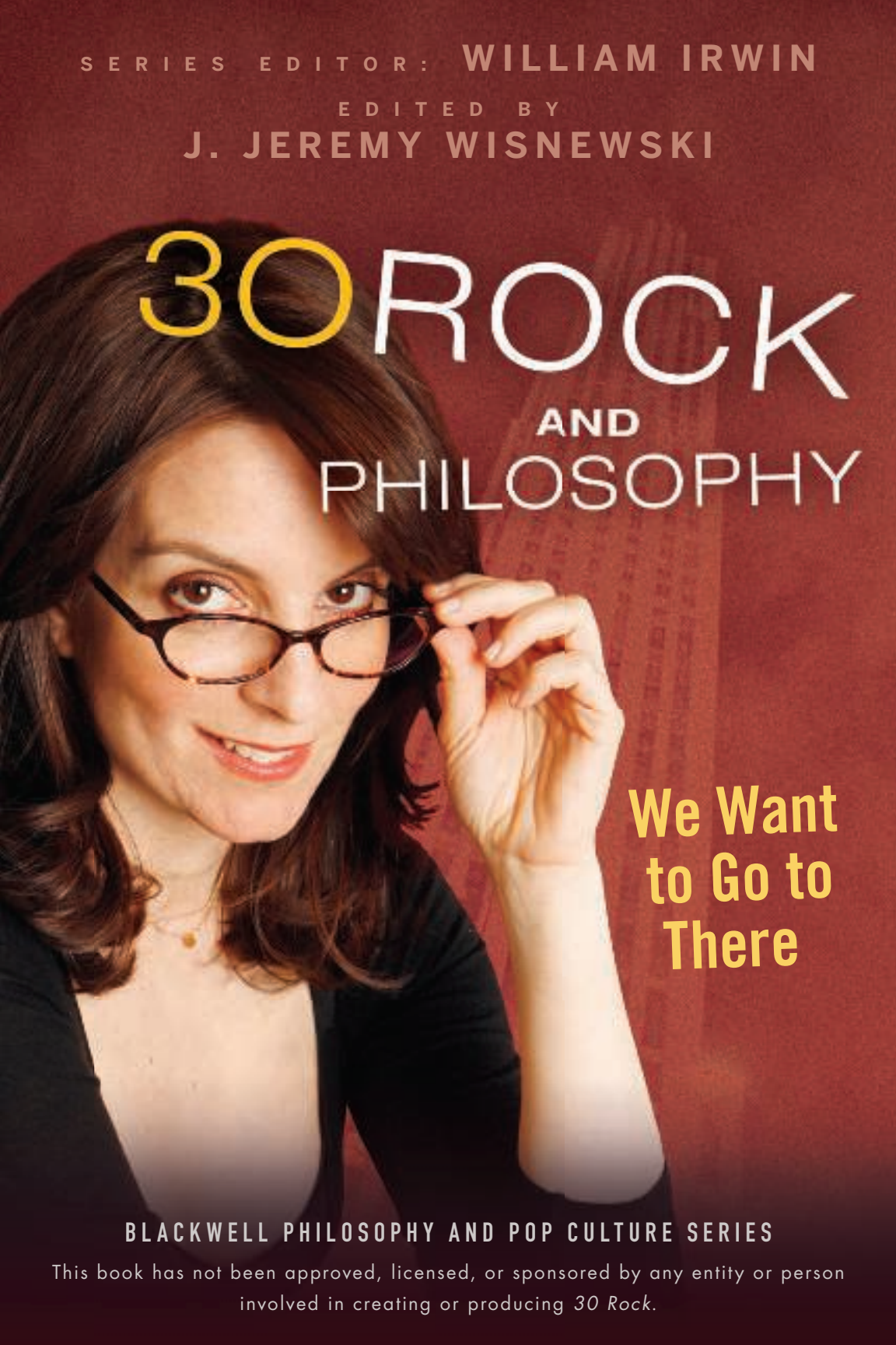


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J. JEREMY WISNEWSKI



# 30 ROCK

AND  
PHILOSOPHY

**We Want  
to Go to  
There**

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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**30 ROCK  
AND  
PHILOSOPHY**

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WE WANT TO GO TO THERE

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### Thanks for Helping Us Go to There

Television saves lives. It jumps into the lake to rescue small children, it lands aircraft in danger of crashing, it prevents natural disasters.

Okay, I'm exaggerating. But I want to thank television nonetheless. While it hasn't ended war or famine, it has provided a constant source of entertainment, and a constant occasion to bring philosophy to bear on everyday life. And for that, I can't help but be grateful.

I'm also grateful to all those folks who helped make this book possible. I've been fortunate enough to work with contributors who didn't require all of the coddling that the cast of *TGS with Tracy Jordan* needs. Thanks for getting us there, everybody! I'm also grateful to Connie Santisteban and Bill Irwin—editors who make working on topics in philosophy and pop culture as fun as it should be. Justine Gray, Nicolas Michaud, and Jackie Seamon also deserve thanks for offering feedback on the manuscript, helping open Frank's Hat Store (see Appendix 1), and collecting the wisdom of Kenneth Ellen Parcell (see Appendix 2).

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Dorothy Wisnewski, for the support that makes it possible for me to do everything I do. I'd also like to thank my children, Audrey and Lucian, for being as wonderful as they are.



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## INTRODUCTION

### Platonic Fantasies and Tina Fey-losophy

I enjoy fantasies. Not the kind you see in movies, or read about in books—the kind in my head. Since *30 Rock* debuted, I’ve found myself fantasizing about who the writers on the show might be. Would Plato fit in among the crowd, or Aristotle? Would Tina Fey hold her own, third-wave feminist style, against Socrates?

Aside from the small matter of being 2,400 years in the past, I can easily imagine Plato at the writers’ table, lizzing away with Tina Fey as they talk through the latest script. Plato was a notorious jokester. His dialogues include jokes about self-importance (Tracy and Jenna, anyone?), jokes about incompetence (Tracy and Jenna again? Devon Banks? Kathy Geiss?), and jokes about sex (have you seen the show!?).<sup>1</sup> I think he’d fit right in, at least once he learned English. I can even picture his hat: Socrates Rules.

Does it seem like a bit much? Is it surprising that television can be a source for philosophical reflection? Can “real” philosophy be done in conjunction with something popular, like *30 Rock*? In asking these questions, we’d do well to remember that Plato said truth could not be written, and that he himself

had never written down his own philosophical teachings.<sup>2</sup> (I'm pretty sure Tina Fey said the same thing in some interview somewhere.) In this respect, all of Plato's dialogues can be regarded as popular writings encouraging people to come to Plato's Academy and to engage in living philosophical dialogue. The written dialogues are meant to begin the philosophical journey, not to end it. They are meant to inspire philosophical dialogue, not to replace it. This is exactly how I think of *30 Rock*, and exactly what brings me back week after week.

When I think of philosophy and *30 Rock*, I like to imagine Plato as a television writer. Plato used a popular medium of his time, the dialogue, to get people to philosophize. And I bet he would have opted for television if he lived in this century. Yes, Plato criticized imitation. Television is of course imitation—and *30 Rock* especially so—it's a show that *imitates* a show. Of course, Plato's criticism of imitation occurs in a speech given by Socrates. The speech recounts a fictional dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Plato was certainly aware that a speech about a dialogue was only an imitation of a dialogue, much as Tina Fey is aware that *TGS* isn't a real show. One can't help but imagine Plato smiling about what he'd done. If he were a television writer, we'd expect no less: he would surely criticize the crap that's on television in whatever show he was writing.

And yes, I like to think of Tina Fey and the writers of *30 Rock* as a collective modern-day Plato (I said I enjoyed fantasy!). They put in just enough shenanigans (to use a little Irish slang) to keep viewers entranced. What does it mean to be black or white? What does it mean to live the good life? Should moral rules always be followed? Can Frank really be gay for just one guy? What is the nature of friendship? How can we know anything at all about the world? These questions arise on the set of *TGS*—and they persist.

Kenneth says he loves two things: everybody and television. While I can't honestly say I love everyone, I concur wholeheartedly with Kenneth on television. It is a glorious invention,

and a remarkable source of wonder. Where else can we view worlds that do not exist, full of quirky characters, doing endlessly amusing things? Where else can we find Tracy Jordon calling Colorado a “white myth,” Jack Donaghy admitting that he has a cookie jar collection, and Liz Lemon flashing a breast? And when we get to a television show *about* a television show, well, that’s nearly too good to be true.

Aristotle claimed that philosophy begins in wonder, so it’s no surprise that philosophy can arise from watching television—especially when the show is about television, and full of some of the silliest stuff imaginable. Wonder is one of the benefits of watching *30 Rock*, and philosophy can’t help but be there too, bubbling up and spilling over everything.

## NOTES

1. Many of Plato’s early dialogues poke fun at both incompetence and self-importance. “Euthyphro,” for example, is about a fellow who thinks he knows what morality is, and even claims to be able to see the future. Of course, the future he sees involves Socrates being acquitted at his trial—which obviously is *not* what happens (Socrates is sentenced to death). The name “Euthyphro” itself can be roughly translated as “straight-thinker”—an obvious snicker at this arrogant SOB. In *The Republic*, as elsewhere, Plato makes his fair share of sex jokes—not the least of which is about women training in the nude, riding “studs” just like men (and yes, all the sexual connotations are there in the Greek, too).
2. See “Phaedrus” and Plato’s Seventh Letter. For a wonderful defense of this view of Plato’s writings, see James Arieti’s *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1991).
3. The text is *The Republic*. It begins with Socrates recalling a conversation. We have no idea who he’s talking to—he just jumps right in. This makes the book already an imitation of dialogue, since Socrates (Plato’s mouthpiece) is the only speaker in the whole of *The Republic* (when he reports what others say, after all, it’s still him doing the talking). A second layer of imitation is present in the very fact that the reported dialogue is *written*, rather than spoken. In this sense, *The Republic* is twice removed from actual dialogue: it is a written, and hence doesn’t have the give-and-take of dialogue, and it’s presented in a speech by Socrates (so there’s only one person talking). Plato knew what he was doing—namely, messing with his readers!





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**PART ONE**

**WHAT WOULD OPRAH DO?:  
ETHICS AND THE GOOD  
LIFE AT *30 ROCK***





## **BEING KENNETH: SOME MORAL LESSONS**

*P. Sue Dohnimm<sup>1</sup>*

Kenneth makes my heart skip. It isn't his dashing good looks or his wonderful sense of style. It isn't just the endearing fact that his middle name is Ellen. Honestly, it's the simplicity of his moral vision. He just sees the world in a way that I can't even imagine. It's an enchanted world, where right and wrong are as plain as the pee and laughter combination we call lizzing. I have the same question Jack Donaghy has.

Jack: Kenneth, I wonder what it's like seeing the world through your eyes?

Kenneth: I don't know, Mr. Donaghy. Well, I think I see the world pretty much the same as everyone else.

Jack: Really? [*music starts, Jack continues, singing*] 'Cause I think you're very special, Kenneth [*Jack is now seen through Kenneth's eyes, as a puppet.*], to be able to get so much joy from simple things, simple things. . . .

Jack [*talking again, and human*]: But most of us grow up and lose our sense of wonder. ["Apollo, Apollo"]

Kenneth sees things uniquely. He is literal-minded. When Jack says, "Now look at me," after talking about some of the things he went through as a child, Kenneth simply says, "I already did" ("Apollo, Apollo"). Kenneth is thrilled with a key-chain he got on his last birthday, joyous because "every time you move his head, his head moves! Look!"

The disenchanted world is complicated. The decisions we have to make can make us unsure of ourselves. We face challenges of all kinds. We're befuddled by moral dilemmas in which we have to make difficult choices. Do we let Jenna fall as she plays Peter Pan in order to get back at her for sleeping with Dennis? Do we let Frank go to law school given his family history? Do we call the ambulance right away when we hit Mom with the car? Kenneth doesn't seem to be bothered by such dilemmas. He sees the world with absolute clarity. There's only right and wrong.

### **Kenneth's Moral Universe**

Jack sees the world in terms of dollar signs. Tracy sees the world egocentrically—everyone is just another Tracy Jordan, having no interests other than Tracy's.

Kenneth lives in a different world. His moral universe involves following a moral code no matter how difficult it is. It's a world where lying is wrong, where one must never steal, and where doing good for others is paramount. Kenneth's good deeds are all over *30 Rock*. Whether he's accompanying Liz Lemon to recover her phone from an unscrupulous cabby, or swearing his undying love for television, Kenneth seems to emit moral virtue like it's going out of style (and maybe it is). When Tracy disappears to save himself from the wrath of the Black Crusaders, Kenneth knows his whereabouts, but refuses to break his vow to Tracy ("Hiatus"). Liz and Jack yell at him,

threaten him, call him a “mouth-breathing Appalachian,” but it’s to no avail. His promise stands strong. When Tracy is running late to *TGS*, Kenneth sacrifices his body to get Tracy there on time. Kenneth voluntarily falls down some concrete stairs so that Tracy can use the ambulance to get him to the show on time (ambulances are only for real emergencies, after all) (“Hiatus”). When Kenneth wins Pete’s wedding ring in a game of poker, he simply gives it back. He can’t see his way clear to keeping it (“Blind Date”).

These acts of kindness and principle seem to make Kenneth what we might call a “rule absolutist.” For the rule absolutist, the moral law dictates what’s appropriate, and it’s appropriate *everywhere and always*. There are no exceptions to moral rules. Period. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is the philosopher usually associated with this view, though perhaps a little unfairly. For Kant, morality demands absolute consistency in action. It involves never making an exception of oneself, and always holding oneself to the highest moral standard. The rule is everything for the rule absolutist.

By contrast, one might think of moral rules as useful guidelines for navigating the difficult waters of everyday life. These rules, however, need to occasionally be set aside when the circumstances demand it. Of course, it’s easy to be wrong about what the circumstances demand, so one shouldn’t set aside rules lightly. All the same, there will be some cases where a rule like “never lie” will lead us astray. (When the Nazis ask if we’re hiding any Jews, saying “Yes, they’re upstairs” would arguably *not* be an example of moral action! And the same goes for telling the Black Crusaders where Tracy is.) With this view, morality is a *context-specific* affair. We can call this *contextual absolutism*. The most famous advocate of this kind of view is Aristotle (384–322 BCE).

As the name indicates, this conception of morality doesn’t equate to any kind of *moral antirealism*—the view that *there are no* moral truths. The idea, rather, is that there *is* always

a right thing to do, it's just that rules can't tell us in advance what that thing will be. We have to pay special attention to the circumstances of our action, and act accordingly. The moral sage is the person who always *sees* all of the relevant features of a given situation, and responds to them appropriately. In this respect, the moral sage has no need for rules. Rules might help us to reach a stage where we act morally most of the time, but they're only a ladder that we must climb up. Once we've attained moral wisdom, the ladder itself can be discarded.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth certainly believes that there's a singular right thing to do. But is he a rule absolutist? Does he take his moral rules so seriously that he simply can't set them aside? In a surprising number of cases, Kenneth does set specific rules aside—and he sometimes does so for all the wrong reasons. But in a complicated world like New York City, what's the son of a pig farmer from Stone Mountain to do?

### Tested Virtue

Kenneth doesn't seem to fetishize rules. He doesn't seem to hold to them in all circumstances no matter what, valuing them in themselves. For example, when Tracy and his wife, Angie, are on the verge of breaking up for good, Kenneth sets aside his aversion to deception. He tries to intervene. By pretending to be interested in Angie as a sexual partner in an attempt to make Tracy jealous, Kenneth Ellen Parcell claims he's real good at the sexy stuff, and that he'd like to visit Angie "at night." We know he doesn't mean it, and we know why he's doing it. He wants to trick Tracy, to *deceive* him.

Kenneth attempts the same kind of deception when Tracy doesn't take his risk of diabetes seriously. He constructs an elaborate ruse involving a story he first heard from his Mee-Maw: the Hill Witch torments those who don't eat their vegetables! In an effort to get Tracy to eat right, Kenneth pretends to be the Hill Witch, trying to scare Tracy into a healthy lifestyle

(ultimately, it's Jenna who manages to successfully impersonate the Hill Witch).

So maybe Kenneth isn't a rule absolutist: he's willing to engage in deception for a greater good. But the strategy can backfire. Consider, for instance, when Tracy tells Kenneth to "please" his wife as a way of making up for Tracy's (pretend) infidelities. When Tracy rushes to stop the consummation, he finds Kenneth looking pale, eating a sandwich, sitting next to Grizz.

Tracy [*running into his house*]: I'm going to kill you, Kenneth the Page!

Kenneth: I'm sorry, Mr. Jordan. I just couldn't do it.

Angie: This boy comes to the door, tries to kiss me, then he throws up, and starts crying.

Kenneth: My body wouldn't let me violate the sacred bonds of marriage, sir.

Kenneth's ability to bend the moral rules has its limits. While Kenneth might be able to be set aside some moral rules briefly (like not deceiving others), he can't set them aside easily—and certainly not for long. When Kenneth tries to get Tracy to believe he's hitting on Angie, for example, he stutters through his pickup lines, using every cliché he can think of. When the ruse is complete, he has trouble taking a drink from his bottled water, shaken by his venture into rule-breaking.

Kenneth's willingness to set aside a moral rule may well indicate that he's a contextual absolutist—that is, he may think that morality sometimes requires setting aside our usual roles. But there's some evidence to the contrary here as well. While Liz is right to call Kenneth a "sweet kid," he doesn't always seem so sweet—particularly when he's doing something for someone else (like Jack).

Jack: The only reason I sent you to Banks was to get information. Why were you telling him anything?

Kenneth: I'm sorry, sir. I had to keep talking just to stop him from putting his fingers in my mouth.

Jack: Kenneth, you are the worst gay bait ever.

Kenneth [*upset*]: You used me?

Jack: For television. Kenneth, I humiliated you for television.

Kenneth [*excited*]: Like on *What's Happening?*, when that man used Re-run to bootleg that Doobie Brothers concert!

Jack: Exactly. And I need to humiliate you again. I've got a very important meeting coming up and Banks cannot be there.

Kenneth: And you want me to kill him . . .

Jack: No. I want you to distract him. You've got to make sure he doesn't leave that hotel room tomorrow morning.

Kenneth: I'll do it. Just like Sydney Bristow on *Alias*, I'll use my sexuality as a weapon. To the wig shop! [*runs away, smiling*]. ["Fireworks"]

And this is certainly not the only time Kenneth is asked to use his sexual energy as a trap for Devon Banks. It's also not the only time he decides to actively deceive others. Television is hardly the greater good, even though Kenneth most certainly thinks it is. Do these examples show that Kenneth isn't the moral beacon we thought he was? Perhaps. Or perhaps not.

There's another way of understanding Kenneth's moral lapses—and one that fits perfectly with Kenneth's personality. Kenneth's immoral actions all stem from the same unholy trinity: gullibility, trust, and unflappable loyalty. He sets aside



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