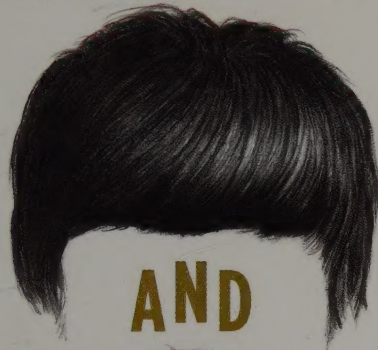


THE BEATLES



AND



PHILOSOPHY



EDITED BY MICHAEL BAUR

AND STEVEN BAUR

NOTHING YOU CAN THINK THAT CAN'T BE THUNK

Popular Culture and Philosophy®

The Beatles and Philosophy

*Nothing You Can Think that
Can't Be Thunk*

Edited by

MICHAEL BAUR

and

STEVEN BAUR



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2

And the Time Will Come When You See We're All One: The Beatles and Idealistic Monism

MICHAEL BAUR

This book brings together philosophy and the Beatles, or—more precisely—it considers the work of the Beatles from a philosophical point of view. But this is not meant to imply that the Beatles *intended* to be philosophical, or that the *content* of their work is overtly philosophical in any obvious sense. In fact, there are good reasons to think of the Beatles' attitudes—and the attitudes conveyed indirectly through their work—as rather anti-philosophical.

Paul McCartney once remarked—no doubt with tongue planted firmly in cheek—that “Love Me Do” was the Beatles' greatest “philosophical song.”¹ And correspondingly, John Lennon was well-known for his deliberate insertion of nonsense lyrics into Beatles songs, for the sole purpose of confounding those who thought that they could find deeper meaning in the work of the Beatles. Referring to his song, “Glass Onion,” Lennon remarked: “I was just having a laugh, because there had been so much gobbledeegook written about *Sgt. Pepper*. People were saying, ‘Play it backwards while standing on your head, and you’ll get a secret message. . . .’ So this was just my way of saying, ‘You are all full of shit’” (*Beatlesongs*, p. 225).

But in spite of their lack of interest in traditional philosophy and their explicit disavowals about the deeper meaning of their songs, there are also good reasons to approach and interpret the

¹ Quoted in William J. Dowling, ed., *Beatlesongs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 33.

Beatles and their work from a philosophical point of view. In his *Playboy* interview from September of 1980, John praised Paul for the philosophical significance of the song, "The End," which appeared on the *Abbey Road* album: "That's Paul again. . . . He had a line in it—'The love you take is equal to the love you make'—which is a very cosmic, philosophical line. Which again proves that if [Paul] wants to, he can think" (*Beatlesongs*, p. 292). And in a similar vein, Paul revealed in an interview that Beatles songs are *meant* to be interpreted from different perspectives and on different levels: "You put your own meaning at your own level to our songs, and that's what's great about them" (*Beatlesongs*, p. 143). Of course, there are many things that are "great" about Beatles songs; but one of the great things—certainly for those who want to be thoughtful and reflective about popular culture—is that they can be interpreted philosophically and thus appreciated in light of philosophical ideas and theories. One such theory is what might be called "idealistic monism."

In general, monism is the philosophical view that all reality is a single, unified whole and that all existing things are modes or expressions of a single, underlying essence or substance. Idealistic monism is a specific version of monism. According to idealistic monism, all existing things are modes or expressions of a single essence or substance which is essentially mental or spiritual in nature (thus idealistic monism is opposed to materialistic monism, according to which all existing things are modes or expressions of some underlying material substance). Many Beatles songs and musical gestures reflect a commitment to a form of idealistic monism—even if this commitment is not explicitly stated by the Beatles themselves.

By interpreting the Beatles in light of idealistic monism, we may learn a lesson not only about the Beatles, but also—more generally—about the relationship between philosophy and popular culture. For philosophy can shed light on popular culture by articulating some of the more interesting and thought-provoking ideas often hidden or embedded within popular culture; and conversely, popular culture can facilitate the practice of philosophy by providing a medium through which some of philosophy's more relevant and intuitive claims might be illustrated. A good model for bringing together philosophy and popular cul-

ture in this way is furnished by Hegel's distinction between "observing" and "observed" consciousness.²

"Observing consciousness" is the consciousness of the philosophically-minded observer who "looks on" as a particular way of life or particular form of ordinary consciousness ("observed consciousness") goes about its affairs in an unreflective way. Often, this ordinary, observed consciousness lacks the theoretical perspective or conceptual framework for giving an adequate, accurate account of itself, and so the philosophical, "observing consciousness" may be in a position to assist ordinary consciousness in giving an account of itself. That is, the philosophical observer may be in a position to provide the conceptual tools or theoretical framework that ordinary (observed) consciousness needs, but otherwise lacks, for explaining its own beliefs and commitments.

A small child (like observed consciousness) may benefit from the conceptual tools available to a parent (observing consciousness), but not yet available to the child himself. The child may crave the loving attention of his parents; but even though he wants such attention, the child may not know how to *explain* that he wants this attention. And so instead of asking nicely for the desired attention, the child may throw a temper tantrum. On a certain level, the child undoubtedly *knows* what he wants, for he will glow with delight just as soon as he receives the desired attention; but he does not know how to *explain* what he wants, and so he might need the help of others (such as parents) who possess a different vocabulary, in order to give an adequate explanation of what he wants.

In a similar vein, those who produce the artifacts of popular culture (like the Beatles and other musicians) may know a thing or two about philosophically relevant ideas; but they may lack the relevant philosophical tools for *explaining* such ideas in a clear and compelling way. To make the same point in terms used by the Beatles themselves: ordinary, non-philosophical consciousness may very well "want to tell you" since it is brimming with "things to say," but it may be at a loss for the right words until it gets a little help from its friends (philosophy).

² For more on this distinction, see Hegel's "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 46–57.

Much of the Beatles' work can be understood as concerning itself with the claims of "idealistic monism." The Beatles did not espouse idealism or monism in any well-developed, explicitly philosophical way, but they said enough in their works to make clear that they were concerned with the sorts of questions and quandaries that "idealistic monism" is designed to address. Idealistic monism is the view that all existing things are modes or expressions of single essence or substance which is essentially mental or spiritual in nature. Now idealistic monism can be understood as both a metaphysical theory (a theory about *being*, or about what exists in reality) as well as an epistemological theory (a theory about *knowledge*, or about how we might *know* what exists in reality). Of course, metaphysical theories often imply certain epistemological views, and (conversely) epistemological theories often imply certain metaphysical views. Thus if one is (metaphysically) a materialist (that is, if one holds that the only thing that exists in reality is matter, or material things), then one cannot consistently hold (in the realm of epistemology) that immaterial operations are involved in our knowing.

In their work, the Beatles make clear that they would reject the epistemological position which, in philosophical circles, has been (pejoratively) labeled "naive realism." According to "naive realism," we can know reality as it is in itself simply by allowing ourselves to be acted upon, or passively affected, by reality as it exists on its own, independent of our knowing it. For the naive realist, our knowledge of reality is immediate, direct, and involves no mediating activity by us as knowers. Rejecting such naive realism, the Beatles tell us in their 1966 song, "Rain," that reality does *not* present itself to us in such a simple, straightforward way. Instead, what seems to present itself to us as reality is "just a state of mind." And in "Strawberry Fields Forever" (1967), John famously sings that "nothing is real." The Beatles thus reject naive realism and (as far as epistemology is concerned) appear to adopt some form of idealism (according to which "the real" is essentially mental or spiritual in nature). But what kind of idealism do they adopt?

It is clear that the form of idealism espoused by the Beatles is not an entirely skeptical or subjectivistic form of idealism. For if the Beatles subscribed to an entirely skeptical or subjectivistic form of idealism (according to which we could not know anything beyond our own subjective states of mind), then the

Beatles could not claim to know anything about reality that is worthy of, and capable of, being communicated to others. But again and again in their songs, the Beatles make clear that they have something of value to convey to us. Indeed, the same two songs which seem to espouse an unqualified idealism (“Rain” and “Strawberry Fields Forever”) both also make clear that the Beatles take themselves to possess a kind of knowledge or insight that can be, and indeed *ought* to be, shared with others. Thus the protagonist in “Rain” plaintively addresses the listener by singing, “I can show you,” and “Can you hear me?” In a similar vein, the protagonist of “Strawberry Fields Forever,” while denying that anything is real in the naive realist’s sense, nevertheless invites the listener to share meaningfully in his experience of reality: “Let me take you down.” The point is that at least *something* is real and that something is worthy of being known and communicated to others (for if this were not the case, the Beatles would not have written songs in the first place); but our access to this reality is not as simple and straightforward as the naive realist would have us believe.

But now how is it possible to reject naive realism (and adopt some form of idealism), while nevertheless believing in the existence of some kind of reality that can be truly known and communicated to others? For the Beatles—as for many philosophers—the solution to this problem can be found if one’s acceptance of (epistemological) idealism is accompanied by an acceptance of (metaphysical) monism; in short, if one accepts the philosophical position of idealistic monism. The American philosopher, Josiah Royce (1855–1916), espoused a form of idealistic monism, and—most helpfully for our purposes here—argued that epistemological idealism and metaphysical monism, properly understood, mutually imply and mutually support one another.

In *The World and the Individual*, Royce argues that anyone who adopts a realistic (non-idealistic) position in epistemology is implicitly committed to a non-monistic position in metaphysics.³ For the realist, in order to be a realist, must hold that there exist (at least) two beings that are wholly independent and

³ See especially Josiah Royce, Lecture III of *The World and the Individual* (New York: MacMillan, 1899).

indifferent to one another. These two independently-existing beings are: the being constituted by one's own thoughts and ideas (the "mind"), and the being constituted by (at least one) entity outside of one's own thoughts and ideas (the "external world"). The realist must think of these two beings as wholly independent and indifferent to one another, such that a change in one implies no change in the other. Thus the realist holds that a change in one's thoughts and ideas (or mind) implies no necessary change in the external object (or world); and conversely, that a change in the external object (or world) implies no necessary change in one's thoughts and ideas (or mind). Royce concludes that the realist cannot be a monist, since the realist must hold that there exist at least two real beings or substances that are wholly independent and indifferent to one another. Indeed, Royce argues that the realist's (epistemological) denial that there is an underlying unity or connection between mind and world is just a particular application of the realist's (anti-monistic, metaphysical) denial that all things are fundamentally interrelated and part of a single, underlying reality. Whether it is acknowledged or not, the realist is inevitably committed to the problematic anti-monistic view (lamented in "Within You, Without You") that there is fundamentally a "space between us all."

Royce argues, however, that just as the consistent espousal of realism entails the rejection of monism, so too the consistent espousal of idealism (and rejection of realism) entails the acceptance of monism. Thus for Royce, the term "idealistic monism" is redundant: the consistent idealist must be a monist, and the consistent monist must be an idealist. Our knowing, and the reality that is known, are not independent and indifferent to one another. Rather, a change in one necessarily implies a change in the other, for "mind" and "world" are not two independently-existing entities, but rather only modes or expressions of a single, underlying reality which is essentially mental or spiritual in nature. The underlying unity or connection between mind and world is just a particular instance of the underlying unity or connection of all things that exist.

Like Royce, the Beatles consistently espoused the view that all things are fundamentally interrelated and part of a single, underlying reality. This commitment to metaphysical monism is evident in a number of songs that deal—on one level or another—with the unity and interrelatedness of all things

("Tomorrow Never Knows," "Within You Without You," "The Inner Light," "All You Need Is Love," "All Together Now"); but it is also evident in the Beatles' obsession with writing and producing songs that could be appealing and catchy, while revolving around only one chord ("If I Needed Someone," "Paperback Writer," "The Word," and "Tomorrow Never Knows").

Even the Beatles' early experimentation with LSD can be understood in connection with their commitment to idealistic monism (though this is certainly not to suggest that those who are seriously committed to idealistic monism must also experiment with hallucinogenic drugs!). For if idealistic monism is correct, then presumably there must be some way in which the underlying unity of mind and world, and of all things in general, can be *experienced* by us. It was this desire to *experience* or to achieve *awareness* of the underlying unity of all things that—at least in part—helps to explain and contextualize the Beatles' experimentation with drugs. Having been influenced by a book called *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert), the Beatles came to believe that one can achieve an awareness of the unity of all things by taking LSD and undergoing the process of "depersonalization" and "ego-loss" that accompanies drug-induced altered states. By annihilating or extinguishing one's individual selfhood through drug-induced states, they thought, one can achieve what Carl Jung and (later) Timothy Leary called "ocean consciousness": the sense that "all things are one, and that consciousness of one's individuality is merely an illusion." Thus the Beatles' tune, "The Inner Light," suggests that on a certain level we can know and experience all that is, if we would only give up our individuality and stop *trying* to know and experience all that is:

The farther one travels
The less one knows. . . .
Arrive without traveling
See all without knowing
Do all without doing.

And in a similar vein, the song "Tomorrow Never Knows" advises the listener to "Turn off your mind" and "surrender to the void."

There's a serious problem, however, if one's desire to experience the unity of all things leads one to seek the annihilation or extinguishment of one's individuality or selfhood. The problem is that there can be no experience of anything whatsoever, if there no longer exists an individual self that is "there" to have the experience. If the individual self really is annihilated or extinguished, then—even if there is an underlying unity that binds all things together—there cannot be any *experience* or *awareness* of that unity. The underlying unity of all things will remain a blind unity, unknown to any conscious self.

Any attempt to bring about the experience or awareness of the unity of all things—if such an attempt is premised on the extinguishment or annihilation of the individual self—is necessarily self-defeating. It's no surprise that the Beatles themselves seem to have grappled with this very problem. They did so most directly in their 1966 song, "She Said, She Said," which was inspired by a conversation that John Lennon had with Peter Fonda. During a party in Los Angeles in August of 1965, Fonda reportedly told Lennon that a recent acid trip had made him lose his individual selfhood so successfully that he was able to know what it's like not to exist as an individual self, or (as the song goes) "what it's like to be dead." Lennon's response to Fonda's absurd claim could hardly be more direct and severe: "No, no, no, you're wrong. . . ."

But if one cannot experience or achieve awareness of the unity of all things through self-annihilation or self-extinguishment, then how is such an experience or awareness possible (assuming that it is possible at all)? The difficulty seems to become even more intractable when one considers that consciousness or awareness is (as many philosophers have observed) always *intentional*; that is to say, consciousness is always *about something* or always *directed at something*.⁴ Thus every conscious act and every conscious representation (whether it be a belief, desire, or feeling) is always *about something* other than consciousness itself, and this "something" is the "intentional object" of consciousness. Even if the intentional object does not have any independent existence apart from con-

⁴ The two philosophers who are most famous for emphasizing the *intentional* nature of consciousness are Franz Brentano (1838–1917) and Edmund Husserl (1859–1938).

consciousness itself, it is nevertheless still the case that consciousness—as intentional—is directed at something that is not the same as consciousness itself. For instance, a conscious fear—even if it's a delusional or misguided fear—is never a fear about consciousness itself, but always about something *other* than consciousness). It's this character of 'being intentional' that distinguishes psychic or conscious happenings from happenings that are merely physical or natural; for merely physical or natural happenings lack the 'directedness' or 'aboutness' that necessarily characterizes all mental or conscious happenings. It is an account of its intentionality that consciousness is always "called on and on," beyond itself alone and across the universe of all possible intentional objects.

Because of the intentional character of consciousness, consciousness always involves consciousness of something *other* than consciousness itself. And so here's the difficulty: on the one hand, there can be no experience or no awareness of the unity of all things, if the conscious, individual self is annihilated or extinguished; on the other hand, the conscious, individual self (just so long as it is conscious of anything at all) is always conscious of what is *other* than consciousness itself. And so instead of being aware of the unity of all things, the conscious individual self—to the extent that it is conscious at all—always seems to be aware of something that is *other* than consciousness itself, and thus always seems to be aware that there is a *difference* between itself and the object of its consciousness. But if consciousness—by virtue of being intentional—always involves consciousness of the *difference* between itself and its object, then it would seem that it is systematically impossible to achieve *consciousness* of the *unity* of all things. For built in to the very nature of consciousness is an awareness of the *difference* or *non-unity* between things (in this case, between consciousness and its intentional object). As long as consciousness is intentional, there must be a *difference* or *non-unity* between consciousness itself and its intended object; as soon as that difference or division is extinguished, then consciousness itself is extinguished. In short, it seems that *consciousness* of the *unity* of all things can never be achieved by anyone.

The German idealist philosopher, Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) accepted the view that consciousness is always intentional; but he also argued that one could achieve con-

sciousness or awareness of the unity of all things—even without the use of hallucinogenic drugs. But how is such consciousness possible? The key, Schelling held, was to see that one's awareness of things *other* than consciousness (rocks, minerals, plants, and other things in the non-conscious, natural world) was at some fundamental level nothing other than an awareness of the underlying substance or essence that constituted one's own consciousness. In other words, the key was to see that the forces at work in constituting things in the natural world (that is, the world that is *other than* or *different from* one's own consciousness) are the same as the forces at work in constituting one's own individual consciousness. It's just that in the natural world, these forces are at work unconsciously and without any apparent aim or purpose; and in one's individual consciousness, these forces are at work consciously and with a sense of purpose. So when an individual, conscious self is aware of something *other* than itself, Schelling argued, it is really (indirectly) aware of its own selfhood, only this selfhood appears to the conscious self under the guise of unconscious nature. In being aware of what is apparently separate from itself (for example, in being aware of chemicals seeking to bond with other chemicals or in being aware of animals seeking the company of other animals), the conscious self is really only aware of its own self, but in disguised, unconscious form. With this insight, Schelling was able to accept that consciousness is always intentional (always *about* something other than consciousness itself), but also hold that it is possible to achieve an awareness of the unity of consciousness and the unconscious world, and thus an awareness of the unity of all things in general.

In their own way, the Beatles seem to have appreciated this insight; and their own work displays many affinities with Schelling's brand of "idealistic monism." For like Schelling, the Beatles seem to have sensed that what—on one level—appears to be merely unintended, unconscious, and lacking in purpose, is—on another level—actually no different from what is conscious, intended, and purpose-driven. The Beatles often incorporated mere coincidences, accidents, and outright mistakes into their finished work, thus implying that what is merely accidental, purposeless, and unconscious, is really the same as what is intended, purposeful, and conscious (albeit in disguised

form). An early example of this is the sound of guitar feedback which the Beatles decided to include at the beginning of their recording of "I Feel Fine." Another example pertains to the song, "Hey Bulldog," which was originally meant to be called, "Hey Bullfrog." But during one of their recording sessions, Paul began to make barking noises in order to make John laugh; the barking noises were picked up by the recording equipment and then integrated into the song itself, which was then re-named "Hey Bulldog."

With time, the Beatles indeed became very sophisticated and deliberate about creating opportunities for the occurrence of accidents and coincidences, which could then be integrated into their finished work. For example, members of the orchestra employed on "A Day in the Life" were instructed to wear party masks and other strange outfits during the recording of the song (the conductor himself donned a bright red, artificial, clown-style nose). The intention was to create a fresh, uncontrolled context within which the conductor and orchestra members could react to each other in new and unexpected ways.

George's composition of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" was motivated by a similar belief in the fundamental unity of all things (including the conscious and the unconscious, the intended and the unintended). Inspired by the *I Ching* (which also teaches about the fundamental unity of all things), George deliberately decided to write a song based on a seemingly random, unintended occurrence. While visiting his parents' home in Lancashire, he picked a book off the shelf with the intention of composing a song organized around the first words he encountered. Those randomly-chosen words were "gently weeps," which then formed the basis of George's famous composition.

A final—and perhaps better-known—example of the Beatles' intentional use of the accidental or the unintended, is to be seen in their regular experimentation with backwards loopings. By using backwards loopings in their recordings, the Beatles deliberately chose to undertake the creative process of music-composition blindly—or in certain a sense, unconsciously—so as to generate new and unpredictable results, and then—only later—to integrate those results into their finished work *as if* they were originally intended. Though they did not explicitly reflect on the philosophical implications of this practice of backwards looping,

the implicit lesson of this practice is the same as the lesson to be found in idealistic monism. The lesson is that what is blind, unconscious, unintended, or without purpose is—after all—not essentially different from what is deliberate, conscious, intended, and purpose-driven. The former (unconscious) kind of entity is really only an undeveloped, inchoate, and disguised form of the latter (conscious) kind. Our becoming aware of the unity of the conscious and the unconscious, and thus our becoming aware of the underlying unity of all things, does not require the extinguishment of the individual self, and does not require that we deny the intentional nature of consciousness. It requires only that we learn to see in all things—including things that are apparently blind, unconscious, and purposeless—a glimmering of our own strivings and purposes as conscious beings. Once we have learned to appreciate all things in this way, then—like the Beatles—we can grow confident in espousing the thesis of idealistic monism: “the Time Will Come When You See We’re All One.”