

MORAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Practical Moral Reasoning and Popular Culture
Convener: Kristin E. Heyer, Loyola Marymount University
Moderator: Thomas B. Leininger, Regis University
Presenter: David Cloutier, Mount Saint Mary's University
Respondent: Martha Stortz, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

David Cloutier explored the impact popular culture has on our moral agency through an analysis of *how* this ubiquitous culture influences us. He framed his discussion with references to the film *High Fidelity*, in which the protagonist, Rob, wrestles with the effects of popular culture, navigating between fantasy and reality. Cloutier argued that popular culture can disable us as moral agents by distracting and distancing us from active participation in “real reality.” He characterized most Christian moral analyses of popular culture’s efficacy, from Vatican II’s decree on social communication to Tom Beaudoin’s *Virtual Faith*, as content-based or concerned with the “what” of popular culture. By contrast, Cloutier shifted attention to the “how” of popular culture, or the ways in which it “forms and shapes agents in particular ways due to its form, and not simply its content.”

Drawing upon wide-ranging examples, from U2’s AIDS ballad, “One,” to *West Wing* addicts, to Billy Ray Cyrus’s “Achy Breaky Heart,” Cloutier highlighted two particular problems with how popular culture functions: it distorts imagination and it promotes consumption and “simulated reality.” Cloutier drew upon Alasdair MacIntyre to show the importance of imagination and social practices for moral agency, and introduced social scientific and media studies research to show the effects of popular culture in shaping our assumptions about how the world works and thus our basic frameworks for making sense of reality. He used several examples from movies and his own teaching to show the pervasive ways in which popular culture frames our reality. Cloutier focused his analysis of popular culture not simply on straightforward behavioral causation but on the dimensions of agency that relate to the perceptions, possibilities, and identities that form “a necessary *context* for action.” Cloutier argued that the key to understanding agents’ use of popular culture is its relationship to what he termed an agent’s “real reality.” He provided examples of sex and violence in the media and different types of media “users” to distinguish cases where popular culture distorts an agent’s imagination because it presents seemingly plausible claims or serves as a “conserving force.” Such reinforcement of prevalent attitudes by popular culture inhibits agents from distinguishing reality from fantasy.

Cloutier identified the second problem popular culture poses as its encouragement of consumption rather than participation in “real reality.” Consuming popular culture, regardless of its content or level of sophistication, remains a spectator sport, whereas participation in “real reality” in the form of a social practice is essential for developing virtues and relationships, both integral to moral agency. Cloutier concluded by highlighting the need for what he called “clunky interfaces,” that is,

the need to clearly identify the seams between popular culture and “real reality” amid a milieu where such distinctions are being increasingly obscured toward “seamlessness.” He warned that “unplugged” should remain the “default position,” since practical reasoning can only ensue in real situations where agents display actual virtues, risk genuine relationships, and decide who we truly are.

In her response, Martha Stortz underscored the necessity and power of the moral imagination. She highlighted how images and metaphors allow us to make sense of our lives, in both academic and popular cultures. The key, she showed through examples from Iris Murdoch and *High Fidelity*, lies in distinguishing between imagination and fantasy, between truthful and false metaphors. Because powerful metaphors pervade all cultures and retain power to “bind or deflect us from what’s real,” Stortz next called for appropriate criteria for assessing such metaphors.

She affirmed Cloutier’s criteria for assessing whether a true or false imagination drives moral agents, yet she concluded that we require more “meaty” standards for determining whether any culture, popular or academic, “enhances or cripples moral agency.” She cited Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell’s criteria for good stories, including stories’ power to help us see through current distortions and their restoration of a sense of the tragic, or “how meaning transcends power.” Finding their list yet anemic, Stortz suggested the more comprehensive and explicitly faithful criteria identified by Patrick McCormick and Russell Connors in their *Character, Choices & Community*.

In the discussion that ensued, Bryan Massingale suggested that the body should be a touchstone for distinguishing real reality from fantasy as well as for helping us to recognize oppression by the dominant culture.

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