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"IMAGINATIONLAND," TERRORISM, AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REAL AND IMAGINARY

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"Ladies and gentlemen, I have dire news. Yesterday, at approximately 18:00 hours, terrorists successfully attacked... our imagination"[1]

"Imaginationland" was an Emmy winning, three-part story which aired as the tenth, eleventh and twelfth episodes of South Park's eleventh season and was later re-issued as a movie with all of the deleted scenes included. The story begins with the boys waiting in the woods for a leprechaun that Cartman claims to have seen. Kyle, ever the skeptic, has bet ten dollars against sucking Cartman's balls that leprechauns aren't real. When the boys finally trap one, to Kyle's shock and dismay, it cryptically warns of a terrorist attack and disappears. That night at the dinner table Kyle asks his parents where leprechauns come from and why one would visit South Park to warn of a terrorist attack. They chide him for not knowing the difference between real and imaginary and he mutters, "I thought I did." What ensues is pure *South Park* genius as we discover that, in fact, *nobody* seems to know what the difference is.

As the story unfolds it's obvious that no one will be safe, as the episode lampoons the U.S. "war on terror," the American legal system, Hollywood directors, the media, Christianity, the military, Kurt Russell, and Al Gore's campaign against climate change [ManBearPig is real… I'm super cereal!] all the while reminding us that imagination is an essential feature of human life. Though much could be said about the issues of metaphysics (that branch of philosophy concerned with reality) at the center of "Imaginationland," this chapter will focus instead on the connection between imagination and something philosophers like to call *critical thinking* – that is, being able to cut through the crap and see things clearly – something which seems to be in short supply these days, especially when it comes to thinking about terrorist threats.

Cutting through the crap is what the writers of *South Park* specialize in and this is one of the biggest reasons philosophers love the show. One of the most consistent themes throughout its lengthy run is that creative imagination, even in its most outrageous and abrasive forms, is indispensable in the face of stupidity and small-mindedness. In this way, *South Park* captures a

[1] "Imaginationland, Part 1" [Season 11, Episode 10]

basic feature of being a philosopher, because thinking critically begins with thinking creatively, and that requires imagination. However, becoming a critical thinker doesn't mean just finding fault in everything. After all, there's a difference between being discerning and being a giant douche. Instead, critical thinking involves originality, as well as the courage to challenge prevailing attitudes. This isn't easy, though, especially when you're surrounded by a bunch of "stupid assholes" with no imagination, who seem to want "to ruin everything."[2]

Critical Thinking and Theory

But, that's just how philosophy got its start, when Socrates (469-399 BCE), the guy often credited with beginning it all, encountered just such a scenario in ancient Athens. As it turned out, the people of Athens didn't like the way Socrates kept asking questions of everyone and so trumped up some criminal charges against him in an effort to make him stop.[3] However, Socrates argued that he *had* to ask those questions because the gods had proclaimed him to be the wisest of all Athenians, only, he didn't see how that was possible, since he felt like he didn't really know anything. Then it hit him! That's what made him wiser than everyone else… because at least he *knew* that he *didn't* know (How's that for irony?!). So he told the Athenians he would continue asking questions until they came to the same realization about themselves. But, instead of facing their uncertainty with creativity and imagination, they turned away from it and sentenced Socrates to death. One might say that their imaginations were held hostage, not by gun-toting terrorists, but by their own fear of risking the unknown. But why does this happen? Why do only a handful of people, when faced with puzzlement or wonder, set out on the path of questioning and investigation, while most others just want to nuke the hell out of it?

There have been many philosophers who have asked that question, or at least its equivalent, and they've come up with a whole laundry-list of answers, including: selfishness, the passions, the desire to fit in, laziness, the standards and habits of modern living, and plain old-fashioned fear. These last two are particularly interesting when considering the lack of critical thinking that has occurred since September 11th, 2001. Why have Americans acted more like the Athenians and less like Socrates since that event? For one thing, after that attack, even the most mundane parts of modern living, such as taking a flight, were suddenly filled with potentially life-

[2] This is what Cartman tells the General in "Imaginationland, Part 3"
[3] See Plato's *Apology* for a full account.

threatening risk. And, if there's something most philosophers would agree on, it would be that we human beings are not very good at assessing risk, often sacrificing long-term values in favor of short-term ones.[4] One contemporary philosopher who has devoted most of his career to working out how risk – especially global ones like terrorism, climate change, and economic crisis – affects the way we think in modern society is Ulrich Beck (1944-present). Beck argues that with the rise of globalization and the computer age, we now live in a "world risk society," a society whose risks no longer involve isolated groups or geographical regions, but include the entire planet. By his estimation, while we humans aren't very good at personal risk assessment, when it comes to assessing risk on that large of a scale, we really suck balls![5] But, the news isn't all bad. Just like the boys in "Imaginationland," we might be able to turn it around with some imagination, critical thinking, and cooperation.

Unimaginative Leadership?

In the Imaginationland episode, Stan, Kyle, Kenny, Butters, and Jimmy are all whisked away by a man looking for the leprechaun and claiming to be the Mayor of Imaginationland. Just as the boys are about to share the leprechaun's message with the citizens of Imaginationland the terrorists attack. Fortunately, the boys are able to quickly make their escape with the help of a Sean Connery-voiced dragon; however, in the confusion, Butters gets left behind. The rest of the boys awake in South Park and assume it's all been a dream until Butters' parents show up looking for their son.

The scene cuts to a debriefing room at the Pentagon and we get our first glimpse of unimaginative leadership:

Specialist: The imaginary attack appears to have been in the works for years. The effects of the attack are so far... unimaginable.

General: We've intercepted this videotape the terrorists made for broadcast. Luckily we've kept it from being broadcast to the public. *[clicks on a remote control, and the video appears onscreen. The Fanciful Mayor is on the ground with a blindfold on. A Care Bear sits to his right with a blindfold on as well. The terrorist starts speaking, then backs up to shoot a Care Bear in the head]*

[4] See Plato's *Protagoras* for Socrates' view on this.
[5] See Beck, Ulrich. *World Risk Society*. (Polity Press, 1998); "The Terrorist Threat: World Risk Society Revisited," *Theory, Culture, & Society* [2002], Vol. 19(4): 39-55; and "Living in the World Risk Society," *Economy and Society* [2006], Vol. 35, no. 3: 329-345

Mayor: No! It's just a Care Bear! *[a terrorist knocks him down with the butt of his gun. A fairy godmother walks up to check on him]*

Specialist 2: Oh my God.

General: *[fast forwards the tape]* Later in the video we can see another imaginary hostage; this one reading a forced statement.

Butters: *[reading the statement at gunpoint]* Praise to the mighty Allah. His divine grace a-and will have brought forth this day. *[a terrorists brings forth a severed bear head to show the viewers]* Oh jeez! *[the terrorist withdraws]* Uhhh, nnow see, your safety is at our whim. This is the price you pay, America! You have defiled Allah, and now we will turn your imagination against you! Death to the Infidels! *[there's no more to read]* Can I go now? *[two terrorists come up and drag him away. The one wearing a vest takes the statement away from Butters.]* Stan! Kyle! Could you could you get me out of here?? *[the tape is stopped]*

General: Gentlemen, the terrorists appear to have complete control of our imagination. It's only a matter of time before... our imaginations start running wild.[6]

It seems the U.S. leaders' imaginations are being held hostage… literally! And, this mirrors the collective loss the American public felt immediately following the 9/11 attacks. As Beck wrote, one year after those events,

> Ever since that moment, we've been living and thinking and acting using concepts that are incapable of grasping what happened then…No one has yet offered a satisfying answer to the simple question of what really happened. The implosion of the Twin Towers has been followed by an explosion of silence. If we don't have the right concepts it might seem that silence is appropriate. But it isn't.[7]

One way to break the silence Beck criticizes and free our imagination from its captive bonds might be to take a page out of Socrates' playbook. Whenever he spoke to other Athenians about philosophical matters, such as justice or courage, he would start by asking them to define the basic concept under discussion. When they tried to answer, he would remind them that just giving examples wouldn't suffice. Instead, he insisted they search for the common features that *any* act would have if it were to be considered a just or a courageous one. It might be helpful to do the same thing when thinking about terrorism.

So… what exactly IS terrorism? We might be able to think of many instances of terrorism, but it may be more insightful, and more difficult, to identify the elements that must be present in

[6] "Imaginationland, Part 1" [Season 11, Episode 10] Transcript found at http://southpark.wikia.com/
[7] Beck, "The Terrorist Threat: World Risk Society Revisited," p. 39

order for *any* act to be called an act of terrorism. Then, once we've addressed the basics, we might be able to move on to tougher questions, like: "How do terrorist acts differ from guerilla warfare?" "From national liberation movements?" Or: "What makes a terrorist act immoral?" "Is it even possible for war to be waged on an emotion (such as terror)?" These are important and complex issues that we won't have time to discuss fully here, but we can't hope to answer them unless we've first thought critically about the basics.

If we consider the origins of the word terrorism, we may start to get an idea about what it means. It is derived from the Latin word *terrere*, which means "to frighten," and it was used initially to refer to state or government repression of its citizens. The French "Reign of Terror" of Robespierre is one example of this early usage. In more recent times, the use of the term has broadened. However, in his book, *Inside Terrorism,* Bruce Hoffman has identified several elements common among terrorist acts, as they are thought of today:

1) Political aims and motives. Terrorist acts often seek to call attention to some social or political inequity, whether real or perceived. Those committing acts of terrorism intend to use terror to advance a particular cause.
2) Physical violence. Terrorist acts are almost always aimed at causing or threatening physical harm or death. Often this harm involves more than just the intended target.
3) Psychological trauma. Acts of terror are often designed to have sweeping psychological consequences well beyond the immediate target.
4) Organization. Terrorism is perpetrated by groups with discernible chains of command or conspiratorial cell structures.
5) Lack of state affiliation. Terrorist groups are typically subnational or non-state affiliated entities.[8]

Given this list, it's apparent why there would be confusion in public discourse about what qualifies as a terrorist act. The criteria are actually quite stringent. This doesn't mean that acts which don't meet those criteria are any less terrible. Many heinous acts (like Cartman feeding a bowl of chili to Scott Tenorman in which the secret ingredient is his parents) might not be considered terrorism, but are still repulsive and morally reprehensible.

Just Because They're Imaginary Doesn't Mean They're Not Real

Now that we know how to identify terrorism, let's explore how best to deal with it. As we've seen, one of the biggest problems with the threat of terrorism is that it represents a risk that is not

[8] Hoffman, Bruce. (Columbia University Press, 1998)

tied to any particular geographical location or any particular group of people. It has become, especially since the attacks of September 11th, a pervasive problem. Beck calls this the "irony" of risk. The more we try to anticipate what cannot be anticipated, the more we are pulled into a state of anxiety which compels us to anticipate.[9] This is worse than the Socratic irony of knowing that one doesn't know. It's more like not being able to know what it is one doesn't know! And that's scary! We can't use our past experiences to help us predict where, when, or how the next terrorist attack will occur. In this way, Beck says, risk is sort of "omnipresent" (everywhere all at once). But, its irony goes even deeper, because risk is something that is not real in the same sense that an attack or a natural catastrophe is real. Risk is more like in a state of *becoming real*.[10] Only when the risk is turned into a catastrophe, like when a terrorist group actually strikes, is it made real, but then, it's no longer really a risk.

These extremely frustrating qualities of risk are part of the reason we suck at handling it. In fact, Beck argues that there are really only three possible responses to risk – denial, apathy, and transformation. Let's focus on the first response for a moment. The people who fall into that group, the deniers, are those who think they can manage risk or prevent it. Like the military in the Imaginationland episode, and like our own national governments, the deniers create more and more complex security measures in the false hope that they can eradicate risk.

We see several instances of this throughout "Imaginationland." As the first episode ends, Kyle and Stan are taken from Cartman's house, where Cartman is about to collect Kyle's debt, by the General and his men. It seems the boys have information the government needs and we find out what that is in the next episode:

Stan: Look, we already told you everything we know. Some guy just showed up in a big balloon and took us into Imaginationland.
General: *[stops and places his hands on the table]* What we want to know is how! We need to find a way into Imaginationland; you've been there! How did you do it?!
Kyle: We just... went on a balloon ride.
Specialist: There must have been some kind of portal or doorway.
Stan: Dude, we don't remember.
General: Do you realize what's goin' on here?! Terrorists have attacked our imagination, and now our imaginations are running wild! *[wags his left index finger at them]* You'd better start remembering!
Specialist: It was the Chinese, wasn't it?
Kyle: ...What?

[9] Beck, "Living in the World Risk Society," p. 329
[10] Ibid. p. 332

Specialist: We've suspected that the Chinese government was working on a doorway to the imagination. *[wags his right index finger at them]* Is that where you were?!
Stan: No.
General: That's it, isn't it?! Where do the Chinese keep this portal? How does it work?
Specialist: Is it better than ours?
Stan: Your what?
Specialist: *Our* portal to the imagination built as a secret project back in 1962 to fight the Soviets
General: *[puts his hands on his hips]* Shhh! Tom! That's super-secret.
Tom: *[a bit chagrined]* Ohh, I'm sorry sir.
Kyle: Wait. The U.S. Government has a portal to the imagination?
General: Aw, see? Good job, Tom! Why don't you just tell them everything about Project X?!
Tom: Yes sir. *[to the boys]* We built a portal to the imagination to use against the Russians during the Cold War, but we never got a-
General: THAT WAS SARCASM. I was being sarcastic, you fucking idiot!
Tom: *[more chagrined]* Aw jeez, I'm really sorry sir.

The Pentagon brass is still working with old concepts like the Cold War, and state espionage – concepts that, as Beck put it, "are incapable of grasping what has happened." They have no clue how to handle this new kind of threat. By the end of Episode II, after a squadron that was sent through the portal under the command of Kurt Russell (because he was "in that one movie that was kind of like this") is raped by evil Christmas critters, they've decided the only solution is to send a nuclear warhead through the portal and, "nuke our imagination." As *South Park* has demonstrated time and time again, there's no bigger collection of unimaginative assholes than one finds in U.S. politics, and "Imaginationland" does its best to underscore that point.

What happens when we attempt to eradicate risk by throwing technology and stricter security measures at it? We *radicalize* the problem of not knowing. The very idea of prevention breaks down in the face of threats we aren't sure are even real. "Now all possible, more or less improbable scenarios have to be taken into consideration" and "the boundary between rationality and hysteria becomes blurred."[11] And, when that happens, politicians are forced to promise a security they can't deliver, because the political cost of failing to act, or acting too slowly, is much greater than overreacting.

The second way of dealing with risk presents us with the apathetic folks, like Cartman, who ignore what's happening around them and focus on their own individual goals and interests. Of course, this doesn't remove risk, it just covers it over and in a way makes it even riskier because

[11] Beck, "Living in the World Risk Society," p. 335

when something finally *does* happen, it's completely unexpected. This gives rise to a radical form of individualism (Cartman even takes on a Rambo-like role at the end of the first "Imaginationland" episode) as people are forced to cope with world risk by themselves. In those moments when imagined risk becomes real catastrophe, the individual depends on experts, "whose judgment he cannot, yet must trust" to make sense of what has happened.[12]

However, those who treat risk through transformation can experience what Beck calls the "enlightenment function" of world risk. Through critical reflection they can open up new possibilities by adjusting themselves, in-part, to the circumstances, and adjusting, in-part, the circumstances to themselves. Let's take a look at what it might take to make a transformative response.

Only You Can Help Us Win This Battle

The third and final part of "Imaginationland" opens with a *Lord of the Rings* type of scene in which the good imaginary characters are preparing to defend Castle Sunshine against the overwhelming hordes of evil characters approaching. Aslan, the leader of the good characters tells Butters that he has a power in Imaginationland that he is yet to fully understand.

Beck seems to suggest something similar about us when he claims that within world risk society there is the possibility of a "cosmopolitan moment" (a moment in which everyone comes together and divisions vanish). He identifies six aspects of this moment: involuntary enlightenment, communication across differences, political catharsis, enforced cosmopolitanism, recognition of governmental failures, and the possibility of alternative government. Involuntary enlightenment occurs when we are forced to pay attention to aspects of our world which we typically tend to ignore. For instance, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005 or when the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck parts of Southeast Asia in 2004, we were forced to see how vulnerable those living in poverty can be in the face of catastrophe, and that forced us to think about poverty in ways we normally might not. The Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 led us to question the cost of energy production. And, the Arab Spring and Occupy movements have given us new insights about social and political inequities both at home and abroad. The media attention that events like these draw puts the

[12] Ibid. p. 336

limits of our old ways of thinking right in front of us, on constant stream, and opens up new conceptual spaces for us to explore… if we allow it.

This is the real danger of allowing our imaginations to run wild or being held hostage. We may miss the really big opportunities to learn something, to gain a little more wisdom. Of course, this requires that we think a little outside of the box—that we think creatively.

This is what Butters learns to do in Imaginationland, just as the evil characters arrive at Castle Sunshine:

Aslan: Get everyone to the battlefield! Defend the castle walls!
Quickly young boy, we need your powers now!

Butters: What powers? Ah I don't understand. gandalf: You are real. You are a creator. That means you can imagine things into existence here.

Butters: I c-, I can?

Aslan: Santa Claus was killed in the terrorist attack. The first
Thing we need is for you to bring him back.

Butters: How?

Glinda: You just have to focus your mind. Imagine Santa and
nothing else.

His first few attempts fail miserably, but after some practice, Butters starts to get the hang of it and the tide of battle begins to shift. Meanwhile, Kyle has regained consciousness in a hospital bed (after Operation Imagination Doorway has failed) only to discover that he can now hear Stan (who was sucked through the portal during the malfunction) in his imagination. Stan convinces Kyle to go back to the Pentagon and try to stop the government from nuking Imaginationland.

World risk society also provides a chance for communication across differences and borders. When we feel the same looming threat of risk as those we traditionally view as enemies, we may be more inclined to cooperate with them. This can lead to a political catharsis (a purging of harmful emotions) wherein old battle lines are broken down. As an example of this, Beck quotes a Turkish reporter commenting on the unprecedented diplomacy that took place between Turkey and Greece after the earthquakes of 1999: "Who would have thought before that tears would be our common language."[13] Likewise, who would have thought that Cartman and Kyle would ever work together, yet that's precisely what happens when they join together in trying to talk the

[13] Beck, "Living in the World Risk Society," p. 340

Pentagon out of sending the warhead through the portal (although Cartman's motivation is ball-related).

The pervasive presence of world risk means that it transcends political or economic borders and enforces a type of cosmopolitanism on us wherein we begin to see ourselves as citizens of the world. This might help to counteract the tendency we have to value security over liberty whenever we are faced with danger because "world risk society brings a new, historic key logic to the fore: no nation can cope with its problems alone."[14] Instead of turning inward, we can reach outward. Only critical thinking and cooperation on an international scale can counteract the uncertainty that has arisen in world risk society.

[14] Ibid. p. 342