**Please Don’t Call Us Jerks**

*A Theory of Jerks and Other Philosophical Misadventures* by Eric Schwitzgebel
Reviewed by Marley Hornewer, Sarah Khan, Rohan Meda, Kit Rempala, Sydney Samoska, and Joseph Vukov[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ina collection of short essays taken primarily from his popular blog *The Splintered Mind*, Eric Schwitzgebel curates a defence and demonstration of what he calls “Wonder philosophy”: the whimsical questioning of what we often take for granted. Or, as Schwitzgebel puts it, philosophy that “love[s] the strange and seemingly wrong” yet “is guided by a norm of sincerity and truth”. The idea that philosophy flows from wonder harkens back to the ancients: “I see, my dear Theaetetus, that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher; for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.” (Plato, *Theaetetus*). Schwitzgebel riffs on this ancient idea, foregrounding the sense of freedom and exploration that results from human intellect “turn[ing] against itself, casting doubt on itself or finding itself lost among seemingly improbable conclusions”. Unlike stodgy academic philosophy, Wonder philosophy throws philosophy’s momentum back to quotidian (yet often ignored) feelings of puzzlement, excitement, and awe. The Wonder philosopher returns philosophy to average people – people who, in their better moments, are attuned to the wonder implicit in their lives.

Schwitzgebel models his endorsement of Wonder philosophy in two ways. First, he considers pedestrian affairs with fresh awe, mulling over philosophical questions inherent in everyday occurrences: from haircuts to birthday celebrations to daily commutes. Second, he simplifies complex philosophical concepts such as Boltzmann brains to make them digestible for everyday readers. Schwitzgebel’s style is likely to appeal to the average person and professional philosophers alike, presenting philosophy in creative prose: 800-word blog post inspired vignettes, short essays, and pieces of philosophical fiction that sometimes resemble science fiction, and at other times, ancient allegories.

Despite the historical echo, Schwitzgebel is far from reverent of philosophical tradition. He expresses disillusionment with beloved philosophical figures, highlighting and then arguing against Kant’s “odious” view that we ought to interpret historical texts charitably.Schwitzgebel aims to demystify philosophy, and, in doing so, calls for today’s philosophers to expand beyond their academic lodgings: to contemplate everyday happenings and value the voices (and minds) of everyday people. Ultimately, philosophising is not an esoteric or inherently serious endeavour, nor does philosophy stand on a pedestal of flawless tradition. Anyone can be a philosopher so long as they are willing to engage wonder. In striking this tone, *A Theory of Jerks* reads as thoroughly forward-looking, an inspirational vision for the discipline.

*A Theory of Jerks* begins with a section titled “Jerks and Excuses”, a series of reflections on ethical decision-making and moral mediocrity. Here Schwitzgebel reflects on the seemingly dismal state of human morality. He examines the mechanisms of “jerkish” and hypocritical behaviour, and argues that most people settle for being as morally good as those around them. Schwitzgebel even reveals empirical data showing that ethicists – supposed paragons of morality – are no more likely than others to behave morally, i.e. to be vegetarian or donate to charity. Nonetheless, “Jerks and Excuses” is hopeful. The section concludes with the idea that “morality speaks to something born deep in everyone” and that, therefore, all people are capable of walking toward the good.

In Section II, “Cute AI and Zombie Robots,” Schwitzgebel turns to explore possibilities that AI presents in the near future, together with the moral implications of these possibilities. By offering a variety of vignettes and short essays, he explores scenarios and circumstances in which AI should be considered similar to humans. By asking provoking questions – *Would making joy and suffering a part of the AI experience render these nonhuman beings morally equal to us? What would be the social implications of implementing realistic AI?* – and discussing potential consequences, Schwitzgebel highlights a sharp divide. On one side, there are our naive fantasies of a perfect world filled with artificial intelligence, and on the other, our dystopian visions of the integration of such technology into our society.

Arguably the most accessible and personable section of the book, Section III, “Regrets and Birthday Cake” is as much a testament to the philosophy of everyday life as it is to nostalgia. Here, Schwitzgebel explores the allegorical value of religious games/observances, ponders big-time topics like love and death, and even embarks on an unexpected (but hilarious) examination of the tantalizing-ness of profanity. Interspersed, the reader will also find humbly profound essays about day-to-day practices like walks across a college campus and making birthday wishes, along with a candid introduction to Schwitzgebel’s father – his own inspiration to undertake Wonder philosophy.

In Section IV, “Cosmic Freaks”, Schwitzgebel examines topics spanning from the space-time continuum to human behaviour, identity, and consciousness. The section starts with an examination of a Matrioshka brain, the infinite computing source pondered by physicists and philosophers alike. Our sense of what the universe is, our place in it, and the acceptance of our individual identities all fall under Schwitzgebel’s scrutiny in this section. In many of these discussions, Schwitzgebel invites the reader to explore highly improbable but logically possible dimensions of human and cosmic existence (i.e. cosmic freaks). By reflecting on statistically insignificant but nonetheless logically viable possibilities, seemingly hypothetical concepts such as infinite lifetimes and experiences, the homunculus problem, and a societal consciousness become grist for the philosophical mill.

In Section V: “Kant versus the Philosopher of Hair,” Schwitzgebel calls his readers “philosophy dorks” and urges them to trust their sense of fun when it comes to philosophy. He focuses his discussion on the overall practice of philosophy, both criticizing the perceived value of academic philosophy and empowering less traditional ideas of what philosophy is meant to be. In his chapter “Truth, Dare, and Wonder”, Schwitzgebel answers the question, *Why study philosophy at all?* and asks why we direct philosophical thought towards some topics rather than others. Complex, heavy ideas often find homes in a philosopher’s mind, but why not have a philosophy of something more light-hearted, such as hair? Overall, Schwitzgebel redefines – or at least reconsiders – what it means to *do philosophy*. By disentangling philosophy from our idea of it as a lofty, academic pursuit, he demystifies what makes it intimidating to novices. Besides calling out Kant over his charitable attitude towards texts, Schwitzgebel explains that our own perceptions of philosophy need to move away from depictions of esoteric incomprehensibility as brilliance. The alternative: a philosophy refocused on a sense of wonder.

\*\*\*

Throughout the five sections of the book, Schwitzgebel thus presents us with a veritable smorgasbord of topics, one he intends to appeal to both professional philosophers and those with no professional training. He addresses his fellow professionals in his footnotes, and in his discussions of Mengzian philosophy, homunculi, and the theories of figures such as Galen Strawson, Daniel Dennett, and Peter Carruthers. In these discussions (and others), the reader needs prior training in philosophy to understand even superficially what is being discussed.

Schwitzgebel speaks to the average person in particular when he reflects on the more profound aspects of everyday life: finding beauty in the face of tragedy, the importance of being present in the world around you, and not taking the small things for granted. Other times his relatability is more whimsical, such as when he discusses problems like profanity inflation – the spoilage of profanity through overuse.

When it comes to fishing for an audience, Schwitzgebel thus casts two nets – one within the academy and one beyond it. Unfortunately, the nets sometimes tangle.

Consider first the net cast beyond the academy. Since many of Schwitzgebel’s chapters are refurbished blog posts, they were written with an audience of professional philosophers in mind: i.e., an audience that would seek out a philosophy blog. So while Schwitzgebel appeals to the average reader with his clear, playful tone, his essays are often written with allusions and terminology that assume more than a passing familiarity with philosophical concerns and methodologies. Would our cousins and great-uncles really care if that one “brilliant” grad student in the department is actually a fraud, or be engaged by Schwitzgebel’s takedown of Kant? Conversations we’ve had with relatives over the holidays suggest not. The book also often assumes an unusual level of philosophical *interest*. Would someone outside professional philosophy care about whether the garden snails ravaging their cabbages are conscious? Maybe. But again, our relatives suggest otherwise. To be fair, the book admits its audience is not an altogether general one: “If you’ve read this far into this dorky book, I have some bad news. You’re a philosophy dork”. Schwitzgebel clearly intends to make philosophy accessible to the everyday person, but we suspect the everyday person who will read this book is one who has already fallen for philosophy, and not merely flirted with it.

On the other hand, *A Theory of Jerks* is often too elementary and insubstantial to be satisfying for an academic philosopher. How many scholars would be convinced by a blog post to accept a theory of group consciousness or a moral Dunning-Kruger effect? In presenting us with a smorgasbord of philosophical topics, Schwitzgebel denies scholars the opportunity to chew on any single entrée. He opts for a superficial skim rather than a deep dive, hedging away from any overly controversial claims. As a result, many chapters are littered with phrases like “I think maybe”. *A Theory of Jerks* may come across as a tease to the academic reader: a rollercoaster that revs your imagination with a steep uphill climb, only to plateau on a flat, safe track.

The relative safety of Schwitzgebel’s book also hampers his own goal of demystifying philosophy. Schwitzgebel completes the first step: he debunks the elitism of academic philosophy and reveals philosophical inquiry as rooted in the everyday phenomenon of wonder. Yet he seems to stop short of the more delicate step: expounding *how* readers can and should connect with the kind of quotidian philosophy he endorses. The average person will testify that their imagination died with adolescence, and, with it, their ability to engage in wonder. By Schwitzgebel’s own lights, it is the responsibility of the philosopher to a) reassure readers that their imagination was never lost, and b) chart a practical path forward for rediscovering it. Schwitzgebel’s book makes some progress on (a), but little on (b). Similarly, while many academics will agree with Schwitzgebel’s notion of philosophical inquiry, they may struggle to identify strategies for applying whimsicality to their work – particularly within an academic system that awards the kind of philosophy Schwitzgebel begs us to move past. In places, Schwitzgebel models methods for connecting with wonder: blog posts, fiction stories, a straightforward writing style, etc. Still, while readers are left with a (largely uncontroversial) destination in sight, they lack the (more controversial) roadmap to get there. Both professional philosophers and others will leave with the impression that Schwitzgebel played it safe.

\*\*\*

Perhaps inadvertently, *A Theory of Jerks* does have an ideal audience: us! We loved the book. As a group, we run the gamut of Schwitzgebel’s potential audiences: undergraduates, a graduate student mentor, and a university philosophy professor. But our younger philosophers were especially captivated by Schwitzgebel’s wonder, both his call to it and demonstration of it. He connected with our love for philosophical inquiry, wrote to our level of expertise, and offered insight into the field we are pursuing. Even more significant, he generated valuable discussion regarding the nature of philosophy, and how we can impact the direction and reach of the discipline. *A Theory of Jerks* is perhaps most relevant to budding philosophers: those who will inherit the philosophical tradition and shape its persistence.

Our final evaluation of *A Theory of Jerks* is thus that it is best understood as a launch pad for a necessary conversation among philosophers. As Schwitzgebel impresses, philosophy is often viewed in problematic ways: as meant only for certain kinds of people, as disconnected with everyday life, as valuable in only its most arcane manifestations. He identifies an attitude – one of wonder – that can counteract the elitism of academic philosophy with humility and playfulness.

The mere idea of wonder, however, is only a starting point. It is the responsibility of today’s philosophers to pick up where Schwitzgebel left off: *how* can philosophy connect with wonder and expand its reach to everyday audiences? We’ll close with a list of suggestions, some already in practice, some aspirational:

* Forego a canonical text in an undergraduate philosophy class and instead read *A Theory of Jerks*. For students, *A Theory of Jerks* will serve as a catalyst for everyday philosophical thinking, and will empower them to seize their place in the field. For instructors, the book will provide a guide for connecting with students at their level.
* Host live, public discussions between philosophers and other scholars in forums similar to the University of Chicago’s “Night Owls” series. Forums such as these discourage the idea of philosophy as mysterious or unattainable, encouraging participants instead to engage in philosophical discussions about ideas that may have previously seemed daunting. This type of engagement invites people from different backgrounds – from those who dabble in philosophy to full-time academics – to find common ground in a philosophical investigation of daily life.
* Present philosophical ideas in interactive and accessible media such as video games, film, and TV shows. There are already philosophical themes at the core of *Black Mirror*, *The Good Place*, *The Matrix*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Nier Automata*, and *Bioshock*. By teaching, discussing, and encouraging the creation of resources like these, elements of philosophy become accessible to a wider audience. These resources can also provide a basis for philosophical dialogue between academic philosophers and everyday people. Philosophy is for the people and by the people, so it should take it to the places where the people are.
* Cross-list philosophy classes with other disciplines to bring philosophy to a broader group of undergraduate students. If there is anything that Schwitzgebel’s “philosopher of hair” exemplifies, it is that there can be a philosophy of anything. And yet, too few undergraduates imagine themselves capable of philosophising, and too many instructors limit their vision of philosophical instruction to the traditional philosophy curriculum. Cross-listing philosophy courses with other disciplines – disciplines in which curious (but hesitant) students already have some experience – allows students to enter a philosophy classroom with more confidence. Moreover, it presents students with the opportunity to expand their knowledge of philosophy while examining a favourite subject in a new light. An interdisciplinary approach to philosophy courses brings new voices to the table, and it invites a larger group of students to think (or rather, wonder) outside their discipline’s box.
* Form research groups composed of faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students. That’s what we’ve done at Loyola University Chicago’s Interdisciplinary Philosophy and Bioethics Lab. Our group is a mixture of undergraduate students together with a graduate student mentor (Kit Rempala) and faculty mentor (Joe Vukov). By bringing these groups together, we encourage each other to challenge entrenched perspectives, refrain from jargon, motivate (but not shy away from) niche philosophical concerns, and develop new ideas in conversation.

These bullets are linked in that they maintain the core spirit of philosophy – an exploration of wonder – while inviting a more diverse group of perspectives to interact with it. Our list, of course, is just a starting point. And we’re grateful for *A Theory of Jerks* for inspiring us to start it.

1. Author order is alphabetical. All authors contributed equally to the review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)