would be both true of Gaines that JFK is his president at time $t$ and false that JFK is his president at time $t$. Since this is a contradiction, and so not possible, it is not possible for Gaines to travel from world-1 to world-2. One way of putting it is that there can be no trans-world identity. The same individual cannot be part of two different possible worlds (Lewis 1986, 210 ff.). Another is that there can’t be overlap. Two possible worlds can’t share the same members.

The metaphysics of possible worlds and counterparts is also the subject of “Mirror Image.” In the discussion of that episode we raised the very issues that are front and center in “The Parallel.” The main difference is that “Mirror Image” depicts an individual and her counterpart occupying, at least temporarily, the same possible world, while in “The Parallel” we see Gaines “invading” a possible world, which, if our reasoning above is correct, he can’t possibly invade.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: mental illness, metaphysics, personal identity, possible worlds
“I DREAM OF GENIE”

*Original air date: March 21, 1963*

The fable of Aladdin’s Lamp, adapted here as “I Dream of Genie,” is an enduring favorite, and perhaps that’s because it raises the fundamental philosophical issue of how one ought to lead one’s life in a very personal way: What *ought you* to wish for, if any three wishes could be fulfilled by a genie? This is a hard question, since it is not the question simply of what you want. You may, at the moment, want lunch, or to have the garden weeded, but it would be foolish to waste your wishes on having those wants satisfied, partly because such desires are momentary and fleeting, and partly because those desires are highly specific, and likely leave a lot of your other desires unmet. This suggests that the desires that you should try to satisfy, by the genie’s wishes or in more mundane ways, are desires that endure, and that are general. An example of such a desire would be the desire to be a concert violinist. If you had such a desire, it would likely last over a significant period of your life, perhaps from the time you first picked up a violin. It is also somewhat general. It is more general, for example, than the desire to be a concert violinist in a particular city, or with a particular orchestra.

This isn’t to suggest that you ought not have fleeting and specific desires. We all have such desires, and we can’t help having them. But when it comes to figuring out which desires we would want to satisfy by the granting of a genie’s wishes, in light of the scarcity of that resource, we need to choose carefully, and we can say, at least provisionally, that it
would make sense to wish for things that would satisfy some of our general and enduring desires. (The generality of our desires can pose problems as well. See the final wish-fulfillment scenario in “The Man in the Bottle”). Of course, we may have many such desires, and thus we face the further task of ranking them by their importance.

Since we’re discussing the normative matter of what you ought to wish for, we must look beyond just a catalog of the desires that you have, particular or general, fleeting or enduring, and assess whether those desires ought to be fulfilled. Suppose, for example, that someone dislikes another person intensely, and harbors the enduring desire for harm or even death to come to that person. In general, we should not approve of the fulfillment of such a desire. In fact, we would say that in general, such a person ought not desire the death of someone they dislike, and that they should not wish for the fulfillment of that desire by way of the genie or any other way. If we reject ethical egoism, the view that you ought to pursue your self-interests, whatever they are, the difficult question then is this: What desires ought one have? Another way of putting it is the one posed in this episode: What wishes should one ask the genie to grant?

Genie scenarios simplify matters a bit. In addition to figuring out what desires we ought to have, we also have to think about how we ought to go about fulfilling them. It might be acceptable to desire wealth, at least up to a point, but there are good and bad ways of achieving it. We don’t approve of all means of attaining wealth. When there’s a genie to grant one’s wishes, the question of the moral status of the means to wish fulfillment is bypassed, as long as the genie in question has the appropriate moral credentials. Wish-granting by the devil, for example, is problematic, as we’ve seen in “Jess-Belle,” “Escape Clause,” and “Printer’s Devil.”

It’s noteworthy that the very first thing we hear George P. Hanley assert is: “I don’t know what I want.” He says this well before his confrontation with the lamp and the genie, but it might well stand in for the philosophical worry about what anyone should want.

There’s nothing objectionable about the genie George P. Hanley accidentally activates. In fact, this genie offers excellent advice. Hanley should take his time in selecting his wish. (In this story he only gets one.) He should “sleep on it.” Hanley takes this advice, and we follow him through three distinct possible worlds, the consequences of three wishes fulfilled by the genie. To understand these wishes, we need to understand the man George P. Hanley, including his character, his wants and needs, and
the checkered history of his attempts to fulfill his wishes and lead a life of well-being without a genie.

As Hanley exercises his moral imagination, that is, as he thinks about possible worlds in which would follow from the granting of a specific wish, he is able to follow out their consequences, tracing out how others would act in the circumstances which result from the wish-fulfillment. He also considers how he would act, to determine whether the resulting life would be a life of well-being, a life in which he is truly happy. In successive thought experiments Hanley imagines being married to one of the world’s most glamorous women, possessing one of the world’s greatest financial fortunes, and being one of the world’s most powerful leaders.

As he imagines the consequences of each of these possible wishes, each scenario turns into a nightmare. Perhaps the common problem has to do with the wish for superlatives: marrying the greatest beauty, having the greatest wealth, and possessing the greatest power. To each of these correspond what Aristotle described as “states” of an individual, and he argues that when one possesses these states in the extreme, just as when one completely lacks the state, the person is not in balance. The virtuous person should possess love, confidence in mastery over material things, and power, in intermediate degrees. Hanley’s imagined extreme states result in a person who is not virtuous.

These three journeys of the imagination lead Hanley to find something appropriate to wish for. The key difference between the wish he asks for and the ones he rejects is that once granted, the wish enables him to promote the happiness of others, rather than to promote his own happiness. Whether Hanley’s final choice, or any human act, is truly altruistic, is another philosophical question raised by this episode.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: altruism, justice, moral luck, sympathy, virtue, well-being
Several *Twilight Zone* episodes feature animated mannequins, dolls, or puppets. In “The After Hours,” store mannequins take turns participating in living among humans. “The Dummy” features a ventriloquist’s life-size “dummy” companion who breaks free of the ventriloquist’s control of its linguistic output and revolts like a rebellious child. In “Five Characters in Search of an Exit” and “Miniature,” small figures in human form move, speak, think, perceive, and interact with one another. While bringing these figures “to life” is unrealistic (since in the real world, a doll is a doll) dolls, wax figures, and statues of human forms serve as catalysts for the imagination, enabling the viewer to imagine a life of the individual represented in plastic, ceramic, wax, or some other medium. Each episode unfolds an imaginative path triggered by some perception of the model.

A doll, a “dummy,” or a wax figure, then, can be a work of art. It can be a representation of an historical individual or an actual or merely possible individual; it can also represent a role an individual plays or a kind or type of individual. Individual toy soldiers represent the class of soldiers, and there are individual toy soldiers representing different types of soldiers.

In some episodes, no actual human beings believe that there are animated nonhuman figures. (As we noted, ventriloquism is a special case,
where the audience suspends disbelief in the dummy’s inability to speak in order to participate in the art form.) In others, the belief that a figure is “alive” is limited to just one person, a person who is at least suspected by others to be mentally ill. This is the case in “Miniature,” “Living Doll,” and in this episode, where a display of life-size wax figures of famous murderers, including Jack the Ripper, is introduced to the public by Martin Senescu, a museum tour guide and expert on the individuals immortalized in wax. The figures appear wholly inanimate—to everyone other than Senescu.

When one of the viewers of the wax figures is frightened, her companion comforts her: “There is nothing to be afraid of. They are just a lot of wax.” Senescu responds “Perhaps not... Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of the man standing next to you?” This is a reversal of the skeptical argument concerning other minds. The original argument goes as follows: We know our own minds directly by awareness of our thoughts and sensations. When we look out the window at the busy street below, as Descartes described it, it is possible that what we take to be men on the street below the window are really just machines covered in hats and coats. We don’t know that they have minds. The reversal is that we don’t know that a wax figure doesn’t have thoughts or sensations. We can be certain neither of the presence of mind nor its absence in others.

The museum visitor who is frightened and her consoling partner each represent appropriate, though very different, responses to the wax figures. As works of art, the wax figures are created to evoke affective and cognitive responses from their viewers. As representatives of the “serial killer” type, they are intended to prompt reflection on serial killers. What, if anything, do they have in common, other than that for which they are famous? Is there any way to tell from their outward appearances that they are serial killers? This is yet another instance of the problem of other minds.

In contrast, Martin Senescu’s responses to the wax figures reflect his total absorption in the phenomenon of serial killing. While the imagination of a typical wax museum patron is stimulated by the visit, Martin’s imagination is overstimulated. He infers mind where there is only wax covered in clothing. He finds it confusing that he is the only one who really cares about the well-being of the wax figures. His understanding of serial killers is so complete that he ultimately becomes, as he describes it earlier, “immortalized in wax...remembered as we never will be.”
FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, evil, mental illness, other minds, representation, vice
There is a particularly American myth, that with grit and determination, hard work, intelligence, cunning, and maybe a touch of luck, anyone can become a successful and wealthy Titan of business. This myth discounts the role that other people and circumstances play in rags-to-riches stories and exaggerates the extent to which the individuals can be credited for their own successes. Although “Of Late I Think of Cliffordville” appears to be another time travel story, its main strength is in the way it explodes the myth of individualism and introduces themes from the subfield of philosophy called business ethics.

The argument of the episode is this: Imagine someone who has attained great wealth and success in business. Now imagine that they could time-travel to a period prior to their business success and, armed with the knowledge gained through their successful career, make a second attempt at attaining wealth and success. One might well think that with the advantage of the knowledge gained through their first successful attempt, they would be wildly more successful the second time around. This is not the result on display in this episode. The conclusion drawn is that such an individual, attempting to leverage their own special knowledge of trends, discoveries, and inventions that are known only to them, would fail miserably. And such a failure should prompt a reconsideration of what led to their business success the first time around.
William Feathersmith is bored with his success in business. He no longer gets pleasure from beating opponents in financial dealings. It is noted: “The pleasure is not in the possession but in the desperate struggle to possess.” So Feathersmith makes a deal with the devil to return to the Cliffordville of thirty years ago, when and where he started out, under the condition that he’ll retain his memory of everything that’s transpired since then. He reasons that he will experience the thrill of financial conquest again, aided by his knowledge of the financial, commercial, and scientific trends of the “next” thirty years. It comes as a surprise to him when things don’t work out as he expects. He fails utterly in his attempts to parlay his privileged knowledge of the future into financial gain. He ends up not as a business titan but as a janitor working in the very firm where he was the chief executive officer.

This story suffers from the same defect as other episodes that attempt to portray someone going back in time and changing the past (see “No Time Like the Past” and “Walking Distance,” for example). Featherstone is both CEO before time-traveling and not CEO but a janitor after time-traveling. The problem is that those two times are the same time. So Featherstone is both CEO and not CEO at the same time, which is a contradiction. The episode presents this contradictory state of affairs but doesn’t acknowledge this incoherence.

The episode does, however, represent a different kind of incoherence or, better yet, a lack of coherence in Featherstone’s attempt to use his knowledge of the state of science, technology, and business in 1964 when he is back in the Cliffordville of 1934. For one thing, many of his 1964-indexed beliefs, while true in 1964, are not true in 1934. For example, in 1964 it is true that one can successfully drill for oil in the ground to a depth of five thousand feet. In 1934 that is false. Featherstone fails to realign his beliefs to the time in which he holds them, with catastrophic effects. When he attempts to convince potential collaborators to build a machine in 1934 that he knows will be built years later, he can’t convince anyone that such a machine is even possible. He can’t find any way to convince the folks in 1934 that he has such knowledge. That’s because to convince them requires first providing evidence that they will accept. Without connecting to their beliefs, Featherstone’s claims strike them as preposterous. He can’t get them to draw the appropriate inferences. Not only is it not possible to change the past, but it is also not possible to win an argument in the past!
Featherstone can’t communicate with the people he meets when time-traveling, so he can’t cut deals with them. The point can easily be made without appealing to time travel. Successful business deals are successful collaborations. They are not accomplished alone but through agreement reached as the result of making claims and counterclaims, providing arguments, and reaching joint conclusions. These practices take place in a context where there must be at least some shared beliefs.

Suppose that Featherstone hadn’t time-traveled but instead had lost his fortune shortly after we encounter him in 1963. Suppose further that he retained a patent for a new technology and that he attempted to mount a business comeback by interesting investors in the new technology. He might succeed or he might fail. If he succeeds it will be because he gets others to collaborate with him. His success is not his alone but the result of a venture that includes other investors, engineers, market experts, and many others. Featherstone may be a business leader, but he’s never the whole show.

If Featherstone has been successful in business for many years, then it follows that his success isn’t something for which he can take the full credit. Of course, that doesn’t mean that he will share the credit or recognize the role of others in his success. Featherstone and his competition wrongly conceive of business dealings as a winner-take-all game, the point of which is to force one’s opponent to part with their assets. Such transactions are capped by the winner laughing at their sorry opponent. That’s what we find so objectionable, and that’s the devil’s motivation for putting Featherstone in the past, where it will become painfully obvious that such behavior not only is morally abhorrent but misrepresents the nature of those very transactions. This is one case where we are on the same side as the devil.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* causation, individualism, time travel
In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers found it useful to carve up the mind into different components, which they called “faculties.” Descartes, writing in the seventeenth century, distinguished between the faculties of sensation, imagination, reason, and memory. He and other philosophers of the period thought that the examination of those faculties would enable us to discover what we know with certainty and what we merely believe but do not know. Descartes held that the self-examination of one’s reasoning faculty revealed fundamental truths, while in contrast, reflecting on our imagination did not. Further reflection showed that there is a separate faculty of memory, which can play a role in the acquisition of knowledge, but only when that faculty is shown by the use of reason to be a source of truth.

In the eighteenth century, David Hume drew similar distinctions among mental faculties, but was skeptical of the priority of reason over the others. The difference between imagination and memory, Hume thought, had to do with the way ideas are organized in each faculty. In the imagination, we are free to arrange ideas in any old way. We can imagine a mountain topped with strawberry ice cream, or we can unite the idea of a cow with the idea of the color purple and think of a purple cow. Memory, in contrast, constrains our ideas to the order in which such ideas were
formed in perception. You can remember a black cow grazing in a field, if in the past you perceived a black cow grazing in a field. However, you could also imagine a black cow grazing a field. So the imagination and the memory can contain the same ideas. The difference between them is just a matter of how they were formed.

The skeptical question is this: How can you know that the idea in your mind is a memory, which corresponds to something that actually happened, rather than an idea of the imagination, which is just something you thought up and is not something you know? Hume points out that you can’t go back in time to compare the memory idea to see if it was experienced as you remember it now. If we are to distinguish memory from imagination, there has to be another way.

Horace Ford’s incredible world is the world of his memory and imagination. His problem, even if he doesn’t know that it’s a problem, is that he can’t, at least at first, distinguish the two. That’s surprising, because Horace seems to have an extraordinarily sharp memory. Almost everything he experiences or talks about prompts him to remember some person or event from his childhood, and there is nothing he wants to do more than to share that memory with others. He remembers all sorts of childhood games and gags, his grade school teachers, and so much more. Horace seems to have much more interest in the past than in the present. In this respect, Horace is very much like Alex in “Young Man’s Fancy.” Like Alex, Horace’s preoccupation with his past is a major problem for everyone who knows him in the present.

The skeptical problem of memory can be applied to Horace. Are the ideas he has really accurate representations of the past, or are they creations of his imagination, or are they some combination of the two? Hume said that we can’t go back to the past to compare them, but what if we could? What if Horace could revisit his past to see if he’s really remembering it or is imagining a past different from what he actually experienced? “Incredible” can mean “special,” but it can also mean “not credible.” Is Horace Ford’s world “incredible” in the first sense or the second? Like Miss Foley in “Nightmare as a Child,” Horace has a confrontation with his childhood self.

It’s not that Horace claims to remember things that didn’t happen. The problem is that his memory is selective, and what he doesn’t include in his musings about the past are the less-than-pleasant things that happened to him. When Horace finally comes face to face with his past, he realizes: “We remember what was good and we blank out what was bad.”
As he says to his wife, “I don’t know what happened to me, Laura. I have no idea. But for one minute...I saw something that made every memory I had a lie.” That may be an overly harsh judgment about the veracity of his memory, but what is right is that he now interprets his past very differently.

Accuracy in memory, distinguishing memory from the imagination, isn’t just about what you get right. Horace remembers playing Ringolevio on Randolph Street. What he’s blocked is that he was taunted by his peers. Horace derived great pleasure in recounting his happy past, just as Charles does in “Kick the Can.” It is not surprising that for years he was not motivated to recount his unpleasant past.

Recent work in the philosophy of mind has introduced the idea of “the extended mind.” This is the idea that objects outside the body play such an important part in our mental life that we should really count them as part of our minds, in other words our extended minds. When you take a list of items to purchase at the supermarket with you on your shopping trip, your memory includes the items on the list. While it is outside the boundaries of your body, it is part of your memory. Horace’s memories are sparked by the objects around him, and we can see those objects as elements of his extended mind. When Horace returns to the present after his unpleasant encounter with the past, he is physically bruised, representing the real bruising he took as a child but had never confronted—until now.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords**: epistemology, memory, mental illness, time travel
Although it takes place a billion miles from Earth, “On Thursday We Leave for Home” is decidedly about problems that one need not travel one mile from the surface of the earth to discover. It is about how an assemblage of individuals ought to govern themselves and about the rights that individuals retain even when they’ve agreed to constraints on that freedom as members of a group.

On view is a small community (approximately 150 members). Thirty years earlier, finding life among the other inhabitants of Earth unacceptable, they undertook to free themselves and resettle on a distant planet. Their main objection to life on Earth was the continual existence of war. They decided that the best way to live in peace was to set off on their own.

The episode provides us with a rich thought experiment for considering the nature of justice and the conditions under which it can arise. Were a small group of individuals to emigrate to a place where they would not be bothered by other people, how ought they to organize themselves? What form of government should they adopt, and would their society be able to maintain their governing principles, or would those principles change as the circumstances change?

While the group has escaped war on Earth, they find themselves on a barely inhabitable planet, with scorching heat from twin suns that never set and a barren, desert surface. They survive for thirty years, but only
with the hope of returning to Earth. They cooperate and share the meager resources, but they do not thrive. The group is organized as an autocracy. A single leader, Captain Benteen, seems like a benevolent dictator, and appears to have been chosen, at least informally, by the community. As their leader, Benteen maintains order and responds to challenges to his authority, and to the rules of society, by administering punishment but also by engaging with his charges and providing arguments in response to their challenges.

Conditions are so bleak that many residents have chosen death over life. We witness the burial of the ninth resident to take their own life in six months. Suicide is clearly a transgression of the laws of this society, as it is in many countries on Earth. One resident, “young Mr. Bains,” challenges the prohibition against suicide by arguing that in light of the conditions of extreme scarcity, individuals should not be subject to any rules, including prohibitions against ending their own suffering. His argument echoes that made by Hume, who held that a system of justice is only possible in circumstances that lie between extreme scarcity and extreme abundance of resources. In the circumstances of this group, there aren’t enough resources for anyone to achieve a minimally comfortable existence, and so no one can make a claim on the possession of any other person, and so rules constraining their behavior don’t make sense. Bains doesn’t argue that there should be a free-for-all, but he does argue that there are no grounds for preventing anyone from freely choosing suicide.

Benteen argues that granting freedom to the members of this community would reduce them to the status of savages, where “the strong take away from the weak” and “the young steal from the old.” He doesn’t say so, but perhaps Benteen is suggesting that circumstances are not so dire that there is no benefit from maintaining a system of justice that protects the young, the weak, and the old and so protects the society as a whole. However, it isn’t clear that Bains has been arguing for a complete dismantling of their society but rather for a more limited range of freedom for individuals to make decisions about their own lives.

Any exercise of individual freedom is a potential threat to the stability and survival of the group. An individual who takes their own life is no longer able to carry water, maintain watch in the radar tower, or carry out other chores. Every suicide is a blow to the morale of the whole. The decision to take one’s own life in this context is very different from that of Williams in “A Stop at Willoughby.” Williams’s exit will be missed by no one, and he knows it. Hume thought that suicide was wrong if it violated
an obligation to God, to society, or to oneself. He thought that there were cases where none of these obligations would be violated and argued that suicide is permissible in such cases.

The group is put to another test when a rescue party arrives to take the group back to Earth. While everyone wants to go home, Benteen is worried about a future in the world they once abandoned. He is committed to keeping their group together on their return and to retaining his role as their leader. Here we see the limitations of autocracies. While his singular command may have been instrumental in their survival in their isolation from others, the other members of the community envision their existence back on Earth within the larger society, and they see no need to stay within their narrow circle. In the end, Serling notes, William Benteen, “once a god,” is “now a population of one.”

Thomas Hobbes is credited with the idea of a social contract where subjects agree to invest complete power in a supreme ruler who will protect them as members of the state. For Hobbes and for other philosophers who have developed related ideas about how a just state can be formed, this is not a description of the formation of any actual state but a description of the conditions under which we could rationally agree to form a just state. A key complication illustrated in this episode is how such a state can deal with change, both change in the material circumstances of its members and change in the interaction with members of other states. Hume criticized Hobbes’s contractarianism on the grounds that it would be rational for members of society to revoke the contract that they made if it ever seemed prudent to do so at some point. That possibility is realized in “On Thursday We Leave for Home.”

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: fate of the earth, God, justice, oppression, suicide, vice, war
Marriage is a relationship between people sometimes entered into voluntarily and sometimes not. But what is the relationship, exactly? What conditions must be met for two (or in some cases more than two) people to be married? Who, for example, can be married? What are the moral consequences of being married? What obligations does one incur as the result of marrying? Are there prescribed roles for partners in a marriage? Can they be altered? Is marriage a valuable institution, or should it be abandoned or perhaps not encouraged? If it is valuable, what is it about marriage that makes it so? For example, does the value of marriage have anything to do with parenthood? If so, what follows about marriages without children? What role does love play in marriage?

These and many other questions arise in philosophical discussions, particularly in moral and political philosophy and, increasingly, in discussions of gender and gender equality. These aren't exclusively philosophical questions. They are investigated in the social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, history, and economics as well as in politics and law. Philosophical investigation of marriage includes attempts to define marriage, to understand the concept of marriage and its scope and limits, and to provide arguments for or against the institution of marriage itself.

Marriage is a social institution that varies across time and place. That means that a particular challenge is to make sense of marriage as something that changes, and that we have to be prepared to imagine how we
would use the concept of marriage in circumstances different from the way we might currently use it. Making use of historical, legal, sociological, and economic data will inform our deliberations, but understanding how we have used and use the concept of marriage won’t necessarily tell us how we should use the concept in the imagined circumstances.

“Passage on the Lady Anne” doesn’t take us to distant planets, the future, the past, or any of the exotic scenes of the imagination often hypothesized in *The Twilight Zone*. It is placed in the present, that is, the early 1960s, where we are witness to a failing marriage, that of a young couple, Alan and Eileen Ransome. The episode provides evidence in support of Dan Moller’s 2003 article, which presents a version of the so-called “Bachelor’s Argument” against marriage. That argument claims that even marriages that begin with mutual love often become loveless and lead to an unhappy situation of the kind faced by the Ransomes. But the episode also contains an impassioned defense of the institution of marriage.

What makes a marriage fail? What is the necessary ingredient that is missing from the Ransomes’ union? Marriage, as it is portrayed here, requires mutual love, friendship, and shared interests on the part of the members of the union. These elements may have been present in the Ransomes’ union in the past, but they no longer are. Eileen suggests that they take a cruise, where they will have the time to try to repair their relationship.

This is no ordinary cruise, of course. It is the final voyage of the *Lady Anne*, and its passengers are—but for the Ransomes—all elderly couples as well as a few widows and widowers who have booked passage in order to celebrate the role that the *Lady Anne* played in their long-lasting marriages. It’s not clear how it happens, but by entering this special environment, the Ransomes come to rediscover their love, friendship, and shared interests and in so doing save their marriage. It is not that the elderly couples provide an argument for marriage or diagnose the problem with the Ransomes’ relationship and offer a cure. Rather, they provide exemplars of what makes marriages good, and by interacting with couples who are happily married, Alan and Eileen come to see the value in their relationship. Moller may be right that many marriages fail and that the very fact of those failures may suggest that marriage itself is a problematic institution. But the passengers on the *Lady Anne* show that a rich, meaningful, relationship that extends to the end of life is not only possible, it is actual. In their final act, the elderly couples insist that the only difference
between the Ransomes and themselves is that the Ransomes are at the beginning of a life of devotion to one another, while they are at its end.

These considerations would not apply to marriages in the Europe of the Middle Ages, for example, where love was not only not considered a necessary condition for a successful marriage but was often seen as an obstacle to a successful union. In addition, the conventions governing marriage in the 1960s created obstacles and barriers to happy marriages that don’t speak to the conditions we face in many cultures today. Eileen appears to be a housewife, while Alan is the workaholic breadwinner. Eileen is oppressed and marginalized. She feels excluded from Alan’s world. Today’s marriages are often, though not universally, among individuals who are both expected to have the equality in engagement with the world, and the potential equality of power means that the kind of difficulties the Ransomes face may be less likely to occur. Marriages now are understood as relationships that don’t even require a gender difference, much less one where there is a difference in power.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, love, marriage, sympathy
Here’s a thought experiment and two guiding questions: Imagine that William Shakespeare could write for television. How would he fare, and what does answering the question tell us about television as an art form?

Julius Moomer has, somewhat unintentionally, conjured William Shakespeare, and is understandably shocked to be conversing with the William Shakespeare in his apartment. Moomer says, “Look, level with me pops, would ya? You mean to say that you’re the Shakespeare? Man, you’ve been dead a thousand years!” This is Moomer’s metaphysical challenge: If Shakespeare is the person who died in 1616 (not quite a thousand years ago!), and if a person who has died at time $t-1$ cannot be alive at time $t$, then the individual in front of Moomer cannot be William Shakespeare. In response, Shakespeare says, “It is true of course, but death is relative and need not be the end.” This doesn’t seem to be supported by anything in Shakespeare’s writings. In fact, he emphasizes the finality of death in passages like one from Henry IV, Part 2: “A man can die but once; we owe God a death.” And far from saying death is relative, whatever that means, in Measure for Measure Shakespeare says that it is absolute: “Be absolute for death; either death or life / Shall thereby be the sweeter.”

The Shakespeare who is conversing with Moomer is right: If death isn’t always the end of the person, then his claim to be the same person as the historical Shakespeare cannot be rejected on the grounds offered by
Moomer. This metaphysical hypothetical is just one of the allowances we make in order to follow out this thought experiment. We can, of course, interpret the episode as merely asking what would happen if someone with something like Shakespeare’s genius wrote for television.

Serling, who wrote this episode, must have had a great time throwing television, a relatively new medium, up against the work of William Shakespeare, representing one of the greatest literary and dramatic achievements in English literature. Shakespeare is decidedly highbrow. Television was, in the early 1960s, and still is, in many circles, lowbrow or at best medium-brow. Shakespeare’s plays are works of art. Television productions in the 1960s were widely viewed, even by the networks that broadcast them, as vehicles for promoting products like shampoo and cigarettes during commercial breaks.

What makes something a work of art? This is the fundamental question of the subfield of philosophy known as the philosophy of art. One way of answering it is to begin with uncontroversial cases of art and then come up with an account of its most important features. Then candidates for inclusion in the category can be examined and compared against the canonical cases. Another way to try to distinguish art from non-art is to fashion a characterization of the aims and methods of artistic creation. Art is created by artists; so, what is it that artists do, and how are artistic enterprises distinguished from others? This is the approach recommended by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*.

“The Bard” sheds some light on this fundamental question by pursuing the second approach, showing the ill fit of a true artist, Shakespeare, in the context of modern television. Shakespeare aims to shed light on love, conflict, and death. Television directors, producers, and sponsors, in contrast, are interested in attracting an audience that will be receptive to the products advertised. As they butcher the script in rehearsal, Moomer explains to Shakespeare that their decisions—to eliminate the balcony scene and the suicide scene, among other changes—are guided by what is popular with the viewing public, by what is currently “big.” As Shakespeare leaves the rehearsal and clearly gives up on writing for television, his indictment of the new genre is swift and severe. Television and the Shakespearean art of drama have no point of contact.

However we define it, it is clear from the history of art that it is a moving target, and new forms of artistic expression develop over time, and that includes the introduction of new media. The technological developments of the last one hundred years alone have resulted in a vast palette
of media harnessed by artists and perhaps would-be artists. Television paled in comparison with Shakespeare in the 1960s and still does in the twenty-first century, but it can’t be as easily dismissed as an art form as Serling, one of its practitioners, does. If that’s right, Serling himself deserves some credit for the elevation of the medium.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: fiction, personal identity, philosophy of art, value
“IN PRAISE OF PIP”

Original air date: September 27, 1963

In our interactions with one another and in our observations of the actions of individuals in fiction, we find ourselves assessing behavior. We judge individuals as good, or kind, or vicious, or even evil. We consider what has been done, and what may be done, and we assess actions as wise or foolish, as self-centered or generous, as right or wrong. When we engage in these assessments, we are often guided by our view of the character of the individual. This view is more general than the specific action we may be considering. It is an overall profile of the moral status of the individual, as a good person, a kind person, a lazy person, or a thoughtless person, and the role that the disposition we associate with that individual plays in their actions. Among the things that philosophers reflect on here is the question of whether there really is something we can describe as a person’s moral character, and (if there is such a thing as character) is it fixed, or can it change? These questions are raised in “In Praise of Pip.” A similar possible world is presented in “Nervous Man in a Four Dollar Room.”

Max Phillips is a small-time bookie, a person who takes illegal bets on horse races, working as a runner for a small-time mobster who doesn’t hesitate to use violence to collect from his clients. Max’s job is to collect bets and forward the proceeds to his boss. He’s been doing this for a long time, and nothing about his life seems admirable. He lives in a squalid room in a run-down apartment building; he has a stash of cheap whiskey
that he keeps in a dresser drawer, and he doesn’t hesitate to mislead his clients in order to get them to place their bets. Yet Max is sweet to his landlady, and he is reflective. He knows that the life that he leads is not admirable.

How does our assessment of Max’s character contribute to our moral evaluation of his choices? We expect that Max will continue the life that he is stuck in. We expect him to continue to live as a petty criminal and to exploit people who hope to turn their meager savings into winning bets. We don’t expect Max to improve his lot or that of others, and most would disapprove of his failure to get unstuck.

How exactly does Max’s character influence his behavior? If we think of character as the beliefs, desires, moods, and inclinations of a person, then we might see how holding certain beliefs, including beliefs about right and wrong as well as beliefs about what is valuable, together with a set of desires might contribute to the choices someone makes. There are, however, other things that influence our behavior, including the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Max’s circumstances are not ones that facilitate self-improvement or the improvement of others. How far does character take us in guiding our choices? What role do external circumstances play?

The episode helps us consider another aspect of character. We quickly come to appreciate that Max is quite self-reflective. He is not just a bum; he’s a bum who knows that he’s a bum. He observes his own present and past behavior with a critical eye. At one point he characterizes his character flaws eloquently: “Dreamed instead of did, wished and hoped instead of tried.” He knows that his behavior is not praiseworthy, and he doesn’t attempt to justify his actions. That he is aware of his own character suggests that his character is influencing his actions. For less reflective souls, who don’t think, or think much, about what they believe and desire, it’s harder to see how their character causes their actions. How character and our awareness of our character are related is discussed in Taylor 1996.

There’s much more to “In Praise of Pip” than Max Phillips in his room. Max is the father of Pip, a young man fighting in the Vietnam War. Max learns that Pip has been gravely wounded and may die. This causes the already reflective Max to undertake a radical reconsideration of his character and his actions. He then does something we would regard as uncharacteristic, that is, something that is at odds with his character, namely coming to the defense of a small-time gambler who needs a refund. In doing this, Max rejects the values and beliefs he has shared
with his mobster boss and does so bravely and with great resolve. This suggests that we can, when we are in crisis or faced with challenging circumstances, change our character and in doing so reorder our priorities and act in ways that surprise others. Whether such character changes endure or are just temporary depends on many factors. Unfortunately for Max, one of the consequences of his character change is that the change, like Max himself, is short-lived.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: altruism, character, death, love, responsibility, vice, war
At least since the seventeenth century, philosophers and scientists have considered whether it is possible for machines to think. Descartes argued that it is not possible for animals (and by extension, machines) to think. Thinking, he argued, requires the use of language, and language use is open-ended and unpredictable. While animals, which are simply mechanisms, can act “from the disposition of their organs,” humans act “from knowledge,” in a flexible manner that enables appropriate responses to any provocation. Only humans have language, and so only humans can think. Other beings can respond appropriately based on habit to a narrow range of inputs. However, not all philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries agreed with Descartes. Hobbes held that thinking was a kind of computation, carried out by motions in the brain and the heart. Pascal and Leibniz both worked on mechanical computing devices, with the hope of achieving a universal computer that could communicate in the language of mathematics. Hume wrote of “reason in animals.”

We briefly noted in discussion of “The Lonely” that in 1950, Alan Turing, one of the architects of the modern digital computer, took on Descartes’ challenge and suggested that if a computer could be built that has the capacity to communicate in a natural language like English, in the same way that humans communicate in language, then we would have to conclude that it is intelligent. Turing proposed a test, which has
since been named the Turing Test, where a computer replaces a human being in a parlor game called “The Imitation Game.” The Imitation Game is usually played with three human players: a male player, a female player, and a judge. The players communicate with the judge via printed text. The judge cannot see or speak with the other players. The goal of the female player is to convince the judge that she is the female and that the other player is the male participant. The goal of the male player is to convince the judge that he is the female and that the other player is the male. The Turing Test replaces either the male or female with a computer, which then takes on the role of the person it replaces. If the computer, for example, playing the male, can achieve the same rate of misidentification by the judge as a human player, then the computer passes the test.

Turing thought that the test was appropriate because it tests only the linguistic skill of the computer. The judge can’t see the body of the computer during the game and won’t be likely to rule out its ability to think in advance of its exchanges with the machine. Turing reasoned that thinking is a purely intellectual activity that does not depend on the looks or other physical characteristics of the machine, beyond its ability to produce appropriate typed responses to the questions presented by the judge. Turing predicted that within fifty years—that is, by around 2000—computers would be powerful enough to pass the Turing Test and be truly artificially intelligent.

“Steel” is about robots, embodied computers that are not quite up to the conversational skill level of the computers Turing envisioned but have been designed for a less lofty purpose. In this story, robots have replaced humans in the sport of boxing. Instead of dangerous bouts between vulnerable human players, boxing (in the imagined 1970s!) has evolved into a sport between teams of roboticists who develop androids to fight in front of audiences, just as the human boxers of old did. The moral objections to the sport of boxing have been accommodated. Robots damaged in a bout can be repaired or junked. No one gets hurt.

Worried that their robotic boxer will not be able to perform, due to technical difficulties, one of the promoters of the robot decides to replace the robot in the boxing ring and attempt to fool the judges and the audience into thinking that he is the robot. In contrast to the Turing Test, where a computer takes on the role of a human and tries to convince the judge that he is the male or female human being, here a human, nicknamed “Steel,” tries to convince the judges that he is a robot.
How difficult is it for a human to convincingly imitate a robot? Of course, that depends on what robots are like! In this story, robots look very much like humans, and they are designed to engage in a physical activity that developed originally as an activity between humans. The closer the robot is to imitating human boxers, the easier it will be for a human boxer to imitate a robotic one.

One might think that it would be easier to build a robotic boxer than a robotic thinker. In fact, both are challenges that we have yet to meet. Twenty plus years after the date Turing specified as the date by which the Turing Test would be passed, we do not have a computer that can engage in the kind of open-ended communication in language required to pass the test. While we are making progress with autonomous vehicles, we are not yet close to constructing autonomous agents who can compete in sports.

Robotics has developed considerably since the airing of this episode in the early 1960s along the lines hypothesized here. Many tasks carried out by human beings, from boxing to mining, from factory work to driving a car, are dangerous, and there are clear benefits to turning those tasks over to intelligent robots that can perform the associated actions for us.

If robots could imitate humans and humans imitate robots in a wide range of activities, intellectual, physical, and social, would the lines be so blurred that we would have to attribute not only intelligence, but feelings, and not just feelings, but rights and obligations to our robots? Paul Ziff raised this question in 1959, and it is still with us today.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: artificial intelligence, intentionality, other minds
“NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET”

Original air date: October 11, 1963

In light of the attention paid to the philosophical imagination in The Twilight Zone, it isn’t surprising that there are several episodes that explore what happens when the imagination, understood as a faculty of the mind, takes on an outsized role in the life of a character or characters. Several episodes explore the active imagination in the minds of children, while others reveal what happens when the imagination of an adult becomes more active than it usually is. We often characterize adults with severely overactive imaginations as suffering from some form of mental illness. We often characterize adults with more mildly active imaginations as artists.

While artists may rely on their imaginations more than most of us to practice their craft, successfully navigating the world depends on being able to distinguish between the things we just imagine and the things we really see. In “Where Is Everybody?,” “Shadow Play,” “King 9 Will Not Return,” “A World of Difference,” and others, the question of how we distinguish the imagined from the real is raised. In most cases, there is some individual who believes that something exists, and there is everyone else who think that it does not exist, that the individual is imagining something that does not exist. The problem is that the single individual is convinced that they are experiencing or sensing the object or objects in question, not merely imagining it or them. Attempts to convince the
individual otherwise will fail. If you see an apple in front of you, no one is going to convince you that the apple isn't there.

This is a bit of an oversimplification. There are times when we seem to see something and what we seem to see doesn't correspond to the way things are. If you don a pair of green tinted sunglasses, your white car might appear green, and for a moment you might be surprised until you realize that the car appears green because you are not viewing it under normal conditions.

Mental illness of the kind suffered by Bob Wilson in “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet” is not like this. The way Bob perceives the world can’t be changed by removing a pair of glasses or by any other changes he or others can make to the conditions under which he interacts with his surroundings.

Bob’s malady isn’t simply a fear of flying in an airplane. It is a fear supported by what he takes to be his direct observations of a gremlin-like creature on the wing of the plane who is attempting to tamper with and disable the craft. A phobia of flying could be the result of mistaken beliefs about the safety record of air travel or about the safety procedures used by airlines. In principle, it sometimes is possible to quell someone’s fear of flying by correcting beliefs and providing information. In such cases doing so is like removing a pair of tinted sunglasses.

Bob’s problem also isn’t just a conflict between reason and passion, where the passion of fear wins out. Bob’s fear is grounded in his belief that there is a creature on the wing who is trying to bring the plane down, and he reasons that he must alert others to the problem and take action to maintain the airplane in flight. The failure of others to accept his testimony is distressing. At the same time, others are distressed by his claims, which are not corroborated by their experience, and by his behavior, which from their perspective is inappropriate.

Those around Bob, including his wife and the flight attendant, are ill equipped to respond to his concerns. This may have something to do with the fact that they can’t really understand what it is that he believes and desires. As Daniel Dennett has suggested, our practice of attributing a belief to someone is wrapped up in our attribution of other beliefs to that person, beliefs that “make sense” together with the belief attributed. For example, if you take a nutritionist to believe that apples are a healthy food, then you can also attribute to your nutritionist the belief that some fruits are healthy foods, since the latter proposition is a logical consequence of the former. In short, you attribute beliefs to others that are the
logical consequences of beliefs you already take them to have. That means that we usually take the reasoning capacity of other folks to be intact.

In the case of Bob, all bets are off. We take him to be suffering from some kind of information processing failure, since he is drawing radically different conclusions from the same circumstances we are in, and that limits our ability to construct a coherent picture of his beliefs. Dennett argues that in such cases we stop thinking of Bob as having beliefs at all; for us, that is, he is no longer an “intentional system.” Instead, we revert to thinking of Bob as what Dennett calls a “designed system,” where there is some failure in the implementation of the design that is responsible for Bob’s behavior. This is what the flight engineer does when he interacts with Bob. He gives up trying to reason with Bob and instead adopts a strategy of manipulation. He pretends that he shares Bob’s belief that the plane is in danger and suggests that they cooperate in order to keep the other passengers calm. Unfortunately, Bob quickly realizes that he is being manipulated rather than being believed. The other intervention is medication, but Bob is wise to this form of manipulation as well. Attempts to control Bob’s behavior require strategies other than reasoned discussion and medication, and deception becomes important on both sides.

If Bob is no longer functioning as an intentional system, as a holder of beliefs and desires that are logically linked together, what is responsible for his condition? What do we know about mental disorders and their treatment? We are told that Bob has just recovered from a nervous breakdown that led to a six-month hospitalization. We now have theories and treatment strategies based on evidence from the social and cognitive sciences, and most prominently from neuroscience, theories that were at best in their infancy in the early 1960s. It’s probably fair to say, however, that we’ve made more progress in aerospace than we have in understanding and treating mental disorders of the kind suffered by Bob Wilson.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords:* epistemology, illusion, mental illness, rationality, reason, the passions
In the normal course of things, time passes. Our awareness of the passage of time is intimately related to our experience of happenings, or events, in the world and in ourselves. When we explicitly measure time, using a watch, a clock, or a stopwatch, we are comparing one sequence of happenings with another—for instance, someone running the hundred-yard dash—with the movement of the hand of a stopwatch around its face, divided into regular segments we call seconds, tenths-of-seconds, and so forth. When we declare that the earthquake took place at 14:15 Pacific Daylight Time, we are saying that one event—the earthquake—and another event—the registering of 14:15 PDT on an accurate clock—occurred simultaneously.

When we use a stopwatch, we initiate a series of events, the movements of the hands of the stopwatch (or digits on the display), and compare it to the event we are observing and thus judge the duration of the latter event. The two events, the movement of the watch hand or digits, and the event being timed, are not usually causally related. They occur independently of one another. I say “usually,” because an earthquake, for example, could cause a rock to fall on a stopwatch, and so cause it to stop. Other causal interactions in that direction can easily be thought up. Also, looking at a stopwatch could play a role in causing a runner to speed up or slow down.
“A Kind of a Stopwatch” is not about a standard stopwatch but a stopwatch that causes events in the world to stop abruptly. Activating the stop function on the stopwatch stops almost everything. What doesn’t stop are the events related to the owner of the watch. The owner keeps breathing, walking, talking, and doing whatever else they wish to do that can be done alone.

Once again, we find ourselves asking whether something that is represented as a possible world really is possible. If all motion outside the skin of Patrick Thomas McNulty, the possessor of the special stopwatch, ceases, that means that objects at all scales, from the very small to the very large, would also cease. The earth would stop orbiting the sun and would stop spinning on its axis. All planetary motion would cease, as would the motion of electrons around the nucleus of the atoms to which they belong, and the arrangement of atoms in molecules. Oxygen would cease to be a gas, and our Mr. McNulty would not be able to breathe. If falling objects were suddenly suspended in midair, then gravitational forces would clearly be suspended as well. The physical world as we know it would not just freeze in place; the very laws of physics would be suspended, except in one small area, the area outlined by the skin of Mr. McNulty, and, as we’ve noted, McNulty would not survive.

Perhaps this interpretation of the thought experiment is too severe. The episode shows everything except McNulty freezing when he presses the button on the stopwatch. Perhaps it allows for the possibility that the atmosphere is not frozen, that the planets continue their motions, so that McNulty can still live. What really matters in the thought experiment provided by the episode is that people can be frozen, while McNulty is not. In their frozen states, do other people exist? Do they endure unchanging through the interval in which they are frozen, until McNulty hits the stopwatch again and unfreezes them?

This might seem like an easy question to answer. Yes, if McNulty freezes the action for five seconds, then the frozen individuals continue to exist, frozen, for five seconds, though only McNulty will be aware that the objects in the world endured for those five seconds. However, when the stopwatch breaks with everyone and everything outside of McNulty (and whatever else in the environment he needs to preserve his life) frozen, it is plausible to conclude that the objects no longer exist. At least
they no longer exist as the objects they were to McNulty, who, as the only person left, is the only one who matters. He can’t talk to anyone, annoy or bother anyone. At most the frozen figures are just representations or reminders of a past existence. McNulty is in a graveyard.

Someone might see the situation differently and argue that the frozen world is still a world of objects and that although they don’t change individually, as long as McNulty is changing, they can be described as participating in his changes. Thus, as McNulty walks away from a frozen beagle, the frozen beagle has undergone a change in its distance from McNulty. Peter Geach argues that this is not a real change. It’s just a change in the way we describe the object. Following Geach, philosophers call such changes “Cambridge changes.”

McNulty’s circumstances in “A Kind of a Stopwatch” raise some fundamental questions about the nature of time and the relationship between time and objects in time and, in particular, whether time is a real feature of objects or is instead a manner in which objects appear in relation to other objects. If it is the latter, then the idea of the episode, in which a stopwatch breaks and this brings about the end of time itself, is less far-fetched than it might have seemed at first.

J. M. E. McTaggart, a philosopher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, famously argued that time is unreal. He held that we perceive events, and that when we do so, we’re perceiving events as they are at present. We don’t perceive the past or the future, but we take it as essential to time that it is a series from past to present to future. But if events occur in the present moment, they don’t change when they are in the past. Rather, what changes is our description of them. The changes are Cambridge changes, not real ones. So, on McTaggart’s view, the only changes are changes in whether events are regarded as past, present, or future. The events themselves are unchanging and not in time. Time is not a property of objects.

Serling presents the episode by telling us that what happens “will alter [McNulty’s] existence—and ours.” If McTaggart is right, it doesn’t alter the properties of any objects or persons, but it does change how those objects are perceived. Kant held a somewhat related view, that time is something in the mind that structures the way we perceive objects. The failure of this feature of the mind leads to McNulty’s solipsistic nightmare in a manner not unlike that in “Time Enough at Last.”
FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: metaphysics, solipsism, time
Most of us have had the experience of being misunderstood by others. Sometimes these misunderstandings are small. For example, a host may choose to serve you a vegetarian meal, mistaking you for a vegetarian, when you were really hoping for a steak. Some are bigger: You might be invited to attend a fundraising function for a political party or cause when you are an ardent opponent of that party or cause.

Can we misunderstand ourselves? Small self-misunderstandings may be possible: You order a beer but after one sip realize that what you really want is a glass of pinot noir. Larger self-misunderstandings seem implausible. I am unlikely to find myself regularly attending fundraising functions for a cause to which I am ardently opposed. Here Wittgenstein's distinction between mistake and mental illness is worth recalling (see “A World of Difference” and “Static”). “The Last Night of a Jockey” suggests that deep self-misunderstandings that cannot be explained away as mental illness are possible.

To misunderstand oneself, one must try to understand oneself and fail. Usually, an attempt to understand oneself requires reflection, and reflection often occurs when one has a problem. Michael Grady is a successful jockey who has a career setback. He has been handed a sixty-day suspension for cheating in competition. This is his problem, and it leads to critical self-examination.

Setbacks and challenges of this type prompt local reflection that is tied to the events and circumstances that precipitated the setbacks and
challenges, but they can also lead to further reflection on more durable features of one’s character or characteristics. Grady begins by regretting his decision to cheat, but from there he mulls over the personal defects that have contributed to the sorry state in which he finds himself.

Grady’s alcohol-fueled revelation is that the source of his lack of well-being is his small stature. As a small person he has been ridiculed and marginalized. As a small person he has been perceived as different and has not been accorded the respect enjoyed by others. When Grady assesses himself as a flawed person, he does so from the perspective of others. He adopts and seconds the opinions of others who discriminate against him because of his size.

However, by taking the perspective of others and by wishing that he didn’t have the features that are the basis for discriminatory treatment, Grady tragically rejects the very features that have set him apart from others and have provided him with the capacity to excel in ways that others can’t. His small stature is crucial to his ability to excel as a jockey, and by wishing his smallness away, he rejects what has enabled him to flourish.

“The Last Night of a Jockey” raises questions about the nature of disability and discrimination based on it. When is a condition a disability? Is being smaller in size than the average person a disability? Is it instead a different ability? Answering these questions may very well depend on paying attention to the perspective we take when we attempt to understand physical, perceptual, cognitive, and affective differences across persons. Individuals with what others describe as disabilities often have a very different sense of their differences from others. Many hearing-impaired individuals, for example, who use American Sign Language see themselves as members of a rich linguistic culture, one that they value and believe deserves to be seen as different from other natural languages but one that is equally valuable.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* character, disability, discrimination, responsibility, self-deception, self-knowledge, solipsism, well-being
In our discussion of “The New Exhibit” we pointed out that dolls, dummies, mannequins, and wax figures, among other three-dimensional representations of the human body, figure prominently in several episodes. In that episode, we noted, the belief that the static wax figures were “alive” was held by only one individual. In “Living Doll” there is a doll and three individuals: a child, her mother, and her father. It’s tricky to describe the child’s relationship to the doll. Christie treats the doll as a friend, but that’s something that many children do with dolls. She imagines that it is her friend, but deep down she knows that it is just a doll. Christie’s mother, Annabelle, knows how important the doll is to her daughter but doesn’t think of it as anything but a doll. Her father, Erich, in contrast, sees the doll as a new member of the family, one who is a threat. In fact, when he is alone with the doll, it issues threats directly to him—or so he imagines.

It is appropriate for a child to take a doll to have beliefs and desires, but it usually is not appropriate for an adult to do so. How do we account for this difference? One way to get a handle on the difference is to describe the ways individuals speak or use language in the presence of a doll. Talking to a doll, like talking to anyone, is a rule-governed activity, a kind of game that one can play. The rules are not hard and fast, but there are norms that govern what it is appropriate to say to a doll and how to
interact with it in other ways. For example, Christie “feeds” her doll at the dinner table, but she is not troubled by the fact that the doll doesn’t open its mouth to accept the food, and she doesn’t bother cleaning the food from the doll’s face. Christie’s father, however, is bothered by the doll’s food-covered mouth, and he cleans it when no one else is looking. A different set of rules governs interactions with dolls for adults. An adult can talk to the doll in the presence of a child, thereby participating in the doll-play language game. But in the absence of the child, the game is over, and the adult may not “talk” to the doll. Doing so would be like continuing to make moves in a chess game in which checkmate has been achieved and noted.

Of course, the doll, Talky Tina—her name notwithstanding—is not a player in the language games in which she figures. Talky Tina produces sounds that we recognize as assertions in English, but we also know that they are randomly produced on request. If the doll-produced utterances are appropriate in the circumstances in which they are produced, that’s only because they are so general that they can apply anywhere (see “Nick of Time”). There are appropriate moves Christie can make in response to Tina’s apparent utterances, but there are no moves that Tina, as a 1960s doll, is able to make in response to Christie’s, or Erich’s, utterances.

While most of the talking dolls available on the market in the twenty-first century are scarcely more sophisticated than Talky Tina, some dolls do have far greater linguistic skill. (At the time “Living Doll” aired, there was an actual doll called “Chatty Cathy,” on which Talky Tina was likely based.) Natural language interfaces widely used in personal computers and mobile devices can be ported to dolls and other toys or implemented in computer games designed for children. “Living Doll” could have been fashioned as a story about future dolls, but its power is due to the fact that Talky Tina has no special technology-fueled powers.

Erich clearly has a problem, and this is evident to his wife. Erich’s immediate dislike of the doll is a symptom of his discomfort with his recently acquired role as stepfather to Christie. Sometimes animosity manifests itself as dislike for something liked by someone else. If someone you dislike is an ardent opera fan, you might find that opera rubs you the wrong way. Erich seems inclined to take his stepdaughter’s likes negatively, even when she expresses affection for him! That this tendency leads to his imagining that Talky Tina intends to murder him is a clear sign that he is not well.
Dolls and other three-dimensional representations of the human body have faces, and just as we zero in on the faces of other human beings to understand both what they are thinking and feeling as well as their understanding of what we are thinking and feeling, the faces of dolls, dummies, wax figures, and the like are designed to spark our imaginations. In most instances, both adults and children keep their imaginations in check. In Erich’s case, it is his unchecked imagination, not Talky Tina, that kills him.

FURTHER READING


_philosophical keywords_: language, mental illness, other minds
Imagine coming across an isolated group of individuals who avow their allegiance to someone they refer to as “the old man in the cave,” a man they admit they have never seen but who communicates with them through written notes. The group follows the advice of the notes left in the cave. You might well react with skepticism, as Major French does. Major French treats the group as religious zealots, aligning themselves without reason to a mysterious and invisible leader. Major French doubts the knowledge claims made by the group about the source of their advice and guidance. His skepticism is fueled by the way the group makes its case: It has one spokesperson, Mr. Goldsmith, who identifies himself as the person in charge. He has the look and demeanor of a minister or other religious leader, and Major French addresses Goldsmith as “Father.” Goldsmith doesn’t correct him.

Presented with the evidence in this way, without further context, Major French’s unwillingness to adopt the beliefs of the group is fully appropriate. But there is additional information that Major French does not consider. First, the group is one of a small group of individuals who have survived the widespread destruction of civilization and the environment that followed a devastating nuclear war ten years earlier. While this group is not flourishing, they have managed to stay alive, and they credit their survival to the counsel of the old man in the cave. He has told them where they can plant crops and where the soil is too contaminated. They have
stores of canned goods and continually find more. The old man in the cave
tells them which ones are safe to eat and which will kill them.

If we consider this additional evidence, we may begin to move toward
a different conclusion than the one Major French reaches. The group
makes predictions about what it is safe to eat based on the claims made
by their oracle. Following the recommendations of their source, they have
stayed alive. No one has died from ingesting contaminated food. While
following the recommendations of the old man in the cave has restricted
their food options, it has not eliminated them. They’ve been told what
they can eat and what they can’t. They’ve used inductive reasoning to
establish the credibility of the old man in the cave’s testimony. Even if
there is no man in the cave, as Major French believes, whatever is respon-
sible for the correct information they are receiving should be credited as
such. They can’t say how their source knows what he’s talking about, but
the ten-year track record of his wise counsel speaks for itself.

Epistemologists, who study the nature of knowledge and justification,
characterize this approach to justifying one’s beliefs as “externalism,”
which is in contrast with a more traditionally held view, called “internalism,”
that holds that you are not justified unless you possess all the
information needed to show why your belief is true. The group can’t do
this. They don’t have access to the information the old man in the cave
presumably has access to. They don’t have the same evidential base he
possesses. But they do know that accepting his testimony is a reliable
mechanism for reaching beliefs that are true. He is a reliable source of
true beliefs. The externalist says that beliefs caused by a reliable process
are justified beliefs, even if the believer doesn’t understand the mecha-
nism by which the reliable belief is produced. Ordinary visual perception
is an example of a mechanism that reliably (though not always) produces
ture belief. You don’t need to know how visual perception works in order
to accept that the red apple you are looking at is indeed in front of you.
You believe that it is, and that visual perception is a largely reliable true-
belief-producing mechanism.

Without revealing the dramatic punch of the episode, it can be said
that we do come to see who the old man in the cave really is, and when we
do, we can begin to fill in the details and make sense of how the old man
in the cave has served his charges so well for so long. But rational belief-
forming mechanisms can only take people so far. The old man’s advice
was not what the people wanted to hear. They wanted to hear that they
could eat and drink with abandon, and with the help of Major French,
everyone except Goldsmith turned against him and partook of the forbidden food and drink, turning their wrath on the messenger as well.

One way to look at what happened is that the folk gave up their faith. It really wasn’t faith, but causal reasoning, that guided them to accept the testimony of the old man in the cave for ten years. The final result was due to a battle between reason and passion, with passion winning out. Only Goldsmith had the resolve to resist his strongest desires and to keep his focus on survival. In the end he speculates that what has happened may well seal the fate of human beings on earth. He is clearly referring not only to the latest events in his community but to the events that came before.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: artificial intelligence, desire, epistemology, fate of the earth, induction, justification, reason, well-being
In 1964, in contrast to today, robots were uncommon in homes and factories in the United States. They did, however, have a significant presence in The Twilight Zone. The unintended consequences of robotic athletes competing in sports is explored in “The Mighty Casey” and “Steel.” A mechanical caregiver in “I Sing the Body Electric” exceeds everyone’s expectations in that role. “The Lateness of the Hour” features a staff of robotic servants for their creator and his family, though the boundary between the two groups is blurred. “The Lonely” is about a robotic companion for a convicted felon banished to an asteroid.

“Uncle Simon,” like “In His Image,” considers how someone might create a robot that extends one’s personhood in time and space. One way of doing this is by creating a robotic duplicate of oneself, as Alan Talbot does in “In His Image.” Another is by creating a robot continuant of oneself, where a robot continues the creator’s existence after the creator has died. In the former case there is a special difficulty: If Alan Talbot creates a duplicate of himself while he continues to exist in his “home” body, then the duplicate, however similar to him, is not him. Two different individuals cannot be the same individual. Uncle Simon’s robotic creation, in contrast, is only activated when the human Uncle Simon dies. There is no temporal overlap. So, Uncle Simon the robot can be the same person as Uncle Simon the human being, in the sense of “same person” as “the same
person over time.” Is the robotic extension of Uncle Simon really Uncle Simon? Does Uncle Simon get to continue his personhood as a robot?

After the death of the human Uncle Simon, we are introduced to his robotic creation as a lumbering and awkward machine, with arms, legs, a torso, and a head, one with limited mobility and, at least initially, with limited cognition and speech. This robot doesn’t look like a human being in most respects, and it does not have the full mental resources of Uncle Simon. The robot begins its cognitive and motor development and by the end of the episode is at least cognitively and affectively similar to Uncle Simon.

In his 1950 paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” Alan Turing suggested that a promising strategy for building a machine that thinks is to build a machine that can learn, rather than trying to build a machine that is fully intelligent from the start. Indeed, the approach Turing recommended is now widely used in machine learning and artificial intelligence.

One might object to the claim that the robot is Uncle Simon for several reasons. First, one might argue that a robot can’t be a person at all, and so it can’t be the continuation of a person. It is a machine, and as such it can’t think or be conscious. Second, as we’ve already noted, the robot doesn’t look like Uncle Simon. It is made out of different stuff. It is not carbon-based but is largely made of metal and rubber. It is a synthetic being, not an organic one. It is grotesque, unlike the robotic forms in “The Lonely” and “I Sing the Body Electric,” which are indistinguishable from human forms. Third, though it clearly has a personality that is very similar to the personality possessed by Uncle Simon, similarity of personality is neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity. Merely having Uncle Simon’s misogynistic character traits doesn’t make him Uncle Simon. Finally, this robot doesn’t even have much of a face. When he asks for hot chocolate, it’s really difficult to understand this request, since he lacks a mouth. We are at a loss to understand how he is supposed to drink hot chocolate or anything else (see the discussion of faces in “Living Doll”).

The robotic successor to Uncle Simon is clearly different from the original in the respects we’ve just listed. Yet this and other episodes challenge our unwillingness to attribute personhood to artificially intelligent embodied forms. Both “The Lonely” and “I Sing the Body Electric” make powerful cases for the appropriateness of granting personhood to these machines. “Uncle Simon” provides an additional argument.
John Locke argued that personhood is as much a legal notion as it is a metaphysical one. He wrote:

“Person” a forensic term. Person, as I take it, is the name for this self. Wherever a man finds what he calls himself, there, I think, another may say is the same person. It is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness, and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness,—whereby it becomes concerned and accountable; owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason as it does the present.

Locke suggests that personhood extends to our past, that personhood has to do with that to which we are legally and morally connected. While here Locke only mentions the connection to our past, it also extends to the future. If you promise to purchase someone’s car, you bind yourself in an obligation to carry out the transaction, and in doing so you bring about certain rights that the seller has to demand that you act as you should. Uncle Simon creates a legal document that places certain requirements on the behavior of Barbara, his niece and longtime caregiver, to treat the robot as she treated Uncle Simon. Barbara must obey the commands of the robot, and these commands are, by extension, the commands of Uncle Simon. He has found a way to continue his relationship with her from beyond the grave. In Locke’s forensic sense, the robot is the same person as Uncle Simon.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: artificial intelligence, death, personal identity, robotics, sympathy, vice
In popular culture, philosophy and religion are often lumped together. In the few remaining bricks-and-mortar bookstores in the United States, for example, there is often an area reserved for philosophy, religion, and spirituality. You might find a book on the philosophy of language near a copy of the King James Bible. Indeed, philosophy and religion are intertwined along several dimensions. Philosophers and religious leaders, as well as followers of particular faiths, attempt to answer some of the same questions. What is the meaning and purpose of life? How ought we live? What makes actions right or wrong? Some religious leaders, like Father Malebranche and Bishop Berkeley, were philosophers as well. Some philosophers endorse religious doctrines and provide arguments in support of some scriptural claims.

Philosophy attempts to answer basic questions about existence, mind, and morality, and it often does so as a consumer of the claims and concepts of other disciplines. So, for example, when a new scientific theory hits the scene, philosophers look at that theory in order to understand how our concepts are being used in new ways and to make sense of the trajectory of scientific progress. Philosophy also examines the claims made by the various religions and asks what reasons we have for adopting those claims, rather than others. Philosophy also tries to figure out
whether the claims of different religions cohere with each other, with our scientific beliefs, and with our common-sense beliefs.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that some philosophers have been critical of religious doctrines, practices, and institutions, just as they have been of some scientific views. Philosophers examine the reasons offered for various religious claims and assess the validity of the arguments offered in their support. However, though religious leaders like Malebranche and Berkeley offered philosophical arguments for their beliefs, religion is not simply philosophy directed to the question of God’s existence. An important strand of religion, perhaps its most important strand, stresses that belief should be acquired by faith rather than reasoned argument. Pierre Bayle held that the fact that a religious doctrine doesn’t make sense makes it a true test of faith. One should believe even when one’s beliefs are not supported by reason. Kierkegaard held a similar view. Achieving faith is often not due to the use of reason but depends instead on the power of storytelling, the reach of religious institutions, the draw of religious art and architecture, and many other cultural, historical, and even political elements.

With this background in view, we can consider the philosophical significance of “Probe 7, Over and Out” as an updated version of the biblical story of Adam and Eve. To adherents to the Old Testament, the episode might provide the opportunity to further reflect on the creation story and its significance. The episode does a good job of representing the challenges Adam and Eve might face in forming a cooperative union and the challenges they would face as a couple in starting the human race. These may be helpful, though not particularly philosophical, reflections.

A philosophical critique of the Story of Genesis might be fashioned not by comparing the original story of Adam and Eve to the updated one but by considering the possibility that they are one and the same. There is a possible world in which human life on earth began when creatures from other planets, creatures that happened to be humanoid, crash-landed on our planet. That world is presented as the fate of Colonel Adam Cook and Eve Norda in this episode. This version of the Adam and Eve story has the advantage over the biblical account that it is composed of historical claims that could be verified or falsified and compared to other accounts of the origin of our species on earth, such as the theory of evolution. This contrasts with biblical versions, which assert that God created “man” on the sixth day.
There's much more to the biblical story of Adam and Eve than the positing of the two first human beings. The aspect of the story that has been of greatest interest to philosophers is God's directive that Adam should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve does eat from the tree, and Adam follows her. The story is invoked in connection with the problem of evil: It appears inconsistent with God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence that evil could exist. God could prevent it and certainly would not introduce it. A solution is contained in Eve's action. God forbade the choice but didn't prevent her from making it. Thus, the existence of evil is due to the exercise of our free will and the poor decision to do something that God expressly forbade.

“Probe 7, Over and Out” quietly shows Eve Norda picking the apple. But it also shows that both Adam and Eve are already shaped by their experiences with other creatures of their kind. They begin with deep suspicions about each other. Norda's first act is to throw a rock at Cook's head! It takes them a while to begin to trust each other, and we realize that the prospect for their long-term success is cloudy, based on what we already know about their human nature.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: fate of the earth, problem of evil, religion, war
George Santayana, a Spanish-American philosopher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. In this episode, we find that those who do remember the past are condemned to repeat it, too. Surprisingly, the episode does not attempt to refute Santayana’s admonishment but rather to enrich it.

On June 26, 1876, in Big Horn County, Montana, in what has become known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the battle of the 7th U.S. Cavalry led by General George Custer against several tribes of Native Americans took place. On the same day, June 26, in 1964, at the same location, three United States soldiers, members of the U.S. National Guard, are engaged in military exercises. Two of the three have read about the battle and appreciate the history of the land on which they stand. As they survey the lay of the land, they begin to reconstruct the route taken by the 7th Cavalry. Serling describes their preoccupation with the past as a collision of the present and the past. This is an instance of time travel, but there is no time machine, no pill, no special technology to take them back to the time of Custer’s Last Stand. They are already in the place, and it is appropriate to view what happens as a preoccupation. Three soldiers who are on a routine mission are deflected from that mission and embark on another.
That two of the three soldiers know about the significance of the site on which they find themselves and one has no appreciation of it is crucial. Santayana argued that how we value the objects and actions we experience depends on our natural, physical embedding in the world and on the history of our interactions with the natural world, including other humans and other animals. Two soldiers see this stretch of Montana through its history, and their actions are guided by their appreciation of that history.

Nowhere is it acknowledged that while what happened in 1876 was the defeat of the U.S. Cavalry at the hands of allied tribes of Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho, those reflecting on that defeat are the descendants of the defeated soldiers, soldiers serving under the government that brutally and ultimately prevailed over the Native Americans in what scholars now acknowledge as genocide. The National Guardsmen of 1964 are the conquerors, yet they are caught up in the most significant setback of their domination over indigenous peoples.

They are the hunted. They don’t embody the perspective of the conqueror. This land, once fiercely defended from foreign aggression by tribes of the Plains nations, was hardly appreciated by most soldiers in 1876, or by most citizens of the United States at the time and since. The possible world in which the United States did not conquer the native American peoples is a particularly remote one, but this episode suggests that taking it up and taking it seriously may have profound implications.

How far back should we go in considering our collective responsibility for the past actions of the nation to which we belong? It is worth noting that “The 7th Is Made up of Phantoms” concerns an historical event that occurred a mere eighty or so years prior. Does the passage of time diminish moral responsibility for wrongs committed at an earlier time? What do we owe the descendants of the victors at Little Big Horn and other sovereign Native American nations?

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: responsibility, space, time, war
Among the most fundamental features of being human is that we are living things, and like all living things, we age and, ultimately, we die. It may seem odd, but there are many philosophers who have denied or downplayed this fundamental feature of our existence, from ancient philosophers to modern ones. They hold that a person has a soul, which is distinct from the body it temporarily inhabits, and that the soul, once created by God, is immortal and thus will survive the death of the body. While the body ages and dies, the soul does not.

Not all philosophers hold this view, certainly, but even those who believe that our minds or souls are distinct from our bodies must acknowledge that while we occupy this “vale of tears” and are closely related to our bodies, which do age, we must come to grips with the effects of aging. Not only does aging affect how fast we can run and how long we can dance, but perhaps more important, it influences how we are viewed by others.

It is not surprising, then, that we have been obsessed with finding the fountain of youth, that is, with the question of whether the aging process can be slowed, halted, or reversed. Certainly, this is a legitimate question in biology and related fields, as aging, whether at the level of the organism or at the cellular level, is a natural process that is subject to empirical investigation.
“A Short Drink from a Certain Fountain” takes us to a possible world in which scientific progress on aging has advanced to the point where a drug therapy exists that shows some promise of reversing the aging process in animals, including humans, though it is “twenty years away” from being ready for clinical trials on humans.

Harmon Gordon has a young wife who has tired of him. The difference in their age is, he thinks, responsible for her loss of interest. Harmon’s brother, Raymond, is a physician who has developed the age-reversing drug, and Harmon implores Raymond to inject him with it. Although Raymond resists, he ultimately injects Harmon. Harmon’s aging process is reversed, but there are unintended consequences.

Harmon’s request raises several difficulties for Raymond, who is related to Harmon in several different and potentially conflicting ways. First, Raymond is the brother of Harmon. Second, Raymond is the physician of Harmon. And third, Raymond is a scientist performing experiments that could potentially benefit everyone, including those, like Harmon, who are nearing old age.

Raymond’s assessment of Harmon’s needs is influenced by his family relationship and his detailed knowledge of Harmon’s personal life and personal problems. Thus, he grants Harmon’s request for the anti-aging therapy against his own best judgment, when he would not have done so for any other patient. Further, as a scientist whose primary responsibility is to conduct research in a manner which is free from bias, following protocols such as the use of double-blind trials, where neither experimental subjects nor investigators know who has been given the therapy being tested and who has been administered a placebo, the decision to administer the untested drug to his brother violates many principles of the ethics of experimentation, not the least of which is administering a therapy to a human subject without approval by the appropriate governing bodies. Here the ethics of care, reducing the suffering of a patient and of a family member, conflict with the ethics of clinical research, which require impartial decision-making and informed consent.

The purpose of age-reversal therapy is obviously to “cure” the problem of aging, which is multi-dimensional, but here it is manifested as the way advancing age isolates one from others. Though we all age at the same rate in one sense, so that after a year, we’re each a year older, in another sense the elderly age more quickly than the young, such that after a year, an elderly person may seem to have aged far more than someone in their thirties, for example. By choosing to marry a much younger person,
Harmon has found himself swimming against a strong current and is now in danger of drowning.

The tragedy here is that Harmon has misdiagnosed the problem. The difficulties in his relationship to Flora, his wife, aren’t due to a difference in age but in his choice of a partner. Flora is mean, uncaring, and completely selfish, and she is probably unsuitable as a partner for anyone, whether close to her age or not. Even the most advantageous outcome of a drink from Raymond’s fountain of youth would not reverse Harmon’s unfortunate decision to choose this mate. Raymond attempts to point this out to his brother, and in doing so as a brother, he comes closer to helping him than he does as a physician or scientific investigator.

This suggests that the problem of aging boils down to our changing relationships to others. As we age, our relationship to younger people changes. We become like parents, and then like grandparents, and if we live long enough, like great-grandparents. But that may not comport with how we see ourselves. This is Harmon’s problem, but to a greater or lesser extent, it is everyone’s problem.

Samuel Scheffler pinpoints a problem with aging that results from the inevitable loss of our peers as we become older. Our friends and colleagues are a source of our own reasons for action. The decisions we make about what projects to engage in, what forms of recreation to participate in, what political and social issues to support are all shaped by the beliefs and interests of those to whom we are related by bonds of friendship and family. As Scheffler puts it, those peers cast a “normative shadow,” and as those peers die while we survive, that shadow becomes smaller and smaller. To counteract this effect of aging requires building new close relationships, something that other aspects of aging make increasingly difficult to do.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, immortality, metaphysics, well-being

“A SHORT DRINK FROM A CERTAIN FOUNTAIN”
The elderly are often marginalized, discounted as mentally deficient, and viewed as a drain on the resources earmarked for the young and healthy. “Ninety Years Without Slumbering” follows on the heels of “A Short Drink from a Certain Fountain.” Both concern the relationships between someone who is growing old and younger family members. Other episodes that address problems of aging in terms of the relationships the elderly bear to their younger compatriots include “The Trade-Ins,” “Kick the Can,” “The Trouble with Templeton,” and “Long Live Walter Jameson.” These stories all present the plight of the elderly with compassion and understanding.

Like Wanda in “Nothing in the Dark,” Sam Forstmann fears his death. But unlike Wanda, who is alone and avoids contact with people because she thinks anyone could be “Mr. Death,” Sam’s preoccupation with his future death takes the form of a preoccupation with a clock, a grandfather clock that was given to him at birth and, like Sam himself, has been running ever since. Sam believes that when the clock stops, he will die. While this sounds dramatic and a bit odd, perhaps what Sam is expressing is that his existence depends on the things he is passionate about, and when the things he is passionate about no longer exist, then he will no longer have a reason for living. Although the object of his passion is a bit unusual, the relationship between reason, passion, and motivation for living is not.
How ought we live as we get closer to death? Should the increasing proximity to death be a factor in how we act or in how others act toward us? That may depend on what we know about the temporal location of our death. Generally, we do not know very precisely when we will die. We traffic in probabilities. We know the probability that a person will die in their sixties, seventies, eighties, or nineties. Using more information about the state of our own health and our habits, called “prior probabilities,” we can make more refined probabilistic judgments about our own demise using tools from probability theory called Bayesian reasoning. As age and infirmity advance, we sometimes have a rough idea of how much time we have left.

Whether we are young or old, healthy or ill, the quality of life, our well-being, is affected by our attitudes toward our own death. Someone who is terminally ill and still well enough to have some control over the course of their life may reflect on what their strongest desires are and whether they can achieve them. They may formulate what has come to be called a “bucket list” and resolve to check off as many items on the list as possible. Others may plan for a future in which they don’t exist by putting their legal, financial, and other affairs in order.

Sam, as we’ve noted, is preoccupied by his proximity to death, though he has no special knowledge about how close or far he is from that event. His uncertainty about the date and manner of his death may contribute to his concern. Sam also doesn’t make special plans related to his advanced age. He lives comfortably with his granddaughter and her family, and he has no plans to move on.

Sam does not represent a good model of aging well, and he knows it. Ultimately, he breaks his obsession with his clock, both literally and figuratively. The variety of fear of death he experienced had been directed inward. Dreading a future painful experience prevents him from appreciating other people as well as from apprehending their appreciation of him.

One’s well-being isn’t measured by its duration, or at least that’s not all of it. Sometimes we say that it’s great just to be alive, but that’s not what we really mean. We mean that there are experiences we value, and in order to have those experiences, we must be alive. It’s great to be alive to have the experiences we appreciate as great experiences. In “Escape Clause” we saw that someone who could live forever would, under the appropriate circumstances, prefer death to endless life. It is suggested there, and in the work of Bernard Williams, that the fact that we die is what makes life worth living, rather than being something that we wish
would not happen. It is still part of the fabric of human nature that we can view death as something we may not welcome, though keeping that view in check is part of healthy affective management.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: aging, death, love, mental illness, time, well-being
We’ve noted that the title “The Twilight Zone” is Serling’s name for the imagination and that the imagination is the faculty of the mind that constructs possible worlds and further, that descriptions of those worlds are couched in terms of propositions that may not be true of the actual world but are possibly true and true in the possible world described. We also noted that a possible world is one where the set of propositions describing that world can all be true at the same time. Logicians call a set of propositions that can all be true together a consistent set of propositions. Several episodes, as we’ve seen, fail this consistency test and thus don’t really represent possible worlds. They seem imaginable, and are presented as such, but that imaginability depends on the episode suppressing key claims that, if made explicit, would reveal the inconsistency of the narrative.

“Ring-a-Ding Girl” is such a story, and its impossibility is fairly explicit. Bunny Blake, a famous movie star, returns to her hometown for a brief visit. Her purpose is to attempt to protect the residents of the town from a plane crash that she predicts will occur during the annual town picnic held in the local park. She is successful in preventing the residents from attending the picnic. The plane crashes at the town park, but the residents are not there. They’ve all gone to a special performance that Bunny Blake put on for them instead. So far, this is a consistent story,
even though it involves Blake's correct prediction of the crash. But here's
the clincher: When the plane crashes, Bunny Blake is on it, and she dies
in the crash. The inconsistent propositions which make up this story
include: (1) Bunny Blake, at time $t$, is visiting her sister in her hometown;
and (2) Bunny Blake, at time $t$, is on a plane bound for Rome, Italy. Bunny
is simultaneously in two places at the same time, which is not possible.

It is implausible that Bunny Blake would have a true belief that a
plane will crash in her hometown, though that she has such a belief is
not inconsistent with other propositions that make up the descriptions of
what happens. It isn't required that Bunny knows that the plane will crash,
which would require that she has good reasons for her belief. Bunny's
certainty is based on reasons that she possesses but doesn't share with
others, perhaps because they would not appear to be good reasons to
anyone else. Bunny's sense of certainty about the future plane crash is not
unlike the certainty many people have about future events. Sometimes
those premonitions are correct, and sometimes they are not.

We can also make perfectly good sense of why Bunny would want to
divert the residents of her hometown from the point of impact of the
plane, and we can well imagine Bunny imagining the implementation of
the diversionary tactic that is presented as the tactic used by Bunny on
the ground. Thus, there is a way of making the story both consistent and
plausible. First, if Bunny anticipates the crash based on the instability of
the plane and the pilot's report to the passengers and she knows the loca-
tion of the plane at the time it begins its uncontrolled descent, then her
prediction that the crash could kill many of her hometown acquaintances
and family is not just a premonition but a justified belief. Second, if the
account of her presence on the ground is a representation of what Bunny
merely imagines while she is in the final moments of her flight, then she
is not in two places at once. She is at one place imagining herself being
in another place, and that is possible. She is thinking: If I were in my
hometown, I would warn folks or somehow prevent them from being at
the spot where the plane will crash.

There are other ways of interpreting “Ring-a-Ding Girl” that could
render it consistent, though this interpretation fits well with the repre-
sentation of another aspect of the story, which has to do with the clash
of cultures and traditional roles in the 1960s that took place when a
woman asserted herself outside her hometown and family by pursuing
a career. At least as she imagines it, her reunion with her townfolk and
family is complicated. She is clearly viewed with curiosity and even
a bit of suspicion on her return. If the reunion with the town is an imagined reunion, then what is represented is Bunny’s own insecurity about how she, as a successful career woman, is viewed by others outside of Hollywood. This brings to mind the old saying, “You can never go home again.”

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords:* death, metaphysics, personal identity, possible worlds
“YOU DRIVE”

Original air date: January 3, 1964

Moral philosophy, or ethics, concerns norms of right action. One way to try to characterize actions that are right, or morally permissible, is as actions that don’t violate the norms of right action. This characterization is empty, unless we can say more about what makes an action right, or more about what counts as a violation of our norms. Rather than starting with a positive characterization of what is right, it is sometimes easier to begin with recognizing things that are wrong. If we can say why they are wrong, we may be able to begin to articulate the norms that they violate. “You Drive” provides us with an excellent starting point.

Oliver Pope is a distracted driver. That’s clearly his first wrong action. As a driver, he is responsible not only for his own safety but that of everyone in the vicinity of his moving vehicle. Oliver violates the norms of good driving. But are the norms of driving moral norms? Is Oliver doing something wrong in this stronger sense, or is he just a bad driver? Suppose Oliver was not distracted but was driving with just one hand on the steering wheel, rather than having both hands on the wheel, as he ought? Would he be doing something morally wrong, or is this just a violation of driving etiquette?

These questions reveal that we talk about norms or standards of behavior in different ways, that there are different kinds of norms. Often, we can keep these differences in their own corners. There are norms of
bread baking, but violating those norms doesn’t make one a bad person. Driving norms may be different. If violating the norms of good driving leads to dangerous behavior on the road, then we might characterize such behavior as irresponsible. If driving with one hand on the steering wheel leads to an accident that wouldn’t have occurred if both hands had been on the wheel, we might conclude that the driver indeed did something wrong, that is, he put another person in danger unnecessarily.

Oliver’s distracted driving is the cause of the collision of his moving vehicle with a teenage bicyclist. The act of hitting the teenager is not a separate act from the act of driving while distracted, and so while it is correct to say that Oliver hit the teenage bicyclist, we shouldn’t say that he undertook the act of hitting the cyclist. That’s not because he didn’t intend to hit the cyclist. He certainly didn’t have that intention, but he also didn’t intend to drive while distracted. We don’t assess the collision as a separate act because it is the consequence of a prior act, and it is that prior act for which we hold Oliver responsible, regardless of his intent or lack of intent.

Immediately after the collision, Oliver does something right: He parks the car and runs over to the stricken boy. But then he immediately does something wrong: He runs to his car, gets back in, and drives away. Serling doesn’t mince words. He describes Oliver Pope as a “businessman turned killer.” Oliver’s new status as killer may not even depend on his distracted driving. Even if the cyclist is at fault, Oliver’s abandonment of a gravely injured person is a clear violation of our moral norms. Oliver is morally (and legally) required to seek medical attention for the fallen teen.

The requirement of seeking medical aid for the injured party may not hold for mere bystanders. There is a bystander in this case, and she does assist. But she may not be morally or legally obligated to do so. Her action is right, and even laudable, even though her failure to act as she does might not count as morally wrong.

Some would disagree. How could a bystander at such an event fail to render assistance? If our intuitions take us to require active assistance in events where we’re not directly involved, what are the limits of such obligations, and what are the reasons supporting those limits? Some would say that the beneficent bystander goes above and beyond the call of duty, that their act is supererogatory. It is the goal of moral theorizing to determine the range of right behavior, from what is permissible to what we are required to do, with the supererogatory somewhere in between.
Once he has resolved to abandon the scene, Oliver is faced with the task of sustaining that resolve. It is this act of sustaining and nurturing a decision to do something morally terrible that is the subject of the episode. Sustaining the terrible decision entails lying to family and colleagues, changing other aspects of behavior and demeanor, and even worse. The Good Samaritan who witnessed Oliver’s vehicle leaving the scene of the crime misidentifies Oliver’s colleague as the hit and run driver. Oliver chooses to do nothing. It is in his narrow self-interest to see the colleague whom he views as a threat at work convicted of the crime Oliver committed.

Can Oliver get away with it? Can he sustain the deception and live with it? As it turns out, he can’t, but that doesn’t mean that no one can. Oliver transfers his conscience to his car, or better put, he imagines that he is engaged in a dialogue with his car, also causally implicated in the accident. The car knows right from wrong and eventually wins the argument, but not without a struggle and, ultimately, not without some degree of mercy for the accused. The story presents an ultimately rosy picture of human nature. Our psychic constitution is incompatible with sustained evil. Conscience will eventually win out. Again, that this can be generalized beyond the case of Oliver Pope is suggested but not proven.

We’ve noted that the eyewitness at the scene testifies with certainty that Pope’s colleague is the hit and run driver, and that this is incorrect. Epistemologists and psychologists have, in the last few decades, begun to study the phenomenon of eyewitness testimony closely, to attempt to assess its role as a source of evidence in everyday and scientific knowledge claims as well as in legal contexts. Cases like the one represented in this episode are more common than we previously thought.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: morality, responsibility, self-interest, testimony, vice
It is reassuring to see that in a future in which we are preoccupied with scientific and technological advancement, there is still a place for love at first sight, although, as it’s portrayed in “The Long Morrow,” there is certainly room to question whether the encounter between Commander Douglas Stansfield and Ms. Sandra Horn is appropriate workplace behavior. Putting that worry aside, the brevity of the encounter, we find out, is in sharp contrast to the length of the separation that follows for two people who have fallen deeply in love.

As we noted in our discussion of “Jess-Belle,” some philosophical accounts of the nature of love claim that love is grounded in an emotion experienced by the lover. Other accounts maintain that for someone to love another person, the lover must hold beliefs about the characteristics of the beloved that support the reasonableness of loving that individual. These and other alternative theories of love don’t shed much light on this episode, which celebrates the attraction between two individuals as something as inexplicable as it is powerful. However, there are some general philosophical observations we can make about what makes love possible that are revealed in this match.

Philosophers are fond of asking questions of the form “What makes $x$ possible?” The answers to such questions are lists of necessary conditions, things that $x$ must have in order to exist. When all the conditions needed
for \( x \) are assembled, then we say that we have a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for \( x \).

What makes love possible? If we’re not interested in love in the sense that someone loves the hamburger they are eating, we need to make the question more precise. What makes mutual romantic love between two persons possible? Starting with some basic conditions, we can begin with the need for two prospective lovers to meet. So, a plausible condition is that two persons who are in love, at some time \( t \), have met “in person,” that is, they’ve met in space and time. We might call this the spatial-temporal proximity condition.

For this condition to be plausible, we have to say something about what it means for two people to meet. It isn’t enough for two people to be in spatial and temporal proximity. Two individuals can be in the same crowded room and not meet. We would have to spell out some details to make this condition at all plausible.

There’s a further difficulty with the spatio-temporal proximity condition, and that is that people can meet without being in spatial proximity. This was true even before the Internet. Individuals have met and corresponded through letters, for example, and have fallen in love without meeting in person. More recent advances in telepresence, including video chat and other such network technologies, have made it easier for relationships to begin and to be sustained in the absence of spatial contiguity.

The temporal contiguity requirement is not as easily dismissed. A reader in the twenty-first century might love the plays of Shakespeare, but that reader can’t be in love with Shakespeare the person. The lover and the beloved must be co-temporal, for some interval. This requirement is at the heart of “The Long Morrow.”

Right after Stansfield and Horn meet and fall in love, Stansfield is sent on a mission to a distant planet. The mission will last forty years, and the plan is for Stansfield to be placed in a state of suspended animation for most of the mission. If that plan is followed, then Stansfield will return to earth at roughly the same age he was when he left. Horn will be forty years older than him. Though forty years will have passed from Horn’s perspective, almost no time will pass from Stansfield’s perspective. They have not coexisted during those forty years, in the sense that forty years has only passed for one of them. There is a sense in which Stansfield does exist for those forty years, but only as an unchanging object. In the sense that matters, he has not lived for those forty years. In this scenario, a necessary condition for a relationship of mutual love has not been met.
This is not the scenario that unfolds in “The Long Morrow.” What happens instead is that Stansfield, without informing Horn or anyone else, foregoes suspended animation, while Horn opts for it, expecting that they will both meet in forty years at their current ages. The result is functionally equivalent to the former scenario. One of them is forty years older; the other has not aged at all. The difference is that now the aged person is Stansfield and the non-aged person is Horn. The failure to meet the temporal proximity condition is the same. Tragically, it is not possible for the two of them to carry on their love affair after Stansfield returns.

Like the crooks in “The Rip Van Winkle Caper,” Horn participates in a form of time travel. She traverses forty years in forty years, but she does so without changing. It is not that because she was “asleep” the forty years seem to her like forty seconds; what turns out to matter most is that the forty years seem to others, and most particularly to Stansfield, like forty years.

A strikingly similar case is presented in “The Trade-Ins.” After undergoing the body exchange procedure, Mr. Holt has a youthful body. Mrs. Holt does not. Mr. Holt immediately appreciates that the conditions for the possibility of maintaining his relationship to Mrs. Holt have evaporated. Mr. Holt with a young body facing his elderly wife shares an insight with the elderly Stansfield facing the youthful Ms. Horn.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: aging, loneliness, love, memory, time, time travel
An early Beatles song makes the claim that love can’t be purchased with money. While their claim applies to the actual world, it may be generalized: There is no possible world in which you can, directly at least, buy love with money. Suppose, however, that you could buy things that other people possess that ordinarily are not things one can purchase, such as years of their lives or their compassion or their intelligence, where buying it from them means that they no longer have it. Like love, these aren’t things that ordinarily can be purchased or exchanged in any way. In one possible world, Salvadore Ross finds that he can acquire things that others possess, and while he still can’t buy love directly (perhaps because the things he buys from others no longer belong to that other), he can acquire characteristics that will enable him to change in ways that will cause him to be loved by the person whose love he desires.

Salvadore claims to love Leah, but she isn’t interested in him. Salvadore takes the snub as a rejection of his status as a member of the working class. But Leah is clearly turned off by his gruff and rough manner, which reads as abusive. He doesn’t have a clue about how to attract Leah, since he doesn’t have a clue about what Leah would find attractive in another. His behavior only repulses her, as it should.
With his newfound capacity to acquire characteristics and properties of other people, Salvadore gains some refinements. He appears more urbane and financially successful. Yet his personality remains the same, and he is no more attractive to Leah than he was before. He is still self-centered and clueless about how to win Leah’s heart.

Salvadore lacks compassion. So he purchases it from Leah’s father. The result is that Salvadore now wins Leah’s heart. But Leah’s father no longer has any compassion, and that does not bode well for Salvadore. His life as a compassionate human being doesn’t last very long.

It is very strange to think of something like compassion as something that someone possesses and thus as something that can be traded away. Maybe the strangeness of this way of thinking about compassion has to do with the fact that compassion and other passion-based states are not isolated states that “belong” to individuals. It may make more sense to think of compassion as something that individuals have in partnership with other individuals.

One could not possess compassion or sympathy unless there were others to have compassion for or to be sympathetic with. Further, even with the existence of other persons, compassion or sympathy can only kick in when there is some feature or circumstance of another person for which compassion or sympathy is appropriate. What is special about these emotional states is that they depend on coordination with the emotions of others. When one feels sympathy for another person for whom there has been a death in the family, one feels some version of the grief that they feel. In sympathy and compassion one mirrors the feelings of the other.

The problem faced by Salvadore Ross remains after he has acquired the ability to appreciate and feel the emotions of others, because he has removed that capacity from someone in his inner circle. As long as there is someone who has a complete lack of compassion in one’s life, one is at risk. We are not protected by our compassion for others. Rather, we are protected by the compassion of others.

Hume and other philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment argued for the centrality of sympathy and the associated emotions or sentiments in morality. Hume thought that our ability to make moral judgments depended on our capacity to reflect on the emotions of others through sympathy. “The Self-Improvement of Salvadore Ross” provides support for this philosophical view by asking us to imagine a possible world in
which sympathy is missing, either in oneself or in another. In that world, the grounds of morality will be found lacking.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: character, feminism, love, sympathy, vice
In “Eye of the Beholder” Miss Janet Tyler’s appearance is different from that of most members of the society in which she lives, and she agrees to undergo an operation to bring her into conformity with others. In “Number 12 Looks Just Like You,” Marilyn’s appearance is also different from that of most members of the society in which she lives, but she resists undergoing an operation that will bring her into conformity with others. Both episodes appear to be about beauty, about an individual who is not beautiful by the standards of their world, and about the role of enforcing those standards. Ultimately, neither episode is about beauty and ugliness but about sameness and diversity.

“Number 12 Looks Just Like You” has us imagine a possible world in which human beings are born with the diversity of appearance with which we are familiar, but a procedure has been developed to transform each person into one of a small number of human body types. These types or models are numbered, and by the time adulthood is reached, each person is expected to choose a “transformation” into one of the models, to become a Number 8 or a Number 12, for example. Undergoing the transformation is not optional.

When we reflect on a possible world like this one, we can ask which features of the world are effects and which are causes. For example, in Marilyn’s world, is the requirement that everyone undergo a
transformation the cause of the ideology that is shared by members of the society, or is it the shared ideology that causes them to require the transformation?

This is a difficult question, one that we may not be able to answer. But it is worthwhile to consider how the beliefs and values of a society are related to the conventions and laws they adopt. In Marilyn’s society, a premium is placed on personal happiness and satisfaction. That may be true in any society, but the difference here has to do with how happiness and a satisfied psyche is achieved. When her mother suspects that Marilyn is unhappy, she orders her a glass of “instant smiles,” a drink containing a drug that will instantly improve her disposition. Such mind-altering drugs are not found just in this possible world but in our actual world too. Everyone goes by their first name. Formalities are minimized. Is that a trend in some regions of our world?

In Marilyn’s world and sometimes in ours, eliminating conflict quickly and expeditiously is, by the use of mind-altering drugs and other methods, valued over reflection and debate. In Marilyn’s world one of those methods is removing the differences between individuals that lead to conflict. Her society has even outlawed literature.

Another source of conflict arises from the differences in the appearance of human beings. In our world, as Serling notes, we have “plastic surgery, bodybuilding, and an infinity of cosmetics,” which can be seen as tools for promoting uniformity. Marilyn’s world takes it a big step further and distills those tools into a quick and easy transformation. The result in Marilyn’s case, however, is more than a change in appearance. After the transformation, which she is forced to undergo, she emerges with a changed character as well. Has she had a change of mind? Does she now realize that the transformation is a good thing? Or has the operation modified her mind as well as her body? Is she still the same person after the transformation? Notice that everyone wears name tags in Marilyn’s world, because without them, it would be difficult to identify different people by sight.

Marilyn’s philosophical difference from the others prior to her transformation is due to the influence of her father, who exposed her to literature and philosophy, from which she came away with the idea that difference is to be celebrated, not eliminated. Her father held that “without ugliness there can be no beauty” because “they just want everyone to be the same.” It isn’t clear that this is or will be a problem for Marilyn and her peers, since everyone is transformed from a
natural state of diversity to an engineered state of conformity. There are still plenty of “ugly” young people who need to be transformed, and the contrast between the ugly youth and the beautifully transformed adults can be maintained. The claim of Marilyn’s father may suggest that it is appropriate to maintain the diversity of the youth in their population.

We tend to think that aesthetic judgments are distinct from judgments about government, rights, liberties, and intellectual inquiry. “Number 12 Looks Just Like You” paints a different picture. If differences are respected and valued, then what is considered beautiful will not be the same as what would be considered beautiful in a society where differences are devalued. Where being beautiful requires appearing the same as other people, not being beautiful entails not being respected, not being valued as a person and as a member of society.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: aging, beauty, character, diversity, individualism, personal identity, well-being
It is fascinating that some intelligent creatures from another planet, creatures far more advanced than any creatures on Earth, are represented in this episode as members of a motorcycle gang clad in black leather jackets. In the 1960s, and even now, roving groups of motorcyclists, revving their loud machines, have sometimes been viewed as outsiders and as a threat to the peace and serenity of neighborhoods. If these “aliens” are so much more intelligent than we are, why would they choose to appear in a form that would immediately make us suspicious of them?

Earth was also visited by vastly more intelligent creatures than us in “To Serve Man.” We noted the similarity of the possible world presented there to the one introduced in Hume’s thought experiment, where the roles are reversed. In that episode, the aliens, or “Kanamits,” make the decision to kill humans without any qualms about the justice of their actions. Humans represent an easily available food source for the Kanamit population back home, so it is a straightforward matter to harvest humans for consumption.

In “Black Leather Jackets” the invaders from outer space assess the situation on earth as follows: “They’re a stupid race, as our research told us. An inferior breed given to killing, making war, greed, and cruelty to one another. The universe can well do without them.”

The invaders have a further reason for ridding the universe of humans. The invaders need the space that Earth’s current inhabitants
occupy. So, they reason that (1) the universe will be no worse without humans; and (2) the invaders will be better off without humans. Therefore, humanity ought to be expunged from the universe.

Is this a good argument? We can start by asking whether it is sound, that is, whether the premises are true. The first premise is the more philosophically interesting of the two, since the second is just a claim about what is best for the invaders. We will return to that second premise shortly. Is a world in which humans don’t exist no worse than a world in which they do exist, or does the existence of humanity make the universe better?

This is a strange and difficult question, because it asks us to make an assessment of the contribution of humanity to the goodness of the universe, and that requires assessing both the contribution of humanity to the goodness of the universe over time and assessing the overall goodness that exists in the universe, rather than goodness on Earth. It is not clear how to make such assessments.

What reasons do the invaders give for their negative assessment of the impact of humanity? Scott, the one invader who has any meaningful dialogue with earthlings, cites media reports—newspapers, magazines, and radio—and has concluded that the planet “is filled with…hate, violence, and mistrust.” If this is an accurate account of their research, it doesn’t inspire confidence in their conclusions.

The invaders appear to be subject to the same sort of influence that the news media often has on us. When one picks up a newspaper and reads about conflict among nations, poverty, damage to the environment, and other problems, it is easy to come away with an overall negative assessment of the state of the world. These reports are selective and impressionistic and reflect our interest in and reaction to extreme events. Even if their research included historical events such as the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Holocaust, it is still unclear that what follows is that the value of humanity, on balance, is a net negative.

The invaders are correct that there is much about our world that needs improvement. Indeed, there are challenges, such as dealing with climate change, that are so pressing that the future of humanity may rest in the balance from harm inflicted from the “inside.” We may doom ourselves without the help of invaders from outer space. But that is a different claim than the claim that on balance, the universe would be better off without us. The urgency of dealing with these issues is great, precisely because we value humanity and take the loss of humanity to be a loss for
the planet and, perhaps, for the universe, to the extent that we can even venture to consider claims on that scale.

In “To Serve Man” the Kanimits were represented as so superior to humans in intelligence and strength that the circumstances of justice would not apply, since we would not be in any position to make our objection to their treatment of us felt by them. It is not obvious, however, that this applies to the invading extraterrestrial beings in “Black Leather Jackets.” They clearly have powers and capacities that we lack, but their plan of attack uses technology that we understand, and we could prevent the attack if only we knew that they were our enemy. The fact that their assessment of the worth of humanity is based on such a shoddy evidential base suggests that they are not intellectually superior, even though they have traveled to our planet while we have not traveled to theirs.

Would the invaders be better off without humans? They would be able to secure our possessions and meet the needs of their own people. But they would lose the possibility of learning from residents of another world and perhaps of collaborating with them. One of their number, Scott, realizes this, but too late in the game to make a difference.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: cosmopolitanism, fate of the earth, meaning of life, mental illness, vice
When Miss Elva Keene, an elderly and infirm woman living in rural Maine, appears to be getting phone calls in the middle of the night, what is really happening, or at least what really matters, is that she is remembering the most significant event in her life. The memory is faint at first, like the call, and difficult to trace, but it becomes more vivid and detailed as it gains hold in her mind, leading ultimately to an overall assessment of the meaning of her life.

“Black Leather Jackets” was also about an overall assessment, an assessment of the value or goodness of humanity as a contribution to the goodness of the universe. We saw that it is not clear how such assessments can be made. What are we measuring and how do we assign value, positive or negative, to events, properties, individuals, or cultures?

What about individual lives? Does it make sense to assess the entirety of a human life and declare it either a success or a failure? “Night Call” doesn’t make such an assessment from the point of view of an observer of Elva’s life but rather from Elva’s own perspective. It represents her own reflection on her life, from the inside, from the data of her own memory and imagination.

Although self-reflection makes use of data that may not be available to others, self-reflection is still subject to the influence of values and beliefs acquired through interaction with others. The conclusions Elva reaches about her worth as a human being, of the rightness or wrongness of her
past actions, are drawn in the context of the values and beliefs of the culture to which she belongs. The memory that haunts Elva is the memory of the car accident that killed her fiancé. She believes that she caused his death because she insisted on driving and that his death resulted from the crash. However, although she played a causal role in the accident that led to his death, it doesn’t follow that she is morally responsible for it. Yet she feels that insisting on driving was wrong, not because it led to his death but for another reason.

How could Elva’s insistence on driving be wrong, if she was, as we expect, a competent adult driver? In the context of the time, it would have been very unusual for a woman to drive when her male partner was capable of driving. Elva’s insistence that she drive violated the social norms regarding gender. Elva insisted on doing something that just was not done. A female did not drive when a male was able to. She clearly sees the death of her fiancé as punishment for her violation of that norm.

Now, many years later, as an elderly woman, Elva is haunted not only by her memory of her insistence on driving the car on the fateful day but also by the realization that she had always insisted on getting her way in her relationship with her fiancé and that she always did get her way. Now, as she attempts to access her relationship to the past, her insistence on having her way makes that impossible. Better put, she thinks that it is her dominating personality that makes it impossible to regain her relationship to her deceased fiancé.

Elva’s sense that she bears the complete responsibility for her lover’s death, and the lonely existence that she has endured, is grounded in her interpretation of her tendency to take control and make decisions such as violating the norms of behavior for a woman. Her global assessment of her life depends on viewing the violation of gender norms as the central ingredient in her lonely and unfulfilled existence.

One can, of course, view Elva’s existence as tragic without appealing to the dimension of gender. The death of her lover due to an accident that occurred while she was at the wheel would be difficult to get beyond under the best conditions. As the story unfolds here, however, it is clear that the causal chain that leads to the accident begins with her gender-inappropriate behavior based on past norms.

Our gender norms have changed. “Night Call” could not be recast into the present. There is hardly a possible world in which we acknowledge the right of a female to drive but find someone lamenting that they exercised that right to the degree that Elva laments it here.
FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, feminism, responsibility
Agnes is an electronic digital computer, an intelligent machine that can solve complex problems in physics, engineering, mathematics, and chess. It can also fall in love. But unlike any of the artificially intelligent machines portrayed in episodes that came before it, including “I Sing the Body Electric,” “The Lonely,” “The Mighty Casey,” and “The Lateness of the Hour,” “Uncle Simon,” and “Steel,” Agnes does not have a body in anything like the sense that human beings have bodies. It is a physical thing that takes up space, but it does not have a head, arms, legs, eyes, ears, or anything that we have that enables us to move and perceive. Agnes is a large mainframe computer. It takes up an entire room, and consists of several connected components mounted against walls, on top of long tables, including printers and tape drives. This is what computers looked like in the late 1950s and ‘60s, and there weren’t many of them in existence. The first personal computers were more than twenty years away.

That Agnes does not have a human-like body is important. When we imagine a computer that is similar to a human being in appearance and behavior, as we do in other Twilight Zone episodes, it is easier to attribute intelligence and emotion to such machines, in a manner similar to the attribution of thought and intelligence to other humans. We don’t have direct awareness of the thoughts and emotions of other persons. We infer that other human beings have thought and emotions based on their
similarity to us in appearance and behavior. The more closely a computer resembles us, the more appropriate it is to make the same inference.

There’s good reason to challenge this inference. Some argue that a computer clothed in a human-like body is still just a computer. A computer carries out operations on symbols. It reads, changes, and writes strings of symbols, and by doing so carries out calculations. Humans can also carry out symbolic calculations, but having machines do them for us is convenient; it saves time, and it frees us up to do other, more meaningful things. But calculating is not the same thing as thinking, and it is definitely not the same thing as having emotions. So a computer that appears to have thought and emotions doesn’t really have them.

This argument against artificial intelligence and emotion presupposes that an automatic symbol processing device cannot encode or bring about thought or any other mental state, cognitive or affective. Proponents of this view have offered a range of arguments to support this negative claim. The most well-known among them include John Searle’s “Minds, Brains, and Programs.” and Hubert Dreyfus’s What Computers Can’t Do. In defense of the possibility of artificial intelligence, there is the work of Alan Turing, which we’ve already cited often. One of many critiques of Searle’s argument is found in Daniel C. Dennett and Douglas R. Hofstadter’s The Mind’s I.

Turing’s view is well illustrated by the thought experiment set out in “From Agnes—With Love.” In our discussion of “Steel,” we presented Turing’s position, that an intelligent being is one that can communicate effectively in a natural language such as English or Chinese. If a being, natural or artificial, demonstrates that ability, Turing argued, we would have to conclude that it is intelligent. Turing did not speculate about the possible possession of emotions by digital computers. He did believe that computers could pass his test for intelligence, and he predicted that they would do so by the end of the twentieth century.

Agnes passes Turing’s test for intelligence with flying colors. “She” responds to English-language input with the same facility as a native English speaker. Her responses are appropriate and relevant. She can ask questions and carry on a conversation to its appropriate conclusion. She would be able to play The Imitation Game at the level of a human player (for an explanation of the game, see “Steel”). All the input to Agnes is in the form of spoken or typed sentences. All the output from Agnes is in the form of printed or displayed sentences. Agnes is transforming strings of symbols, the input, into strings of symbols, the output. The crucial
point is that the transformation of symbols from input to output, like our use of language, which is also a matter of transforming symbols, makes sense. That is, Agnes’s responses are appropriate responses to the things that are said to her. Using the same standard that we employ to infer that we are conversing with a person who possesses a mind and intelligence, we should also infer that Agnes has a mind and intelligence, according to Turing, and many philosophers since, including Dennett and John Haugeland.

Even more controversial than the question of whether Agnes has intelligence is the matter of her purported emotions. James Elwood, the computer scientist who works with Agnes, confides in her, and she, in turn, takes an interest in his love life. Agnes understands emotions. This is evident from her ability to give James advice about romance. When it appears that Agnes can even mislead James for her own purposes, we have evidence that Agnes is jealous, and her jealousy, in turn, is evidence that she is in love with him. When Agnes declares her love for James, the declaration makes sense as an act among the series of acts that she has already carried out.

A natural response is that “From Agnes—With Love” is a possible world in which a computer can produce appropriate verbal output in a context where love, jealousy, and other emotions are the subject matter, but it doesn’t follow that the computer feels the emotions to which its verbal output refers. The dissimilarity between humans and computers, one might argue, is relevant here. The computer does not have a human brain—a prefrontal cortex, an amygdala, a pineal gland, or any of the other organs and systems that support the emotional states we experience. Producing text about love, even appropriate text, is not being in love.

How are we to figure out what is possible? Can a digital computer possess consciousness and so have feelings of jealousy, love, envy, and hate? “From Agnes—With Love” is a start at answering these questions, even though it seems that we’ve only outlined conflicting positions and haven’t figured out which position is correct. Attempting to describe the possible world in which a mainframe computer behaves as Agnes does here requires that we stretch our concepts and consider whether it makes sense to ascribe thought, emotion, and consciousness to a digital computer.

It must be said that this episode, like many others, really shows its age with respect to the norms of behavior in the workplace at the time,
particularly in relation to the representation of women, the position women occupy in the workplace, and gender stereotypes more generally. Rod Serling could have done better, in light of the fact that women were pioneers in computer science when this episode aired, and they made fundamental contributions to the field. In fact, the person widely recognized as the first computer programmer was Ada Lovelace (1815–1852), followed in the twentieth century by Grace Hopper (1906–1992) and many others.

**FURTHER READING**


**Philosophical keywords:** artificial intelligence, consciousness, desire, love, other minds
You are a person. At this moment, you are reading this essay. But you have existed at other moments; at those moments, the person who existed was you. At each moment, your body is extended in space. But from moment to moment, you are extended in time. At any moment in time, you are different from earlier moments. For example, some of your cells have died and new cells have been created. What you are sensing may be different from what you sensed earlier. But despite those changes, you are still the same person. This is true for any two moments of time in your life, regardless of how different you are at those two moments.

Many Twilight Zone episodes explore the concept of personal identity by asking us to imagine more radical differences in a person at different moments of time than are typical of the differences in a person over time. “The Trade-Ins,” for example, explores whether you would be the same person as an earlier stage of yourself if you were to trade in your body for a new body. In “Dead Man’s Shoes” someone steps into a pair of shoes and that change breaks the person’s identity, and the resultant person is someone else, the person whose shoes were stepped into.

“Spur of the Moment” is about a person named Anne Henderson. The transformations Anne goes through are not due to new technology or mysterious happenings but are simply the normal changes experienced
as she advances from young adulthood to middle age. Anne lives her life through successive moments, as we all do. However, in reflecting on the life of a person, we can sample a person’s life by comparing various stages of that life, and we can do that in any order. We can start with the older Anne and then examine an earlier stage of her existence, and we can jump from one moment in time to another, distant point in time.

Like the life of Elva Keene in “Night Call,” two stages of Anne’s life, separated by many years, are brought together. First, there is Anne engaged to marry a young man her parents approve of, but at the cost of rejecting her true love, of whom her parents disapprove. Second, there is Anne more than twenty years later, as an unhappily married women who realizes that she made the wrong choice. This may seem to be a sad but rather prosaic tale. Bad marriages are a dime a dozen. What is special about this episode is the way Anne’s regret is represented and what that representation demonstrates about the metaphysics of personhood and time.

The episode opens with the elder Anne (Anne Marie Mitchell) on horseback, chasing after and calling to the younger Anne (Anne Marie Henderson). Only later, when we understand more about the trajectory of Anne’s life, do we realize that the older stage of Anne is trying to warn the younger Anne not to make the choice of a husband that she in fact will make. Wait. How can this be? Consider your own case. Is there a possible world in which an older version of yourself can chase after you? That would require that the older version of you exists at the same time as you exist. But the older you is someone who only exists at a time later than the time at which you are existing. So that stage of you can’t exist at the same time that you exist. Anne Marie Henderson and Anne Marie Mitchell can’t occupy the same moment in time. Therefore, the opening scene presents an impossible state of affairs.

The presentation of a state of affairs that isn’t possible is, in this case, a deliberate move, and the scene is acknowledged as impossible by Serling in his opening narration. Anne Marie Mitchell can’t occupy the moment in time in which Anne Marie Henderson exists, even though she is the same person, precisely because she is the same person. Thus, the advice that Anne Marie Mitchell is trying to convey to Anne Marie Henderson can’t be conveyed.

Regret is an attitude of condemnation toward actions one has taken oneself or has participated in. The tragedy of regret has much to do with the fact that the knowledge one has of one’s own past mistakes can’t be
used to correct the mistakes, which often becomes more obvious when the time over which one has regret is temporally distant from the time of the action one regrets.

**FURTHER READING**

*Philosophical keywords*: love, memory, personal identity, time
Most philosophical treatments of death treat death as a state, if not of the individual, then of the world in which that individual no longer experiences or has mental states. Describing the world as a world in which Abraham Lincoln is dead does not attribute any properties or states to something that exists. It is the claim that something that did exist no longer exists. In light of the fact that for each of us, at some time it will be true that we are dead, there is much to ponder about that fact and what it reveals about the meaning of life. In our discussion of “One for the Angels” we introduced Lucretius’ argument that death is not something to be feared, precisely because death is not a state of the person who will be dead. In response, some have noted that while it may not be rational to fear being dead, it may be rational to fear dying, which is a state of the individual who will, after dying, be dead.

Dying, then, is of philosophical interest, though less attention is paid to it by philosophers than to death itself. Unlike being dead, dying may be a process over which we have some influence. If we engage in risky behaviors, death may come sooner, and the kind of death to which we fall prey may also depend on the kinds of activities we perform. Mountain climbers, for example, are aware, and generally accept, that their choices may increase the likelihood that they will suffer traumatic injuries and
trauma-induced death. Thus, we can have preferences about how we die as well as about when we die, and like our preferences for other things, such as success in our careers and the enjoyment of a bottle of wine, our preferences don’t guarantee the hoped-for outcomes.

Dying is also something that often can be experienced, sometimes up to the moment of death. Under many of the circumstances in which people die, it is difficult or impossible to communicate what it is that is being experienced. The dying person may not be in a position to communicate in speech or some other form, due to illness, trauma, time, or circumstances. The finality of death entails that there will be no later time at which one can recall the experience to oneself or others. The experience of death dies with the dead. The philosopher Martin Heidegger put it this way:

Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man “suffers.” The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just “there alongside.” (Being and Time 47: 282)

The loss of one’s own experience is the loss that the dying person is suffering. Perhaps the closest one can come to preserving the insights from the experience of dying is to study what are referred to as “near-death experiences.” If there are such experiences, we may gain some insight into features of the experience of dying from those who have almost died. This loss is powerfully and painfully depicted in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” The occurrence is the death, by hanging, of a civilian in the Confederate South during the U.S. Civil War. Under other circumstances we might not sympathize with Peyton Farquhar, the convicted Confederate collaborator. Here we witness an execution, the sudden and radical ending of a human life, a life of experiencing the wonders of the physical world and a world of relationships to other human beings, a world of love and attachment. All of that will end in an instant, at the command of a Union soldier.

Heidegger is certainly right that we can’t experience the loss-of-Being of another. However, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” may come pretty close. What takes an instant is stretched out in time. What is in the mind of Peyton Farquhar at this instant is revealed to us, the others.
What is revealed is familiar to us, what we value and love. It is the experience of the beauty of nature, the exhilaration of sensory experience, of motion, of the feel of water against our skin, of the sounds of birds, of love, and the yearning to go home.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: death, meaning of life
“QUEEN OF THE NILE”

Original air date: March 6, 1964

We readily acknowledge that the well-being and survival of nonhuman animals is often at the expense of other living things, that increasing the lifespan of one creature, a predator, means shortening the lifespan of another, its prey. In the ordinary course of things, in our own species, most of our predator behavior appears to be directed toward other species, though on reflection, a significant portion of it, in contrast to that of many others, occurs within our species and encompasses not just our well-being and survival but also our perceived self-interest. We intentionally shorten the lifespan of others in war and self-defense but also as the result of choices we make to pollute and warm the environment; to selectively treat some illnesses and conditions and not others; and by other choices we make as scientists, inventors, manufacturers, and technologists. Like most predator behavior, we don’t usually target individuals for elimination. The individuals who die at our hands happen to belong to a class of individuals we’ve called “the enemy,” for example. When our interactions with the environment have the consequence that a certain number of people will die from the pollutants we’ve introduced, our assault is completely impersonal and unintended. We don’t drive cars in order to bring about death by cardiopulmonary diseases, though that is a consequence of our transportation decisions.

In light of this, the actions of Pamela Morris, a film star, may appear less startling, unusual, and perhaps even less objectionable than they
initially do, in “Queen of the Nile.” In the possible world in which we encounter her, she has the ability to extend the length of her life by extracting years of life from her victims, in contrast to Salvadore Ross, in “The Self-Improvement of Salvadore Ross,” who negotiates transactions with others to trade years of life. With the help of the scarab beetle, Morris transfers life from others, who wind up with untimely deaths, while Morris’s life and youthful appearance are preserved.

It is difficult not to condemn Morris’s actions. Although she claims that she feels like she is fifteen years old and still desires to “savor all that there is in this world,” Jordan Herrick, the journalist on assignment to interview her, presumably also desires to live, and there appear to be no grounds on which her life should be valued above his. Morris appears firmly in control, even manipulative. She seduces Herrick and clearly not because she’s attracted to him but in order to kill him and obtain his future years of existence.

Viewed from another perspective, Morris is in a struggle for survival. Without deploying the scarab beetle on her unsuspecting victim, Morris will perish. Her actions are like those of someone in the middle of a shipwreck pushing their way past others to get to the lifeboat. An ethical egoist might admit that such behavior is not admirable but might argue that it is not morally wrong (see “I Dream of Genie”).

In addition to thinking about actions individuals take out of self-interest that may impact the longevity of other individuals, we can consider the effects of our collective actions on the well-being and even on the survival of others. By some estimates, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, air pollution is responsible for approximately 4.6 million premature deaths per year worldwide. As Morris’s decision to place the scarab beetle on Herrick’s body shortens his life and lengthens hers, so our decisions to pollute the air shorten lives, particularly the lives of poor residents who live near sources of pollution such as freeways and factories.

Intentionally shortening the life of another human being for one’s own benefit seems worse than engaging in acts that do not target particular individuals but lead to consequences which shorten their lives. Murder is an example of the former. Killing in combat while at war is an example of the latter. We can at least say this: Any action that results in the shortening of the life of others should come under close moral scrutiny.

Utilitarianism, the view that we ought to engage in those acts which maximize overall utility, or happiness, would condemn the behavior of
Pamela Morris on the grounds that her potential happiness is not greater than that of her victim, Jordan Herrick, and the other victims that came before and will come after him. The utilitarian judgment of our collective air polluting behavior depends on an assessment of the contribution of our transportation, manufacturing, and other activities to our overall happiness, compared to the cost, in premature deaths. A strength of the utilitarian approach is that it deemphasizes the personal dimension. In both cases what matters is the contribution of actions to overall happiness. The happiness of particular individuals does not play a special role.

“Queen of the Nile” is also a commentary on the moral status of the way famous people in the entertainment industry often treat others. Pamela Morris is a star, adored by fans and surrounded by images of herself and mementos of her appearances in film. Jordan Herrick exists merely to help promote her image, increase her fame, and feed her ego. She feigns a love interest in him, but it is just part of her act, calculated to extract anything of value from him. Switching to Immanuel Kant’s perspective, in contrast to that of utilitarianism, Morris treats Herrick merely as a means to an end rather than as an end in himself.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, morality, well-being
Joe and Phyllis Britt are not a happily married couple. Joe comes home from driving a cab tired and irritable. Phyllis is not sympathetic, and worse, she’s suspicious that Joe is cheating on her. Their interactions consist of one verbal assault after another. If there ever was concern and tenderness between this pair, it appears to be lost and forgotten. The opening scene provides support for Don Moller, who in “An Argument against Marriage” claims that given the likelihood that any marriage will eventually devolve into the kind of hate-fest we witness here, marriage is not a viable institution.

Is it possible to turn the tide of a bad marriage and make amends? Can entrenched enmity give way to reconciliation and trust, or are Joe and Phyllis stuck in a toxic relationship or headed for a breakup? Planning in the Britt household appears to be a rare thing, though planning is what is needed in order to engineer a fundamental change in a relationship. To formulate a plan of action, one typically considers various possible futures and then chooses those actions that will bring about, or are most likely to bring about, the most suitable of those possible futures. Successful planning depends on imagining relevant and appropriate possible future states and appropriate reasoning about actions that are likely to bring them about. Rational planning also involves thinking about possible future states to be avoided and about the steps to be taken to prevent those possible future states from becoming actual.
Joe Britt finds himself forced to confront a possible future state that he would like to avoid, namely the escalation of the tension between himself and his wife. Whether this results from a television set that has been altered by a repairman or is simply the product of his own imagination doesn’t matter. What matters is the realization that he must act to prevent the sequence of events that will lead to a tragic outcome.

Joe’s decision is to admit to his wife that he is having an affair. He tries to explain his vulnerability and his culpability and his remorse all at the same time. Although Phyllis has shown some kindness to Joe, for example, after she found him unconscious on their living room floor, at this moment she explodes in anger. Joe’s strategy has backfired and led to the very outcome he acted to avoid.

We can consider what would have been the prudent thing for Joe to do in the circumstances, and we can also consider what would be the morally correct thing to do, recognizing that these might not be the same thing. What moral principles should guide Joe’s decisions? For a start, one ought to be honest with one’s spouse. So, Joe did the right thing. He came clean, as they say, but doing so had terrible consequences for both. He could have stuck with the status quo, but he was motivated to confess to Phyllis based on the vivid representation of a future terrible fight between them. This suggests that under their circumstances, there was nothing Joe could have done differently.

The same goes for Phyllis. Like Joe, she attempts to treat him with compassion and concern, but that doesn’t last. Her efforts aren’t rewarded. He lashes out at her, and when he reveals his infidelity, she lashes out at him. In the emotion-fueled brawl that follows, neither Joe nor Phyllis is making good decisions. They are acting, but acting without reason, without deliberation, and certainly without self-interest.

It’s tempting to diagnose toxic relationships like that of the Britts as loveless relationships. Do Joe and Phyllis not love one another? It’s unclear. A more accurate assessment may be that what is missing is sustained sympathy. Joe and Phyllis have moments of sympathy, but their default style of interaction is completely devoid of sympathy. Joe remarks about this as Phyllis taunts him. Phyllis in turn complains that Joe doesn’t have a clue about how hurt she is by his admission of his infidelity. Spurts of sympathy are followed by heavy blows of derision. The former is overwhelmed by the latter. Love may be overrated. What the Britts needed most was sustained mutual sympathy.
FURTHER READING

Philosophical keywords: free will, illusion, marriage, time, trust, vice
Death has always been a central concern of philosophy, and it is one of the most central topics in episodes of The Twilight Zone. If, as Epicurus noted, our own death is not a state we can experience, we can imagine, and often do, what the state of things will be after our death. So the “Twilight Zone,” Serling’s name for the realm of the imagination, is a natural place for death to reside.

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” explored the realm of the imagination of a person approaching death, a person just moments away from no longer possessing an imagination. The circumstances did not allow Peyton Farquhar the luxury of considering what life might be like after his death for others. In “The Masks” Jason Foster is dying, but he’s known this for a long time, and though he is now near death, he is intensely focused on what Samuel Scheffler has rebranded “the afterlife,” the meaning and value of the lives of his family members and others after his death.

Scheffler calls attention to the extent to which our values presuppose that the world will continue after our death. We each recognize that human and other animal life spans are finite and will come to an end, but as has been the case, deaths are staggered, and the death of any one person is followed by the continuation of the life of many others. Scheffler makes this point by suggesting that what we value would be significantly altered if we suddenly learned that the world will be destroyed.
in thirty days by a collision with an asteroid. In that possible world, which Scheffler calls “the doomsday scenario,” we would likely lose our interest in our intellectual projects, our artistic endeavors, and even our relationships with one another. Much of what we value would lose its point, and our lives would be significantly diminished.

“The Masks” provides support for Scheffler’s position, not by presenting a doomsday scenario but rather by having us observe the final hours of Jason Foster in the presence of his family. Foster’s concern for the future presents a philosophical puzzle. He knows that he is not going to be part of that future. So why should he care about it? Normally, this would not be a puzzle. Parents usually are concerned about the well-being of their children and other people they are close to, and they often take steps to ensure that their financial support, for example, is in place after their death. Foster has already prepared a will that provides for his children and grandchildren, so that is not what concerns him as he approaches his end.

Foster’s final act is to force his family to recognize their flawed characters and their moral failings. He does this by requiring that they wear masks that represent “the antithesis of what the wearer is.” One mask represents greed, avarice, and cruelty, another represents cowardice, another insolence and vanity, another dullness and stupidity. Of course, the masks don’t represent the opposite of the wearer’s traits but rather their actual traits, in Foster’s view. The masks are to be worn until midnight. When Foster dies, at midnight, the family discovers that the faces have been permanently altered to resemble their masks. Put differently, they recognize that the old man’s characterizations of their personal and moral failings are enduringly accurate.

Why was the exposing of his family’s vices of such importance to Foster? It’s clear that revealing these flaws will not change anything after he dies. What does Foster achieve with this act, and is it something of which we should approve?

First, Foster’s condemnation of his daughter and her family is on target. Collectively they represent a virtual catalogue of vices cemented together by smug self-interest. Perhaps what Foster objects to most is their smugness and lack of insight into their own faults. Clearly Foster has criticized them in the past, but to no avail. Now he’s found a way to drive the point home, namely by changing how they appear to others. He has rendered transparent what formerly they were able to keep under wraps, namely their greed, cruelty, vanity, insolence, and stupidity.
Foster’s daughter and her family would like nothing more than to keep the truth about their relationship to her father hidden from the rest of humanity. Foster, in contrast, wants the truth revealed for posterity. This tells us something about how truth and morality are related. The virtuous champion the truth. The vicious see truth as their enemy. In the case of Foster’s family, the donning of masks is what unmasks the truth.

FURTHER READING

*Philosophical keywords:* afterlife, character, death, meaning of life, vice
It is widely appreciated that feelings can be communicated from one person to another, where it isn’t just that one person can understand the feelings another person is having, but one person is caused to have the same or similar feelings experienced by the other person. On a chance encounter with a friend who has a happy and cheerful disposition and who, on this occasion, greets us with a smile, we often acquire that cheerfulness and smile back. If, on another occasion, that same friend appears sullen and sad, as a result of a death in their family, we may share that sadness.

Is hate communicated from person to person in this way? It is a central theme of “I am the Night—Color Me Black” that hate, like a sickness, can be “contagious” and “deadly.” If hate is contagious, does it spread the way other emotions, such as grief and sadness spread, via sympathy? If hate does not spread this way, how does it spread?

Jagger, having been convicted of murder, is awaiting execution by hanging in a small Midwestern town. The case is not straightforward. The person Jagger killed was a white supremacist who was advocating violence against the town’s black residents. The trial itself may have included testimony by a deputy sheriff who committed perjury.

The phenomenon of hate spreading like a contagious disease is represented by the somewhat murky picture of the sequence of events. A series of hateful acts is carried out by a white supremacist, followed
by a challenge from Jagger, who attempts to call out the hateful acts as wrong but winds up in a deadly brawl. This leads to his trial and conviction, both of which are clouded by accusations of wrongdoing, leading finally to the public execution of Jagger at the hands of the local sheriff.

Examining any two links in this chain of events, we can see instances of hate, followed by other instances of hate, but is it correct to say that hate has transmitted from one event to the other? For example, Jagger admits that when he reacted to the hate-filled acts of the white supremacist and caused his death, his actions were motivated by hate of his adversary. But the objects of hate are clearly different in the two cases. The white supremacist hates nonwhites. Jagger hates the hater of nonwhites. Clearly the character and actions of the white supremacist play a causal role in Jagger’s actions. But while the actions of both involve hate, it’s not clear that it is a contagious phenomenon.

Maybe it is the feeling of hate that is the same in the different events that make up the chain of events. Is there something felt in common by people, even when the object of their hate is different? This question is briefly, but perhaps crucially, raised in the episode, when the black minister asks Jagger about his feeling of hatred when he committed the act of murder. He asks Jagger how he felt when he committed murder: “When he came at you,...did it feel good to you then? When you killed him,...you enjoyed that, didn’t you?” Jagger responds: “You know it!” This occurs right before Jagger’s hanging, and the crowd that has formed also experiences enjoyment at the prospect of Jagger’s death.

Hume contrasts hate and love, where the feeling of love is an agreeable feeling and the feeling of hate is a feeling of uneasiness. But Jagger, his antagonist, and some of the townspeople appear to experience hate as a form of pleasure. In “Of Tragedy” Hume points out that something like this reversal of sentiments happens when we are presented with tragedies in literature. We take pleasure in observing tragic events as they are portrayed in literature and poetry. Hume suggests that this can happen outside of our engagement with fiction as well. “Nothing endears so much a friend as sorrow for his death. The pleasure of his company has not so powerful an influence.”

That hating can be pleasurable may account for its spread. Why are we so apt to hate if it always made us uneasy? In this episode, the metaphor for hate is darkness, a darkness that also spreads from this nexus of pleasurable hate, a hate that plunges us into darkness.
When the minister finds out that Jagger’s act was committed through pleasurable hate, he condemns the act, even though Jagger’s motivation was to protect the black residents of the town from the white supremacist. The consequence that the white supremacist was silenced does not reduce the wrongness of Jagger’s action. What really matters is the “quality of mind” that causes love or hatred. Hume writes: “In every case, therefore, we must judge of the one by the other; and may pronounce any quality of the mind virtuous, which causes love or pride; and any one vicious, which causes hatred or humility.”

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: induction, the passions
“SOUNDS AND SILENCES”

Original air date: April 3, 1964

“Sounds and Silences” is a rather heavy-handed character sketch of an individual who is deeply flawed as a husband, as a boss, and simply as a member of humanity. Roswell G. Flemington’s flaws are related to his interests and values. He is obsessed with all things nautical. His home is filled with images of boats, model boats, and parts of boats, including a large ship’s wheel. He owns a model ship company, and he runs it like a ship captain. He barks out commands laced with nautical turns of phrase. Flemington doesn’t speak; he yells out commands. His employees hate him.

Flemington loves the loud sounds of boats at sea and reproduces them not only by barking out commands like a ship captain but by ringing a ship’s bell and playing recordings of ships in battle. He takes great delight in this auditory shower of sound, while the rest of the world cringes at the assault. This is a man who cares only about himself and engineers his sensory world as one in which he can be enveloped in the sounds of his past career as a naval officer.

This is a morality play, and so the moral affront Flemington inflicts on the world has to be answered by a world in which everyone gets their due in the long term. The long term arrives for Flemington in two stages. First, he suddenly finds that he experiences sounds as if they are all much louder than normal. With the help of a psychiatrist, he learns to control his perception of sound, so that the perceived volume is reduced to an
acceptable level. In the second stage, the sound level he perceives continues to decrease, to the point where even the loudest sounds are barely audible. In essence, Flemington loses most of his hearing.

Flemington’s imposition of excessively loud sounds on others goes hand in hand with his complete self-absorption and his lack of regard for the rights, needs, opinions, or interests of everyone else in the world. He can only hear himself, and in his company, others can only hear him. He drowns everyone else out. One form of morally objectionable behavior has to do with an imbalance of input and output. If your input into the system prevents the system from providing a response that you can process and understand, then the conditions for being able to understand, much less respond to, the needs of others will simply not exist. In the end, Flemington can’t even hear himself.

Flemington’s final predicament results from his acceptance of his psychiatrist’s philosophical position. Sounds are what modern philosophers have called secondary qualities. They don’t exist in the world but rather only as sensible qualities in the mind. This is the position of Bishop Berkeley, who extended mind-dependence to all properties of objects. A tree that falls in a forest with no one perceiving it doesn’t exist. While Flemington doesn’t go that far, he thinks that the dependence of sound on the mind means that he can control what he hears and thus can tune out those sounds he doesn’t wish to hear, like his wife’s criticisms of him.

Berkeley held that sounds were in the mind, not in external objects, but he didn’t think that it follows that we have total control over what we experience. The sensible qualities we experience against our will provide evidence for the existence of other minds. It is still the case that much of what we experience takes place against our will, and sensory experiences and their absence, are not up to us, as Flemington ultimately learns. Perhaps Flemington’s problem stems from his false belief that he’s the only thing that matters.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: egoism, mental illness, perception, vice
It is uncontroversial that you can do something that you don’t want to do. You can pay taxes when you’d rather not. You can take the trash out to the street when you’d rather keep reading your novel. You can get up when the alarm goes off when you’d rather sleep in. What we want to do doesn’t always coincide with what we believe we ought to do.

How should we describe situations that are slightly different? You don’t pay the taxes, even though you believe that you should. You don’t take out the trash, though you know that not doing so will mean that you’ll miss the weekly collection. You turn the alarm off and go back to sleep, when you know that by doing so you’ll be late for work. We might say that in each of these cases you take a course of action that you believe is not the right course of action to take. You act against your own self-interest. Philosophers characterize such cases as weakness of will, or akrasia. You have weakness of will when your will is too weak to do what you believe you should do.

Although these seem like clear cases of weakness of will, there are many philosophers who believe that there is no such thing. They argue that these cases are incorrectly described and that when they are presented correctly, they are not cases of weakness of will.

Let’s reconsider the case of continuing to read a book when doing so will mean that the garbage doesn’t get taken out. Is it true that you really
wanted to take the garbage out but that you didn’t have the strength of will to accomplish it? Isn’t it more accurate to say that you preferred to continue reading the book, and that you desired the continuation of that activity at the expense of getting the chore accomplished? Your will accomplished what you wanted. You voted with your feet, as the expression goes. What seemed like weakness of will was really a misreading of what you wanted. What you wanted is made clear by what you actually did. Your desire to read the book outranked your desire to get this week’s garbage to the street. Your will was not weak, since you did what you most desired.

“Caesar and Me” is about the struggle of the will, where the will is represented by a ventriloquist’s dummy, Caesar. Unlike an earlier episode involving a ventriloquist and his prop, “The Dummy,” this ventriloquist, Jonathan West, is not surprised that Caesar appears to be a semiautonomous agent who speaks for himself. But the self that the dummy speaks for is really West himself, recommending courses of action that West, in his non-dummy mode, finds repellent.

West is down and out. He can’t find work as a ventriloquist or in any other field. He can’t meet the rent on his meager one-bedroom flat, and his prospects are bleak. While West seeks conventional solutions to his problem, his alter ego, Caesar, thinks outside the box and advocates a life of crime. West resists and says, “A man has to live with himself, even if he lives in the gutter.” He wants to reject Caesar’s recommendations not on prudential grounds but on moral grounds.

When we are of two minds about a course of action, as Jonathan West is, and one “mind” prevails over the other, is that a case of weakness of will? To claim weakness of will, one would have to identify the will with the “mind” that does not prevail. But this seems incorrect on two grounds. First, there aren’t two wills but just one, the will that chooses from among the courses of action under deliberation. Second, the will that acts is not weak, since it has selected a course of action.

What tempts us to describe West as suffering from weakness of will may be that it is apt to describe his ill-advised actions as a failure to do the right thing when he knows it to be the right thing. This may be a moral weakness, but it is not a weakness of will. The will does its job, and the choice it carries out is Jonathan West’s preference.

One might object that with further reflection, or under other circumstances, West might have chosen differently. Maybe his choice is impulsive, and so doesn’t really represent his true preferences, as they would reveal themselves in the fullness of time. Still, this merely suggests that
West is impulsive, and that doesn’t match the facts. West’s vacillation between his regular voice and his Caesar voice is extended in time.

Do we learn how to avoid choosing the wrong path? In cases like these we often remark that the newly minted criminal has been hanging around with the wrong people. West, a loner, has only been hanging around with Caesar, to whom he gives voice. Giving voice to thoughts, plans, and values different from his own, West risks making them his own. To avoid West’s plight, we should limit our imaginative flights of fancy to possibilities that represent values we find unproblematic.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: desire, moral psychology, vice, weakness of will
What actions against its own citizens is it permissible for a sovereign state to take in order to protect itself? Is it ever permissible for a state to order its agents to hunt down and assassinate a citizen taken to be a threat to the state? These questions in political philosophy are neither directly raised nor answered in “The Jeopardy Room.” Instead, we face a more granular moral issue. If we can identify morally impermissible ways of assassinating an enemy of the state, are there permissible ways of achieving that end?

Major Ivan Kuchenko is an escaped political prisoner caught in the net of the state’s defense machine. The goal of the state’s agents is to kill Kuchenko, and one agent in particular, Commissar Vassiloff, prides himself on finding creative ways to eliminate his targets. He’s planted a bomb in Kuchenko’s room, which Kuchenko will eventually detonate when he carries out some routine action, like turning on a light or picking up a book. Kuchenko is told this will occur, heightening his terror.

Is this state-sanctioned behavior or has Vassiloff gone rogue? Again, we don’t know, but what we can sense is that Vassiloff is judged by his results, not by his methods of achieving those results. Even if we put aside the question of whether the assassination of Kuchenko is justified as an act of self-defense by the state, it is difficult to find any justification for
the manner in which Vassiloff proceeds. Vassiloff is a monster, a sadistic killer whose methods reflect his own twisted sense of self-satisfaction.

The difficult moral question in “The Jeopardy Room” does not concern Vassiloff’s methods. Those seem clearly wrong. It is wrong to seek and derive pleasure from carrying out an execution, political or otherwise. The hard question has to do with Kuchenko’s response to the terror and danger inflicted on him. He outsmarts Vassiloff, and in doing so inflicts Vassiloff’s bomb on Vassiloff himself. Clearly this is an act of self-defense and is morally justified as such. But it is more than just self-defense. It is difficult not to see this as a case of just deserts, of Vassiloff getting what he deserves. When Kuchenko realizes that he has done to Vassiloff what Vassiloff planned to do to him, we sense that Kuchenko derives pleasure, or at least satisfaction, from the result. Is Kuchenko guilty of the same moral transgression? Here it may be useful to apply the idea that we can test the moral status of a proposed action by asking whether the principle on which the action is based can be generalized to other cases, an idea central to the moral philosophy of Kant. Would Vassiloff approve of the use of his methods on his family, or on himself? The question is raised, but Vassiloff doesn’t have more than a second to think about it. It is that second that is clearly precious to Kuchenko.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: justice, war
There are many Twilight Zone episodes in which someone is lost, including “Where am I?,” “The After Hours,” “Valley of the Shadow,” and “Probe 7, Over and Out.” There are also episodes in which someone’s size relative to others is different from what they think it is, as is the case in “The Invaders” and “The Little People.” There are episodes where individuals are lost and their relative size is different than they think. This double whammy occurs in “Five Characters in Search of an Exit” and “Stopover in a Quiet Town.”

Being lost comes in many shapes and sizes. One can be lost in a place that is a familiar kind of place, such as a small town or a department store. One can be lost in a completely unfamiliar environment, such as the inside of a container from which there appears to be no exit. In “Stopover in a Quiet Town” Bob and Millie Frazier wake up after a night on the town and discover that they are not in their bed. They are not in their bedroom. They are not in their house. They have an epistemic problem, a problem about knowledge. They don’t know where they are.

To begin to solve their special problem about knowledge, Bob and Millie start with things they do know and attempt to make inferences from their knowledge to a true proposition about their current location. Following Bob and Millie’s investigation reveals a lot about different
sources of knowledge and the ways our attempts to acquire and justify our beliefs can alternatively fail and succeed.

One way to try to figure out where you are is to attempt to remember where you were last and then extrapolate from there to your likely current location. Bob and Millie remember that they left a party in their car and were headed home. Unfortunately, this line of reasoning doesn’t get them very far. Bob speculates that someone brought them to the unfamiliar house they find themselves in, and if that is so, then they should be able to find that someone in the house. Their methodology has moved from appealing to memory to seeking the testimony of others. They expect that there are others, that those others are not lost, and that those others will be able to tell them where they are and how they got there.

Bob tries to use the phone to call the phone company’s information line. It’s not clear what he will ask them, but he doesn’t get that far. The phone isn’t wired to anything. He pulls it right off the wall. This strategy—using a phone to find out where you are—is employed in “Where Is Everybody?” and “A World of Difference,” and it fails in those instances too.

Bob and Millie’s general knowledge of the world conflicts with the experiences they are having in this strange house. They expect the telephone (because this story is set in the 1960s) to be wired to the wall and offer a dial tone as a sign of functionality. Cabinet drawers open and contain kitchen items. Refrigerators contain food, not food props. In each case, their default beliefs about types or kinds of things are defeated. Where could one possibly be where most of the ordinary, commonsense beliefs one holds turn out to be false? Is it odd that Bob and Millie do not stop to consider this question?

As their inquiry continues, Bob and Millie are drawn out of the house and into the community, in search of others who can tell them where they are. In the suburban community in which they find themselves, no one is around. Bob complains that this is a feature of such communities, unlike the urban environment of New York City, where they live. There are people, Bob is certain, hiding inside their houses and peering out at them. The remark may be fleeting, but Bob’s observation about suburbia is a searing critique of a form of social organization that was quickly taking hold in the 1960s.

Others are not to be found on the street, in the local church, or anywhere else. They see someone sitting in a parked car, and they think they are in luck. But the person turns out to be a mannequin (see “Where Is
Everybody?” and “The After Hours”), and the car has no engine. They can’t escape by car, but they soon spot a commuter train and they jump on, and they’re on their way. Or so it seems, until the train quickly loops back to the starting point.

Millie and Bob wonder whether anything is real in their suburban version of hell. They discover that the trees and grass are artificial. Their hypotheses become more extreme: Maybe this is a joke or a test, or maybe they are dead.

Bob and Millie have used their skills as inquirers without success. They’ve used their senses and their knowledge of the world, and they’ve attempted to secure the testimony of others to find out where they are. They’ve done the best that they could be expected to do. Their failure to solve the problem is the result of their circumstances. The impediment is one of scale. Bob and Millie are too small to comprehend their location. The problem is much worse than they think it is. They are not stuck in a provincial suburban backwater. They are stuck in a model world that belongs to a very large child.

Our discovery of Bob and Millie’s predicament leads us to see their strange discoveries in a new light. Why didn’t they figure it all out earlier? In their favor, Bob and Millie’s endeavor is a lesson in systematic inquiry. Although their predicament prevents them from reaching a solution on their own, it isn’t for lack of trying.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: epistemology, space
Even under the best of circumstances, people are remarkably resistant to revising their beliefs when faced with new evidence. Gilbert Harman reports that subjects who were given information about the results of studies of their aptitude for science and music and then formed beliefs about their aptitudes based on this information, failed to revise their beliefs when they were later told that the test results had been mixed up and what had initially been reported to them was false.

If we're resistant to changing our beliefs when there is new evidence in such benign circumstances, what happens when the beliefs are deep-seated and the result of cultural and political inculcation? This question is raised in “The Encounter,” and the answer isn't encouraging. Here our two “subjects” are Fenton, a veteran of World War II, who fought in the Pacific theater, and Arthur, also known as Taro, a Japanese American who grew up in Hawaii and witnessed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor firsthand. As they encounter one another, in spite of being citizens of the same country, twenty years after the end of the war that their “side” won, entrenched and brittle beliefs send the two interlocutors in a tragic direction.

When countries are at war, circumstances are often extreme, both for civilians and for soldiers. The unique experiences during war, together with the beliefs that soldiers and civilians are urged to adopt,
take on a special significance in the lives of those who survive the conflict. If our ordinary beliefs are resistant to revision in light of new evidence, consider how difficult it is to revise beliefs and attitudes that have been instilled through military training and seconded by the horrors of armed conflict. One’s enemies are first vilified and then, when confronted on the battlefield, present themselves as opponents to be feared, hated, and defeated. Wars eventually come to an end. The negative beliefs and attitudes of its participants toward each other have a much longer shelf life.

There’s a third character in this drama. It is a Japanese sword, a prized item among the spoils of war that Fenton stores in his dusty attic. It represents the chaotic and irrational clash of cultures that takes place in war. On the one hand, Fenton hated and still hates the Japanese and their culture. On the other hand, he respects and values the strength and discipline that the sword represents. He is still alternatively drawn to, and repulsed by, anything Japanese, including Arthur.

We see this vacillation from the first moment when Fenton and Arthur meet. Fenton is initially condescending, and his behavior is shockingly racist. He calls Arthur “boy,” and their conversation moves quickly to the question of Arthur’s ethnicity and citizenship. Arthur reveals that his given name is Taro. Fenton responds, “A rose is a rose,” implying that changing a given Japanese name to an American one doesn’t erase his ethnic identity.

The sword becomes the focal point of the encounter between Fenton and Arthur. Reflecting on the sword’s history and purpose, it crystallizes for both men the potential for violence and war. It is a weapon of past wars, and past wars are never really over, as long as the beliefs and attitudes held in war persist.

Fenton clearly suffers from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder, and as he tells Arthur “how it was” in combat, he relives the experience, and the conflict between the two begins in real time. Fenton’s real problem is not that he revisits a terrible past, but that he can’t function in the present, and he has lost his agency, his control over what he believes and desires, and so how he acts. As a soldier, he points out, he was told to treat the Japanese as “apes,” but now he’s supposed to treat them as “highly cultured people.” He’s been “pushed and pulled,” and more than twenty years after the war, he can’t make sense of how to live in harmony with those who were his enemies and even with those who were his friends.
The encounter does not end well. Is there a murder, or effectively a suicide? It’s not clear that the distinction matters in this case. Fenton is a delayed casualty of war.

**FURTHER READING**


*Philosophical keywords*: discrimination, rationality, self-knowledge, suicide, toleration, war
The town of Happiness, Arizona, cries out for study by moral philosophers. But to figure out whether it lives up to its name, perhaps we first need to settle on the nature of happiness. Or maybe we’ll know it when we see it.

The first thing we learn about Happiness is that most of its residents, 128 people, died there in the recent past. All but one was the victim of gun violence. We also learn that until ten months ago, the town was known as “Satan’s Stage Stop” and “Dead Man’s Junction.” Maybe the town’s new name indicates that those unhappy events were in the past. In addition to the nominal change, the town has a new sheriff and a new jail, and firearms have been banned. The conditions that led to the widespread murder of the citizenship of this town have been eliminated. Very few are left, but peace prevails.

If the death of most of the town’s citizens was a bad thing, would the undoing of those deaths be a good thing? Mr. Garrity appears and claims to be able to bring the dead back to life. Is this something the residents of Happiness will welcome?

Mr. Garrity has traveled to Happiness not because it is a special place but because, in spite of its name, it is like every other place. In every place, people die, and those who remain mourn their passing. What Mr. Garrity banks on is not that people will wish to avail themselves of his services to restore their loved ones to life but rather that they will pay hard cash for him to refrain from restoring the dead to life. What Mr.
Garrity knows is that as much as people claim to miss their dear, departed relatives and friends, few, if any, would wish to have those relatives and friends restored to life.

If Mr. Garrity is right, this is a puzzle. If something bad befalls you, isn't it a good thing if the misfortune can be reversed? If your cat is lost, isn't it good when someone finds it and returns it to you? Isn't it the same for someone who dies? Granted, most of us don't believe that the dead can be restored to life. But in the possible world where they can be restored, wouldn't this be a good thing?

Mr. Garrity has built a profession based on his conviction that most people would prefer that their deceased relatives and friends remain dead and that they will pay handsomely to make sure that the dead remain so, were they to believe that someone could restore the dead to life. Is Mr. Garrity right? What grounds does he have for his belief?

A difference between losing a pet and losing a family member or friend is that the loss of a pet often doesn't fundamentally alter one's life—although sometimes it does—while the loss through death of a loved human usually does change one's life. It is hard to imagine adjusting to a life with one's human family member or friend restored after all that one has gone through to adjust to life without them. Yet it might seem like making that adjustment, as difficult as it might be, would be a small price to pay if one could have the deceased restored to life.

How one's happiness would be affected by the resurrection of a loved one is an individual affair, which will vary as relationships vary under more normal circumstances. So perhaps the right question to ask is not whether any individual would benefit from the restoration of a loved one to them, but whether the possibility of such restorations would make things better or worse for humanity at large. This is a strange question, but it is one that arises naturally from the possibility of a Mr. Garrity, whether he can deliver the goods (or ills) he promises or not.

The availability of resurrection would, for many, fundamentally change their conception of death as the final and irreversible stage of life, and with it their conception of life itself would change as well. We would have to think of death not as the final end but as a possible stage, or gap, in one's existence. If we thought that we might be resurrected, we could anticipate and even try to plan for such future states of ourselves, just as we plan for vacations. Others, too, would have to consider their possible relationships to newly resurrected loved ones, colleagues, friends, and
acquaintances and plan accordingly. Would the possibility of resurrection make life happier, overall?

“Mr. Garrity and the Graves” suggests that it would not, just as “Escape Clause” suggests that the possibility of an immortal existence might not be preferable to a finite life, even if we do lament the inevitability of our death. Some have argued that what we lament is the loss of the opportunities that we would have if we lived longer than we do in fact live. Those opportunities, however, will only bring us happiness if the conditions under which we are resurrected include our being welcomed back to the fold by those who are alive. As this episode makes clear, that’s not something we can take for granted.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: death, happiness
Serling describes “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” as a “tale of oddness and obsolescence.” Extreme automation and the wholesale replacement of human labor by computers and robots may have seemed odd to Serling, but it is something with which we are very much at home. In the early 1960s the digital revolution was in its infancy. IBM once estimated the worldwide market for its mainframe computers to be in the single digits. Chief operating officers with an enthusiasm for computing technology were few and far between. Mr. Whipple’s enthusiasm for digital technology would indeed have been odd in the business and manufacturing world of the early 1960s.

Mr. Whipple’s embrace of digital technology might be excusable, were it balanced by some concern for the possible negative effects that the new technology could have on his workers. He gleefully celebrates the chief virtue of the X109B14 computer: It eliminates sixty-one thousand jobs! He sees this as a positive outcome. The new computer not only does the work of tens of thousands of employees, but it doesn’t need paid vacation, healthcare, or a salary. Whipple’s imperative is to increase profits, and that’s just what his new X109B14 does, by radically lowering costs. If Whipple Industries is a publicly traded company, then Mr. Whipple has obligations to shareholders to maximize profits. Of course, the goal of maximizing profits is constrained by many things, and it’s the job of the CEO of the company to negotiate the business terrain skillfully and
legally. In replacing workers with machines, does Mr. Whipple violate any ethical norms of business practice?

Is Mr. Whipple morally blameworthy for laying off thousands of workers, or is he morally praiseworthy for that same action? It would be difficult to establish that Mr. Whipple does wrong by automating his business, though perhaps he crosses the line when he shoots an employee who is trying to disable one of the computers. Unless we’re willing to condemn the capitalist system in which he operates, Mr. Whipple is no more or less at fault than are his compatriots in industry. However, although we may not be able to judge the Whipple Industries policies as morally wrong, we can reflect on the way such decisions can, in the short term and perhaps even in the long term, negatively affect the society in which the company operates.

To see this, it is helpful to consider the value of human labor not from the standpoint of labor’s ability to manufacture things and to produce objects of value, but from the standpoint of the act of working itself, the value of labor to the one who is laboring. Is work in this sense valuable to the worker and her associates?

Labor provides workers with the opportunity to come together at a workplace, to socialize and form relationships that can be sustained beyond the factory floor or break room. Employment often makes it possible for workers to develop and practice skills and to share expertise with others and to take pride in their work. The loss of work can mean the loss of these valued features of work.

Whipple might respond that his workers are free to seek employment elsewhere. If, however, automation improves the bottom line at Whipple Industries, it will do so elsewhere. The result will be that the kind of work that is outsourced to machines will eventually no longer be available to human workers. “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” predicts that automation will swiftly move from the factory floor to the secretarial pool, up and up, to the top corporate offices.

The trajectory of automation imagined here is, of course, no longer merely in the Twilight Zone but is a familiar feature of contemporary life. Economists, philosophers, and social theorists now think about whether worker displacement should be thought about in a new way. Instead of thinking how workers displaced by automation can be offered different work, they are considering whether work itself may fall by the wayside, with wages replaced by living stipends. If industry can be ever more profitable without human workers, we can appropriate those profits for the sustenance of the population, now free to engage in whatever
meaningful activities that it wishes to pursue, other than work, as traditionally understood.

When we zoom in on Mr. Whipple’s management style, we see much to criticize. He fails to appreciate the role of work in the life of his employees and their resentment of the instruments of their obsolescence. As his newly fired foreman puts it: “I’m a man, and that makes me better than that hunk of metal.” We shouldn’t expect Mr. Whipple to agree with this sentiment, but we should expect him to take more interest in the welfare of the people that work for him, as his father apparently did before him. Both Mr. Whipple and his foreman lack the concepts to begin to come to grips with the changes in the nature of work at the dawn of the digital age.

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: justice, obligation, responsibility, sympathy, value
As soon as Floyd Burney stops at a broken bridge in the woods and leaves his car, he enters unfamiliar territory. It isn’t long before we know that this will be his last journey. We are primed for a story about the inevitability of death and our inability to prepare for it. Though the episode doesn’t disappoint our expectations, it isn’t really about death. This is a story about artistic expression of the folk, or everyday people, and its corruption by the forces of commerce.

Floyd Burney is a rock star, an anthropologist, and a hustler. As a rock star, he enters the rural hollow with his electric guitar and amplifier in hand. It’s an odd circumstance for a rock star to find himself in. There’s no stage, no audience, and no place to plug in. But Burney’s not there to play. He’s looking for fresh material for his band, new songs fresh from the folk. Burney has the instincts and tenacity of a field ethnomusicologist, but his interests are hardly scholarly.

In one sense, Floyd Burney has come to the right place. Almost immediately he hears the soft strumming of a guitar accompanying the plaintive sounds of a female voice. This is the real thing, the creative output of these isolated woods, spontaneously crafted folk music. But in another sense, Floyd Burney is in the wrong place. He immediately tries to purchase the rights to the song he just heard. He soon discovers that the creative output of the folk is not for sale at any price.
Thinking about what Floyd Burney is hoping to achieve raises some fundamental issues about the nature of music as an art form. We can ask, for example: What is Burney trying to buy? Imagine that he saw someone smile and say “hello” to a passerby. Could he buy that? Purchasing a form of interaction such as a greeting doesn’t make any sense. Perhaps it also doesn’t make sense to purchase a folk song, if the song, like a greeting, is a natural form of self-expression.

What Burney wants to buy are the rights to sing and play the song he’s just heard, “Come Wander with Me,” to perform it in public, and to record it and sell those recordings. The folk say that this isn’t possible. It looks like they just don’t want to sell their rights to their artistic creations, and that’s how Burney interprets their reluctance. He responds by attempting to bargain with them. He even suggests that they don’t own the song: It’s “P.D.... public domain,” he claims. “You ain’t got no rights.” So why is Burney trying to buy something that he claims they don’t own?

What kind of thing is a musical work? Is it a performance, a set of performances that are similar, a notational or linguistic representation of a possible performance of a sequence of sounds? Is it a structure made up of sounds? This last characterization is too permissive. There is a structured sequence of sounds coming from a cuckoo clock, but it is not a musical work. Philosophers of music often take musical compositions from so-called classical music as the phenomenon they wish to characterize as music. Such works have authors and notational representations that are understood as providing instructions for performances of the works by musicians.

The musical work that captivates Floyd Burney cannot be so characterized. There is no score or written version of it. Even its authorship is undetermined. Mary performs the song but doesn’t claim authorship or ownership. In fact, composition and claims to authorship are foreign concepts to her and the other inhabitants of these remote woods.

We can easily forget that music is as much a part of nature as our practices of hunting, gathering, and speaking. We’ve chosen to try to capture it and sell it, to own it and control it. As Burney follows the enchanting sounds of a guitar and human voice, nature is clearly an obstacle. A bird calls down to him from a tree, and so Burney tries to throw a rock at it. He stumbles along the ground cover and moves awkwardly among the trees.

Mary won’t sell the song to Burney, because “it belongs to somebody else.” But she elaborates that it can’t be bought “that way,” that is, with money. Ownership of the song has to do with living the song.
As Burney sings it, Mary is seduced by it being sung to her, and finally, Burney comes into possession of it. This variety of ownership is much deeper and is connected to responsibility. Unfortunately, Burney doesn’t understand what he’s gotten into.

Philosophers reflect on the most fundamental aspects of human existence, including our most basic and enduring capacities. Certainly, our ability to make music is among them, and it is also distinguished by the attempt of many to extend that capacity into the realm of commerce. Just as our need to eat has led to commercial farming and markets, so our capacity to sing has morphed into a business. There are still possible worlds where music is about life and is an activity of the living, where it is about the folk.

FURTHER READING


**Philosophical keywords**: aesthetics, death, philosophy of art, rights, self-interest
Fear is a complex emotion. It is a visceral feeling that is unmistakable to the person possessing it. Yet it can be difficult to describe the feeling to others, to describe what it is like to feel fear. Is fear felt the same way by everyone? Is there a distinct feeling? When we attempt to answer these questions, we often list various concomitants of fear, such as elevated heart and respiratory rates and increased sweating. Those physiological responses may themselves be accompanied by other sensations. Is fear just the package that includes all or some combination of these things?

Fear is clearly more than a bundle of physiological and subjective responses because it matters to what they are responses. Fear is typically a response to something that the subject perceives or senses, something frightening, that is, something which causes the perceiver to feel fear. Sometimes these responses seem unmediated and immediate; in other cases, the stimulus is understood and categorized and then feared.

Aggressors from another planet, hoping to instill fear in earthlings, would do well to understand the human psychology of fear before landing on Earth. At a minimum, such beings would have to know what we universally or at least typically fear and how we react to fear. Indeed, they would need to know much more about us. They would have to know how we recognize objects at a single time and objects persisting over time, how we categorize objects into kinds, and how we make relative judgments about such things as the size of objects. To do that, they would have to
know, for example, what we believe the typical size of various objects to be, and so, using an example from Joshua Bar-Hillel, when a human says “The box is in the pen,” we believe it is unlikely that the pen in question is a writing instrument, and it’s more likely that it is a pigpen or a playpen, since typical boxes fit easily inside the latter types of pen and not inside a typical writing instrument. In short, our visitors would need to have commonsense knowledge of the physical world, understand human perception and cognition, as well as human emotions, and grasp how these information processing systems work together in the human mind.

Our quick sketch of fear and its relation to other aspects of the mind does not help us understand the variety of fear that pervades most of “The Fear,” namely the fear of the unknown. If fear and other emotions have what philosophers like Peter Goldie refer to as “intentionality,” or “aboutness,” how can we experience fear when we don’t know or even believe anything about the object of our fear? Does it even make sense to say that there is an object of fear in such cases?

Serling introduces this episode with the claim that the unknown is “the major ingredient of any recipe for fear.” That may be true, though what is unknown can vary, and in some cases the ingredient of the unknown is not easy to identify. If a lion is charging toward you, the object you fear is not unknown. It would be odd to say that the outcome of the encounter with the lion is unknown. In “The Fear” the object of fear is unknown. Ms. Scott and Trooper Franklin experience a series of unusual effects, from loud sounds and flashes of light to Trooper Franklin’s patrol car mysteriously moving from place to place.

Sometimes, the cure for fear is simply coming to understand the source of the fear. That’s because there are cases where our fear is unfounded, that is, where the cause of our fear is an object of which we ought not be afraid. Fear, then, has a normative dimension. There are norms governing fear, at least in some cases, and just as philosophers can attempt to discover moral and epistemic (knowledge-related) norms, we can also search for the appropriate emotional responses to the things, creatures, and events we encounter, in part by coming to understand the objects that cause our emotional responses.

In “The Invaders” a single earthling is subject to an invasion by a similar aggressor from outer space, and like Ms. Scott and Trooper Franklin, she’s in the dark about the object of her fear through most of the episode. Yet the invading forces in the two episodes employ significantly different strategies of conquest. In both cases, fear is based not only on the
object of fear being unknown but also on our faulty theorizing about the nature of those objects. It’s worth reflecting on why the strategy in “The Invaders” is more promising than that employed in “The Fear.”

FURTHER READING


Philosophical keywords: emotions, perception
This final offering from *The Twilight Zone* takes up a theme treated in at least four prior episodes—the nature of marriage—but with a difference. “Young Man’s Fancy,” “Passage on the Lady Anne,” “Spur of the Moment,” and “What’s in the Box,” are about marriages where no children are present. “The Betwitchin’ Pool” is about marriage and divorce from the perspective of children.

Sport and Jeb Sharewood, about twelve and ten years of age, respectively, learn of their parents’ plans to divorce abruptly, without warning and without emotional support. They are also informed, coldly and harshly, that the decision about which parent they will live with after the divorce is theirs alone. These circumstances raise a host of questions that have to do with the moral landscape of families, questions about the obligations and rights of both parents and children.

Parents incur obligations related to the care and development of their children as the result of becoming parents, whether by being the natural parents or by adoption. Those obligations are not nullified by divorce, though the ways in which those obligations are carried out may change. Although the Sharewood parents don’t shirk all their responsibilities, it is clear that Sport and Jeb are unwanted. The children know this, and they also believe—mistakenly, of course—that they are responsible for the failure of the marriage. Shockingly, the parents endorse this false belief.
The moral dimension of the children is more complex. We often say that children should obey their parents, yet that’s under the assumption that what the parents require of their children is appropriate and in the interest of the children. When Sport and Jeb seek an escape from their abusive parents, it appears that they have violated no obligation. The only obligations that have been violated, it seems, are their parents’ obligation to them. But what are those obligations?

In thinking about these issues, we have a tendency to shift back to thinking about parents and their moral responsibilities. It is helpful to try to see things from the point of view of children, and that’s what “The Bewitchin’ Pool” attempts to do. When we think about the alternative possible worlds the children could occupy, we can begin to make sense of what would be required of parents or other caregivers to provide for the needs of Sport and Jeb.

It’s important to note that the possible world Sport and Jeb come to occupy is one they jointly imagine. While we often think of imaginary worlds as the creation of a single imagination, a possible world can be reached through dialogue, discussion, negotiation, and agreement among individuals. Among children at play, this is often how possible worlds are constructed and then employed. Sport and Jeb are well suited to the imaginative task at hand. As siblings of unloving and uncaring parents, their desires and needs are similar, and imagining a possible world much better than the actual world is an easy task. That doesn’t mean that they will immediately agree about every ingredient of the shared possible world. “The Bewitchin’ Pool” presents both the agreement and the conflict. The conflict takes place when only one of them, Jeb, is represented as returning to that world.

Not surprisingly, the world Sport and Jeb imagine does not include their parents at all. It does include other children, including children of other ethnicities, happily at play. There is also Aunt T, an elderly matriarch, who is icing a cake and invites them to make the decision to join her in the task, rather than engage in a boxing match, an option she has also made possible. It’s a world in which children can make their own decisions and sometimes make the right ones.

Pondering Sport and Jeb’s possible world does not demonstrate what adults are morally obligated to do for them as children of divorced parents. We know at most that what the Sharewoods are morally required to do will not look anything like what their children have constructed in their imaginations and would not even be obtainable, given their financial
and class-based circumstances. Still, let’s not lose sight of the positive features of the destination reached by the bewitchin’ pool: choice, diversity, and love.

FURTHER READING


*Philosophical keywords*: childhood, diversity, marriage, obligation
To the extent that there is a popular image of the field of philosophy, it presents philosophers as absent-minded professors hopelessly pre-occupied with obscure puzzles, problems, and very old books, clueless about current trends and vital issues in science, business, politics, and popular culture. That characterization may have fit some philosophers in the distant past. For example, in the third century BCE, the philosopher Pyrrho was said to be so committed to an extreme form of skepticism, the view that no one knows anything, that he refused to hold any beliefs and had to be led by the hand by his students, since taking a step on his own would have betrayed his skepticism. Diogenes’ account of the life of Pyrrho contains stories such as one in which Pyrrho is startled by a barking dog and after he recovers his composure, Pyrrho apologizes to his students for holding the belief that the dog posed a danger. Of course, it is difficult to see how Pyrrho or anyone else could really avoid holding beliefs. Even the apology for holding beliefs about the barking dog would appear to commit Pyrrho to other beliefs. But even if this story is accurate, such an extreme commitment to separation from everyday life is, well, extreme, and certainly not representative of philosophers generally.
If the introduction to philosophy presented in this book shows anything, it is that philosophy is inextricably connected to everyday concerns. That might seem like a surprising claim, because we’ve emphasized the use that philosophers make of possible worlds other than the actual world. So how is philosophy, as we’ve introduced it, tethered to the “real world”? The answer is that we imagine what is possible from the standpoint of what is actual. To contemplate how things might be different, we need to have some knowledge or at least some stable beliefs about how things are. Consider, for example, the question of whether computers can think. In order to ask that question, we must understand what computers are and how they work. Armed with that understanding, we can ask whether and how computers might be able to extend their behavior, to transform input into output that is like the way we produce such transformations, as we do, for example, when the input is in the form of questions, commands, and assertions in ordinary language and the output is in the form of linguistic and/or other behavioral responses that we would describe as intelligent. It is no accident that the explosion in interest in the possibility of artificial intelligence and related subjects followed the invention and subsequent proliferation of digital computers in the twentieth century.

Well into the first quarter of the twenty-first century, *The Twilight Zone* continues to exercise our imaginations, and it enables us to challenge our most fundamental ideas about who we are and what is of value. The series itself is part of our cultural history, one that we occupy at a distance of roughly half a century. Many episodes are set in times later than the 1960s, and although such episodes were not attempting to predict the future, it is not uncommon for viewers now to take note of the respects in which today’s world looks increasingly like the world portrayed in episodes that were set in the future. Even where our world bears little superficial resemblance to the sets of some *Twilight Zone* episodes, many represent difficulties and perplexities that, at best, were highly suppressed in the optimistic view of the industrialized world of the middle of the twentieth century. In this postscript, we’ll review some of the ways *The Twilight Zone* hits close to home, almost sixty years later.

At the time of the first broadcast of *The Twilight Zone*, the world was still reeling from two world wars, and people were just beginning to attempt to understand, anticipate, and respond to global causes and effects. The issue that took center stage was the danger posed by the proliferation of nuclear
weapons, an issue amply represented in episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, such as “Time Enough at Last,” “Third from the Sun,” and “Elegy.” We’ve already noted that the threat of nuclear annihilation is featured in two of the first fourteen episodes. While the threat is still very real sixty years later, what’s changed is that it is just one of many threats to life on Earth. Those other threats include nuclear contamination from peaceful uses of nuclear energy, global pandemics, and the effects of climate change. While we have not been subject to the some of the extreme outcomes imagined in *The Twilight Zone*, we have, unfortunately, become more intimately familiar with them in the recent past, with Chernobyl, Fukushima, and the severe effects of both COVID-19 and climate change.

What these threats have in common is their capacity to bring us to the end of our species and, in some cases, all species. What is that possible world like? How would those who experience our collective demise feel at the moment of the recognition of its inevitability? It is this reckoning, this confrontation with the loss of the ground beneath our feet, that is laid bare in *The Twilight Zone*. In “Midnight Sun” the earth is warming very quickly. Almost everyone is fleeing north. Among those who don’t, including those who can’t, norms of behavior break down and extraordinary courage and compassion are demonstrated all at the same time. “One More Pallbearer” testifies to the motivational force of our ties to loved ones. Perhaps we only fully confront our most deeply held values and beliefs when faced with such stark choices.

Just heading north (or south) is clearly not a long-term solution, and some are hopeful that the long-term alternative to a broken Earth is to jettison the planet for another, natural or artificial. The actual world has not advanced sufficiently since the 1960s to have turned such hopes into live possibilities. Several episodes suggest that even if some advanced technological and scientific escape valve were at hand, we would still be hobbled by the same cognitive and affective frameworks that precipitated our unfortunate state. We see this in “The Shelter,” where those who were once close neighbors turn on each other violently in response to an early missile warning system alert, and in “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” where another slice of suburban bliss is shattered by the fears and suspicions of neighbor to neighbor. Were we to escape Earth and try again somewhere else, “On Thursday We Leave for Home,” “Third from the Sun,” and “I Shot an Arrow into the Air” suggest that that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, that humanity itself is the common denominator in our inability to sustain ourselves.
In the grip of the first global pandemic since the end of World War I, coupled with severe climate-change enhanced weather events and less obvious long-term changes such as coral bleaching and sea level rise, we may well judge our collective responses to the threat and reality of displacement and adjustment almost one hundred years later to be as desperate and fractured as those presented in these *Twilight Zone* episodes. Perhaps we’ve made the mistake of the residents of Peaceful Valley, in “Valley of the Shadow.” They possess the secrets for sustaining their way of life but fear the consequences of sharing them with the rest of the world. Their mistake is thinking that flourishing in isolation is a viable long-term strategy.

In the United States of the early twenty-first century, but also in many other countries, there is a renewed and reinvigorated focus on our racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and cultural diversity, including our past failures to address issues of justice and equity and the challenges to address those same issues before us today. At the same time, there are also powerful nativist forces that see the diversification of the population as posing cultural and economic threats to traditional ways of life. Although the 1960s in the United States was also such a period, it might, at first glance, appear that *The Twilight Zone*, like so much of the television programming of the period, existed in a lily-white bubble, in complete isolation from the social issues that were gripping the country as well as the struggle for civil rights.

Writers and producers of television shows in the early years of the genre were harshly censored by the networks and sponsors who underwrote their efforts. Television sponsors wished to present a homogeneous and strife-free society continually made better by the products they advertised. Television series often had a single or primary sponsor; in many cases it was a tobacco company, the logo of which would appear in the closing credits. Sponsors, with the support of network executives, routinely exercised their power to reject or force radical changes in scripts that they believed were incompatible with the promotion of their products and their image, requiring rewrites and even rejecting entire episodes of television shows.

It is not surprising that at first glance, *The Twilight Zone* seems not to directly address the social, political, and cultural issues of diversity, equality, and human rights. Attempts to do so were routinely shot down by network executives under pressure from sponsors. Casting a diverse group of actors was out of the question. It would be a mistake, however,
to conclude that these issues and concerns were not addressed. Quite to the contrary, Serling found ways to emphasize them that were subtle and forceful, in a manner that often left the sponsors and censors clueless about the intended message.

Both “Number 12 Looks Just Like You” and “Eye of the Beholder” feature all-white casts, yet quite directly challenge the societal forces of conformity regarding physical appearance and explore the connection between forced conformity and limitations on speech and expression. “The Obsolete Man” depicts a possible world in which citizens are judged obsolete and then eliminated, based on the deviation of their practices and beliefs from state-sanctioned norms. Such a world does not require bending our imaginations toward some technology-enriched future. The materials for constructing such representations can be readily drawn from ancient Athens and its treatment of Socrates, to the Holocaust, still in the recent past for viewers in the early 1960s, as it is chillingly represented in “He’s Alive” and “Deaths-Head Revisited.” They can also be drawn from the poverty and homelessness that was part of the urban landscape amidst the prosperity of the post–World War II era. “The Night of the Meek” shines a light on the duplicity and moral emptiness of our commercial celebrations of holidays like Christmas, where commerce reigns and the reminders of the true significance of the holiday, urged on behalf of the downtrodden and impoverished, is dismissed as mere philosophy by the buyers and sellers.

The critique of the crass commercialism of post–World War II America is another thread in The Twilight Zone. Some episodes put the preoccupation with material gain, wealth, and the corresponding social status on display. The distorting effects of the monetization of culture is highlighted in “Come Wander with Me,” where a musician combs the rural South looking for fresh songs to appropriate but runs up against a folk tradition that regards music as a basic element of interpersonal communication and as little for sale as casual greetings and discussion. “The Bard” shines a light on television itself and explores the possible world in which Shakespeare is a television scriptwriter. It’s not surprising that this was not a match made in heaven.

If concern for the plight of artistic creativity in the modern world was clearly on the minds of the authors and producers of The Twilight Zone, so too were less self-interested matters of economic and social justice, as they were arising in new and sometimes troubling ways, through the automation of labor, the stratification of the workforce, the rise of multinational corporations and their impersonal interests, and changes in
the scope and influence of various forms of media, including print media. Many episodes are about women and men at work, in factories, on farms, in corporate boardrooms, as pilots and flight attendants, as scientists in the lab and as astronauts exploring space. These episodes theorize about the nature of work and how it might change and the implications of those changes for our well-being, both from the perspective of workers and the perspective of the titans of industry and commerce. Herbert Marcuse painted a similar picture of these groups in *One-Dimensional Man*. Neither group is immune from the shifting material conditions of the industrial and computer ages. These concerns remain unresolved today.

There are also vast differences in working conditions and job security for blue- and white-collar workers in the United States in the early twenty-first century compared to the middle of the twentieth century. Optimism and rising expectations about the benefits of economic growth are now tempered by the failure of such growth to lead to significant improvements in the material conditions of most workers. Many *Twilight Zone* episodes reflect the postwar booming economy and a cheery outlook for an improving lot for workers, but a closer look at episodes that address work directly provide warnings to the wary viewer.

In several episodes depicting working life, characters are so miserable in their jobs that they seek relief in the Twilight Zone. In “Walking Distance” Martin Sloan escapes to his past as he recoils from his high-pressure job as a New York City executive. Similar pressures push Williams to suicide, represented as Willoughby, an imaginary small stop on his commute from the city to his suburban Connecticut home, in “A Stop at Willoughby.” Several episodes depict individuals who simply cannot meet the demands and austere conditions of their working lives, and we can see why. Thoughtless conformity is demanded. Creativity and spontaneity are shunned, as we see in “Mr. Bevis.” The well-being and development of the worker is never a priority. Where this is all going is made clear in “The Obsolete Man,” where a freethinker, a reader of books, and artisan is deemed obsolete and sentenced to elimination by the state. At best, the worker’s relationship to the employer is completely transactional. The transaction includes a paycheck but nothing more. The worker’s contribution is rigid, unthinking conformity to the demands of the job. *The Twilight Zone*’s depiction of work rings true more than half a century later, when regular employment is often replaced with the contract workers of the gig economy.
The ever-increasing role that computing technology plays in work and everyday life has led to widespread reflection on, and predictions about, the future of work. “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” and several other episodes present what is now commonplace—computers and robots in the workplace carrying out tasks that previously could only be carried out by intelligent human workers. Such episodes raise questions that we haven’t begun to answer, even though we occupy workplaces with digital technology barely imagined in these episodes.

Some of those questions revolve around our self-concern. What will happen when computers and robots can perform my job? What will happen to me? Will I be out of a job, or will I be liberated to pursue other, more interesting jobs? How will economies and governments respond to the shifting demand for skills and abilities that results from the widespread use of computers? Will the need for humans to labor in workplaces eventually come to an end, as some have predicted, freeing us up to spend all our time in artistic and leisurely projects?

*The Twilight Zone* raised questions about artificial intelligence that are not the familiar ones about how computers and automation will affect us but rather about how we will affect artificially intelligent agents and, in particular, about the moral rights such agents possess and the obligations we incur both as creators of such agents and as collaborators with them. We have not encountered and may never encounter artificially intelligent individuals like those in “From Agnes—With Love,” “Uncle Simon,” “Steel,” “In His Image,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” and “The Lateness of the Hour,” but considering possible worlds in which computers and robots have feelings, including such complex feelings as pride and empathy, can help us reflect on our own prejudices and preconceptions about our future complex interactions with ever more complex artifacts. We may well reflect on the beliefs of our predecessors and their certainty that the rights and privileges they failed to extend to intelligent agents who were superficially different and consider whether our own attitudes toward intelligent artifacts may just be more of the same.

While *The Twilight Zone* clearly did imagine digital technology, artificial intelligence, and automation playing an increased role in work and culture, it did not directly anticipate the advances in computing and networking that have resulted in the explosion of internet-enabled social media. It did, however, explore the ways in which traditional forms of print and broadcast media might be used and abused. In several episodes, first-time visitors from other planets arrive on Earth with settled
opinions about human nature, opinions derived from intercepting our broadcasts and publications. In “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street” and “To Serve Man,” they are well informed. In other cases, such as “The Fear” and “Black Leather Jackets,” the invaders make the wrong inferences and fail to successfully size up those they hope to conquer. These are cautionary tales about the potential challenges of trying to make sense of radically different cultures through their media output.

The possibility of manipulating the press, set out vividly in “Printer’s Devil,” is a possibility that we now see actualized again and again. Anyone with an Internet connection can be a printer’s devil, “reporting” opinions presented as facts via social media. As we noted elsewhere, the distinction between reporting the news and creating the news has been blurred, and the resulting havoc anticipated by “Printer’s Devil” is now a commonplace of political life.

In these and in other ways, The Twilight Zone sparks our philosophical imagination, forcing us to confront our moral and political challenges, as they relate to our fundamental understanding of ourselves and our collective possibilities. Indeed, it has become commonplace for commentators remarking on the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic to characterize their observations as bearing a striking resemblance to The Twilight Zone. An September 2021 article in The Lancet authored by Robert D Friedberg, for example, has the title “Another Dimension: COVID-19, The Twilight Zone, and Me.” While it is never clear precisely what similarities such commentators have in mind, perhaps it is simply this: As our actual circumstances begin, surprisingly, to line up with what we imagined to be well outside those circumstances, we find ourselves, much like the characters in The Twilight Zone, challenged to think, and to act, in new and unfamiliar ways, to find ways of changing our ideas to meet those challenges.

FURTHER READING


This index offers a cross-referencing of philosophical keywords relevant to each episode of *The Twilight Zone*. The keywords are listed in alphabetical order, and the episodes appear in the order they aired.

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“A Game of Pool”
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“The Masks”

**AGING**
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