

A Minimal Book Example

John Doe

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About

Philosophers do not often take a serious interest in popular music, let alone country music. Some who have done so include Gracyk (2016); Prinz (2014); Riggle (2010); Wiltsher (2016); (???); and (???). One explanation for this could be that the standard objects of focus for philosophers are things like ethics and other values, what makes a behavior admirable for instance. Or questions in metaphysics about the necessary qualities of matter and substance, or how can humans have free will if God is all knowing? Some questions that philosophers ask in relation to music more generally, and often these discussions tend to focus on music that is not listened to by the more general public, are questions about the ontology of music, for instance, how can a song sound sad (Trivedi 2014) when it is merely the collation of vibrations across a given medium?

Maybe the necessary and sufficient conditions for a song *being* sad, are vibrations at a given frequency, say less than 40.20Hz sufficient to qualify as *sad*? When looking at the more dominant questions in philosophy, they are typically situated in domains such as ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and sometimes value theory. But in these disciplines, we typically ask questions like “is lying wrong?”, “is a right act right because God commanded it or did God command it because it is right?”, “when is a true belief knowledge?” etc. But in relation to music, it is difficult to ask these kinds of questions in a philosophically interesting way. For instance, during the 1980’s, there was a large public outcry against rap music as immoral and that it undermines social values.

For a philosopher to analogously wade into these waters, they would have to say something like “lying is wrong and therefore one shouldn’t sing about it”. But this is odd and cringy. How can hyperbole be wrong in the same way that lying is wrong and many artist think that what they are doing something analogous to hyperbole. When thinking about popular songs therefore, it is difficult to provide a sustained critique of one’s values in relation to these and one of the things philosophers care about is value. We do not often think that expressions of value in a popular song is that appealing, perhaps because it is not clear that this is what is occurring, that an artist is merely providing content devoid of any kind of truth values. So we just typically accept that lyricists are doing anything like purporting to make value claims in their music is not a popular view.

There are however those of us who think that this is false. Often times, it sounds as though a given artist is making a value claim through her music. Country music however, is often thought to express a given value. Whether or not it is a view that the author espouses is not always clear. Philosophers writing on country music have often asked this question (E.g., ???; ???; Shusterman 1999). Are country music artists authentic, and does this mean that the values they express in their music is authentically theirs?

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