Consider the fish swimming in the aquarium at the beginning of Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life. Among other things, they note their fellow fish, Howard, being eaten outside of the aquarium. But they make no connection between that event and their own likely fates, and they wonder, casually if not benightedly, what life is all about. Have they missed something? Have we?

The meaning of life is a central philosophical question, and philosophy is important in everything Monty Python has created.

The concept of philosophy itself is all about how to think for yourself. This individual-centered component of philosophy is strongly endorsed by Monty Python, particularly in a well-known scene from Monty Python’s Life of Brian. In an attempt to dissuade a horde of would-be disciples, Brian argues:

Look…you´ve got it all wrong. You don´t need to follow me. You don´t need to follow anybody. You´ve got to think for yourselves. You’re all individuals.

The importance of this scene cannot be overemphasized in attempting to locate an existential message – or indeed the message of philosophy itself – in Monty Python. It is without doubt one of their rare moments of open and direct expression of a philosophical idea, although it fits naturally into the plot and scene. The Monty Python members have repeatedly stated that Monty Python’s Life of Brian is one of their finest achievements due to its consistent theme – and the theme, of course, is the philosophical plea for a little “critical thinking” on the part of the individual. In various interviews, they have made the following comments on the film’s message:

**John Cleese:** One of the themes of the film is, “Do make up your own mind about things and don´t do what people tell you.” And I find it slightly funny that there are now religious organizations saying, “Do not go and see this film that tells you not to do what you are told.”

**Michael Palin:** There´s a real feeling that we´d moved up a notch with Life of Brian. It was taking on something that could be difficult and controversial, but essential dealt with all sorts of things that were right at the basis of what Python comedy was all about, which is really resisting people telling you how to behave and not how to
behave. It was the freedom of the individual, a very sixties thing, the independence which was part of the way Python had been formed…

So, it’s worth reminding ourselves that Monty Python emerged with, and hastened along, what was at the time called “the counterculture revolution.”

A counterculture (also written counter-culture) is a subculture whose values and norms of behavior differ substantially from those of mainstream society, often in opposition to mainstream cultural mores. A countercultural movement expresses the ethos and aspirations of a specific population during a well-defined era. When oppositional forces reach critical mass, countercultures can trigger dramatic cultural changes. Prominent examples of countercultures in Europe and North America include Romanticism (1790–1840), Bohemianism (1850–1910), the more fragmentary counterculture of the Beat Generation (1944–1964), followed by the globalized counterculture of the 1960s (1964–1974), usually associated with the hippie subculture and the diversified Punk subculture of the 1980s.

Especially in my pop culture file on Ghost Rider, I have depicted my own fascination with the counterculture of the 1960s.

The counterculture sought to break down hierarchies and reverse traditional priorities. The Pythons fit this agenda almost as if they invented it on their own. The “spiritually” high and mighty, particularly the pompous, were parodied, especially if they had little to offer beyond platitudes the did not live by. And an audience of quite ordinary people, the supposed sheep of the flocks, were laughed into seeing the institutions around them, especially the supposed “meaning purveyors,” as silly or empty, or hilariously both.

Such an anarchistic attitude is an important step in philosophy; that is: in the steps towards thinking for yourself.

Monty Python you might say, is showing the ways in which this central message is being distorted, right from the plain silly (What's So Funny About a Roman prefect named Biggus Dickus?) to the grotesque (Mr. Creosote, who eats until he vomits and explodes).

You could also say that the Pythons are revolving around one central thought distortion, namely Truth by Authority. Truth by Authority is about taking statements to be true simply because an alleged authority (experts, teachers, states of enlightenment, divine sources, paranormal abilities, etc.) on the matter has
said/justified that they are true. A level of critical thinking is always appropriate, because the statement may be based on different kinds of other thought distortions.

The dangers of blind obedience to authority are illustrated when Brian unintentionally gains a collection of followers. He tries to convince them that he is not the Messiah, but they do not listen. “Only the true Messiah denies his divinity,” a woman explains, typifying the way that the crowd reinterprets everything he says to support the conclusion they want to hear. This response reaches its peak when, in frustration, Brian says, “All right, I am the Messiah.” The crowd is relieved. “Now fuck off!” says Brian. The crowd is quiet. Finally, one man asks, “How shall we fuck off, O Lord?” Their desperate desire to have rules to follow prevents them from critically accessing the commands they receive.

Later Brian highlights this point in the above-mentioned scene where his followers have grown tremendously in numbers. After accidentally exposing himself (in one of the best uses of male full-frontal nudity in film history), Brian tells the crowd: “You´ve got to think for yourselves! You´re all individuals!”

The crowd replies, reverently, “Yes, we´re all individuals!” They simply don´t get it. This is reduced even further to absurdity when a man in the crowd says: “I´m not…” And the crowd answers: “Shhh!”

So, people don´t understand the idea of thinking for yourself neither. The fish at the beginning of Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life do not connect death with what life is all about with what life means. Similarly, the couple examining the philosophy menu in the restaurant in the film show no more that the most idle of curiosities regarding philosophy:

**Waiter:** Good evening! Uhh, would you care for something to...talk about?

**Mr. Hendy:** What is this one here?

**Waiter:** Uhh, that’s “philosophy”.

**Mrs. Hendy:** Is that a sport?

**Waiter:** Aah, no, it´s more of an attempt to, uh, construct a viable hypothesis to, uh, explain the meaning of life.

**Mr. Hendy:** Oh, that sounds wonderful. Would you like to talk about the meaning of life, darling?

**Mrs. Hendy:** Sure, Why not?

**Waiter:** Philosophy for two?

**Mr. Hendy:** Yup. Uhh, - uh, h – how do we –

**Waiter:** Oh, uhh, you folks want me to start you off?

**Mr. Hendy:** Yeah.
Waiter: Well, ehh,…
Mr. Hendy: Hmm.
Waiter: … look. Have you ever wondered…just why you´re here?
Mr. Hendy: well, we went to Miami last year and California the year before that, and we´re –
Waiter: No, no, no. I mean, uh, w – why we´re here…on this planet.
Mr. Hendy: Hmmm. No.
Waiter: Right! Aaah, you ever wanted to know what´s it´s all about?
Mr. Hendy: Nope.
Mrs Hendy: No. No.

If wisdom were to result from consuming philosophy – which the menu has on offer – you would think that their interest would be keen and their appetite great. Shouldn´t they be almost passionately involved in ordering? Could you ever be more voraciously hungry, excited or intensely careful, if what you were ordering was wisdom?

What this scene suggests is that just as religion had, for many, become conventional and humdrum in its form and rituals, deadening in fact, philosophy, especially in the Pythons´ England, had become very removed, sophisticated and “picky.”

Moreover, philosophy appeared on the menu, but aroused next to excitement. They didn´t want to think for themselves. They wanted the waiter to tell them what they should think.

The concept of philosophy (and the lack of understanding it´s message) just keeps popping up overall in Monty Python´s Flying Circus. Just take The Bruces sketch. The sketch involves a group of stereotypical "ocker" Australians of the period, who are all wearing khakis and cork hats. All are named Bruce, hence being known as the Bruces.

The Bruces are revealed to be the Philosophy Department at the fictitious University of Woolamaloo. The department appears to be situated in nothing more than a simple wooden building apparently somewhere in the outback. The Bruces all have a common fondness for beer and a dislike of "poofers".

"Bruces' Philosophers Song (Bruces' Song)" is a popular Monty Python song written and composed by Eric Idle. All the philosophers whom the song mentions were dead by the time it appeared, apart from Martin Heidegger. Socrates is the only one mentioned twice in the song, not coincidentally. The song goes:
Immanuel Kant was a real pissant  
Who was very rarely stable

Heidegger, Heidegger was a boozy beggar  
Who could think you under the table

David Hume could out-consume  
Wilhelm Friedrigh Hegel

And Wittgenstein was a beery swine  
Who was just as schloshed as Schlegel

There's nothing Nietzsche couldn't teach ya  
'Bout the raising of the wrist  
Socrates, himself, was permanently pissed

John Stuart Mill, of his own free will  
On half a pint of shandy was particularly ill

Plato, they say, could stick it away  
Half a crate of whiskey every day

Aristotle, Aristotle was a bugger for the bottle  
Hobbes was fond of his dram

And René Descartes was a drunken fart  
I drink, therefore I am

Yes, Socrates, himself, is particularly missed  
A lovely little thinker  
But a bugger when he's pissed

Yes Socrates is missed, or he might have gone pissed. Today philosophy namely has been taken over by Self-helpers and New Agers, who play the modern of role of Socrates (or the false prophets). Instead of following the example of the archetypal sober philosopher Socrates, they follow the example of his opponents, the drunken Sophists.

You might say that Monty Python's main target is religion, or rather Christianity, but New Age is even worse, because everyone here talks about themselves as prophets.
We’re back at the time of Jesus, where hordes of false prophets and Messiah claimants ravaged around.

In Wikipedia you find a list of Messiah claimants followed by this list, which shows how big the phenomenon is (also see the Matrix Dictionary entry on Spiritual Placebo):

List of avatar claimants
List of Buddha claimants
False prophet
List of people who have been considered deities
Messianic Age
Messianism

So, in Monty Python’s Life of Brian, when a man in the crowd says: “I’m not…” And the crowd answers: “Shhh!” you have the paradox of today’s self-help industry in a nutshell, which also could be used against the existentialists (Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Kafka), which Monty Python often is compared with, especially because of the last singing theme: “For life is quite absurd. And death’s the final word…”. We shall see that though this not is entirely wrong, it is not entirely true either.

When the self-help industry tells people, that they through self-improvement can become themselves, it opens the doors for its own built-in paradox. It promises people liberation and praises the responsible and self-leading human being – but creates at the same time people, who are dependent of continued therapeutic intervention. The more people are told, that they can treat themselves, the more they are in the risk of being made into uncritical objects for therapeutic treatment.

The widespread psychologized, emotionalized and therapized belief in the hidden aspects of humans (the unconscious) has not only given humans a new way of self-creation, but also a new outer definition of new authorities (self-help consultants, practitioners, identity-experts, therapists, coaches, spin doctors), who are characterized by, that they neither want to be authorities or to be looked at as authorities. People in the age of authenticity will no longer suppress others or be suppressed from the outside, they want to express others and themselves be expressed
from within. But the expression doesn´t come by itself; it has to be established in a self-help process, which builds on the idea that people have a chronically authenticity-problem and therefore are in need of treatment.

The self-help industry, and its belonging therapeutic techniques, thereby exposes the paradox, that the more resource-filled a human being is conceived to be, the more it has to be supported therapeutic. The more self-actualizing a human being becomes, the more it is in need of help to actualize itself. And the more responsibility a human being is said to have for its own life, the more this same human being, as a basic starting point, is considered as a victim, as non-authentic, and therefore as powerless.

The Self-help industry is directly inspired by existentialism, but has supplied it with New Age reincarnation romanticism (this is also why this last song hasn´t anything to do with positive thinking, which it also is compared with). As many former counterculture advocates Monty Python can, best of all, be compared with Buddhism. In my pop culture file on David Bowie I investigated how Bowie in a similar way has been compared with existentialism and later postmodernism. In reality he was a practising Buddhist. So is John Cleese. He is a Buddhist and vegetarian. He is a long-time supporter of the Dalai Lama and has even visited with him at the Dalai Lama's home in Dharmasala, India. Not that John Cleese´s life philosophy says what Monty Python´s message is. But to compare it with Buddhism is not completely wrong. I will return to that.

Later in the film, Brian needs to escape from the Roman guards and literally drops into a group of prophets. With this goal in mind, Brian attempts to reproduce a parable we assume he has heard from Christ. The crowd does not respond well.

Brian: Consider the lillies…
Woman: Consider the lillies?
Brian: Oh, well, the birds then.
First Man: What birds?
Brian: Any birds.
Second Man: Why?
Brian: Well, have they got jobs?
Third Man: Who?
Brian: The birds.
Second Man: Have the birds got jobs?
Fourth Man: What´s the matter with him?
Third Man: He says the birds are scrounging?
Brian: Oh, no, no, the point is: the birds, they do all right, don´t they?
Fourth Man: Well, and good luck to them!
Second Man: Yeah, they’re very pretty.
Brian: Okay. And you’re much more important than they are, right? So what do you worry about? There you are! See?

Even if we have the right rule and are attempting to interpret it, we can still go awry. Brian’s failure to communicate a meaningful message to the crowd reflects his limited understanding of the parable.

The scene in the film where the true Jesus actually is speaking is highlighting the problem of interpretation - the audience members at the back of the crowd are having trouble hearing the Sermon on the Mount:

Man: I think it was, "Blessed are the cheesemakers"!
Gregory’s wife: What’s so special about the cheesemakers?
Gregory: Well, obviously it’s not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturer of dairy products.

Interpretation is a challenging process, and simplistic understandings of the rule will not be sufficient to provide us with guidance.

The Pythons have repeatedly claimed that they were not poking fun at Jesus in Monty Python’s Life of Brian, but rather at the social movements that were, and still are, formed to interpret Jesus’s teachings. As Terry Jones put it later:

[Monty Python’s Life of Brian is] very critical of the Church, and I think that’s what the joke of it is, really: to say, here is Christ saying all of these wonderful things about people living together in peace and love, and then for the next two thousand years people are putting each other to death in His name because they can’t agree on how He said it, or in what order He said it. The whole thing about “The Sandal” [the followers of the Gourd or the Shoe] ...is like history of the Church in three minutes.

Should I dare my own interpretation of Jesus? Well, I think Jesus preached idleness. His whole life and teaching is about the philosophy of idleness. I started to realize this after having read Tom Hodgkinson. His philosophy, in his published books and articles, is of a relaxed approach to life, enjoying it as it comes rather than toiling for an imagined better future. Together with his friend Gavin Pretor-Pinney he founded The Idler which is a bi-yearly British magazine devoted to promoting its ethos of ‘idle living’ and all that entails (read an additional account on idleness in my pop culture files on The Big Lebowski and The Hobbit).
Ronald Hutton’s book *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* demonstrates how the festive culture of the Middle Ages was gradually eroded by the Reformation and the Puritans. It was in this merry time the legend of Robin Hood was formed. Robin Hood is a heroic outlaw in English folklore who, according to legend, was a highly skilled archer and swordsman. Traditionally depicted as being dressed in Lincoln green, he is often portrayed as "robbing from the rich and giving to the poor" alongside his band of Merry Men. Robin Hood became a popular folk figure in the late-medieval period, and continues to be widely represented in literature, films and television. In *The Hobbit* we discover that this idea of gift economy is shared by Bilbo, who gives most of his treasures away. Also it is seen in the hobbit custom of giving presents when they celebrate their birthdays, instead of receiving them.

And Max Weber’s book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* shows how the competitive Protestants booted out the cooperative Catholics [we are talking about people in that culture, not the Church]; it shows how a new ethic based on work and earning a lot of money came to replace, in the eighteenth century, the old medieval ethic, which was based on mutual aid. The medieval culture (which wrongly are depicted as a dark age by the Protestant work ethic) combined a love of Jesus, who preached idleness, and a love of Aristotle, who argued that contemplation led to happiness. (I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to banish their guilt around work – and, if you want to go deeper into the philosophy of idleness, see my Links to Idlers).

How the Church can turn the demonstrable simple fact that Jesus preached idleness (or for certain: peace and love), into the grotesque caricatures of money greed, and all kinds of other horrible things, is difficult to understand. But if we can find a way to make a mass-murdering, genocidal, slave-trading maniac (Christopher Columbus) a national hero, we can find a way of using religious teachings in grotesque ways.

In *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* an old man is to be stoned by a crowd impatient to hurl their rocks (women dressed as men, since only men were allowed to do stonings). The condemned man cries out that he only meant to compliment his wife’s cooking when he said “that piece of halibut was good enough for Jehovah.” As soon as the mob hears the name “Jehovah,” one of them strikes the old man with a stone. The official in charge (John Cleese) chastises the offender and commands the group to allow the charges to be heard. When he further instructs them not to react when hearing the name “Jehovah” until the proceedings are concluded, he too is struck. One of the offenders (Eric Idle) defends his action, saying to Cleese, “After all, you did say ‘Jehovah’” and Idle is also assaulted. Each time the name “Jehovah” is spoken, however inadvertently, rocks fly. The uncivilized may view the stoning of
blasphemers as despicable violence, but in the “civilized” interpretation of religion, it is actually a religious duty.

In *The Meaning of Life* John Cleese portrays a schoolmaster. One of his Bible readings to his congregation of schoolboys goes like this:

*And spotteth twice they the camels before the third hour. And so the Midianites went forth to Ram Gilead in Kadesh Bilgemath by Shor Ethra Regalion, to the house of Gash-Bil-Betheul-Bazda, he who brought the butter dish to Balshazar and the tent peg to the house of Rashomon, and there slew they the goats, yea, and placed they the bits in little pots. Here endeth the lesson.*

Cleese then turns to his chaplain (Michael Palin) who rises to lead the congregation in prayer:

*Let us praise God. Oh Lord, oooh you are so big. So absolutely huge. Gosh, we´re all really impressed down here I can tell you. Forgive us O Lord, for this dreadful toadying and barefaced flattery. But you are so strong and, well, just so super. Fantastic. Amen.*

Headmaster Cleese then addresses the schoolboys with a series of general announcements, including the importance of “Empire Day, when we try to remember the names of all those from Sudbury area who gave their lives to keep China British.” Almost forgetting, and clearly resenting its intrusion on these more important matters, Cleese turns to one boy, Jenkins, for just enough time to deliver a message from home: “Oh…and Jenkins…apparently your mother died this morning.” Over Jenkins´s tears, Palin briskly resumes business by leading a hymn to match his earlier prayer: “Oh Lord, please don´t burn us,” it goes. “Don´t grill or toast your flock, don´t put us on the barbecue, Or simmer us in stock…”

This sketch is emblematic of a philosophical mood that one finds throughout Monty Python´s work. But it sparkles in *Monty Python´s The Meaning of Life.*

Part VI: “The Autumn Years” begins with a song about the glories of having a penis which is appreciated by all the audience in the cabaret, including the talking fish in the aquarium in the vicinity of the piano. The fish have human faces of the Monty Python crew superimposed over their bodies and they call to mind something of the unsettled hybrid creatures found in hellish landscapes by Hieronymus Bosch, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dutch artist (it is no coincidence that the cover images of my books Dream Yoga, A Dictionary of Thought Distortions, and The Matrix Conspiracy, part 1 and 2, all is by Hieronymus Bosch).
Their enjoyment of the ditty, however, quickly vanishes when the fish catch sight of the entrance of Mr. Creosote into the restaurant. “Oh shit!” cries one of them as they whiz off-screen.

Mr. Creosote, a gargantuan figure, lumbers into the dining room. The music that accompanies his entry recalls the giant shark’s in Jaws, and his belly is so ponderous it nearly scrapes the floor. His face, framed by muttonchops, is swollen to the point of swinishess. He is dressed in a tuxedo but his body is mis-shapen, more like a pyramid of wobbling flesh than a human form. As Creosote ambles to his table, he commands a flurry of attention from the sycophantic maître d'. This is obvious a very, very good customer, one who could eat whole families under the exceedingly expensive tables of this lavish eatery.

Maître d': "Ah, good afternoon, sir; and how are we today?"

Mr. Creosote: "Better."

Maître d': "Better?"

Mr. Creosote: "Better get a bucket, I'm gonna throw up."

Creosote is then led to his table, and once seated starts projectile-vomiting, failing to hit the bucket he had requested a moment before. The floor quickly becomes covered in vomitus, and so do the cleaning woman and the maître d's trousers. Creosote listens patiently while highlights of the evening's menu are recited to him; after vomiting on the menu held open in front of him by the maître d', he orders all of the dishes listed by the maître d'. As a result, he is served moules marinières, pâté de foie gras, beluga caviar, Eggs Benedict, a leek tart, frogs' legs amandine and quail's eggs with puréed mushrooms all mixed in a bucket with the quail eggs on top and a double helping of pâté. The appetizers are followed by the main course of jugged hare, with a sauce of truffles, bacon, Grand Marnier, anchovies and cream. For drinks, Mr. Creosote has six bottles of Château Latour 1945, a Methuselah (Double Jeroboam/6 litres) of champagne, and half a dozen crates of brown ale (144 bottles)—considerably less than his usual fare.

Maître D: Bon, and the usual brown ales ...?

Mr. Creosote: Yeah… No wait a minute ... I think I can only manage six crates today.
He finishes the feast, and several other courses, vomiting profusely all over himself, his table, and the restaurant's staff throughout his meal, causing other diners to lose their appetite, and in some cases, throwing up as well. Finally, after being persuaded by the smooth maître d' to eat a single "wafer-thin mint", he explodes: covering the restaurant and diners with viscera and partially digested food—even starting a "vomit-wave" among the other diners, who leave in disgust.

When the explosion clears, Creosote is amazingly still alive, but his chest cavity is now blasted open, revealing his spread ribs and intact, still-beating heart. As he looks around, seemingly confused by what has just happened, the maître d' calmly walks up to him and presents, "the cheque, monsieur."

This scene sounds more horrific than comic (admit it, you were laughing). It, like so much of the humor of Monty Python, is on the dark side. The scene has few peers in the annals of motion picture comedy, save perhaps the pie-eating sequence in Stand By Me. But even that seems tame next to the spectacle of Mr. Creosote’s extravasation. The philosophical question it raises is: how is it possible to laugh at humor as black as this? Because it shows our own thought distortions (our greed and foolishness) put in extreme caricatures.

According to Henri Bergson, “the Comic” just is anything overly stiff that holds itself opposed to the flow of experience, and when its rigid bearing is noted by others, laughter results. The person who is “comic” has at least two very important characteristics. First is this mechanical inelasticity, this rigidly amid what should be a flowing present. Second, a “comic” person is invisible to himself as comic, does not realize he is being rigid. As Bergson says, “the comic person is unconscious. As though wearing the ring of Gyges with reverse effect, he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to the world.” Hence, the art of the straight man affects sincerity, rigidly, unself-conscious pathos – and the Pythons, especially Chapman and Cleese, are among the best straight men comedy has ever produced. But for the pathetic follower of a self-made interpretation of God, comic rigidity is no affection, it is a mode of existence. So the issue is not whether religious fundamentalists are utterly comic, the crux of the matter is whether anyone will point it out so that we can all laugh.

This is done by showing the absurdity in it; that is: the absurd consequences. Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life is filled with reductio ad absurdum arguments; that is: positions that would have absurd consequences if true. If you for example preach relativism and believe that everything is relative and for that reason equal true, you have thereby accepted that nazism, fascism, dictatorship, popular murder, terror and violence, are as equally great blessings for mankind as democracy, negotiation and
dialogue. Then you have no basis in order to criticize, because you haven´t got any rational frame to start from. You can´t criticize anyone for argumentation bungling, or to replace arguments with machine guns, because this presupposes, that there is a rational foundation in your arguments.

The movie continually reduces traditional positions to absurdity by drawing out their logical conclusions or by juxtaposing them in the context of our deeper (usually ethical) convictions. So it goes throughout the film – not just the cruel humor but also the suggestion of a causal connection.

As already suggested, there is something medieval about the Creosote episode; indeed, a medieval theme runs throughout the film, including dungeons and the Grim Reaper (perhaps this is a result of taking up, and then dismissing, Roman Catholicism as a source of the meaning of life). In many ways, the scene is the modern equivalent of a morality play, an allegory of gluttony and its consequences. If you eat to the point where you feel like exploding, you will. The scene culminates in a visual pun or verbal image – that is, it literalize the way we describe ourselves when we´ve overindulged at the table glutonously. Creosote´s *sentence* is the sentence “I´ve eaten so much that I´d burst if took another morsel.” He does and he does. It is a punishment befitting Dante´s *Inferno* or Kafka´s “The Penal colony” in its diabolic ingenuity and appropriateness. Indeed, it provokes laughter for being *so* appropriate, so well-deserved.

The laughter engendered by Creosote´s predicament is, then, over-determined. Part of it is rooted in incongruity – the absurdities of the scene presented in a context bereft of any perceived danger to human life and limb. But there is also another route to laughter here: the sense that justice is served, that the punishment matches the crime perfectly. Moreover, with respect to this second source of joy, Mr. Creosote, I think, gives us additional insight into the springs of laughter. Much comedy, especially satire and even much of what is called black comedy, induces laughter because we feel that the objects of the indignities and violence suffered by its objects is deserved. It is a different kind of laughter than the laughter prompted by an innocent pun. And it is our sense of justice that makes such comic genres possible.

Perhaps one thing that is so artistically effective about the Creosote episode is that it is able to weld these two sources of laughter so exquisitely. I suspect that it achieves this by the way in which the visual pun it articulates both comically amuses us with its absurdity – its violation of biological norms – while simultaneously satisfying our sense of justice in the most devilish manner. Like many medieval visions of hell, such as the punishments meted out in Dante´s *Inferno*, the travails of Creosote mix horror and humor in a way that seems natural. It taps into the same emotional well by
being an updated version of them. Horrific imagery and humor are often interlaced. Mr. Creosote shows us how these two ostensibly opposed elements can co-exist. They belong together because they both specialize in the incongruous and the impure – in violations of our standing cultural categories and norms. But the overall effect of these subversions of our cultural categories will not dispose us toward horror, unless they occur in the context of some clear and present danger. Where there is no danger to anything we would call human, there is no cause for horror, and there is an opening for laughter. That is Creosote. Moreover, Creosote is not just comically amusing for being a biological absurdity. He is also worthy of our derision for his sins (in his case, perhaps he is the sin itself personified). And this helps us to see that underlying the vitriol of humor is often a perception of justice.

If we want to think critically, we may be tempted to turn to science to provide answers. However, science does not provide any particular advice for living a good life. The great power of science is that it aims simply to describe the world, not to determine what ought to be. Scientific work, unfortunately, often threatens to undermine traditional sources of meaning and value. The result is nihilism, the destruction of all values. Nietzsche, famous for declaring that “God is dead,” put it in this way in Book 1, Section 1 of his Will to Power: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.” The challenge that science poses for value is also an important theme in Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life. Some of the most powerful points are made, in typical Python fashion, in song.

Consider our sense that our individual lives are significant, that the project we engage in are meaningful. Listen to “The Galaxy Song,” following along in your imagination. We start on earth, looking down at a revolving planet, then back away and see our sun, then our galaxy, the Milky Way (with its “hundred billion stars”). We aren’t even in the center of our own galaxy – “We’re thirty thousand light years from galactic central point.” Our entire galaxy itself is just part of a much larger universe (though “millions of billions” of galaxies is probably excessive). Our best understanding of the Universe, in short, is that it is unimaginable vast in both space and time, and we play a role in it that is beneath trivial.

In some ways, however, the picture is even worse. The song that begins the film (also called “The Meaning of Life”) poses a question that has troubled many people since the modern synthesis combined Darwin’s evolutionary theory with the understanding of our genetic code: “[A]re we just simply spiraling cols of self-replicating DNA?” Our drives and goals and hopes and dreams may all just be products of evolution. An animal that is not driven to pursue goals will not reproduce, and so will not leave descendents. But the goal themselves have no greater significance.
The threat of nihilism, then, is quite real, and is perhaps the most pervasive theme in the work of the Pythons. Part of their response is to revel in the absurdity – think of the scene in the middle of the film, in which several bizarre characters try to “Find the Fish,” with shouts of encouragement from the audience. Throughout all stages of their work, the Pythons take a gleeful pleasure in the collapse of meaning and the limitations of human institutions.

In popular culture there are several grotesque reactions to nihilism, which I under one has termed The Matrix Conspiracy. The most common is postmodernism. But Social Darwinism is also quite central. Social Darwinism has in its Matrix version two branches: an atheistic, and a spiritual. The atheistic version is represented by Richard Dawkins and the New Atheism movement, included the Skeptic society. Culture is here explained through the concept of the Meme. The other version is rooted in Theosophy, with an enormous tree of branches. Culture is here explained through the concept of evolution of consciousness. The worst implication of it all is the flirt with fascism (see my article The Matrix Conspiracy Fascism).

The Matrix Conspiracy has several education-instruments, or programming-technologies, all of which can be collected under the terms coaching and psychotherapy. An important aspect of getting people into these technologies is the implant of the victimization culture, which we already have mentioned in connection with the paradox of the Self-help industry. In fact, victimization is the main reason why we don’t believe we can think for ourselves. We crave for others to teach us the meaning of life.

The Pythons were very aware of the victimization culture. “Terrific race, the Romans,” says Michael Palin, hanging from the ceiling in chains the Romans granted him the privilege of wearing.

On a reply to Brian, who complains over having been spat in the face: “Oh, what I wouldn't give to be spat at in the face. I sometimes hang awake at night dreaming of being spat at in the face.”

The prisoner thinks he has deserved everything, and that the Romans has taught him to respect them for teaching him this. He even thinks he is more privileged than Brian, and brags with that he has hanged there for five years. “You’ll probably get off with crucifixion! You lucky bastard!”

He would probably have paid for it.
Would we pay for being insulted and abused when we in fact could be insulted for free down in the local supermarket? Of course we would. The victimization culture has taught us that, because it’s the way to *The Meaning of Life*, as it says.

Attack therapy is an outgrowth of ventilation theory. Here the patient becomes the subject of verbal abuse, denunciation, and humiliation. This assault may come either from the therapist in individual sessions or from peers in a group context. Sometimes both methods are used. This negative and destructive development in therapy was encouraged by two major influences. First came the growth of unmonitored group therapies, which took hold in the late 1950s and continue to this day. Second was the widespread popularity of some form of therapeutic *encounter*. The actual therapeutic value of much of this type of work with clients is highly questionable.

In the 1960s and 1970s the world witnessed a kind of free-for-all approach to psychotherapy (due to the spread of postmodern intellectualism – subjectivism and relativism – the same approach to science, treatment, philosophy, spirituality, etc., etc., is today seen in the New Age environment). As life became faster paced, so did the quest for a quick and radical cure for all problems, including psychological and emotional ones. Groups, which until that time were quite sedate and conventional, suddenly turned into “marathon” encounter sessions that went on for hours, days, or entire weekends. Therapy – whether one-on-one or in a group setting – took on a confrontational and piercing quality. In many cases there was no history taking at all, simply an almost coercive thrust to deal in the “here and now,” often with a stress on nonverbal techniques. As one critic put it, “Tact is ‘out’ and brutal frankness is ‘in.’ Any phony, defensive or evasive behavior...is fair game for...critique and verbal attack.”

It seems that with the acceptance of this pressing immediacy, all sense of propriety and ethics was thrown out the window. There were no rules, no standards, no guidelines in this milieu where the overarching goal was to express and experience feelings. It’s not surprising then that more violent and active psychotherapy techniques would arise in this out-of-control climate, and that the abreactionist school of thought would be adopted by so many – mental health practitioners and purveyors of self-improvement programs alike.

Theories of screaming, pounding, fighting, sitting on the hot seat, and group confrontation were put into place in a number of therapy centers. The popular therapies emerged out of Esalen and other “human potential” centers, growing out of groups like the Living Theater and the Theater of All Possibilities and evolving into myriad innovations like Bio-Energetics, Gestalt Therapy, and Psychosynthesis. Model confrontational programs, such as Synanon and its clones, were being praised left and right.
Another variant of the confrontation therapies appeared in the commercially sold large group awareness training programs such as Mind Dynamics, Direct Centering (aka Bayard Hora Associates, aka The Course, aka Naexus), Arica Institute, Insight Seminars, and Lifespring. These programs were sold to hundreds of thousands of customers over two decades, and some still exist in old, revised, and new forms. Marketed to individuals, organizations, and business and industry as experiential education, they typically use powerful psychological and social influence techniques, not always bringing about the advertised claims of success and profit to the buyer, and sometimes bringing psychological distress to the clients.

Varieties of these confrontation therapies and self-awareness programs are still with us two and three decades later; in fact, they’re going stronger and stronger.

Perhaps most striking of all to a practicing philosopher is the “Argument Clinic” sketch (Monty Python’s flying Circus, Episode 29, “The Money Programme”). The customer enters the Argument Clinic, after a false start with Mr. Bernard in the abuse room:

Mr. Bernard: What do you want?
Customer: Well, I was just…
Mr. Bernard: Don’t give me that, you snotty-faced heap of parrot droppings!
Customer: What?
Mr. Bernard: Shut your festering gob, you tit! Your type really makes me puke, you vacuous, toffee-nosed, malodorous, pervert!!!!
Customer: Look, I CAME HERE FOR AN ARGUMENT, I’m not going just to stand…!!
Mr. Bernard: OH! Oh I´m sorry, but this is Abuse.

He then finds Mr. Vibrating, in the argument room:

Customer: Ah, is this the right room for an argument?
Mr. Vibrating: I told you once.
Customer: No you haven’t.
Mr. Vibrating: Yes I have.
Customer: When?
Mr. Vibrating: Just now.
Customer: You didn’t.
Mr. Vibrating: I did!
Customer: You didn’t!
Mr. Vibrating: I´m telling you I did!
Customer: You did not!!
Slyly evoking the English pantomime tradition, the professional arguer simply contradicts every statement that the man seeking the argument makes. The customer objects that

**Customer:** I came here for a good argument.

**Mr. Vibrating:** No you didn´t; no, you came here for an *argument*.

**Customer:** An argument isn´t just contradiction.

**Mr. Vibrating:** It can be.

**Customer:** No it can´t. An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.

**Mr. Vibrating:** No it isn´t.

The customer goes on to draw the distinction as follows: “Argument is an intellectual process. Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says.”

In a nutshell you here have the difference between Socrates and the Sophists, where the customer is Socrates, or rather, he was seeking out Socrates, but finds a Sophist. He was looking for a *good* argument but found just an *argument*. And, in a nutshell, you have here the Matrix Sophists.

The New Age guru Byron Katie is a typical Matrix Sophist. She has it all, both the Abuse Clinic and the Argument Clinic. Her therapeutic method is called *The Work*, and I can assure you that it is a hard day´s work.

*The Work* is a “single cause-single cure” mix between Cathartic psychotherapy and positive thinking. There is used confrontational theories and attack therapy in order to provoke negative feelings and memories (Cathartic psychotherapy as shown above – the Abuse Clinic). Positive thinking (the Argument Clinic) is then introduced via four questions and a turnaround technique. The question of the truth of the evoked negativity is hereby ignored. Subjectivism and relativism justify this ignorance.

The Abuse Clinic (Cathartic psychotherapy) is used in workshops and her nine-day “School for The Work.” Here there also is used other techniques such as fasting etc. (see my articles *Cathartic Psychotherapies* and *The Vampirised Spirit of John Rosen* as well as my book *Lucifer Morningstar – a Philosophical Love Story* about spiritual vampires).

The Argument Clinic is then introduced. *The Work* – Byron Katie´s philosophy and method – is the four questions and a turnaround technique. So Byron Katie´s method
is based on the idea that you can reach peace through the use of thinking alone. You can think yourself to peace. This is in all its simplicity (simple mindedness) also the central message of New Thought, the inspiration for the positive thinking movement (see my article The New Thought Movement and the Law of Attraction).

The four questions are:

1. Is it true?
2. Are you absolutely sure it is true?
3. How do you react when you think this thought?
4. Who would you be without this thought?

The instance which does that The Work only is an Argument Clinic, and not a Good Argument Clinic, is that it has a conclusion in advance, namely that the thought is false, and therewith it is in progress, as with other New Age directions, of eliminating peoples’ ability of critical thinking. Problematic, because the training of critical thinking (think for yourself) is the first step in a true spiritual process, and on the whole a primary condition for a healthy mind.

When the conclusion is given in advance then The Work’s four questions becomes so-called rhetorical questions; that is: questions which are asked purely for effect rather than as requests for answers. In that case the four questions function in precisely the same way as persuader words.

After that you, as expected, have “realized”, that your thought is not true, then you have to turn it upside down; you so to speak have to think the opposite thought.

If you read Byron Katie’s book Loving What Is with a distanced attitude, you will find it an incredible boring series of arguments (not much different from the Argument Clinic, and the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says). Because you know the conclusion in advance: you’re wrong. The series of arguments could have been ended in two sentences: 1. The central thought (for example: My father was abusive). 2. Turn it around – that is: think the opposite thought (my father was a loving guru). Wupti! You are now enlightened.

Well, I have made a good argument for why Byron Katie actually is ending in nihilism and not enlightenment (see The Matrix Dictionary entry on Byron Katie).

The prize for Byron Katie’s nine-day “School for The Work,” where you first are being abused, and hereafter contradicted in anything you say, until you’re convinced
that your entire life is a fallacy: $5,697.00 (accommodation and transport not included). Book quick! People are standing in queue!

Much of Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life is a critique of ridiculous and dangerous distractions that dehumanize us. Among them are religious ideology, class distinction, science, medicine, education, and corporate greed. The film displays the myriad ways that humans alienate each other and also alienate themselves from their own happiness. And as mentioned, it might seem like nihilistic postmodernism.

But the Pythons have another response to the challenge of nihilism as well, and, as also already mentioned, I don’t think it is far away from Buddhism.

When John Cleese was asked: What role does religion play in your life now? he answered: "I think the main thing to realize is that everything is transient. The Buddhists have got it completely right. It's all transient, and everything is a part of a process, and it's an inevitable process, and yes, we are all going to die. It's just a question of the date.”

In their rejection of a transcendent God being outside nature, Buddhism and Monty Python converge in their celebrations of the grotesque. The Python crew seems to relish the disgusting facts of human biology and they take every opportunity to render them through special effects. Throughout the film, blood spurts, vomit spews, babies explode from birth canals, decapitated heads abound, and limbs putrefy. Theravada Buddhism also celebrates the revolting, treating it as a meditation focus for contemplating the lack of permanence. The believer of the transcendent God consoles herself with the idea that this physical body may decay and perish, but an eternal soul will outlast the material melt-down – not so for the Buddha.

In an attempt to undercut human vanity and demonstrate the impermanence of all things, Buddhist scriptures are filled with nauseating details about rotting carcasses and putrid flesh. And, as the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna said:

*I have no view of my own. My critical arguments are simply reduction to absurdity of the views ignorance has created.*

Transcendental dogmatism is dehumanizing, but so are the opposite extremes of hedonism and nihilistic skepticism. The Buddha made this point explicitly when he argued for a Middle Way between all opposing extremes. Just as one should find a middle way between the slaveries of excessive indulgence and excessive asceticism (self-denial), so too one must avoid embracing both absolutist worldviews and relativist worldviews (where all values and meanings are leveled or negated). The
Buddha´s Middle Way doctrine rigid blind faith and also avoiding distracting speculations about matters that are remote from lived experience.

So, what are these more down-to-earth human values that must be rescued from transcendental flights-of-fancy and nihilistic negativity? In light of the film´s critique of transcendentalism, the “answers” to the meaning of life make good sense. They are introduced by Palin (in drag) as he interrupts the Vegas-style celebration of perpetual Christmas in Heaven. “Well, that´s the end of the film,” she announces. “Now here´s the Meaning of Life.” She opens and envelope and reads, “Well, it´s nothing special. Try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.”

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