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Speaking of South Park

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Title: Speaking of *South Park*

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South Park is, at first blush, an unlikely vehicle for the teaching of argumentation and of reasoning skills. Yet the cool of the program, and its ability to tap into the concerns of youth, make it an obvious site. This paper analyses the argumentation of one of the programs which deals with genetic engineering. Entitled 'An Elephant makes love to a Pig', the episode begins with the elephant being presented to the school bus driver as 'the new disabled kid'; and opens a debate on the virtues of genetic engineering with the teacher saying: 'We could have avoided terrible mistakes, like German people'. The show both offends and ridicules received moral values.

However a fine grained analysis of the transcript of 'An Elephant makes love to a Pig' shows how superficially absurd situations conceal sophisticated argumentation strategies. Kids appreciate both the humour and the ethical concerns; and take in the complexity of the ethical argument. My proposal is to harness their interest in the episode and develop exercises for fostering ethical reasoning. The paper is part of a larger project designed to teach reasoning skills to kids using television product.

South Park, created by Trey Parker, 26, and Matt Stone, 28, from animated images drawn on brown paper, was first seen on the net in a bootleg episode called 'The Spirit of Christmas' in 1996. This, the first of the cartoon series, is a kung-fu match between Santa Claus and Jesus over who owns Christmas. They are watched by four ten year old boys, Kyle, Stan, Cartman and Kenny, who live in South Park, Colorado. The real South Park is near Denver, and the characters are an agglomeration of the kids of the two creators' childhoods. The Jewish Kyle is based on Stone, Stan on Trey and the others on friends or, better, acquaintances. As Trey Parker puts it:

The bus stop sort of dictated who your friends were. It wasn't like you picked your friends. It was who was at your bus stop (*Aerial*, 1998, p7)

Kenny, the almost incomprehensible and most sophisticated of the kids is killed in the first cartoon, as he is in every subsequent episode, in increasingly baroque ways. 'The Spirit of Christmas' was an immediate cult success.

Despite its profanity, it was picked up in August 1997 by Comedy Central where it was aired on Wednesday nights at 10pm and received cable's highest ever rating points¹. In the US in June 1998 the audience share was reported at 4.5 million viewers, of which most were in the 18-24 age group². SBS carries the program in Australia. The outrage the program generated here has in part been defused by moving it to a later timeslot from its original 7:30 to 9:30 pm on Mondays. The viewership on SBS is extraordinarily high for that network, at 1.3 million, with about 45% of viewers in the 13 to 24 age

group (*ABC Media report*, 1998, p8). The show has spawned a huge number of internet sites, including the official site owned by the US cable network and a 'Rights for Kenny' page³.

The program continues to generate controversy. The press has run hot with articles analysing, decrying or deifying *South Park* as immoral, post modern, crude or just childish. When Stan's homosexual dog runs away to learn about gay rights, and when Jesus is cut off by a commercial break just as he is about to reveal how he feels about homosexuality, humour and crudeness are being deployed on complex issues, with some sensitivity. The censor at SBS, Doug Stewart says:

Paradoxically, it's a quite pro social series, I mean it's satirising things like racism and sexism and homophobia, it's satirising gun culture, fast food advertising on television, mindless television' (*ABC Media report*, 1998, p8) .

The 'prosocial' view is taken to the extreme in *Spin Magazine's* March 1998 issue, in which the cartoon is given a disembodied life as a course in moral education, or as a series of moral fables, by eliminating the vulgarity and sexism, and reducing each episode to brief synopsis, media references, and moral values (Norris, 1998). In a similar vein, FOX executive Brian Graden is quoted as saying that,

If you pay attention, they tell good stories about issues, but people think they're watching some naughty cartoon. ... There are some things that are kind of wholesome about South Park. The bottom line is that as insane as it gets, right always sort of wins

(McDonald 1998)

In fact, the moral force of *South Park* has become a matter of constant media debate. Robert Bolton, Professor of Communications at UNC, takes a more balanced view, arguing that

'I don't think that South Park has a particular political agenda, and I think it shares this kind of very profound political ambivalence with an awful lot of popular culture in America... What it does do is open up as a source of humour an awful lot of things that could either be read as being left or right' (*ABC Media report*, 1998, p 4).

Helen Musa, on the other hand, is scornful

'If you have not yet indulged on Monday nights, you should know that this cartoon(a) sent SBS reeling uncharacteristically into nationwide double figure ratings, and (b) has spurned a truckload of pretentious talk...

Really *South Park* says as much about contemporary theories of

representation as the Nescafé ad did about the shifting nature of gender relations. Nothing'. (1998, p15)

My own view is slightly different. *South Park* is, in itself, not particularly 'prosocial'. It a funny and somewhat simplistic send up of a range of views, some of which are and some of which are not worthy of criticism. However, kids are watching *South Park* and laughing at the jokes days after they first saw the program. The issues are hot, and kids are ready to talk. Indeed kids who are not allowed to watch are going to feel left out. But that does not mean we should take *South Park* as it comes. The issues raised can and should be discussed not just in the style of playground reminiscence but critically, with an eye to making kids aware of the philosophical angst that grounds much of the humour, and the objectionable racism, sexism and sheer crudity. Television as part of our culture should be as open to critical debate as any other – far too often critics of television just turn it off. I advocate using television for teaching thinking skills – reasoning and philosophical argumentation.

South Park may be, at first blush, an unlikely vehicle for the teaching of argumentation and of reasoning skills, but the cool of the program, and its ability to tap into the concerns of youth, make it an obvious site. This paper looks closely at the argumentation of one of the programs which deals with genetic engineering. Entitled 'An Elephant makes love to a Pig', the episode begins with the elephant being presented to the school bus driver as 'the new disabled kid'; and opens a debate on the virtues of genetic engineering with the teacher saying: 'We could have avoided terrible mistakes, like German people'. The show both offends and ridicules received moral values. However a fine grained analysis of the transcript of 'An Elephant makes love to a Pig' shows how superficially absurd situations conceal sophisticated argumentation strategies. Kids appreciate both the humour and the ethical concerns; and take in the complexity of the ethical argument. My proposal is to harness their interest in the episode and develop exercises for fostering ethical reasoning. The paper is part of a larger project designed to teach reasoning skills to kids using television product.

1 Reasoning, Philosophy and Television

Traditionally reasoning skills have been taught through written examples, some of which are highly anachronistic or artificial. Philosophical issues are typically also presented – not always of course – in extended passages of print. What about television? It is not just print that requires philosophical thought or critical reasoning skills. Many use television as their major source of information about the world and as the source of basic understanding of the world. Yet we rarely provide students with the skills directly to criticise and analyse television's world view.

It has been argued that print differs from other media in being uniquely well

suited to logical thought. If that were so, the teaching of reasoning through television would be misguided. Arguments have been mounted on both sides of the pro-contra television fence. Technophobes such as Postman (1993) decry the impact of the new media, suggesting that the linear patterns of thinking may be undermined by the immediacy and impact of television, and that hot links on the internet also fail to encourage the development of logical thinking skills. The general argument is what we might call technological relativism – a form of neo McLuhanism. Postman for instance, calls on Eisenstein's (1983) finely worked analyses of the impact of print to suggest that television, with its plethora of clues, limits the imagination, and the demands made on the viewer. Print, on the other hand is both 'linear' and demanding - the imagination is working double time to think through images given in language, while at the same time interpreting the logical links explicit in written language.

On the other hand, prophets of the new media, such as Douglas Rushkoff share Postman's assumption that television alters reasoning skills, but welcome the consequences. In *Children of Chaos* [Surviving the end of the World as we Know it], Rushkoff talks of the expectations of young viewers; of their inability to tolerate linear patterns of television viewing. He claims that the addiction to channel surfing and highly complex television product is evidence of the sophistication of what he calls 'screenagers'. He notes in particular the framing of MTV product, and its demands on the audience. Kids, he thinks, are actively interpreting television in new ways, 'seeing connections across their storehouse of images' (quoted in Gabriel, 1996). As he puts it, television has changed: 'the linear story just broke apart as the programs reached turbulence' (1997: 45). He goes on to argue that the turbulent viewing behaviour of the young is a new paradigm;

The "well-behaved" viewer, who never listens quietly, never talks back to the screen, and never changes channels, is learning *what* to think and losing his own grasp on *how* to thinkthe viewing style of our children is actually more adult (1997:49)

Rushkoff argues that the cartoon format itself is a highly significant form for conveying of meaning. Comics, he claims, by providing icons of human figures, rather than full realistic detail, gave access to a streamlined representations which 'free the comic medium from the constraints of linear storytelling, and thus train comic book readers to see the world in new ways' (1997:57). He goes on to argue that comics also free the reader from the constraints of linear thinking – because the images are laid out on the screen, and spatial conventions can take the place of temporal sequence.

The arguments of Postman, on the one hand, and Rushkoff on the other, share the assumption that there is one canonical form of linear reasoning which is paradigmatically found in print. I think that this is an error. Being reasonable is fundamentally a feature of discourse and action, not of written linear texts. It is only a contingent feature of our culture that extended patterns of reasoning do normally appear in print. Reasoning, in the broad sense I am concerned with, is

closely linked to descriptions of how we act - and rationalise our acting in the world. But it is also, and fundamentally, linked to discourse. Framing the rules whereby we extract arguments from extended passages of print, let alone of television, is difficult, as are the rules of good reasoned discourse. Govier (1987) and van Eemeren et al (1992) offer important recent approaches, which draw on Gricean principles, a principle of charity and informal logical approaches. But this does not mean it is impossible to do so.

Rushkoff notes that the young have the ability to view simultaneously on four or more channels. As he puts it in another context: 'Most kids are doing media deconstruction while watching television' (Gabriel, 1996). The issue which Rushkoff does not take up is the extent to which what he calls 'the ability to piece together meaning from a discontinuous set of images' (1997:49-50) is itself dependent on highly refined linear thinking skills. A similar objection, I think, applies to his view that cartoons avoid nonlinear thinking - at no stage does he define what is non linear about spatial representation of time!

Postman and Rushkoff are correct to note that television is different from print: it *is* visual. The reasoning on television is not equivalent to, or reducible to, the reasoning of its spoken components, even as listed on a printed script. The voluminous literature on ads, on television news and the impact of visuals, on the impact of sound tracks and other queuing devices makes it clear that much of the impact of television is not just the impact of words. Visual media evoke immediate and emotional reactions, so that television gives us little room for reflection. Television moreover is one way – we cannot answer back. But it does not follow that there is no reasoning involved.

'Reasoning and television - an oxymoron' is a common reaction to the notion that reasoning can be taught through television. Television does not model rational behaviour. We see kids behaving bravely, adults behaving with sympathy, or dispassionately, but we almost never see people interacting as rational agents. This is as true of current affairs as it is of situation comedies and drama. Detective series do give the appearance of reasoned argumentation, and, I argue elsewhere, ads are often very effective – if often slightly shonky – cases of practical reasoning. Political debate certainly rarely involves argumentation - it has been reduced to a competition to discover who is more adroit with the one liners. But obviously one can often extract an argument from what is *not* argued, and when it comes to ethical argumentation, the soap opera often serves as the Bible of modern youth – the cautionary tales of our era.

This does not mean that we can't teach reasoning through television. It is always possible to criticise content and argument strategies as they appear on the television, but even better we can train students to identify rational and irrational moves themselves. We can do this in the familiar mode of logic exercises in a classical framework, applied specifically to television product. As a source of fallacies, for instance, advertisements are remarkable fertile, although I have found often more sophisticated than they seem at first. A

method I prefer involves a process of debate and inquiry in a group, in such a way that students become able to question what they and others say, according to criteria of rationality. My model is derived from Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children (p4C), although it has many other antecedents.

In this paper, I will talk of some groups where we have actually tried to explore reasoning skills with groups of kids. But I also will mention a web site I have been developing. In a web site, such as that I have devised, we can combine time for reflection, philosophical questions, with a space for debate. It is not perfect, but the advantage of web delivery of material about reasoning on television is that the two media, print and visual, can be combined. The critical distance and space for reflection offered on the web page can be directly applied to downloaded television content.

2 Media Effects and Kids' talk about Television

It is an assumption of my project, and indeed of most of the television industry, that television has an impact on kids – so that it is worth intervening. It is a moot point whether it does. This is in part because of the difficulty of obtaining definite proof that viewing television actually alters behaviour, fundamental though that assumption is to both ad agencies and political campaigns. Complicating any debate about television and children is this vexed question of media effects. The concern about *South Park* can be put, very generally, as a concern about whether the racist, sexist and foul mouthed style of the South Park kids; and whether the random violence of the ex Vietnam veteran or which ends Kenny's life might be a model. Does media violence promote real violence? The debate is a vexed one, with recent summaries (Federman, 1998) deciding on a guarded positive response.

Most laboratory studies have suffered from a woeful lack of judgement in operationalising aggression and defining what violent television is. Bandura's (1973) laboratory tests, for instance, purported to prove the connection between violent viewing and aggression by showing kids hitting bobo dolls on television to a group of other children, the 'subjects'. When the subjects were given a bobo doll to play with, they, not surprisingly, hit it. After all they had had a lesson in how to use a new toy. The connection between such games and real life violence is at best tenuous. On the other hand, media violence does seem to be mimicked in real life. The best current theory is that media effects desensitise viewers to violence: as Bart Simpson puts it 'Don't shut your eyes. You'll never become desensitised to the violence that way' (quoted in Jackson, 1998).

One of the most convincing findings of recent media effects research that, for kids as for adults, the impact of 'real' news is far greater than that of violent fiction. Reality checks serve as a filter for how we view television. For Jackson (1998), kids like *South Park* because they know it is not real and can enjoy it, while their parents are shocked. 'Half the fun is the disgust it produces in

others....' (1998), but she goes on

Surprisingly, this generational psyche comes from an understanding that cartoons, films and television programs aren't actually real...Older people still haven't grasped this idea, something scientists are blaming on the early days of television, when live shows were really live, and breasts were really just breasts.' (1998)

While somewhat dismissive of the intelligence of 'older people', this is consistent with Rushkoff's point, mentioned earlier, that the impact of cartoon figures, iconic and exaggerated as they are is because they are not real; fun just because they do not really look or seem like real people. Cartoons work because they are not real. As one Australian kid said of *South Park*

Boy: I think if the director of it expressed his views on life in any other way apart from animation, he'd be locked up by now, but you know, it's still a funny thing to watch (quoted in Media Report, 1998)

Kids do not take television at face value. There is a process of largely inchoate evaluation and criticism already in place: the kids talk back. Those who talk of the 'active' audience, such as Buckingham (1993, forthcoming 1999), Palmer (1986) and Nightingale (1990), suggest that viewers are more engaged than earlier theorists assumed: viewers do not simply adopt the perspective of the producer; they react and interpret what they see. But audiences need training. David Buckingham⁴, perhaps the best known defender of models of research which valorise the understanding viewers bring to the media, talks of the danger of 'sentimentalising' children's grasp of television. He is aware of the need for critical views. I would argue, and he, it seems, agrees, that interpreting television is a skill, which must be fostered, particularly in so far as it involves skills of resisting advertisements. Among the most crucial of those skills are reasoning skills.

All too often, the fact that kids – and adults – talk about television is derided, seen as trivial and unimportant. Yet television is as much part of kids' culture now as the Bible may have been a century ago - and it produces a vivid imaginary and secondary life for kids. They talk about what is happening on their favourite programs, *South Park* among them, and they do so with great verve. Yet it is talk we tend to ignore.

Kids understand the difference between real and fictional television. But it does not follow that fictional and even iconic views of the world cannot change how we view the world. Indeed, fiction does change how we see the world. Soap operas give us templates for understanding the world. Recent studies (eg Steele & Brown, 1995) fill out the anecdotal evidence of the role of soap opera in adolescent lives. One 15 year old, Chelsea, says of the soap *Growing Pains*

'it has a teenager in it and there are typical problems that you would have every day. It kinda helps you look at it and say, 'oh yeah, that's a different way to solve that problem' (Steele & Brown, 1995: 566)

Fiction and myth have always had a moral role of this type. George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, like Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, not only produced social commentary, but also allowed us to see our lives differently. We debate over who was right or wrong, for instance, as a way of discovering our own moral attitudes. Television fiction plays the role of the great novel of the nineteenth century in this sense. It is no easy matter to judge guilt, for instance, or the worth of a presidential candidate. The fictional soap operas and sit coms give us an impersonal way to begin debate about moral issues.

But while kids talk about television and soap opera, they rarely do so with a high level of reflective and critical attention. They lack the skills to interrogate the content, whether of television or of the net. The skills needed for informed and critical debate about major public issues are not those which come automatically with the ability to deconstruct. They are skills which have had a major role in Western culture for many years, and have been developed over centuries of debate, and of debate about how debate should proceed - of philosophical and political questioning. It is that skill to debate which is missing in the sophisticated young.

Kids talk of *South Park*, at least in Australia, with a mixture of buzz words and laughter. They do not analyse or develop the ideas presented on the program, they merely joke. When Robert Bolton interviewed teenagers on the Media Report (1998) the most articulate responses were from two boys, one of whom was cited above:

Boy: He chops the bloke's head off, it's not very nice. I mean it's a cartoon, it's a bit rude for a cartoon when the blood goes - but it's quite funny, other bits.

The boy is trying to formulate a criticism, but is painfully ill equipped to deal with the complex questions of why animation should – or should not - be obscene. There is another equally tricky thought, what it is to be funny and what it is to be rude and the connection between the two. The child is not given any chance to develop the ideas, ideas that are certainly worth working on.

Television product is part of the common culture. My project is to develop critical thinking skills in kids by nurturing resources within the culture: the critical debate that already exists about television within the medium itself. Rather than seeing television as injecting a view of the world onto participants, we should see it as part and parcel of the culture. What is needed is not new television as much as new strategies for dealing with it: the ability to reason and be critical about television. At this point I wish to return to *South Park* and the episode I have chosen for us to look at.

3 'An Elephant Makes Love to a Pig'

In "An Elephant Makes Love to a Pig," the boys learn about genetic engineering from the primary school teacher Mr. Garrison. In order to research the possibilities of splicing a potbelly pig with an elephant as a school science fair project, the boys decide to visit a genetic engineering ranch. Here, they meet a scientist who experiments with genetic engineering by creating animals with four asses. The scientist, however, scares the boys with his research, causing the boys to leave the ranch. However, just before they leave, the scientist takes a sample of Stan's blood. The children then go to the school cafeteria and tell their friend the Chef, the school cook, that they want to make potbelly elephants. At first, the Chef, who comes out with a song by the 1980's pop band Loverboy, 'Pig and elephant DNA just won't splice', has his doubts. However, after the Chef gives it some thought, he suggests that he and the children could make money from the sale of potbelly elephants. He then joins the children's plan to create a new kind of household pet by suggesting that the children combine the pig and the elephant DNA the old fashion way, "by making sweet love".

In the morning, the genetic engineer tells them Stan's deviant clone is destroying South Park. Stan takes the clone back home to meet his abusive older sister. Stan asks the clone to beat up his sister. However, the clone misunderstands and ends up destroying Stan's house while Stan's sister ultimately knocks the clone unconscious. At this point, the genetic engineer claims that he had no right to interfere and pretend to be God, and he shall put an end to this horrible creature, then shoots the clone in the head.

The arguments here are limited, and familiar. We have the case for genetic engineering, presented first by the puppet, the schoolteacher's accomplice, Mr Hand, then by the genetic engineer:

MR. HAND That's right Mr. Garrison, genetic engineering is an exciting new science. You can splice the DNA from some animals and make them better. Yes Mr. Garrison, genetic engineering lets us correct God's horrible mistakes, like German people....

and later

GENETIC ENGINEER

It's thanks to the wonders of genetic engineering that soon there will be an end to hunger, disease, pollution, even war. I've created things that will make the world better. For instance, here's a monkey with four asses.

In each case, the argument that genetic engineering might help people is immediately countered with an argument, amusingly enough put, but cogent: that genetic engineering might be misused. In each case the counter argument is implicit in the joke of taking the argument for seriously. The first argument is

that genetic engineers might undervalue people, and implicitly refers back to a busload of disabled kids in the introductory segment: presumably what Mr Hand would call 'God's Horrible mistakes'. Even at this point, the argument looks quick and nasty. Humour is deployed to put a fairly familiar line of thought, but humour is hard to argue with. The second argument is based on the ludicrous conjunction of the genetic engineer's claim to have create things to make the world better, with his four assed animals. The overgeneralising suggestion is that all genetic engineering is equally trivial. Of course, an invalid argument is often a good starting point for debate with kids – but it is and should be a starting point only.

As the action moves on to the deviant clone, we have another form of argument implicitly being called on. If there are dangers in genetic engineering, the program seems to suggest, then we should avoid any form of it. Again, humour is used to nail down the argument. In the penultimate scene, Stan, Kyle, and Cartman are looking at the clone that Stan's sister has just knocked unconscious, when the genetic engineer enters.

GENETIC ENGINEER All I ever wanted was to genetically engineer something useful, but I failed. Perhaps we shouldn't be toying with god's creations, perhaps we should just leave nature alone to its simple one ass semantics.

Here there are layers of humour: the evident contradiction between the claim that he was giving up playing god, and shooting the clone give a twist to the question of what sort of thing the clone is – a person or not? Earlier the genetic engineer had chased up Stan to find the clone, because they had exactly similar minds – what then are we to make of his lightly killing a clone? What, indeed, is a clone?

I was introduced to this episode by a student at NYU, Janine Michael. She was interested in techniques for discussing *South Park* with kids. Together we designed a series of questions to raise when kids had watched the program. The questions focussed on issues of personal identity, in much the fashion of the Philosophy for Children program. We began with a series of questions adapted from the P4C materials,

What makes you you?

Would you still be you if you had different clothes on?

Would you still be you if you cut your hair?

Would you still be you if you lost your leg?

Would you still be you if you lost your memory?

Would you still be you if you changed your name?

We then moved to questions dealing with cloning and identity.

If you had a clone would you still be you?

If you had a clone would the clone be you?

Would the clone have your memories?

If the clone had your memories would it be you?

Would you still be you if there were two of you?

Could you have twenty clones?

Would you still be you if there were twenty of you?

The general line of questioning is a familiar philosophical one – the particular philosophical context is the unfamiliar element. I would suggest that *South Park*, with much other television product generates immensely powerful philosophical questions – questions the kids are longing to have a chance to talk about. In this case, Janine reports a lively debate among adolescent New Yorkers of some sophistication:

Those who felt that clones were not equal to humans argued that since they are copies of a human prototype and did not actually experience different events, they can not have the same characteristic traits as a human. Like a computer database, clones can only retrieve information from its memory, and not understand, feel, or learn from it without the actual experience. One girl, Laura, argued that, 'an experience is something you have to be apart of, not just remember'. She continued with an example that, 'A mother may tell their kid not to play with matches, but he doesn't know what that means. It is not until the kid gets burned that he knows not to play with them [matches.] He has to experience it for himself.

In another response from Laura, she stated that 'He [the scientist] had to kill it, it was destroying the town, I mean it didn't make a differences if he shoot it of cut it's head off, it's not a human.' However, those who felt that the clone was a human being found this response insensitive. Jennifer stated, 'if it wasn't a cartoon, that would be considered murder' (Michael, 1998)

Janine's conclusion, based on interviews, was that this episode of *South Park* was in fact a sustained argument against cloning. The violent behaviour of the clone, the insanity of the genetic engineer, the chef's admiration for the beauty of love making and the boys ultimate choice in using the natural way to create a potbelly elephant, combine to produce a case against genetic engineering. My own view is that indeed the episode offers arguments, but that we should be emphasising that such episodes should not be allowed the last word – we

need to intervene and talk with kids about what is going on. That talk means, in effect, philosophical talk about the complex and baffling questions cloning raise.

This episode is far from unique: as any *South Park* fan will attest, each episode picks up and runs with an issue. Perhaps the most often cited as 'prosocial' are those dealing with homosexuality: more interesting are issues like euthanasia

Woman: Now blow out the candles Grandpa.

Grandpa: (Wheezes)

All: Hooray!

Man: How does it feel to be 102 Paps?

Grandpa: Shoot me!

Woman: Make a wish Grandpa.

Grandpa: I wish I were dead.

Man: That's our silly Grandpa.

Grandpa: I'm not being silly, kill me. I'd do it myself but I'm too damn old.

The issue of what it is properly to treat a person as a person is tied up in quite tantalising ways in the program with euthanasia. Disentangling those issues is a complex and major task, and one well worth the kids' time.

4 The website

Kids are longing to talk about television, not just to chat, but to think about it in new ways. That drives my project to set up a site which raises the philosophical questions relating to television product, together with space for kids to reply. It consists of a combination of television product, including *South Park*, which are discussed linked to questions about the philosophical ideas and a page called 'Have your Say'. There are logical exercises and a public space for commentary and development of new examples⁵. Pages deal with advertisements, news, soaps and cartoons – including *South Park*. Each episode or tv clip can be downloaded, and I have associated with it what I have called 'Big Ideas': really philosophical questions and some logic exercises. The original 'Spirit of Christmas' episode is sampled, and, since the extract talks of the meaning of Christmas, there are questions about 'The meaning of Christmas'

1. Should Christmas have only one meaning, or can it have many meanings?
2. Can the word 'Christmas' have more than one meaning?
3. Can the word 'good' have more than one meaning?
4. Can a name have more than one bearer? Is there more than one Bill Clinton?
5. Is there a difference between the way the word 'Christmas' has meaning and the way the name 'Bill Clinton' does?
6. Is there a difference between the way a word has meaning and the way an event, like a ball game, does?
7. Is there a difference between the meaning a ball game has, and the meaning of a religious event? Why?

Students are asked to comment on the questions in a familiar style of chat room called 'Have your say'. A selection of comments from the last few weeks most of which are fairly unsophisticated, but are not uninteresting. So for instance, one first year undergraduate group had comments such as

Q1 Christmas has different meaning but most are still generally positive - unless you've had some isolated bad experience at Christmas time

And another, which alerted me to the need for some Frege -

Q1 I believe that every single word, object, subject or even an action does not have their single unique meaning. Because different people perceive the things are so different based on their perceptions, experience, culture, beliefs and values. So, with these differences, they will interpret the things differently. It is very hard for the world to share a same unique meaning of words, objects, subjects and actions with these differences.

Others come up with familiar arguments:

Q3. When you think of the word good it is always in a favourable sense it just depends on the degree. So yes there is only one meaning to the term good.

Others less familiar

Q6. When you think/hear the term rugby union you can visualise all aspects of the game you do not have to actually be on the side line to capture the essence of the game. Therefore the meaning of a word holds just as much impact as does the event itself.

Notice that this 'Have your say' page aims to encourage a debate as part of the process of developing critical attitudes to the media. But the site is only a beginning. As each new ever cleverer cartoon – or ad - hits the screen, we need to talk about it, enjoy it, but also examine what is going on. The website will, I hope, allow others to help. Anyone who has a good idea about television ads can either get a password and the template for entering new product from me, and launch it. In New York two years ago, I came across a - very expensive - product called 'Philosophy': a range of cosmetics. In Ottawa this week, I found another ad using 'Philosophy': this time for a range of second hand clothes at Goodwill Stores. It talks of the 'Goodwear Philosophy': "Goodwear is not a label. It's a virtual thing." In Canada, not only is philosophy apparent in popular culture; so too is 'virtual' philosophy.

Endnotes

1 It had an average of 3-5 points since its debut in August 1997.

2 More specifically, 50.1% are men 18-24 and 35.9% are women 18-24. However, cable figures, however high, still do not compete with the network figures. Robert Allen, Professor of Communications, University of North Carolina puts in 'Remember this in on Comedy central, it's definitely minority viewing option for most Americans' (ABC Media Report 1998).

3 Any search engine will take you to it, but the SBS website will provide a start under *South Park* at www.sbs.com.au. My own site is, for now not cross referenced, but is up at <http://communication.canberra.edu.au/Reason&Media> and under the Media Workshop page at <http://mediaWorkshop.org/working/Slade/frontpage.html>.

4 Talk at NYU 02/25/97 'Teaching the Media', quoted by permission. See the argument at chapter 5 of 1999, forthcoming, in which he points out that commercial interests cite media literature kids as evidence that ads have minimal effects.

5 With CUTSD funding, I have developed the website with Jessica Millstone and Melissa Philips of the Media Education Workshop in New York with colleagues here.

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Appendix

A Reason & Media Discussion Page

Discussion Topic: Should Cartoons be Lifelike

Q1. Cartoons are no better when they look like real people than when they look abstract. It is what they say that makes them funny Q.2 Yes cartoons are more life like when they look like real events, viewers can identify with the cartoon more and then find it more funny. Q.3 South Park can have more character reality than a cartoon that has more real looking animation. Again, it is what is said that matters not nec. the animation. I also believe that the dodgyness of South park animation contributes to it be funny. 2:26:16 PM, Fri, 16 Oct 1998

Q.4 I don't think that cartoons could be made to say they are not real in ANY way because characters die and come back to life. there are some aspects of reality to them, otherwise we wouldn't find them funny. I believe that objects that i consider to be real are more sciebtific in nature. Toys are not real, but actual photos and fossils are real, they come from a living being. The color blue is real because it comes from a plant, yet the sea's blue color isn't treal because it is the depths of the sea and what lays on its bottom that creates the blue image we see. 11:43:14 AM, Wed, 14 Oct 1998

I agree with both the comments earlier, that cartoons work because the

characters are not lifelike. Why would 'cuteness' and non realism be a plus?
(CS) no, cartoon characters are better whne they don't actually look exactly like humans - the South Park episode where Cartman took the "Beefcake" (Beefcake!!)product to 'bulk up' for his television appearance wouldn't have looked quite as good if he didn't turn ou as big as he did - and no normal human would ever be that big. 9:30:44 AM, Tue, 13 Oct 1998 cartoons are creatures to me as well, very much cuter then human beings that's all. they can be more lifelike if they want to. at times , they have to be what they are coz children love the ways they behave. They act as an entertainer in children life, most of the time. Mainly coz of their character & behaviour. I think their role is much more difficult to play compare to a clown! 11:30:19 AM, Mon, 12 Oct 1998