

Reviews

Edwards, Douglas. *Philosophy Smackdown*. Polity Books, 2020. 164 pp.
\$16.95/Pbk

As an introduction to philosophy for wrestling fans, *Philosophy Smackdown* is a fun, engaging, thought-provoking, and all-around lively introduction to big-picture questions in philosophy. Keeping in line with popular philosophy texts, Edwards introduces, in an eminently accessible way, questions that philosophers have discussed for as long as the discipline has existed. The book is broken up into six chapters, each touching on core themes in philosophy: (1) Reality, (2) Freedom, (3) Identity, (4) Morality, (5) Justice, and (6) Meaning. The book concludes with a “dark match” pitting philosophy against the spectacle of professional wrestling. Edwards explores the ways philosophers can learn from professional wrestling and uses professional wrestling to illustrate to newcomers how philosophy *should* be done. Utilizing his passion for, and knowledge of, wrestling and its history, Edwards illustrates perennial philosophical problems. At times, however, he gets almost too caught up in the wrestling side, making some of the chapters feel uneven.

The first two chapters of the book perhaps suffer the most from this unevenness. The book opens with a discussion of how Plato’s cave mimics the different “layers of reality” in professional wrestling. From the infamous “Montreal Screw-Job” to WWE’s proprietary “reality” shows, Edwards teases out some of the core challenges in making sense of reality both in, and outside of, the ring. Just as Plato introduces the allegory of the cave in the context of his political treatise, *The Republic*, Edwards turns to a brief discussion of politics, news media, and democracy in this chapter. Yet, the turn seems to come like an RKO, “out of nowhere,” and the result is a disjointed finish to the first chapter.

The discussion of freedom in the second chapter also comes across as a little unfocused. To be sure, there are a number of related discussions regarding the nature and questions about freedom and utilizing the semi-scripted nature of pro-wrestling as a foil for exploring those questions is a particularly ingenious angle. But the chapter touches very quickly on many topics, from Jon Moxley’s exit from WWE (and subsequent arrival in AEW), to the stoics’ views on the scope of personal freedom, to social pressures, women’s wrestling, and intergender wrestling. The through-line is, of course, the question about whether something scripted can still allow for genuine freedom. The chapter is short and these are huge questions, so it comes off as a little quick and unfocused.

By the third chapter, *Philosophy Smackdown* starts to turn the corner. Chapter three concerns personal identity, and the focus is on Razor Ramon/Scott

Hall. The discussion of the differences (or lack thereof) between person and character in wrestling raises interesting and important questions, and the pages fly by. Despite the rich subject matter, this is the shortest chapter in the book, and I was left wanting more on the interrelated problems of personal identity. But where the first three chapters left me wanting more, the last three delivered. Without a doubt, the chapters on ethics, justice, and meaning are the strongest, most thought-provoking, and most important chapters in the text.

Chapters four and five pair nicely. Chapter four introduces the face/heel dynamic and explores the rise and fall of wrestling heroes in terms of virtue and vice. Slotting various wrestling personae into the Aristotelian framework of vice and virtue, Edwards offers helpful discussions of why we love Stone Cold and why we hate the Super-Cena run. This rich discussion of good and evil gives way to a careful, direct, and important discussion of social ethics (questions of justice, commodification, prejudice, and bias) in professional wrestling, both as a business and as a form of entertainment. Edwards does a brilliant job of addressing the ugly side of wrestling head-on, and forces readers to consider their role as consumers of wrestling as a product.

The final chapter turns to a conceptual analysis of professional wrestling. Edwards considers whether it is merely entertainment, a sport, and what exactly “sports entertainment” might mean. Edwards finally concludes that pro-wrestling is a “monster” akin to Frankenstein’s. It is something *sui generis*, composed of pieces taken from other forms of entertainment but not quite the same as any of them. Conceptual analysis is, to my mind, a critical starting point for philosophy, and this chapter expertly discusses the unique challenges professional wrestling presents philosophers as it seems to defy analysis. This is a particularly strong finish for the book, but I wish it would have been the opening salvo – having an analysis of what wrestling *is* right at the outset would provide readers a powerful entry into just how deep the rabbit hole goes and would have introduced philosophical tools prior to engaging specific questions. Nonetheless, this is a fun main event.

The book concludes with a “dark match” pitting the practice of philosophy as a dialogical and seemingly combative discipline against professional wrestling. It’s a shame the dark match was relegated to the very end of the text, as it is arguably the strongest chapter. Metaphilosophy (the philosophy of philosophy) is often alienating and inaccessible, but Edwards cleverly employs the aims and purposes of wrestling to illustrate how philosophy *ought* to be done. In a shocking heel-turn, Edwards calls academic philosophers to task for often forgetting that, like professional wrestlers, we ought to see philosophy as a collaborative effort. He writes, “It takes two to tango, and wrestlers need to work together to achieve their

goals. The same should apply in philosophy. Philosophy is not about winning arguments; rather a philosophical discussion should be a collective enterprise where people work together to pursue the truth” (150). This serves both as a reminder to philosophers, and a cautionary note to newcomers that while it might *appear* that philosophers are combative and fighting, but we are actually working together to get closer to the truth. It is a shame this “dark match” was buried; it is a co-main event quality chapter.

Philosophy Smackdown provides a compelling and accessible introduction to philosophy, grounded in a passionate discussion of the history of professional wrestling. Despite some initial unevenness, the ideas are sharp and compelling. It provides a strong introduction to philosophical thought and uncovers the deep questions lying beneath the glossy veneer of professional wrestling.

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Laine, Eero. *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*.
Routledge, 2020. 148 pp. \$160.00/hdc

Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage is a short, well-researched academic book. Laine’s introduction makes clear the intended audience, “This book, then, intervenes in theatre studies to examine a century-old, embodied narrative form that extends from its local places of performance through globally mediated live events” (4). This book is of great relevance to theatre scholars, students of theatre and performance, as well as scholars in cultural studies, economics, and marketing. Professional wrestling here is examined as a publicly traded, transnational theater company. For Laine, “the logic of professional wrestling at the business level is not unlike any other commercial theatre” (21). Throughout the book, Laine looks behind the curtain to consider the economics—supply chains and institutions—necessary to stage a live performance that travels and circulates. Although Laine has many research questions, one that remains constant is: How can one circulate and sell something like a theatrical performance that is ephemeral and not replicable? (11).

Chapter One, “Productive Theatre and Professional Wrestling,” explains that professional wrestling functions within a theatrical business model where live events drive sales and profits. Laine draws on Marx’s *Theories of Surplus Value* to describe how professional wrestling is still “productive” even though it does not

always produce tangible goods (22). This chapter also offers an etymology of the concept “kayfabe,” which non-wrestling fans may find helpful.

In Chapter Two, “Form and Content,” Laine acknowledges sometimes professional wrestling content reinforces racist and sexist tropes. This chapter offers case studies of plays about professional wrestling such as *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* and *Trafford Tanzi*. These case studies help support the point that, despite professional wrestling’s potential to be critiqued, wrestling can also be something “...approaching progressive, left, feminist, and maybe even socialist politics” (55) to be commended as well.

In Chapter Three, “Hardcore Wrestling,” Laine presents an economic explanation for the rise of the hardcore wrestling style: international market forces and deregulation efforts that emerged in the late 1980s (63). Laine suggests the financial benefits of deregulation encouraged wrestling promoters to claim wrestling is entertainment (67). If professional wrestling was entertainment (and not sport), promoters paid less taxes and incurred less state oversight. By this logic, deregulation opened the door for more extreme stunts and human cost. For Laine, hardcore wrestling can thus be read as a violent application of the market economy with low wage workers taking on often extreme risks (69).

Chapter Four, “Trading Likenesses,” considers the material effects on pro wrestlers’ bodies, the legality of likenesses, and trademark law. Laine’s research on WWE trademarks highlights just how complicated it is to determine: where do rights to protect a WWE character begin and end? Ultimately, Laine concludes, “likenesses are just one way of codifying and monetizing the process and circulating the labor of the wrestler beyond the ring” (97). Although making substantive contributions, this chapter highlights one of the book’s greatest flaws (openly recognized by Laine): the lack of images. The book would greatly benefit from rights to use images that illustrate excessive, bloody injuries such as those central to what Mick Foley did as a performer.

Chapter Five, “Stock Theatre Company,” considers the impact of shareholders and public stock on WWE. For Laine, it is “a surprisingly traditional theatrical business model” (103). WWE hosts live events with audience interaction and special effects. WWE storylines are reliant on live events, the actions of spectators, and the connections between theatrical entertainment and finance. Laine observes storylines like the Vince McMahon Kiss My Ass Club demonstrate the impact of financial markets on the wrestling product—which sometimes play out in the ring itself (117). This chapter hints at what some may call a flaw of the book: the lack of attention to other wrestling companies. For me, he justifies his choice to focus on WWE sufficiently by explaining WWE is “the largest and

currently most profitable professional wrestling company,” (11) and has “with surprising consistency bought out or beat its competition” (103).

In the conclusion, like many who have come before him, Laine argues pro wrestling studies offers promises (and challenges) for interdisciplinary scholarship. He urges further archival research on professional wrestling. Laine remarks, “The field has not yet fully engaged, I think, with this massive trove of material” (126). The biggest takeaway of this chapter was Laine’s recommendation, “There is a lot of work to do in professional wrestling studies” (128).

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