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2021

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# George Carlin as Philosopher: It's All Bullshit. Is it Bad for Ya?

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## Contents

Introduction.....	
Part I: Summary .....	
Part II: The Value of Truth over Ignorance .....	
Plato and Allegory of the Cave.....	
Nozick and the Experience Machine.....	
The Ethics of Illusion .....	
Part III: It's Bad for Ya .....	
Conclusion .....	

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the comedy of George Carlin (1937-2008) as a powerful statement about the value of truth over ignorance. Carlin challenged his audience to confront the truth, regularly using clever rhetorical strategies to force viewers to grapple with inconvenient realities about the world in which they lived. This chapter examines historical and contemporary philosophical arguments for the importance of the pursuing truth over comforting fictions. I begin with Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which argues it is preferable to know reality as it truly is over appearances of the truth, even when it's painful or difficult. I then discuss Nozick's argument that humans would not want to plug into a pleasurable experience machine. Last, I examine contemporary arguments that there are distinctly moral reasons for pursuing the truth. I show how there are examples of all three arguments in Carlin's comedic work, and suggest we can consider Carlin's work a critical commentary that reveals multiple reasons for valuing truth over enticing fictions.

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## Key Words: Carlin, Plato, Nozick, truth, illusion

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### Introduction

George Carlin (1937-2008) entertained audiences for decades with his vulgar, unapologetic, in-your-face brand of humor. Over the years, Carlin appeared more and more as a grumpy old man, presenting monologues that were essentially long lists of things that pissed him off. Sometimes he tackled the absurdity of the mundane, dirty words you can't say on TV, and the silliness of phrases used when riding on an airplane. At his best, he provided scathing social commentary that forced his audience to confront uncomfortable truths about the world in which they lived. Over the years he repeatedly forced his audience to reflect on the hypocrisies, paradoxes, and absurdity of the United States' social, moral, and political landscape. With a sharp tongue that pulled no punches, Carlin got his audience to laugh while forcing them to confront the contradictions and injustices of the world around them.

A consistent theme throughout Carlin's comedic work is the tension between appearances and reality. He prompted his audience to examine commonly held religious, political, and cultural beliefs and then exposed the uncertain foundations upon which they rested. Whether it's preferable to live in a world of appearances and illusions (instead of the world as it actually is) is a question that always interested philosophers. From Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Robert Nozick's Experience Machine, to more contemporary work on the ethics of belief, philosophers have explored the tension between the way things appear and the way things are and questioned the value of acknowledging uncomfortable truths over comforting fictions. While philosophers have, for the most part, come down firmly on the side of truth over ignorance, the question of what, if anything makes truth preferable to fiction remains unsettled.

Throughout his decades of complaints and grievances, Carlin examined commonly held beliefs such as the immortality of the soul, the American Dream, the existence of rights, the value of voting, the function of the police, and child worship, and forces his audience to submit them to scrutiny. This often revealed an uncomfortable truth about them, either by appealing to clear counterexamples or revealing absurd conclusions by fleshing out the logical implications of the views. Carlin called out the colonialism, imperialism, and blatant hypocrisy in the actions of the leaders of the United States, both past and present, as well as illuminated the corporate control of almost every detail of modern life, from politicians to media, to our cultural values. He challenged common assumptions regarding moral values Americans hold dear such as “rights,” and mocked Americans’ paradoxical desire for a “balanced budget” amidst an entire culture dedicated to spending money they don’t have on things they don’t need. His audience was forced, at least temporarily, to sit in the reality behind their deeply valued illusions.

In this chapter, I will explore some of the common ways philosophers have dealt with the tension between appearances and reality, and the value of pursuing knowledge over comforting fictions. I will explore the question of what, precisely, makes truth more valuable than illusion or fiction and whether it is ever preferable to believe in a comforting fiction over the truth. I will then show how Carlin’s comedy sketches elucidated this tension by forcing his audience to confront the full scope of the illusions and hypocrisies of modern life, and whether confronting these illusions head-on is preferable to living in illusions we collectively tell ourselves.

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## **Part I: Summary**

Carlin's early comedy sketches focused on pointing out the irony and paradoxes of the mundane, as well as questioning everyday social norms and language. In his early standup specials, he comically emphasized what he described as little things we all experience but no one talks about: going to shake hands with someone and they don't notice, going up or down the stairs and thinking there's one more stair than there is, almost putting your groceries in the wrong cart, your dog licking its genitals in front of company ("On Location" 1977). Carlin was able to create a sense of shared experience and community with his audience, as everyone realized that yes, they had these experiences, and there is both humor and comfort in poking fun at things we all do.

But even in his earliest stand-up specials, he coupled his observations of the absurdity of the mundane with social commentary that emphasized the paradoxes of our social conventions, including our use of language. One of the most famous bits from his early career focused on "dirty" words you weren't allowed to say on TV. Carlin questioned why there were words that you could only say sometimes, and never say on TV. He pointed out that children don't know what the banned words are and often find out only by being hit when they say a dirty word. Some words, like "ass" you could use when referring to a donkey, but not to your anatomy. Other, more "vulgar" words were off the table all the time. Carlin prompted his audience to ask why, suggesting there is nothing inherently good or bad about a word, it is only the context that makes it good or bad. He also pointed out the irony that you could not say "fuck" or "fart" on TV, but you could refer to fucking (love scenes, romantic plots) but couldn't even *refer* to farts on TV. Why do we construct a TV world in which no one experiences a daily, normal bodily function? ("On Location" 1977).

Throughout his 40-year career, his standup routines continued to consist primarily of these two elements: everyday observations and social commentary. However, over time, his social commentary grew more explicit, more complex, and into more of a center point of his routines. Carlin no longer limited himself to commenting on the language we used; he drew attention to the paradoxes and hypocrisies of our entire cultural landscape. He criticized religion, which he called “the greatest bullshit story ever told,” and offered political commentary, with several bits on the corporate control of our politicians, corporate-sponsored America, and how it is corporations (not “the people”) who control our political landscape and govern modern life. He criticized our criminal justice system, our cultural love for violence, the illusion of the American Dream, and our often inconsistent consumerist beliefs.

To highlight the nature of the paradoxes while getting his audience to laugh, Carlin employed at least four rhetorical strategies. First, he would point out obvious counterexamples to a societal belief or value. Second, he would employ the exercise of assuming a premise as true and then drawing out the absurd conclusions, a strategy that originates in the Socratic method. Third, he would conjure up a seemingly absurd scenario, and once he got his audience laughing, point out the scenario is really not that different from what is going on right now. And last, he would often point out how the language we use is deceptive, contrived to sugar-coat things that should be bitter.

As an example of his first method, in which he appeals to obvious counterexamples of commonly held beliefs, in his final HBO special titled “It’s Bad for Ya” he delivered a scathing monologue on the American obsession with rights. “Boy, everyone in this country is always running around yammering about their fucking rights. I have a right, you have no right, we have a right, they don’t have a right.... Rights are an idea, they’re just imaginary, they are a cute idea,

cute... but that's all, cute, and fictional" ("It's Bad for Ya," 2008). Carlin continued with a thought experiment, asking: if rights are real, where do they come from, and if they come from God, what does that mean? "The Bill of Rights of this country has ten stipulations...And apparently God was doing sloppy work that week, because we've had to amend the bill of rights an additional seventeen times. So God forgot a couple of things, like...SLAVERY."

Moving beyond where rights originate if they are real, Carlin prompted his audience to think about Japanese American citizens being put into internment camps during World War II. They were denied any right to an attorney, no right to due process at all, the only right they had was "Right this way!" Just when these American citizens needed their rights the most, they were taken away. And, Carlin says, rights aren't rights if someone can take them away. He concludes that all we have ever had in the United States is a bill of temporary privileges, and the list of privileges we have gets smaller every year. US citizens tend to believe that rights protect them. Carlin is pointing out that often they do not. While Carlin seemed to confuse legal and civil rights, and human and natural rights (which are supposed to exist independent of whether they are protected by social institutions), Carlin forced his audience to confront whether the legal rights they often assert actually protect them the way we often believe they do.

As a second example of this first method, consider how Carlin examined the belief in the "sanctity of life" that is commonly cited by anti-abortion activists in his 1996 HBO special "Back in Town." While the supposed sanctity of life is often appealed to as a value that would morally prohibit abortion, Carlin pointed out the many counterexamples to the idea that we hold life as sacred. He pointed out that the state is interested in the life of babies so they can become dead soldiers. Does a society as committed to war as the United States truly believe life is sacred? Carlin pointed out the number of "crack babies" waiting to be adopted. Aren't their lives

sacred? He pointed out that “life” is a continuous process, billions of years old. If we really want to be consistent, we shouldn’t be burning coal because we need the carbon for life. What about all the fertilized eggs that don’t become successful pregnancies? Aren’t those lives sacred? Is any woman who’s had more than one period a serial killer? He pointed out the broad support for capital punishment and the fact that millions of people have been killed in the name of religion. In short, “Sanctity of life? Bullshit.” We constructed the concept because we’re alive. We get to choose which life is sacred and which isn’t because we, according to Carlin, “made the whole thing up.” (“Back in Town,” 1996).

The second method he used was to accept a premise for the sake of argument and then draw out the logical conclusions of accepting the view. In “It’s Bad for Ya,” he examined the religious belief expressed by some people that their dead parents “up there” help support them in their lives. Carlin, for the sake of argument, agreed to accept this idea as true and then elaborated on the implications of actually embracing it. What if your children are also dead? Do you go into retirement? What if you were adopted? Which set of parents helps you? What happens to dead people who don’t have any living relatives to help? Do they help strangers?

In “You Are All Diseased” he referred to religion as the greatest bullshit story ever told and prompted the audience to consider the implications of common religious views. Religion has posited the idea that there is an invisible man who can see everything you do, and has a special list of 10 things you aren’t supposed to do, and if you do those things he sends you to a fiery world of torture and pain ... “But, he loves you.” He pointed out that three out of four people in the United States believe in angels. Carlin asked, why draw the line at angels? Why not then also believe in goblins and zombies? Isn’t there equal evidence for all of these mythical creatures? Carlin said he really tried to believe in God, but the more he looked at the world, the



more he could see that it couldn't possibly be the result of divine planning. If God is real, he is "either incompetent or doesn't give a shit" ("You Are All Diseased," 1999). This is actually a formulation of the philosophical problem of evil, in which the following question is explored: why, if God is all-good and all-powerful, does evil exist? If God is all-powerful, he should be able to prevent evil, and if he is all good, he should want to. So either we are wrong about God, and he doesn't want (or is unable) to prevent evil from happening, or he doesn't exist.

A third method Carlin used was to prompt his audience to imagine an absurd, comedic scenario, and once his audience was laughing, suggest that the scenario was not all that different from things going on in society. This is essentially a philosophical thought experiment: prompting the listener to imagine a hypothetical world or situation that, while fictional, is designed to test our intuitions or assumptions. For example, in "Back in Town," Carlin asked why we don't profit off our country's support of capital punishment. Why not, year-round, broadcast capital punishment, and develop more and more creative means of executing people? Crucifixions, beheadings, shooting someone from a cannon against a brick wall. People could bet on the outcomes and the profits could help balance the budget. He gave another bit about fencing off four rectangular states, one for drug addicts, one for sex offenders, one for the seriously criminally insane, and one for violent offenders. Every 50 miles there would be a small door that is only 10 inches wide and open for seven seconds a month. Corporations could sponsor the different groups of people. People could watch it on TV or pay-per-view and the profits would lead to a balanced budget. The scenario is meant to be funny because it is so absurd, but Carlin reminded his audience it's not so unlike what things are like right now. "Everyone would have a gun, everyone would be on drugs, and no one would be in charge. Just like now! But at least we'd have a balanced budget" ("Back in Town," 1996). In a country with

a serious criminal violence problem that has more guns than people, Carlin forced his audience to question whether this scenario is that absurd after all. The United States criminalizes more behavior and incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (Wagner and Sawyer, 2018) and we have a culture that valorizes and profits off violence whenever possible. We also have a capitalist, corporate-controlled culture where people love to spend money they don't have, yet repeatedly express that they want a balanced federal budget. People also love to watch real live criminal shows like *Cops* and *To Catch a Predator*. Is the scenario Carlin presented to the audience, in which the undesirables are removed from society and (through corporate sponsors and customers who pay to see it) brutalize each other in order to balance the budget, really that much different from what we have now? Even if the practices seem different, aren't the underlying values the same? And what does this ultimately say about the worthiness of our cultural practices and values?

A fourth method he used was to point out our tendency to make things sound better than they are with the words we assign to them. He said this is a method we use when we have trouble facing the truth. For example, in "Doin it Again," Carlin discussed how World War II veterans (who were so traumatized by the horror of war that they couldn't function) were referred to as having "shellshock." This transitioned into "battle fatigue" which then became "operational exhaustion." This different way of labeling the condition made it seem less awful. "Sounds like something that happens to your car." Finally, we now refer to the condition as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Carlin pointed out the pain had been buried under jargon. We introduced a long, eight syllable word to mask reality. "Shell-shocked" sounds brutal because they were suffering from a brutal and horrific experience ("Doin it Again," 1990).

Carlin clearly liked his audience to reflect on the truth behind the masks. Using a blend of comedy and intellectual questioning, Carlin's monologues serve as a form of philosophy in which the audience is prompted to ponder whether their words and beliefs represent reality. This includes the consistency of cultural values, and metaphysical beliefs about the nature of our world. Carlin rarely appears to be calling his audience into any kind of action, often, to the contrary, he forces them to confront truths about which they can really do nothing about. The title of his final HBO special "It's Bad for Ya" is a reference to the line he repeated multiple times in the monologue. "It's all bullshit, and it's bad for ya." The bullshit he referred to are the long list of religious, political, and cultural lies we tell ourselves. Carlin also made a normative claim: this bullshit is bad for you. But why? Why is it bad for us to dwell in illusions instead of reality, especially if we cannot do anything to change it?

Carlin is not alone. Philosophers in particular, going all the way back to Socrates and Plato, have argued that pursuing and advocating for truth is better than believing in comforting fictions, even when confronting the truth doesn't result in any concrete action or change. In the next section, we will explore some classic and contemporary philosophical arguments in favor of pursuing and promoting truth rather than, as Carlin calls it, bullshit.

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## **Part II: The Value of Truth over Ignorance**

### ***Plato's Allegory of the Cave***

The value that philosophers place in affirming the pursuit of truth over comforting fictions is found as early as ancient philosopher Plato (428-347 BCE). One of the most often discussed philosophical thought experiments ever is found in his *Republic*. In the dialogue, Socrates, who

conveys Plato's views, prompts his interlocutor Glaucon to consider the possibility of people who have lived their entire lives shackled inside of a cave. These people are shackled so they can only see what is right in front of them; they cannot turn their heads. Behind them there is a fire and a half-wall upon which townspeople carry statues, carvings, and artifacts. The prisoners see the shadows of these artifacts on the cave wall in front of them like a puppet show. Because they have been shackled this way their entire lives, they believe that the shadows of objects they see in front of them are the objects themselves. If they heard a voice coming from a person of whom they could only see their shadow, they would assume the voice was coming from the shadow. When Glaucon tells Socrates that this is a highly unusual scenario he has constructed, Socrates replies that we are not so unlike the prisoners in the cave (just as Carlin reminds his audience we are not so removed from a society of watching criminals kill each other on TV) (Plato, 1985, 514-515, p. 209-210).

If the prisoners were to be released from their shackles, their eyes would be so used to viewing the shadows that they would intuitively turn away from the fire and back at the familiar wall of shadows. The flickering lights would hurt the prisoner's eyes and make them unable to look directly at the objects. If the prisoner was forced to look directly in the fire, it would hurt their eyes so much that they would turn back to the shadows and see them even more clearly. If the prisoner was dragged completely out of the cave and up into the sun, they would feel pain and rage. They would not be able to see the world as it really was, because they were used to viewing the world of shadows. Eventually their eyes would adjust and they would be able to look at actual beings in the world. Eventually the prisoner would reach a state where they could look directly at the sun itself and try to contemplate what it is.

SOCRATES: It is at this stage that he would be able to conclude that the sun is the cause of the seasons and of the year's turning, that it governs all the visible world and is in some sense also the cause of all visible things (Plato, 1985, 516b-c, p. 210-211).

Socrates then asks Glaucon to consider what the prisoner would want. Would the prisoner, at this point understanding the nature of the sun, envy the people in the cave? Would the prisoner prefer an existence in which they only saw shadows of what is, now that they had gone through the uncomfortable process of learning there was so much more to the world? Glaucon says the prisoner would not wish to become that type of human being. Socrates poses one last question: if the prisoner did return to the cave, his eyes would take time to adjust to be able to see the shadows again, and those still shackled would use him as proof that it is better to remain shackled in the cave, as one is never forced to adjust their eyes. The once freed prisoner, however, knows that those who remain shackled do not see the world as it truly is (Plato, 1985, 516c-e, p. 211).

Plato ponders the realm of Ideas, or forms: abstracting from the particular into the universal. Plato wants us to examine the meaning behind appearances—that the full truth about things is actually much more than their surface appearances. The world of appearances is one of change, imperfection, and deception. The realm of forms is permanent and perfect. While a beautiful white and blue bird with a sharp beak exists at the level of the physical world, the concepts of “beauty,” “whiteness,” “blueness,” and “sharpness” exist in the realm of forms. Someone who truly knows the realm of forms understands how the concepts of beauty, whiteness, blueness, and sharpness can be abstracted from an individual instantiation and applied in other contexts (See for example 1985, Book VI). At the heart of Plato's conceptions of forms is the ability to abstract deeper universal meanings from our everyday interactions with the world of appearances. To give an example from Carlin, someone could experience his skit on the seven

dirty words as funny because of its vulgarity and the way it bucked social norms at the time. At the deeper level, “Seven Dirty Words” is about revealing the inconsistencies in our understanding of language and approach to censorship.

Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is used to illustrate how difficult it can be to realize that your reality is not its surface appearance, especially if this is all you have ever known. While almost no one today accepts Plato’s conception of the forms, the allegory still demonstrates the value of knowledge over false belief. The prisoners chained in the cave do not know they see only shadows, thus they do not know what they are missing. The freed prisoner goes through a very difficult process of adjusting their eyes to acquire this new-found knowledge, but Plato clearly believes that once they have come up from the cave and seen the sun, they would never wish to return to their previous way of life. Thus while obtaining truth over fictions and seeing the true foundations of your everyday appearances can be difficult and uncomfortable, Plato argues that the affirmation of the truth is preferable to a life chained in a cave, believing the world consists only of shadows. Plato clearly thinks it is not a fully human life to accept the surface world of appearances as the complete representation of the world as it is. The fully human life, outside the cave, emphasizes the importance of objectively understanding how the world works rather than being comfortable with being deceived. The fact that the prisoner who sees the world as it truly is would not want to return to a life of being fooled shows the fully human life pursues the truth even when it is difficult to confront.

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**Nozick and the Experience Machine**

One reason it can be argued that illusions or appearances are preferable to the truth is that believing in comforting fictions can bring happiness or pleasure. Believing in guardian angels, a loving creator God, or a heavenly afterlife, for example, brings people happiness and helps them deal with grief and death. A more contemporary philosopher who argued that humans should ultimately prefer reality over fiction, even when those fictions are enticing and pleasurable, is Robert Nozick. In Nozick's 1974 work *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, he poses a thought experiment called The Experience Machine:

Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? (Nozick, 1974, 42-43)

While plugged into the machine, you wouldn't know that you were actually floating in a tank, you would think that the things were really happening. Every two years, Nozick says you could come out of the tank for 10 minutes or 10 hours and reprogram the next two years' worth of experiences. Would you do it? Should you do it?

Nozick thinks we wouldn't and shouldn't for three reasons. First, he says humans seek to do certain things, not just experience things. We don't want to experience writing a novel, we want to actually write a novel. Second, we want to be a certain type of person. A person floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob, not a person. Third, and most importantly, the experience machine exposes you to a human made, constructed reality, but not the *true one*. "There is no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated" (Nozick, 1974, 43). Nozick compares the process to being on hallucinogenic drugs. While we

may enjoy the experiences we have on them, we ultimately know they are not real. And humans ultimately crave real, true experiences in the world as it *really is*, rather than simulated ones.

This is because humans crave more out of life than just pleasure. Nozick poses the possibility that the machine could be a transformation machine that would transform you into whatever sort of person we'd like to be, or a results machine that produces any result we would want to produce in the world in order to make a difference. Nozick says that what is undesirable and disturbing about all these machines is that they would be living our lives for us and denying us contact with reality (1974, 44). In Nozick's view, we don't just want pleasure, experiences, results, or to be a certain way. We want our beliefs to be true and to interact with the world as it actually is.

Nozick argues that we care about more than just internal feelings or happy mental states. We want our beliefs to be true, for our emotions, whether happy or sad, to be based on facts. In short, we seek a connection with reality itself.

To focus on external reality, with your beliefs, evaluations, and emotions, is valuable in itself not just as a means to more pleasure or happiness...And if we want to connect to reality by knowing it, and not simply to have true beliefs, then if knowledge involves tracking the facts...this involves a direct and explicit external connection. We do not, of course, simply want contact with reality; we want contact of certain kinds: exploring reality and responding, altering it and creating new actuality ourselves (Nozick, 1989, 106).

While we ultimately desire to be happy, we care about the source of our happiness and how it is produced. We want actual experiences, real relationships with other people, to be moved by the awesome or the tragic, to actually create something new, to create a life that we are proud of.

“What we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to—and then to give it that response.” While we ultimately seek happiness, we seek a justified happiness: one that has a connection with an external reality and is based on events and experiences we can call



our own. We would not plug into the Experience Machine because it ultimately denies us a basic connection with external reality that is necessary for true, justified happiness.

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## **The Ethics of Illusions**

So far we've considered whether seeking truth over ignorance is part of living a fulfilling human life, and whether experience with the truth leads to a deeper sense of happiness. Another question is if there are distinctly *moral* reasons we should seek the truth. Is it not only undesirable to hold false beliefs, but actually morally wrong to do so?

One way to evaluate that question is to consider the *effects* of holding or promoting false beliefs. Work that explores this angle of the issue comes from William Clifford, and more recently, from David Kyle Johnson and Simone De Beauvoir. In "The Ethics of Belief," Clifford argues that all beliefs with insufficient evidence ultimately risk causing harm to others. First, the false belief could itself cause harm, as in the example of someone who chooses to believe that something is safe when it is not (Clifford, 1999, 70-71). NASA was warned the night before the Challenger exploded that the shuttle was unsafe to launch in frigid January temperatures but officials chose to believe the illusion that the evidence was inconclusive, leading to the deaths of everyone on board (McDonald and Hansen, 2012). Or, citizens could believe the Covid-19 pandemic is not that serious and thus refuse to social distance and wear masks, contributing to higher rates of transmission and more deaths.

Clifford thinks the ethics of beliefs goes even further: even if one particular false belief does not harm other people, a general attitude of credulity is ultimately harmful for humankind.

False beliefs discourage the critical, inquisitive attitude of pursuing the truth that is necessary for society to progress.

The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery (Clifford, 1999, 75).

This warning could not be more prescient. There is a culture in the United States that takes pride in ignorance, touting not only unsubstantiated religious beliefs that they want forced on other people, but government conspiracies and rejection of scientific evidence. This has led to a revival of the belief that the world is flat, and the rejection of the results of free and fair elections, despite all evidence to the contrary. This pride in ignorance and beliefs without justification was amplified by the Trump administration, which openly appealed to “alternative facts” and blasted his critics as “fake news,” and created a culture that denies the existence of climate change and the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic. This not only has caused harm to others, but has hindered vital societal progress in developing more sustainable habits and creating innovative solutions to contemporary challenges. Disregard for scientific expertise became a proud standard of the Trump administration, as they disbanded the nation’s pandemic response team in 2018 (Riechmann, 2020). They also cut funding for scientific research ranging from the prevention of invasive insects to the effects of certain chemicals on pregnant women (Davenport and Plumer, 2019). While this anti-science agenda may be partially fueled by the Trump administration’s ties to oil and fossil fuels, as well as wanting to free businesses of environmental regulations, the United States’ culture of glorified ignorance has lent support for simply giving up on caring about the truth. This attitude, as Clifford points out, hinders vital societal progress.

More recent work on the ethics of truth and ignorance comes from David Kyle Johnson's work on the Santa Lie. Johnson argues that what many view as a harmless, fun holiday practice—telling children that Santa is real—can actually be morally harmful. As part of this argument, he introduces potential reasons we could argue in favor of promoting a fantasy. One reason is of course consequential: telling people stories often prompts them to change or control their behavior. We see this strategy with the Santa Lie. The myth of Santa is used to control the behavior of small children. . If they do not behave, of course, Santa will not bring them any presents. But is this a morally desirable way to get children to behave? Isn't it preferable to teach children why a behavior is undesirable than to use an illusion based on reward to get them to behave? In the same vein, many religious people behave in certain ways because they want an eternal reward—Heaven—after death. Is this a *good* reason to be good? Shouldn't you do the right thing for the right thing's sake, not because you want a reward for yourself? The Santa Lie, Johnson argues, discourages instilling good reasons for moral behavior in children, and instead promotes behaving morally for the sake of personal reward (Johnson, 2010).

Another reason someone may promote a false belief such as Santa is that it creates a sense of security or comfort. Believing in Santa, or believing in God, or the goodness of the police, is comforting to many people. It helps them create a world in which there are definite rules and following those rules leads to a reward. It's a simple world. Simone De Beauvoir called this simple world the "serious world." It is a world in which right and wrong are black and white, institutions are there to protect us, adults know what they are talking about, and what your parents and teachers tell you is true. Beauvoir thought the serious world was very comforting. She also thought it was an illusion, and ultimately a harmful one. Beauvoir thought that belief in the serious world, a world of moral black and whites and absolute values, stifled creative

freedom and led to the continuation of harmful institutions and practices. It is the belief that these institutions are inherent, God-given, and self-evidently good that fuels resistance to change as well as a failure for individuals to embrace their own freedom to create. It also leads to disrespecting the freedom of others, and choosing alleged pre-given ideals over concrete human lives.

But the serious man puts nothing into question. For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution – army, highway, revolution, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant... Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the thing, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing. The colonial administrator who has raised the highway to the stature of an idol will have no scruple about assuring its construction at the price of a great number of lives of the natives; for, what value has the life of a native who is incompetent, lazy, and clumsy when it comes to building highways? (Beauvoir, 1980, 49).

The sense of security that the illusory serious world offers discourages critical reflection on our social norms and leads to becoming wrapped up in harmful social causes. It further stifles individuals, hindering them from embracing their ability to create change and transformation in our social world.

This leads directly into the overall argument of the ethics of promoting false belief: even if there were some allegedly positive consequences of promoting false beliefs, such as the control or modification of behavior or an illusion of security, aren't those outweighed by negative effects? Clifford, Johnson, and Beauvoir ultimately argue that it, indeed, is. The promotion of false beliefs discourages critical thinking, distorts our ability to distinguish between good and bad evidence, and ultimately risks harm to others. Further, it can make us resistant to change and creativity, and lead to getting wrapped up in immoral causes. As emphasized by

Johnson, while potentially false beliefs such as belief in ghosts or angels may not seem like that big of a deal, false beliefs that the government is responsible for 911, that the Newtown school shooting was a hoax, or that Covid-19 is a government conspiracy are less benign. When individuals get used to accepting beliefs without solid evidence, they are more prone to fantasies that have the potential to cause harm to others and to society at large.

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### **Part III: It's Bad for Ya**

In his final special, Carlin repeatedly made the statement that holding false beliefs or illusions is bad for you. "It's all bullshit, and it's bad for ya." Why? Is it because someone who knows the truth, however difficult, would never want to return to a life of illusion? Is it because part of seeking true human happiness is having real experiences that connect us with ultimate reality? Is it because it is potentially harmful and therefore unethical to hold false beliefs? In short, yes.

First, let's consider Carlin's comedy in light of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Plato's prisoners thought that shadows of objects were the real world. Little did they know the real world contained so much more. The world of shadows was simple, one dimensional, and easy to understand. Being dragged outside the cave and exposed to the world as it truly is was extremely painful for the prisoners; but upon making the adjustment, Plato argues they would never want to return to the life of believing in mere shadows.

As a comedian can take many routes to humor, Carlin clearly considered the exposure of truth to be an important component of the purpose of his comedy. Unpacking the deeper concepts and ideas behind surface appearances is an ongoing theme of his comedic work. I think

it's clear that Carlin himself considered his perceptions to be preferable to illusions and would not want to live a life that fails to critically examine our societal values. In his first HBO special, "On Location" in 1977, Carlin suggested there ought to be more truth in names, especially in advertising.

They've tried to clean up, to clean up advertising claims, let them clean up some of the names, like Excello and Acme and Ace and Top. Bullshit. Things should be called what they are. I'd like to bring out a new car, the 1977 Piece of Shit. A Division of United Consumer Fuckers ("On Location").

Rather than describe the capitalist process that uses deception to maximize profit at the expense of quality, Carlin suggested calling it exactly what it is. Behind the shiny appearances of how products are manufactured lies the essence of advertising: trying to get people to buy things for more than they're worth in order to maximize profits. The person who ultimately loses out is the consumer.

In "Doin' It Again," he examined the concept of prostitution, questioning why it is illegal.

Selling is legal, fucking is legal. Why isn't selling fucking legal? You know, why should it be illegal to sell something that's perfectly legal to give away? I can't follow the logic on that at all. Of all the things you can do to a person, giving someone an orgasm is hardly the worst thing in the world. In the Army, they give you a medal for spraying Napalm on people. Civilian life, you go to jail for giving someone an orgasm. Maybe I'm not supposed to understand it (Doin' it Again).

On the surface, we assume prostitution is illegal because there is something morally wrong with it. Carlin asks his listeners precisely what that is. It is not illegal to have sex nor is it illegal to sell things. Yet we've banned selling sex as an unacceptable social activity. He pointed out how we regularly do much worse things that are legal, and are even often rewarded for doing them. Carlin used the Socratic method to try to tease out the concept behind the practice. If something is morally wrong there must be a reason why. Is it wrong because someone is being harmed?

But Carlin showed that it's not clear what the harm is in prostitution: many of the harms that come to prostitutes are a result of its criminalization. Additionally, there are behaviors that are obviously much more harmful than the state has designated as perfectly fine in some contexts. Carlin fails to find an essence of "badness" in prostitution—further he sees no consistent standards for badness in our cultural norms at all.

In his 1992 special "Jamming in New York," Carlin opined about the United States' obsession with war and violence. "We have to declare war on everything," he says, "the war on poverty, the war on litter, the war on cancer, the war on drugs, but did you ever notice we got no war on homelessness?" Carlin asks the viewer to ponder why, then concludes that there is no money to be made off of solving the problem of homelessness. "If you can find a solution to homelessness where the corporate swine and the politicians could steal a couple of million dollars each, you'll see the streets of America begin to clear up pretty goddamn quick, I'll guarantee you that!" Carlin exposes a deeper truth behind the American obsession with war: the wars we wage, whether literal wars motivated by politicians' ties to fossil fuels, the military industrial complex and weapons industry, or figurative wars like the war on drugs that fund the private prison industry, the wars we choose to wage are financially motivated. We declare a war when the powerful stand to financially profit from the results. The surface appearance is that we wage wars for justified, morally sound reasons. Politicians will go to great lengths to make militaristic intervention appear justified. George W. Bush insisted Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and must be stopped, but the evidence he provided was proven false. The War on Drugs, it was claimed, was morally necessary due to harmful effects of drugs on youth and the criminal behavior of those who used them. In reality the War on Drugs led to the United States having the largest prison population in the world, benefitting the private prison industry

which has spent tens of millions in lobbying, while having no effect in actually decreasing drug use (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2011). We now see increasing legalization of marijuana in multiple states as well as small amounts of cocaine and heroin in Oregon (Fuller, 2020). The essence of what is considered a necessary war in the United States, at least in Carlin's view, is who stands to profit from waging it.

In his continued musings on homelessness, Carlin suggests there is further deception in the way the concept functions in societal discourse.

I got an idea about homelessness. You know what they ought to do? Change the name of it. Change the name! It's not homelessness, it's houselessness! It's houses these people need! A home is an abstract idea, a home is a setting, it's a state of mind. These people need houses; physical, tangible structures.

Why is this distinction important? Because a home, as he says, is a state of mind, an abstract concept that no one can easily provide to someone else. But what the homeless need is much simpler: they need a physical place to live. This is a solvable problem, if we chose to solve it.

The heart of the issue, according to Carlin, is that we don't want to.

They need low-cost housing but where're you gonna put it? Nobody wants you to build low-cost housing near their house. People don't want it near 'em! We've got something in this country – you've heard of it – it's called NIMBY, N-I-M-B-Y, "Not In My BackYard!" People don't want anything, any kind of social help, located anywhere near 'em!

He slams America's supposed spirit of generosity, which he, of course, believes is an illusion.

Carlin proposes his own solution to houselessness: build the low-cost housing on golf courses.

Golf is a sport that only the wealthy can afford and takes up way too much space: build some houses on it, house the homeless, and the problem is solved. In this monologue Carlin takes the surface appearance of homelessness: a problem we as a society have decided is not solvable because of our inability to provide the concept of "a home" and because we believe it the unfortunate workings of the economy that will always render some people without a home, and



reveals the deeper, true essence behind it: we don't have enough affordable houses, we could have affordable houses, but we choose not to. We choose not to because we are not actually a generous society, and because the wealthy and powerful do not stand to profit from solving this particular problem.

In "Back in Town," Carlin explored another surface belief that is quite common among the American public: the idea that "politicians suck." People of all religions, political affiliations, classes, and racial demographics will feel comfortable agreeing that our politicians suck. But Carlin asks his listener to consider what we truly mean when we say this.

But where do people think these politicians come from? They don't fall out of the sky. They don't pass through a membrane from another reality. No, they come from American homes, American families, American schools, American churches, American businesses, and they're elected by American voters. This is the best we can do, folks. It's what our system produces: Garbage in, garbage out.

Carlin tells his viewers to look in the mirror. Our politicians are elected from among our citizens and are a product of our society. "When you have selfish ignorant citizens you're going to have selfish ignorant politicians," he opines. "So maybe it's not the politicians who suck. Maybe something else sucks around here. Like, the public?" Behind the surface appearance of the truism that "politicians suck," Carlin forces his audiences to confront the true nature of the issue. Our politicians are us. If the politicians suck, so do we. Many people were surprised by the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and that he managed to get even more votes in 2020 (although he still lost). It is likely Carlin would not have been surprised at all. In a society that encourages and rewards selfishness, greed, consumerism and ignorance, the election and popularity of a narcissistic billionaire reality TV star is a predictable result.

Like Plato's prisoner who comes up out of the cave, Carlin takes the shadows: "prostitution is immoral" "our wars are justified" and "politicians suck" and exposes the deeper truth behind them. His listeners are brought up out of the metaphorical cave and confronted with the true essences. And like Plato, Carlin is firm that he would not want to return to the cave of shadows after the painful process of being dragged up to see the light. "I don't like language that conceals reality. Americans have trouble facing the truth " (Doin' it Again).

"I'm not a good American because I form my own opinions. I have certain rules I live by; my first rule: I don't believe anything the government tells me... nothing, zero, no, and I don't take very seriously, the media or the press in this country...I don't really believe in my country and I gotta tell you folks, I don't get all choked up about yellow ribbons and American flags. I consider them to be symbols and I leave symbols to the symbol-minded (Jamming in New York)."

With the play on words of "simple-minded" Carlin expresses that he sees the world of shadows as an inferior mental space. A truly human life utilizes our intellect to reflect on the real foundational concepts behind our fictional platitudes.

What about Nozick and his experience machine? Does Carlin think humans ultimately desire a true connection with reality? Is happiness only true happiness if it is justifiable and based on real experiences? Again, I think the answer is yes.

In "It's Bad for Ya," Carlin attacked the common phrase "Proud to be an American." Pride, he said, should be reserved for something you achieve or earn. No one achieved or earned simply being born in the United States.

I've never understood ethnic pride. ...I'm fully Irish. And when I was a kid, I would go to the St. Patrick's Day parade, and I noticed that they sold a button that said "Proud to be Irish"...And I could never understand ethnic or national pride because, to me, pride should be reserved for something you achieve or attain on your own, not something that happens by accident of birth. Being Irish, being Irish isn't a skill. It's a fucking genetic accident. You wouldn't say, "I'm proud to be 5'11". I'm proud to have a predisposition

for colon cancer. So, why the fuck would you be proud to be Irish or proud to be Italian or American or anything?

Here Carlin emphasizes the importance of justifiability in what we take pride in. What's the point of being proud if it's not something you earned? He also attacks the self-esteem movement that tells us that every child is special.

Boy, they said it over and over and over, as if to convince themselves. Every child is special. And I kept saying fuck you. Every child is clearly not special. Did you ever look at one of them? ...Now, PT Barnum might think they're special, but not me, I have standards. But let's say it's true. Let's grant this. I'm in a generous mood...Let's say it's true as somehow all...every child is special. What about every adult? Isn't every adult special, too? And if not, if not then at what age do you go from being special to being not-so-special? And if every adult is special then that means we're all special, and the whole idea loses all its fucking meaning.

If everyone is special, then simply put, no one is. Carlin asks, what is the point of being considered special if the concept has no meaning? As humans we crave not just to be called special, but for that statement to have a connection with reality: we want to actually *be* special. Carlin believes the self-esteem movement has made the concept meaningless. What good is a belief that a child is special if it does not have an actual connection with reality? Is it any different from an experience machine where you could plug in and be the type of person you wanted to be?

In "You Are All Diseased" Carlin shared that he really tried to believe in God. But the longer he lived, the more he realized that something was wrong. Looking around at the world he realized this was simply not good work and should not be on the resume of a divine being. If God were real he must be either incompetent or simply not care. Carlin says he looked for something else. So he became a sun worshipper. He worships the sun because he can see it. He knows it is a real thing to worship.

So every day, I can see the sun as it gives me everything I need... heat, light, food, flowers in the park, reflections on the lake... and occasional skin cancer but hey, at least there are no crucifixions and we're not setting people on fire simply because they don't agree with us. Sun worship is fairly simple. There's no mysteries, no miracles, no pageantry, no one asks for money, there are no songs to learn, and we don't have a special building where we all gather once a week to compare clothing. And the best thing about the sun, it never tells me I'm unworthy, doesn't tell me I'm a bad person who needs to be saved, hasn't said an unkind word, treats me fine.

Carlin wanted a connection with true reality, not a fabricated experience. While believing in God may have been fancier, with songs and miracles and a shiny afterlife, Carlin didn't find it credible and thus not worth believing in. Instead he chose a much simpler object of worship, one that is much less flashy and doesn't promise him a potential eternity in heaven or a divine plan, but is, importantly, *real*. Nozick argued that we don't just want pleasure, experiences, results, or to be a certain way. We want our beliefs to be true and to interact with the world as it actually is. We want our emotions, whether happy or sad, to be based on facts. Carlin believes his semi-religious relationship with the sun is preferable because it is at least based on a real experience and on facts: the sun is real and it provides for his basic needs: his need for food, light, warmth, and life itself. Like Nozick, Carlin argues that it is better to have true beliefs, real experiences, and justified emotions than simulations, hallucinations, or illusions of good experiences.

Last, are false beliefs and their promotion unethical? Do false beliefs risk causing harm to others and society at large? It's a resounding yes.

For example, let's return to his monologue on rights. Carlin asks what a right is, and where rights come from. He points out that different countries have different numbers of rights. In moral and political philosophy, there is a distinction between moral and legal rights. Carlin is talking about rights that are granted to you by a government, so he is talking about legal rights. Moral rights, sometimes called human rights, are rights that every person is entitled to

irrespective of where they live and the laws of their country. Carlin is looking for a source of legal rights, and criticizes the common belief that legal rights come from God.

But let's say God gave us the original ten. He gave the British 13. The British Bill of Rights has 13 stipulations. The Germans have 29. The Belgians have 25. The Swedish have only 6. And some people in the world have no rights at all. What kind of a fucking, goddamn, God-given deal is that? No rights at all? Why would God give different people in different countries different numbers of different rights? Boredom? Amusement? Bad arithmetic? Do we find out at long last after all this time that God is weak in math skills? Doesn't sound like divine planning to me. Sounds more like human planning. Sounds more like one group trying to control another group. In other words, business as usual in America ("It's Bad for Ya").

Carlin compares the belief that our rights come from God to a form of social control. If the rights we have are "God-given" it bestows a sense of security or comfort, much like Beauvoir's serious world. It is also, like Beauvoir's serious world, illusory. Believing that "God" backs the legal rights that we have leads to a complacency and lack of reflection on the rights we and others do or do not have. This is, ultimately, harmful to society at large.

Personally, folks, I believe that if your rights came from God, he would have given you the right to some food every day, and he would have given you the right to a roof over your head. God would have been looking out for you. God would have been looking out for you, you know that? He wouldn't have been worrying about making sure you have a gun so you can get drunk on Sunday night and kill your girlfriend's parents.

The belief that our legal rights are part of the serious world and thus inherent, God-given, leads to the acceptance of barely regulated gun ownership as a "God-given" right, because it was granted in the original constitution, but the right to a shelter is not. There is a strong correlation between a large number of recipients of gun lobbyist funds and voting records against gun control. Politicians who receive donations from gun lobbies reject attempts to regulate guns (OpenSecrets.org, 2020) and states with gun restrictions have less gun violence than states which have enacted gun control measures (Committee on the Judiciary, 2019). Meanwhile thousands of people live without access to housing and nutrition, and the problem goes largely ignored.

Further, a belief that legal rights are backed by the authority of the serious world can make people less questioning when these rights are gradually taken away. With lack of critical reflection on the rights we have and why, we often assume there is a good, morally and legally sound reason that our rights to privacy or against unnecessary search and seizure are suspended. Or, as Carlin points out, many sat silently while Japanese citizens had almost all legal rights suspended after the Pearl Harbor attack and were put in internment camps.

Just when these American citizens needed their rights the most, their government took them away, and rights aren't rights if someone can take them away. They're privileges. That's all we've ever had in this country is a bill of temporary privileges. And if you read the news even badly, you know that every year, the list gets shorter and shorter and shorter. You see how silly that is? Yeah. Sooner or later, the people in this country are going to realize the government does not give a fuck about them.

The false belief that the government is enforcing God-given rights is harmful on multiple accounts, in Carlin's view. It leads to beliefs that being denied rights to health care, housing, or nutrition are justified because that's just "how things are." It leads to unreflective acceptance of policies such as gun ownership with very few restrictions, even though that legal right was established at a time when weapons and society in general were very different. Last, it leads to a belief that those enforcing the rights are backed by a God-given moral authority, of which our government officials are enforcers, which makes people more complacent when their legal rights are restricted or taken away.

Clifford argued that a society that promotes or accepts false beliefs ultimately accepts a sense of complacency and stops the curious and rigorous questioning needed for societal progress. In one of Carlin's most famous bits in "Life is Worth Losing," he attacks the illusion of the American Dream. He begins with the common complaint that education in the United States "sucks" compared to many other advanced countries. Carlin says there is a reason the

education system is the way it is and will never improve: the big wealthy business interests that control things simply don't want that.

Forget the politicians. They are irrelevant. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. You don't. You have no choice! You have OWNERS! They OWN YOU. They own everything. They own all the important land. They own and control the corporations. They've long since bought, and paid for the Senate, the Congress, the state houses, the city halls, they got the judges in their back pockets and they own all the big media companies, so they control just about all of the news and information you get to hear. They got you by the balls.

These owners spend billions in lobbying making sure they get what they want—which is more for themselves and less for everyone else. But, Carlin says, there is one thing they definitely don't want:

They don't want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don't want well informed, well educated people capable of critical thinking. They're not interested in that. That doesn't help them. That's against their interests.....You know what they want? They want obedient workers. Obedient workers, people who are just smart enough to run the machines and do the paperwork. And just dumb enough to passively accept all these increasingly shitty jobs with the lower pay, the longer hours, the reduced benefits, the end of overtime and vanishing pension that disappears the minute you go to collect it, and now they're coming for your Social Security money.

It is in the interest of the wealthy capitalist class to have workers who accept their lot. Lacking a critical consciousness of their situation, they are more complacent to accept worse and worse positions and to have more and more of their benefits taken away. The American Dream is the illusion that working hard can result in the accumulation of wealth and social mobility. But when you are not the primary beneficiary of your own labor and the capitalist owners reap the benefits of your hard work, the accumulation of wealth is not possible. The illusion, however, is enough to keep people complacent.

Good honest hard-working people continue, these are people of modest means, continue to elect these rich cock suckers who don't give a fuck about you....they don't give a fuck about you... they don't give a FUCK about you. They don't care about you at all... at

all... AT ALL. And nobody seems to notice. Nobody seems to care. That's what the owners count on. The fact that Americans will probably remain willfully ignorant of the big red, white and blue dick that's being jammed up their assholes every day, because the owners of this country know the truth: It's called the American Dream, because you have to be asleep to believe it.

More to Clifford's point, Carlin argues the lack of education makes citizens credulous, easily manipulated, and prevents their own progress. It also prevents them from critiquing the political and economic system that each year makes it more and more difficult for them to flourish, thus thwarting overall societal progress.

We can also read this in light of Beauvoir's concept of the serious world. The American Dream is comforting; it instills in people a sense of certainty and knowledge of what they need to do: work hard, and you will be successful. The paths are clearly laid out for them, the world makes sense. But like all aspects of the serious world, it is illusory. Believing in the American Dream prevents people from seeing the ways this concept stifles their freedom and leads to an undesirable situation in which the benefits of their work are transferred to the capitalist class. Further they accept this situation as "just the way things are" so they do not see the situation as one that they can potentially transform. They do not see themselves as creative, free meaning-givers who could potentially create a more fair and just system. Instead, constrained by the comfort of the black and white spirit of seriousness, they are content to go about their lives and accept a system that gradually takes away the benefits extended to the middle class.

Thus it is clear that Carlin thinks false beliefs and their promotion are morally harmful. Not only do the ideas themselves risk harm to others, but they lead to a less critically reflective and inquisitive attitude, leading to complacency, lack of progress, and thwarting our potential to conceive of ourselves as meaningful creators of our social world.

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## Conclusion

A true philosopher of comedy, Carlin joins a long tradition of philosophers arguing that truth is preferable to illusion. Like Plato, he searched for the true essences behind the realm of shadows, and would never want to return to a world of surface appearances. Like Nozick, he believed that real experiences and a happiness based on justified, true circumstances are preferable to a life of pre-programmed, pleasurable illusions. And like Clifford, Johnson, and Beauvoir, he argued that false beliefs have the potential to cause harm to others and stifle societal progress, thus there are distinctly moral reasons for pursuing the truth. Carlin was a true comedic visionary who entertained his audiences for over forty years while forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths about religion, politics, and our societal values. A master at pairing ancient philosophical truth with modern comedy, he offered us a true gift: a critical examination of our society's civil and moral contradictions and absurdities, elegantly wrapped in humor.

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