



Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing is as it Seems

James B. South (Editor) , Rod Carveth (Editor) , William Irwin (Series Editor)

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A look at the philosophical underpinnings of the hit TV show, "Mad Men" With its swirling cigarette smoke, martini lunches, skinny ties, and tight pencil skirts, Mad Men is unquestionably one of the most stylish, sexy, and irresistible shows on television. But the series becomes even more absorbing once you dig deeper into its portrayal of the changing social and political mores of 1960s America and explore the philosophical complexities of its key characters and themes. From Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to John Kenneth Galbraith, Milton Friedman, and Ayn Rand, Mad Men and Philosophy brings the thinking of some of history's most powerful minds to bear on the world of Don Draper and the Sterling Cooper ad agency. You'll gain insights into a host of compelling Mad Men questions and issues, including happiness, freedom, authenticity, feminism, Don Draper's identity, and more. Takes an unprecedented look at the philosophical issues and themes behind AMC's Emmy Award-winning show, Mad Men Explores issues ranging from identity to authenticity to feminism, and more Offers new insights on your favorite Mad Men characters, themes, and storylines

Mad Men and Philosophy will give "Mad Men" fans everywhere something new to talk about around the water cooler.

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From Reader Review *Mad Men* and Philosophy: Nothing is as it Seems for online ebook

Rachel says

In short, this book is useful for the *Mad Men* enthusiast, particularly if one is interested in thinking through some big issues of the characters. However, the focus feels so much on Don--and to a lesser extent Roger--that I began to tire of the essays, as several quoted from the same scenes and basically discussed the same themes. (Granted Don is the lead character, but it honestly became repetitive.)

My biggest disappointment is how little gender or female characters were explored in this book, particularly since the show explores these topics like none other. The world of the show is certainly larger than the confines of the Sterling Cooper office, though that almost seems the only focus of the majority of the works.

The "Mad Women" piece plays like a basic introduction to the show's female characters, painting the Peggy, Betty, and Joan characters as such stark archetypes of womanhood that I never saw a close focus on them as individuals (with their own trajectories and contradictions.) Ashley Jihee Barkman's essay is useful, but I feel it should have been complimented with another essay about the female characters, gender, feminism--etc. Ultimately, the particularly rich topics of race, gender, and sexuality seem shunted to the final section ("Social Philosophy"), instead of these issues/characters being examined multiple times and throughout the book.

There are several compelling essays in the collection, including Rod Carveth's essay on *Mad Men* and race (and how the show has often sidestepped these issues), James B. South's look at how the City (NYC) shapes the characters using Plato's *The Republic* as a frame of reference, George Teschner and Gabrielle Teschner's examination of the creation of the Carousel, incorporating Nietzsche and looking at "culture-transforming technologies" (131), and John Fritz's interesting look at how Pete, Peggy, and Don variously "remember and forget" aspects of their lives to continue to progress and thrive.

Steven Buechler says

The book provides to be the perfect companion to the series for the intellectual. It takes common works of philosophy and applies to the drama taking place. Most viewers may understand that the show looks at the values of the 1960s but by using the book, it enlightens the reader by comparing the actions of Don, Roger, Pete, Betty, Joan, Peggy, et al and compares them to the thoughts of Aristotle, Socrates, Emmanuel Kant, Frederick Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Ayn Rand, Carol Gilligan and so on. Essays in the book are written by the leading philosophy instructors in the United States right now. And so we get not only examine the lives of the people in the past through the drama on TV but we also compare their actions with the leading intellectuals today

Loren says

What do we mean when we say we "know" something? Isn't belief just a way to buy in?

If we can look back at the authenticity of the Mad Men show and cringe at their anachronistic missteps, what stupidity will we look back from this present time? Will it be the folly of organic foods or the necessity of permaculture? What about the truth of climate change or why we weren't more skeptical of what are considered exaggerated claims within the world of environmentalism? Or will we look back at our obsession with sexual orientation and the stereotypes that follow suit and laugh at the absurdity of it all? How about America's incessant belief in moral and social superiority when we have the worst social record of any developed nation from highest incarcerations, illiteracy, poverty, child hunger and violence to name a few. Will we look back at our unfounded testimony on positive thinking leading to wealth while inhaling the world's anti-depressants and be ashamed?

If anything Mad Men teaches us that our desires (whether created or actualized) don't discriminate from reality and illusion. If our emotions are allowed to dictate our perceptions and our perceptions can be manipulated, then what of freewill? Ironically it is our assumed knowledge of the rights and wrongs that allows these characters to behave void of ethics. We are not very different today and yet we are entertained by their debaucheries from our position "in the know" here in the future of rights and wrongs we've evolved to understand. So how today do we live in veridicality?

Protests must be signed off with permits. Radio Stations require to be certified to run. Television channels require corporate backing. To own & operate a printing press you must be approved and register. Even at this, people are maced, hosed and sometimes even killed at protests. Shock Jockeys are thrown off the air when they say something someone doesn't like. Books are destroyed for disclosing personal accounts deemed a threat to national security. And now corporations are people and these "people" are trying to censor the internet. Thinking against the mainstream isn't illegal but our history is wrought with evidence that it might as well be. Mad Men points this out in amplification.

We turn to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. We hear economic visionaries and philosophers Ayn Rand and Galbraith. We even hear the philosophies of Ralph Ellison without direct mention. We get to postulate on Karl Marx's perception of money and the "slave mentality." We listen in on Nietzsche explaining how you either create your values or are consumers of them. Heavy.

John Adams once said that "There are two ways to conquer and enslave a nation. One is by the sword. The other is by debt." Surely this is a simplification but it is relevant to note America is enslaved to no nation, nations are enslaved to us. We are the Mad Men in all their profligating hedonistic glory. And anytime someone doesn't want to play the proverbial "capitalist globalization" ball, we go to war. We are an empire, sadly one that is not on the decline as everyone seems to think. We are still thriving, we still have the highest GDP in the world, but we do have some markers indicating our eventual demise, one being the growing economic disparity of its citizens akin to an accepted financial apartheid whereas certain people are entitled to everything and others to nothing. We are consistently being convinced through an onslaught of media propaganda of this alleged fact. We can thank Mad Men for pointing this out.

One hard truth is understanding the hoi polloi worldview dictates the level of cultural evolution and progression even possible. I look back at the early 60's when I watch the show Mad Men and like so many watchers, it is easy to point out the sheer stupidity in sexism, racism and homophobia people tolerated back then. Much like then, we embrace our homogenous spirit-crushing nature the same way they did. We tolerate it because majority rules even if said majority is being socially engineered.

John says

As one of my friends said to me, "Mad Men is like crack". I agree. And the only shortcoming of this volume is that it is limited to the first three seasons of the show. The contributors obviously are fans as well as philosophers and bring their varied ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical perspectives to the glamorous and engaging subject matter. Reading this was a pleasure.

Mr says

Should have waited until series ended. Author just rehashed a few episodes and got a big check.

Rosa Macpherson says

As a great fan of the show and of philosophy what's not to like? I wish it covered the whole of the series though. Excellent.

Paul says

Some parts were really good. The book is a great analysis for those who like to know what they eat - or what they watch.

Chad Malkamaki says

I started reading the Pop Culture and Philosophy series with their first two, the Simpsons and Seinfeld, and then noticed they started churning these out as soon as a series started. I decided to grab this one, while rewatching Mad Men and thinking during a particular scene what would those college profs have to say about Don's philosophical dilemma. I didn't even know if this book existed. Well it did, and maybe it should have waited to be published until there were more episodes or the series finished. The writing was rushed, too many essays used the same scenarios--the Heineken episode, Don and the first Lucky Strike campaign--It's toasted. Also, on the chapter on race, when referring to an African American character the prof actually wrote "monkey see, monkey do." Really, this got past the editors, and the editors of the publishing house, for shame.

Nathan says

This book delivers both a philosophical analysis of the themes, ideas and characters in *Mad Men* and an (introductory) explanation of some classic or modern philosophies with key elements of the series as example. The often misunderstood philosophy of Ayn Rand was never so clearly spelled out. That chapter and those about economy, existentialism and Nietzsche are the highlights.

Although there is definitely repetition (which could have been countered by incorporating Season Four), the inaptitude of an essay like "*Mad Men* and Race" to actually tackle a real philosophical problem is much more unsatisfying. However, one can only enjoy the series more after reading this book, or visit one of the chapters again. That already proves a lot of its worth.

Beth says

I had high hopes for this book and was sincerely disappointed.

Matthew says

A look at the philosophical underpinnings of the TV show, *Mad Men*. Each chapter was independently written by a philosopher and was a fun way at looking at some of the deeper aspects of the show.

Melisa says

I'm rewatching parts of Season 1 and 2 as I work on a synthesis writing assignment for my AP Lang students. I want to think about the reinvention of the self and if that is authentically possible, how it fits in with the evolution of the American Dream, and what the consequences might be. We're reading *The Great Gatsby* now, and will consider Jay Gatsby, Don Draper, possibly Peggy and/or Betty, and... anyone have any other suggestions? I'm on the hunt for a *This American Life* episode featuring a daughter telling about her father who constantly reinvented himself. And yes, I'm reading this book. It's not earth shattering but it is interesting.

I read most of it. Interesting for die hard fans. I'm counting it as read, as I'll likely never go back to it. Well, I might if I use *Mad Men* again next year, but I don't feel like it was a tremendous success. Fun, yes, but maybe too out of context.

Chris says

If you had asked me a year ago which television show you should absolutely make time to watch, I would have immediately told you to start watching *Mad Men*. Deep, complicated, and made with great attention to detail, it is a show that rewards viewers. The characters reveal themselves over time, minor plot elements emerge as major turning points, and they give us 21st-century viewers a chance to look at the '60s in a whole new light. The show had had three outstanding seasons, and up until that point, I would have recommended it unreservedly.

Until they dropped my brother from the cast.

I understand that I did not really default to my rational soul in this instance. The third season was one giant setup for the surprise ending in which Sterling Cooper is bought out (again) and Don and Lane hatch a plan to break away with all the staff and clients they could carry. In this situation, they needed their strongest

people, and when it came down to choosing writers, there was no question that Peggy Olsen was a better writer than Paul Kinsey. It had been shown again and again during the season, so that when Kinsey was left twisting in the wind at the end, it *made sense* - from a writing perspective.

That didn't mean I had to like it.

So when season four rolled around, I started to download the episodes, but I resisted watching them. I just sulked. Was I being childish? Immature? Petty? We may never know the answers to those questions, but I can tell you this - the reason I finally gave in and started watching it again was this book.

Part of the Pop Culture and Philosophy genre of books, this volume takes a deep, intellectual look at the series, examining its characters, its ethics and its messages, to see what kind of lessons we can learn from it. From Aristotle to Ayn Rand, thousands of years of human thinking are illustrated in this tv show, and the authors who have contributed to the book are able to tease fascinating concepts from whiskey and smoke. How do Betty, Joan and Peggy represent second-wave feminism? What are the responsibilities of advertisers to their target audience? How might be Peggy a Nietzschean Superwoman, and why does Pete fail so hard? Is Don Draper a good man, and would Ayn Rand have salivated over him, as Bert Cooper claimed she would? The book is full of interesting ideas, and I'll share a few of my favorites with you.

In "Pete, Peggy, Don, and the Dialectic of Remembering and Forgetting," John Fritz examines the Nietzschean virtue of willing forgetfulness and how it applies to these three characters. The way it goes is this: Nietzsche believed that the past should serve the present, that you should be able to use your memories to push yourself forward. Not all memories do this, as we all know, and to hold on to memories that simply hold us back - to live in the past - is detrimental to leading a good life. Pete Campbell, for example, perpetually lives in the past. He can't forget anything, especially if it is something he perceives as a slight against him. When Ken Cosgrove gets a story published, Pete stewes over it, bitter that Ken did something worthwhile and he did not. Rather than do the adult thing - congratulate Ken and move on - Pete cannot let go. He ends up nearly forcing his wife into the arms of another man just to try and match Ken's accomplishment. Pete's inability to forget causes him almost constant distress.

Don is a little better. Don knows that you need to forget things, and tries to live that way. When his estranged brother shows up, Don tells him, "My life moves in only one direction - forward." He chooses to forget the things he has done if they will interfere with the way his life is going now. When he gets into a car accident, and Peggy has to bail him out, he doesn't remember to pay her back until she very pointedly reminds him. It's probable that he used this willing forgetfulness as part of his strategy to cheat on Betty. The only way to live both lives at once is to forget the one that will cause you trouble, and then recall it when it's time to get some nookie again.

But Don's not perfect. His memories are triggered again and again - sights and smells bring him back to his childhood, to his abusive father, and to the traumatic day in Korea when he became someone else. Don's past follows him, like a loyal dog, occasionally nipping at his heels and reminding him where he came from, no matter how much Don would like to forget it.

Peggy, on the other hand, is the champion of willing forgetfulness. The birth of the child she had with Pete is a fantastic example of this, and my favorite moment is when she finally tells Pete what had happened. She sits him down, and very calmly explains that she had his baby and then gave it away, and the tone of her voice is less exciting than someone talking about the new shoes she has bought. Peggy forgot about the baby - she *chose* to forget about the baby, no matter how much her family and Father Whatawaste tried to remind her. But for this one moment, she unpacked it, held it out at arm's length just long enough to tell Pete, and

then she wrapped it up again and buried it in her mind. Peggy knows that there are things in her past that will hold her back if she clings to them, so she doesn't. In this way, she is the model of Nietzsche's virtue of willing forgetfulness.

In "'In on It': Honesty, Respect, and the Ethics of Advertising," Andrea Novakovic and Tyler Whitney ask about what ethical rules bind advertising, if any, and how advertisers relate to consumers. The essay centers around the season 2 episode, "A Night to Remember," wherein Don uses his wife as a demographic model for Heineken beer. During her meticulously-planned dinner party, full of international cuisine, Betty reveals that they are drinking Heineken, from Holland, which comes as a welcome surprise to Don and Duck Phillips. Betty is upset by this, and after the party accuses Don of purposefully embarrassing and humiliating her, and Don doesn't quite get what the problem is. No surprise there.

But does Betty have a legitimate beef with Don and Sterling Cooper? Well, that depends on why she bought the Heineken. If she bought it because she likes it, or because she had heard good things about it, then no. But she suspects that Don had done his research too well, and that the only reason she picked up those nice green bottles was because he knew her so well that he could make her *think* she wanted to buy it. From her point of view, he manipulated her, (which in fancy-pants philosophical terms might be called depriving someone of agency) and then laughed about it. Don has shown no respect for his wife and her ability to make choices on her own, and this reflects the larger issue of respect between advertisers and the consumers they target.

It is, of course, a challenging topic, even within the show. In the pilot episode, "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," Don actively rejects psychological profiling in coming up with an ad for Lucky Strike, yet in that season's finale, "The Wheel," he is quite clearly using psychological manipulation to sell his idea for Kodak's Carousel. So what is the difference between profiling Betty to sell beer and using nostalgia to sell a slide projector? It's a matter of respect. It is easy for people watching the Kodak ad to understand what is going on in an ad that uses their memories to evoke an emotional response. The advertiser respects the consumer's intelligence and agency, and uses that to sell their product. In Betty's case, however, the manipulation was more subtle. Display techniques, signage, subtle and professional methods which start from the assumption that the consumer doesn't know her own mind.

Finally, in "What Fools We Were: *Mad Men*, Hindsight, and Justification," Landon W. Schurtz asks the question we all asked about the people in this show: how could they be so *dumb*? I mean, when Betty's daughter shows up with a dry-cleaning bag over her head, Betty is angrier about the possible state of her clothes than the chance her daughter could suffocate. When we first meet Sal Romano, he is so ridiculously gay that we can't believe no one notices. And Sterling-Cooper gleefully take on Richard Nixon as a candidate when we all know what the man is clearly a crook. From our perspective, these things seem completely obvious, yet the characters on *Mad Men* just don't seem to know any better. So why is that?

Well, it depends on what you mean by the word "know," and that's what Schurtz tries to figure out in this essay. We can know things through direct experience, for example, but Betty has probably never had a daughter asphyxiate on plastic, Don and the others have probably never met an openly gay man, and, well, historians still don't know how Nixon convinced America that he wasn't a weasel in an ill-fitting suit. We can know things through the testimony of others, but again - those bits of knowledge hadn't quite permeated the culture yet. Even if they had, whom could you trust for accurate testimony? Don rejects Doctor Guttman's suggestions for the Lucky Strike campaign because he rejects the significance of psychological research. The elders of Sterling Cooper continued to reject Pete's ideas because they didn't believe young people could know anything worth knowing.

In short, no - the people in the '60s weren't stupid. They just didn't know any better.

This book got me to give up my sulk and start watching *Mad Men* again. Even though it is clearly diminished with the absence of Paul Kinsey, I was reminded that the show is immensely complex and worth the time to watch. So I am recommending it to all - watch the show. And read the book. Together, they defy the common wisdom that modern entertainment has nothing to offer us. Indeed, they give us a new perspective not only on the show, but on our own lives. Pretty impressive for an hour a week.

"The basic desire to feel okay is deeply human, but if Don Draper can take this generic human longing and create a desire for a particular product, are we genuinely free?"

- Kevin Guilfooy, "Capitalism and Freedom in the Affluent Society"

Laura Ostermeyer says

Essays are well written and thought provoking however, they seem to quickly become very repetitive.

Melinda Elizabeth says

The essays become fairly repetitive in terms of examples used and it gives the feeling of reading the same essay over and over... if you were to flick through the book and read each essay by itself and leave the book for a while, you might appreciate the essays on a stand alone basis.

Having said that, there are plenty of thought provoking essays in the book that make it worth reading.
