“What is my purpose?”

Artificial Sentience Having an Existential Crisis in *Rick and Morty*

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Abstract

The American television show *Rick and Morty*, an animated science fiction sitcom, critiques speciesism in the context of bleak existentialist philosophy. Though the show focuses primarily on human characters, it also depicts various forms of artificial sentience, such as robots or clones, undergoing existential crises. It explicitly effaces any distinction between human sentience and artificial sentience, forcefully treating all sentient life with an equivalent respect (or disrespect). The show also problematizes human speciesism in relationship to terrestrial and extra-terrestrial life.

Philosophers sometimes describe philosophical questions as problems of “the human condition.” As so often in philosophy, initial definitions have important consequences. This essay does not aspire to any definitive delineation of the “human,” an ambiguous and complicated category (see Dennett 1988, Gee 2020). However, it observes that different definitions of the “human” determine how or whether philosophical ruminations about “the human condition” apply to non-humans, including various hypothetical forms of artificial sentience imagined in science fiction: robots, clones, and the like. Artificial sentience, as distinguished from those sundry technologies known as artificial intelligence, lies far beyond current technological ability. The absence of empirical knowledge about artificial sentience restrains our ability to contemplate its philosophical properties. Nevertheless, the literary genre of science fiction has repeatedly proven a productive vehicle for speculations about hypothetical future technology. This essay considers the existential crises of non-human sentiences in Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland’s television show *Rick and Morty* (USA, 2014 to present) which first broadcast on 14 April 2014 on Adult Swim, the adult-oriented evening programming on the cable channel Cartoon Network. We will see that the show repeatedly explores how non-human actors might confront existential questions.

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This essay uses the term "existential" in an everyday, non-technical sense, referring only tangentially to the European philosophical tradition that enjoyed such great popularity in the aftermath of the Second World War. Existentialist philosophy has inspired a rich scholarly literature, most of which is too specialized for the purposes of this investigation. If, as one authority insists, "the term 'existentialism' properly interpreted, is not capable of being defined" (Lescoe 1974, 8), might it not be more helpful to define the term improperly? The student guide *Existentialism for Dummies*, meanwhile, has proposed a very broad definition: "If you've ever asked 'What does it all mean?' or 'Why are we here?' or 'What should I do with my life?' you've asked an existential question" (Panza & Gale 2008, 10). Several religious traditions answer these sorts of questions with an appeal to gods, a singular God, or other supernatural forces. For the purposes of this essay, such answers do not qualify as "existential." The word "existential" here describes secular approaches to finding meaning in life.

This essay, however, draws more concrete inspiration from philosophical debates about "speciesism." The term is modeled on the word "racism," and is intended to evoke an equivalent moral censure. The label "racism" is pejorative: it condemns valuing one race over others as unjust discrimination. An accusation of "speciesism" similarly condemns valuing of human lives over the lives of other species. According to one philosopher of animal liberation, speciesism serves

> to provide a general ground for the operation of human identity as such, for the very fact that I am *not an animal* is the only surety I need to possess value. No matter how imperfect humanity may be in practice, no matter how bloody our hands may be as a species, or how ruinous our multivarious ways of life may be for the planet – the anthropocentric conceit never fails to recuperate its object. (Sanbonmatsu 2014, 37-38)

An anti-speciesist argument might e.g. denounce eating meat as fundamentally unjustifiable: it involves destroying life when vegan alternatives are readily available. Considerable work on speciesism addresses vivisection and environmental destruction. However, anti-speciesist arguments also apply to the relationship between humans and artificial sentiences, addressing problems that have not yet arisen, but which unpredictable technological innovation might pose in the future.

The importance of science fiction in contemplating hypothetical future technology has long been recognized. A recent essay observed that science fiction is "a genre where the problems of the human condition and identity are put on display" (Baron, Halvorsen & Cornea 2017, 83). Science fiction, however, remains a diverse genre. Most scholarship on science fiction focuses on drama, but some issues, perhaps, are best approached through comedy or satire. John Morreall (2009, 130) has specifically suggested that comedy is uniquely suited to exploring existentialism, since both share the theme of absurdity, both at the level of the individual and as a commentary on existence generally. Humor, according to a recent book on heroism in a tragic world,

> is not only possible in relation to the more superficial and inconsequential incongruities of life. As gallows humor or concentration-camp humor will attest, it may also express a certain heroic defiance in the face of life's most crushing defeats, an unquenchable nobility of spirit that refuses to permit a given fate or oppressor to have the last word (Hyers 1996, 91)

Comedy speaks with a unique voice, and can also reach audiences other genres may perhaps struggle to find.

The cartoon *Rick and Morty* has certainly found an audience. The first episode, released in December 2013, earned mostly positive reviews, but in late 2016, during the hiatus between season 2 and season 3, the show became a cultural phenomenon. The roots of the show's great popularity have already attracted some scholarly curiosity; commentators have variously proposed "the hegemonic order of capitalism" (Miranda 2017) and "the millennial mindset" (Koltun 2018, 112) as possible explanations. Indeed, the sometimes frighteningly ardent enthusiasm of its fanbase has inspired journalistic anxiety (see e.g. Stokel-Walker 2017, Gaudette 2018, Parker 2018).

The show's titular characters are Morty Smith, a supposedly dim-witted high school student, and his maternal grandfather Rick Sanchez, genius scientist and troubled alcoholic. Rick's inexhaustible inventions arguably transform him into what Sigmund Freud (1930, 50) famously described as a "prosthetic god": he even has the ability to regenerate when killed (S04E01). Indeed, Rick even comes close to actually proclaiming himself a supernatural being. During a confrontation with the U.S. president, a member of the White House staff urges the president to stand firm since Rick is "not a fucking god." Rick replies "you don't know what I am, and you don't know what I can do!" Morty makes the point even more explicit, declaring that Rick is "like a demon or a super fucked-up god" (S03E01).

The show makes no pretense to scientific accuracy, or even scientific plausibility. Some episodes of the show contain openly supernatural elements. One episode contains dragons (S04E04), another the devil (S01E09). Nevertheless, the show does not really belong in the fantasy genre. Both of the aforementioned episodes pit Rick as a scientist in opposition to the supernatural, and in both episodes science quickly proves more potent than magic. Additionally, the show often alludes to physics. The portal gun with which the characters explore alternate universes rests loosely on the so-called "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics. The season premiere of season 2 refers to both Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger (S02E01). Even the protagonists' location on "Dimension C-137" may be a physics joke: Matt Brady (2019, 134-40) thinks it refers to the dimensionless fine structure constant α, approximately equal to 1/137. The fantastic elements of the show nevertheless recall Arthur C. Clarke's so-called third law, namely, that a sufficiently advanced technology becomes "indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke 1977, 39).

Individual episodes of *Rick and Morty* typically involve space adventures, often satires of famous works of science fiction. Among other things, *Rick and Morty* has parodied Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* [Christopher Nolan, USA, 2010] (S01E02), the postapocalyptic *Mad Max* films [George Miller, Australia, 1981, 1985, 2015] (S03E02), the *Terminator* franchise [James Cameron, USA, 1984, 1991] (S04E05), the *Alien* franchise

[Ridley Scott, USA, 1984, 1986] (S04E07) and the Borg, an alien civilization frequently appearing in *Star Trek: the Next Generation* [USA 1987-1994] (S02E03). That said, each season of the show contains a longer story arc exploring the emotional dynamics of the dysfunctional Smith family. The troubled marriage of Morty's parents, Jerry and Beth, drives much of the plot; one episode even sees them undergo couples counselling on an alien planet (S02E07). Other episodes feature Morty's older sister Summer, a teenager who also attends Morty's high school. The show thus combines absurdist space adventures with family sitcom. (This paper, note, considers only the first four seasons of the show; it was written before season 5 aired).

Philosophically, the show proclaims a brand of existentialism surprisingly dark for popular entertainment. Lucas Miranda (2017) characterizes the show as dealing with both "nihilistic anguish" and "philosophical questions deepened in existential crises." In one of the show's most quoted lines of dialogue, Morty tries to persuade Summer not to run away from home by telling her, among other things, "Nobody belongs anywhere, nobody exists on purpose, everybody's going to die, come watch TV" (S01E08). Since the show often uses Rick to embody the human condition, Summer's assessment of Rick apparently reflects the show's assessment of human existence: "the fact that we're all going to die one day, the fact that the universe is so big nothing in it matters, those facts are who you are" (S02E07).

Rick actually makes a problematic spokesman for any life philosophy. He is a deeply unhappy character who treats members of his family poorly. His intelligence cannot be denied, but his wisdom might be. If, as Walter Veit (2018, 222) suggests, "Rick embodies Camus' struggle with the absurd," perhaps Harmon and Justin Roiland intend him as an absurd hero? On the other hand, Rick also resembles an anti-hero. Either way, the show often chooses to articulate its philosophical ruminations through Rick's perspectives and experiences.

Existential absurdity features prominently in those episodes where *Rick and Morty* addresses human speciesism in relation to artificial sentience: several episodes depict artificial sentience experiencing an existential crisis. Perhaps the most striking example comes from an episode that opens with Rick welding a mechanical device at the breakfast table. Flying sparks disturb Jerry as he eats his pancakes. Thirty seconds later, Rick completes his device, sets it on the table, and flicks a switch. A small robot wakes into existence, and immediately asks: "What is my purpose?" Rick tells it to pass the butter, and, when it complies, takes a pat of butter for his pancakes. Twenty seconds later, the robot asks a second time: "what is my purpose?" When Rick tells it "you pass butter," the robot's head drops in despair. It examines its butter-passing appendages, and exclaims: "oh my God." Rick responds: "yeah, welcome to the club, pal" (S01E09). Humor arises from the existential anguish of a sentient kitchen appliance. Nevertheless, the show suggests that an artificial sentience would pass immediately from awareness of the true nature of its existence to horror at the absurdity of that existence.

The butter-passing robot's existential crisis arguably arises from its creator's callousness, since Rick bestowed upon it the ability to contemplate its existence without providing it a meaningful life. Another of Rick's artificial beings, however, apparently experiences an existential crisis because of a technical glitch. At the beginning of season 3, after Beth separates from Jerry, life in the Smith residence becomes tense. Morty and Summer are both angry and distraught, and even Rick comments: "home is nuts right now. My daughter's going through a divorce and I am not dealing with it in a healthy way." Rick, Morty and Summer take refuge in an alternate dimension that has become a "Mad Max" wasteland: the post-apocalyptic dystopia makes a welcome relief from the fraught emotional situation at home. To keep Beth company, Rick leaves behind cloned versions of Summer, Morty and himself. When Rick, Morty and Summer decide to return home, their artificial counterparts are summoned to the garage to be deactivated, so that the human characters can resume their lives. Clone Rick and clone Summer obediently comply with the summons, but clone Morty, awakening to a sudden self-awareness, resists, giving an emotional speech: "I want to be alive! I am alive! Alive, I tell you! Mother, I love you, those are no longer just words! I want to hold you; I want to run in a stream! I want to taste ice cream, not just put it in my mouth and let it run down my throat but really eat it!" Clone Morty's sentience is short-lived: a remote override restores his compliance, and shortly after, judging by the sounds that come from the garage, he is destroyed offscreen (S03E02). Slapstick partially masks the horror of a sentient consciousness briefly flickering into existence only to be snuffed out, yet the humor also derives from the absurdity of that consciousness's existence.

Philosophers of existentialism have written much about absurdity (Belliotti 27-63), but rarely in the context of artificial consciousness. Morreall (2009, 130), pondering existentialism as human beings experience it, highlighted the difference "between a person and a thing, and the inauthenticity of a person acting like a thing." Since he did not ponder the hypothetical consequences of future technology, however, Morreall ignored the possibility that a thing might act like a person. Yet if we define personhood through rationality, self-consciousness, self-contemplation, or something similar, both the butter-passing robot and clone Morty qualify. An artificial sentience thus blurs the line separating persons from things.

Rick's censurable lack of sympathy for his intelligent creations reflects a more general indifference to the suffering of others. Rick is occasionally sentimental (e.g. S01E10), and intermittently kind to members of his family. Nevertheless, he perpetually bullies Morty, Summer and especially his son-in-law Jerry. He often enjoys destruction for its own sake (S04E07). The show sometimes suggests that Rick's emotional dysfunction derives from his intelligence: he is less able than others to forget or ignore the meaninglessness and futility of existence and suffers accordingly. At other times, however, the show depicts Rick's callousness as a sign of drug addiction or mental illness. Rick is repeatedly presented as an alcoholic, and when he has his "toxins" removed at an alien spa, the resulting "Healthy Rick" is noticeably happier and more considerate to others (S03E06).

For whatever cause, however, Rick routinely displays callous disdain for all forms of life: human, artificial, or extra-terrestrial. In the pilot episode, Rick and Morty are being chased by insect-like aliens at the galactic equivalent of airport security. Rick throws Morty a gun, and when Morty objects "I don't wanna shoot nobody," Rick replies "they're just robots, Morty, it's okay to shoot them, they're robots!" Morty then shoots one. The insect-like alien cries out in pain, and its comrade exclaims “Glen’s bleeding to death! Somebody call his wife and children!” Morty, alarmed, tells Rick “they’re not robots!” so Rick clarifies, “It’s a figure of speech, Morty! They’re bureaucrats! I don’t respect them!” (S01E01). Rick proves equally indifferent to human civil servants: during a confrontation with the U.S. President, he massacres White House security staff (S03E10).

No sentient beings in the cold universe of *Rick and Morty* are so casually snuffed out of existence as the light blue humanoids calling themselves Mr. Meeseeks. Users of a so-called Meeseeks box can press a button to bring a Meeseeks into existence. The Meeseeks will introduce itself with the words “I’m Mr. Meeseeks, look at me!” The user can then ask it to perform a task. Rick, demonstrating the use of the Meeseeks box to his family, tells one particular Meeseeks to open a jar of mayonnaise. After the Meeseeks completes the task, Rick explains, “it stops existing,” and the Meeseeks indeed vanishes in a puff of light blue smoke. A horrified Summer exclaims “oh my god, he exploded!” but Rick, unalarmed, tells her “trust me, they’re fine with it.” He hands Beth, Summer, and Jerry the box to play with, warning them “keep your requests simple. They’re not gods” (S01E05).

The hapless Jerry, as it happens, sets his Meeseeks too hard a task: he asks it to take two strokes off of his golf game. Mr. Meeseeks attempts to coach Jerry, but Jerry does not improve. Jerry’s Meeseeks itself eventually presses the button on the Meeseeks box, bringing into existence a second Meeseeks, whom the first asks for help. Soon a small army of Meeseeks stands witness to Jerry’s failure to improve his golfing skills. Jerry, angry and frustrated, eventually gives up, declaring to the horrified crowd of Meeseeks “at this point, my golf swing is more your problem than mine.” The initially helpful Meeseeks then grow desperate. They do not like to exist for such a length of time, they want to die. One even exclaims it has existed “for two days, an eternity in Meeseeks time!” The frantic crowd of Meeseeks first fight among each other, but eventually decide that if they cannot take two strokes off of Jerry’s golf game by helping him improve, their only option is to “get all strokes off his game” by killing him. In a final confrontation, a ringleader Meeseeks brandishing a pistol gives an impassioned speech about how the Meeseeks experience their existences: “Meeseeks are not born into this world fumbling for meaning, Jerry! We are created to serve a singular purpose which we will go to any lengths to fulfill!” The crisis is ultimately averted by Beth. She coaches Jerry on his golf swing, improving his game. By succeeding where the Meeseeks had failed, she enables the relieved Meeseeks to vanish in puffs of blue smoke (S01E05).

The Meeseeks are ultimately consumer products. Rick, it seems, did not construct his Meeseeks box, but acquired it on some alien planet. Indeed, other episodes show Meeseeks boxes with extraterrestrial owners. When Rick and Morty visit Blips and Chitz, an alien video game arcade, in the background a Meeseeks helps an alien creature master a video game (S02E02). We also learn that a rival company manufactures discount “Kirkland brand” Meeseeks boxes. The Kirkland Meeseeks is red instead of light blue, has longer hair, is rude instead of solicitous, and smokes (S04E01).

The Meeseeks experience their existences quite differently from the butter-passing robot and clone Morty. Any given Meeseeks has a clear purpose in life: it exists to fulfil whatever request is made by whoever presses the button of a Meeseeks box. In striking contrast to the butter-passing robot, a Meeseeks finds meaning in the completion of simple tasks. Nevertheless, the confrontation with Jerry shows that the Meeseeks still have wills of their own: they strive to fulfill Jerry's request even after Jerry himself has lost interest.

The question of the Meeseeks and their independent agency has already attracted some philosophical discussion. One study ultimately found itself unable to decide whether the Meeseeks are "acting on an ethic of compassion" or "monstrous beings produced by the egoistic channeling of the will" (Polizel & Oliveria 2019, 2). Either way, however, their acutely meaningful lives strongly differentiate them from other artificial intelligences in *Rick and Morty*: the butter-passing robot and clone Morty, when they experience philosophical self-awareness, both fumble for meaning. Nevertheless, Jerry's Meeseeks still experience their own existential crises. Indeed, Jerry's Meeseeks arguably differ from other artificial life because their existential suffering is the greatest. When they encounter difficulty fulfilling their task, they suffer physically. Dark blotches appear on the body of one two-day-old Meeseeks, and in the final confrontation with Jerry, the ringleader Meeseeks exclaims: "Existence is pain to a Meeseeks, Jerry, and we will go to any lengths to alleviate that pain!" While the butter-passing robot and clone Morty both experience anguish and anxiety from their existential crises, they do not suffer the sort of physical pain that the Meeseeks apparently do.

The show *Rick and Morty* explicitly compares the existential crises of artificial intelligences to those of a human character. Toward the end of Season 3, Beth is confronted with evidence of her childhood cruelty. When she asks her father: "am I evil?" Rick responds with a philosophical monologue:

> Worse, you're smart. When you know nothing matters, the universe is yours. And I've never met a universe that was into it. The universe is basically an animal, it grazes on the ordinary … smart people get a chance to climb on top, take reality for a ride, but it will never stop trying to throw you, and eventually it will. There's no other way off.

When Beth then poses the classic existential questions "Who am I, what do I do?" Rick advises her to "take off. Put a saddle on your universe, let it kick itself out." Beth objects that she has obligations to her family, so Rick offers her the same technological solution that he, Morty, and Summer had employed earlier in that same season after Beth first separated from Jerry, when they hid out in the post-apocalyptic alternate reality: Rick offers to make a clone of Beth, "a perfect instance of you with all your memories," which will fulfill her family obligations while she is away. The clone Beth can replace the real Beth for however long she wants to be away, "a day, a week, or the rest of your life," with no negative consequences. Should Beth decide to return, Rick explains, "I flip a switch, and the clone's job is done." When Beth still hesitates, Rick tells her that she is also free to remain with her family and enjoy "a life you can finally know you've chosen" (S03E09). Beth contemplates the family photographs on the refrigerator door as sentimental music plays and, as far as viewers know, decides to remain with her family. And so Beth's first existential crisis ends.

When offering to create clone Beth, Rick promises that the clone "feels no pain, regrets nothing, and has zero chance of going Blade Runner" (S0309). Clone Morty's existential crisis, of course, suggests that Rick's clones can feel both pain and regret. Clone Morty's attempt to resist the summons to the garage also shows that the clones can disobey; i.e. "go Blade Runner." Hypothetically, Rick might have been unaware of clone Morty's anguish, or he might have improved his clone-manufacturing skills. Alternatively, the show might suffer from continuity errors. It seems most likely, however, that Rick is simply lying. Indeed, Rick's general unwillingness to take responsibility for his creations suggest that he is lying not only to Beth, but to himself.

Beth, in any event, does not believe Rick's assurances. In the immediately following episode, she undergoes a second and more serious existential crisis when she starts to think she might be the clone, rather than the original Beth. She calls Rick and asks him point blank to verify her authenticity: "Did the real me choose to leave and I only think I chose to stay because that's what I need to think because I'm the replacement Beth?" Rick denies it, but informs her that if she were the clone, "becoming self-aware would mean I'd have to terminate you." After Beth finishes her call, she screams in horror: the conversation has convinced her that she is in fact the clone. While her second existential crisis initially arose from anxieties about possible artificiality, she now experiences a more concrete fear of death: she fears Rick will destroy her consciousness by flicking a switch (S03E10).

Like clone Morty, the possibly-cloned Beth fights for life. She goes to Jerry in his bachelor flat and reconciles with him. The two of them then collect Morty and Summer and the family flees from Rick. Beth thus reacts to her second existential crisis much as she did to her first: she finds meaning in life through her relationship to family. When Rick later appears carrying an assault rifle, Beth, still believing herself to be a clone, pleads for her life. She describes herself as a central part of a "real family" and denounces the real Beth for abandoning her children (S03E10). Rick exasperatedly tells her that she is his real daughter, not a clone, and the finale of season 3 ends with the family reunited.

Later on, the show even more explicitly conflates the existential crises of humans and clones. The finale of season 4 spectacularly reveals that Rick actually did create a Beth clone after all! Unable to decide whether he wanted his real daughter to leave Earth or to remain at home, Rick shuffled the original and the clone, obscuring both from himself and from the audience which was the original (S04E10). The show thus refuses to reveal whether it was biological Beth or clone Beth who underwent the existential crisis that united the Smith family, who thus accompanied the other characters in the various adventures depicted in season 4, and who left for adventures in outer space. Indeed: since there is no way to tell the difference, the show contends that no meaningful difference actually exists. If the existential anxieties of a human being and those of a clone are indistinguishable, they are equivalent.

Beth's ability to find meaning in her dysfunctional family differentiates her from Rick. Rick clearly cares for his relatives, but unlike Beth he does not seem to find much existential purpose in his family life. Insofar as Rick symbolizes the human condition, the show suggests that family bonds cannot in general resolve the fundamental existential questions. In light of Rick's lack of satisfaction with family, his contempt for therapy is significant: "I think it's helped a lot of people stop panicking, which is a state of mind we value in the animals we eat, but not something I want for myself" (S03E03). Rick's attitude illustrates his dysfunctional personality as a character in the show. He is, as he himself says, "a terrible father" (S04E10): he behaves as irresponsibly toward his biological offspring as toward his artificial creations. Rick's attitude nevertheless suggests that he is dissatisfied not so much with his particular family dynamic, but with family life as such.

The show, through Rick, elsewhere rejects other popular approaches to achieving satisfaction in life. Love, often championed as providing meaning to life, attracts a particularly scornful dismissal. When Morty confesses his feelings for Jessica, a girl in his school, Rick tells him that "what people call 'love' is just a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed. It hits hard, then it slowly fades" (S01E06). Beth and Jerry's unhappy marriage certainly illustrates Rick's point, but Rick takes an equally dismissive view when his close friend "Bird Person" gets married. Rick throws his wedding invitation in the garbage with disgust, dismissing weddings as "basically funerals with cake." When various circumstances compel him to attend the wedding after all, he gives a speech in which he asks the embarrassed wedding guests whether any couple can be genuinely together. How, Rick asks, can they know that their relationship is "not just some big lie we're all telling ourselves because we're afraid to die alone? Because you know, that's exactly how we all die – alone!" Admittedly, he subsequently offers a more conciliatory toast "to friendship, to love, and to my greatest adventure yet: opening myself up to others!" But then the show immediately punishes Rick's momentary sentimentality: just thirty seconds later, Bird Person's bride Tammy reveals herself to be an undercover agent of the galactic government, the enemy of Rick and his friends. Tammy shoots Bird Person and tries to arrest Rick. Rick afterwards curses himself for relaxing his guard, "which I will never do again!" (S02E10).

Finally, the show rejects mainstream religion right in the pilot episode. Over the breakfast table, Rick declares: "There is no God, Summer. You gotta rip that band-aid off now, you'll thank me later" (S01E01). Subsequent episodes depict religious leaders as comically ignorant buffoons (S02E05), or as knowingly dishonest money-grubbers (S03E06). The show also conspicuously refrains from criticizing Rick for playing God with his artificial intelligences, even when showing how those intelligences suffer.

The show is particularly dismissive of Christianity. In a meta-referential episode about narrative structure, Rick and Morty defeat the character of "Story Lord" by praying to "our best friend and savior, Jesus Christ." By resorting to Christian prayer, Rick and Morty destroy their "relatability," "broad appeal" and "marketability," foiling Story Lord's plans. Story Lord protests: "this sucks! Stop! You guys would never do this!" After Rick and Morty escape, Rick then comments "Ugh, we're safe, Morty. Nobody ever wanted to see that shit," adding that Story Lord will "spend eternity in every writer's hell: the Bible" (S04E06). Morty's response, "I dunno, some people actually like that stuff," is the closest the show comes to acknowledging the appeal of faith. Even if some do find solace in religion, the showrunners and their characters clearly do not, and neither, it seems, do their intended audience.

The philosophical stance of *Rick and Morty*, therefore, declares that family is not enough, love is just a chemical reaction, and religion a distasteful lie. The universe is fundamentally meaningless, and that meaninglessness is painful. What then is to be done?

How can one live a good life in such circumstances? The show explores some possible answers to these classic existential questions.

The show's primary response to death and suffering is denial. In more than one episode, when Morty confronts some new horror, Rick advises Morty: "don't think about it" (S01E01, S01E06). Indeed, Rick has even invented a device to erase unpleasant memories; one episode revolves around the fact that he has frequently used it on Morty (S03E08). The show also proposes the option of keeping busy in order to distract oneself from existential crisis. In an early episode, Rick advises Morty to "focus on science" (S01E06).

However, Rick probably articulates the show's actual philosophy in a different conversation with both his grandchildren. Summer, speaking to Morty, advocates a philosophy of *carpe diem*, provoking Rick's vigorous approval: "to live is to risk it all. Otherwise you're just an inert chunk of randomly assembled molecules drifting wherever the universe blows you" (S03E02). When considering existential questions from the perspective of technological anti-speciesism, Rick's support for the *carpe diem* philosophy is significant not so much because it finds meaning in risk or daring, but because of its description of a sentience that lacks meaning. Did not the butter-passing robot start off as an inert chunk of molecules? Much as the show blurred the line separating human existential crises from the existential crises of artificial intelligence, Rick's description effaces the line separating human life from artificial life.

In light of its technological anti-speciesism, it seems significant that *Rick and Morty* also addresses animal anti-speciesism. The show consciously equates human life with terrestrial animal life in its second episode. After the family dog Snuffles pees on the carpet, Rick places an intelligence-enhancing helmet on its head. Intelligent Snuffles, frustrated with his inability to communicate, invents a telepathic voice synthesizer: "Humans understand Snuffles now? Snuffles want to be understood. Snuffles need to be understood." Over time, Snuffles becomes dissatisfied with his status as family pet, resulting in yet another existential crisis. He adopts the new name Snowball (rejecting Snuffles as his "slave name"), creates an army of intelligent dogs, and conquers the human world (S01E02). Humans in dog-world must wear muzzles and are routinely castrated. The role-reversal, though played for laughs, can be read as an animal-rights critique of how human beings treat dogs, though it also provides more evidence of Rick's irresponsibility toward the intelligences he creates.

While the show has not subsequently explored the theme of animal rights at length, brief allusions in subsequent episodes express a similar stance. One episode mocks a veterinarian who alludes to his oath not to let any animal come to harm "apart from when sterilizing them, aborting them, euthanizing them, or eating them" (S02E06). A brief video short, released online as bonus material between seasons 3 and 4, even makes an explicit case for veganism. When Rick casually destroys an artificial Morty, the horrified real Morty vehemently protests. Rick retorts: "well, you eat chicken, Morty, what do you think happens to them? You know, it's a cold universe. Factory farming, Morty!" An abashed Morty concedes the point, and then declares "I'm going vegan! This is canon: Morty is now vegan!" (Tiarawhy 2017). Whether Morty's veganism will prove enduring remains to be seen, but breakfast scenes in season four show Morty eating only pancakes (S04E01, S04E02), while family breakfasts in previous seasons had also depicted eggs and sausages (S01E07, S01E10).

Rick and Morty also challenges any distinction between human life and alien life. There is no space to discuss all human-alien interactions depicted in the show, but one striking episode has Rick and Morty encounter a species of "facehugging parasites," clearly based on the horrifying creatures from the *Alien* franchise. Rick and Morty free themselves and wreak carnage on facehugger civilization, even celebrating that "there's no guilt" in destroying it. Back home, however, they realize that they have left Summer behind, and must return to save her. Viewing the devastation they have caused, they feel guilty after all. The show then presents a poignant backstory for the two particular parasites who had colonized Rick and Morty: they were close friends who were estranged, reconciled, shared physical intimacy, and then decided to start a family together (S04E07). The parasites in *Rick and Morty* evoke some of the most frightening monsters in American science fiction; they also pose a mortal danger to the show's titular characters. Nevertheless, even these dangerous alien parasites have rich emotional lives, and the show invites viewers to sympathize with their hopes and fears.

Several scholars have sought to extend philosophical contemplations of the so-called human condition to non-humans. Tim Ingold (1994, 28), for example, has pondered the human condition "without prejudging the extent to which biologically human beings or other animals actually partake of it." *Rick and Morty* takes a clear stance on this issue: non-human beings possess intelligence, self-awareness, and sentience. They suffer existential crises, and the show explicitly equates those crises to those of human characters. Since non-human sentience, as depicted in *Rick and Morty*, suffers from anxieties similar to those that plague human beings, its philosophical approach to existence applies to non-human sentience. The show may take an ambiguous stance on the nature of the human, but emphatically rejects any implication that the suffering of a non-human counts for less than that of a human.

By refusing to prize human life over other forms of life, whether animal, artificial, or extraterrestrial, *Rick and Morty* uses the existential crises of its various characters to articulate a strikingly consistent anti-speciesism. The experiences of the butter-passing robot, the various clones, the Meeseeks, and the alien parasites differ, but throughout the show encourages sympathy with non-human beings. Insofar as the show addresses existential questions, then, the show argues that existential dilemmas apply to non-humans, implicitly problematizing the "human condition" as a category of philosophical inquiry. Perhaps such ruminations could better be framed as the contemplation of the sentient condition, or of the animate condition.

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