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Media Savvy: The Thinker

Serious philosophers make the case that Jon Stewart is the Socrates of our day

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Deep, esoteric chin-pulling is not the reaction you'd expect from people who watch "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart."

I laugh, therefore I am?

Not exactly.

But then, Jason Holt is not your average viewer of Comedy Central's popular fake-news program. An assistant professor at Acadia University in Canada and the author of two academic books, Holt processes the pop-culture world through a philosophical prism.

So, to him, Stewart and television cohort Stephen Colbert are nothing less than the Socrates and Plato of our time.

Really. He's serious about studying these TV funnymen. In fact, Holt enlisted the help of 20 other academics – or "Senior Philosophical Correspondents," to ape a "Daily Show" shtick – to put their high brows together and muse on the significance of all things Stewart.

The result: "The Daily Show and Philosophy" (Blackwell, \$17.95, 270 pages), a compendium of essays that consider whether Stewart and his merry band of fakecasters are the public intellectuals of today, whether "truthiness" is indeed a higher form of truth, and just how edifying those "Moments of Zen" really are.

"I sent out a call for papers for this project and got upward of 50 proposals," says Holt, on the phone recently from Nova Scotia. "I couldn't take all of them for the book. But that shows you the level of interest."

Hmm. "The Daily Show" popular among philosophers? Who knew?

And what, pray tell, would the congenitally snarky Stewart think of all this?

Well, we never heard back from Stewart's people, but Holt is willing to venture a guess.

"Outwardly, (Stewart) would – and perhaps should – mock it," he says. "He could use this kind of thing as grist for his mill, because he always sells himself short. He underplays the cultural importance of the show.

"But if he reflected on it, he might see that we might be on to something."

The book travels all over the philosophical landscape, although the scholars spend most of their time comparing Stewart to Socrates, the classical Greek thinker who founded Western philosophy, and Diogenes, the leader of the ancient Greek "cynics" school.

Just as Socrates' and Diogenes' reason-over-emotion doctrines served as an antidote to the sophists and rhetoricians of their day, Stewart's nightly reports combat the dissembling of politicians and the blathering of mainstream media's so-called "chattering class." At least, that's Holt's thesis.

And then, there's this: Socrates and Diogenes were as snarky then as Stewart is now.

Diogenes once lived in a bathtub to show citizens the folly of the pursuit of wealth and comfort. And Socrates was known for comically feigning ignorance – "I know that I am intelligent, because I know that I know nothing" – to dissect an opponent's argument.

Indeed, this use of "Socratic irony" is alive and well today in Stewart's interviews, according to Indiana State philosophy professor Judith Barad.

"(Stewart) shares Socrates' appreciation of one-on-one encounters, and he resembles the ancient sage when he pretends to be confused and requests explanations that underscore how ridiculous someone else sounds," Barad writes in her essay. "Socrates showed them that people may have high positions and power, yet at the same time be irrational and deeply confused."

Barad even speculates that Socrates would have "made one of those awestruck faces Jon Stewart is famous for."

Essayists Steven Michels and Michael Ventimiglia of Sacred Heart University write that Stewart is like Socrates in that the late-night host allows people to embarrass themselves by "letting them fall on their own swords." Socrates did it through his dialogues; Stewart through TV sound bites.

As an example, the essayists compare Socrates' dismissive dialogue with the out-of-touch religious leader Euthyphro over the meaning of piety with a "Daily Show" snippet in which Stewart mocks Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens' uninformed speech about the proposed Net Neutrality Act.

After a clip in which Stevens shows little knowledge about the Web, Stewart pounces: "You don't seem to know jack ... about computers or the Internet. But hey, that's OK; you're just the guy in charge of regulating it, so what difference does it make?"

Essayist Alejandro Barcenas of the University of Hawaii writes that the ancient cynics sought to "provoke outrage," but did it by "ridiculing those traditions that most people unreflectively considered moral and proper."

Diogenes, for example, famously met Alexander the Great and, rather than be cowed by the leader, said, "Do not shade me; stand out of my light."

Now, consider Stewart's nightly mocking of President Bush.

Same concept, Barcenas argues, adding, "A student of Diogenes, Crates of Thebes, said, 'One should study philosophy until seeing in generals nothing but donkey drivers,' a statement that 'The Daily Show' writers would no doubt happily approve."

In fact, "The Daily Show" relishes in showing clips of the president of the United States falling off a Segway scooter, perhaps the modern equivalent of a donkey.

For his part, Holt says that Stewart can show current philosophers and "public intellectuals," such

as himself, a thing or two.

"Intellectuals in the past used to do a lot more public engagement, reaching out behind the walls of the ivory tower," Holt says. "Now, many have not taken this challenge up, and they've left a gap in the culture. A lot of pundits have taken over.

"What Stewart and 'The Daily Show' do is fill that gap, not because it's intellectual discourse first and foremost, but because they're doing a better job than academics like me have traditionally done."

All that, and good ratings, too.

Stewart

"Most viewers (73 percent) fall in the 18-to-49 demographic."

Begat Stephen Colbert.

Was the host of the 2006 Academy Awards.

"Pretends to be confused and requests explanations that underscore how ridiculous someone else sounds."

"The role fake news plays supervising the fourth estate can be understood in light of the traditional role that philosophy plays countering rhetoric."

Socrates

Had a "group of appreciative young men follow (him)."

Begat Plato.

Was sentenced to death by the state and forced to drink hemlock.

"Practiced philosophy ironically, talking with anyone who claimed to know, while proclaiming himself to be ignorant."

"Showed ... that people may have high positions and power, yet at the same time be irrational and deeply confused."

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