



THE ORCA MIGHT EAT YOU

And Other Things Philosopher
Scott Kimbrough Wants You to Consider

By Owen Holmes | Photos by Walter Coker

Students at Jacksonville University are required to take Introduction to Philosophy. How quaint. If they get it with Scott Kimbrough, who chairs the division of humanities, the first thing they learn is

bullshit. No, really — the opening lecture is on the subject of bullshit, as in baloney. There are bullshit artists, and there are bullshit experts; fortunately for JU undergrads, Dr. Kimbrough is one of the latter.

Kimbrough didn't write the book "On Bullshit" — that volume, slim enough to be kept in one's pocket and consulted throughout the day, is by Harry Frankfurt, the unimprovably named American philosopher. Kimbrough has published an acclaimed critique of the book¹, however, in which he expands the definition of the term to include unintentional bullshit, contending that a person can bullshit without meaning to, and warns of "the particular danger of believing your own bullshit."

Of course, Kimbrough's Intro students are thrilled just to hear their professor say "bullshit." Repeatedly. (The current crop, judging by their snickering at the mere mention of homosexuality in a class two weeks ago, must have been in hysterics.) Come final exam, it's the topic they've retained best. Meta-ethics may or may not sink in, but bullshit sticks.

Traditionally and prohibitively academic, the field of philosophy could use a little repackaging, and in the case of Kimbrough's lecturing undergrads on bullshit, how better to do so than profanely. "I want to bring the idea of philosophy down to earth, instead of it being, 'Here are our hallowed philosophers before whom you should bow down,'" the professor says in his campus office, which is filled with books, sunlight, and artwork by Tonia, his wife of 21 years. Photos of their two kids are all over the place.

Kimbrough's aim of making philosophy accessible extends beyond the classroom, however, and into that other, less-hallowed hub of critical thinking, the barroom. With two like-minded JU colleagues, Kimbrough hosts a popular, long-running series of —

hang on — *philosophy slams*. Held monthly in unassuming bars in the urban core, the event offers students and everyone else a chance to engage scholars on topics ranging from "Is That Art?" and "Is Plastic Surgery Fake?" to Kimbrough's own — spread the word — "The Structure and Function of Bullshit." No hallowed-philosophers bowing-down here.

For Kimbrough, engaging in philosophical exercise — and inviting people to crawl in off the streets to help with the job — is a matter of social progress. It's not only how he's helping make philosophy more accessible, but also why he wants to in the first place. "We filter between things that are serious and things that are bullshit because we have only so much time and attention," he says. "So it actually matters how one distinguishes bullshit from serious discussion." Referring to the broader, more encompassing definition of bullshit he proposes in his Frankfurt critique, he adds, "The way I go about it makes it harder because you can't just

¹ "On Letting It Slide," Chapter 1 of the collection "Bullshit and Philosophy," Open Court Press, 2006.



ask yourself, 'Am I being sincere?' We don't get at truth just by being sincere."

Tell it to Shamu. Kimbrough saw the SeaWorld production on a family trip a couple years ago and recognized a popular theme: Believe in yourself and you'll achieve your wildest dreams; go ahead and jump in the pool with the predatory beast. It's the kind of pervasive, well, bullshit that philosophy empowers people to sniff out, he says. In the case of swimming with Shamu, it doesn't matter how sure you are of yourself — all possible outcomes must be considered. For instance, he observes, "The orca might eat you."

Can a "philosophy slam" possibly be sufferable? If the guy at the City Council meeting — or, hell, calling into "First Coast Connect" — can't be trusted to keep his comments succinct and pertinent, how about when the subject is philosophy? "There are people who say nutty stuff," Kimbrough confides, "but that's part of the fun of the event — someone's going to say something a little loopy, and then the speaker does what they can with it."

And so on a recent Tuesday at Jackson's Grill in Riverside, several dozen people crowd around a small corner stage, on which a drum kit, evidently belonging to "Oyster Knife," is set up for later. In time for Valentine's Day, the theme of tonight's slam is "What Is Love?" Beats me. Some participants hit the bar for philosophical lubrication; others remain dangerously sober. Only one person is wearing a turtleneck.

Kimbrough, who is 43, has a nice if slight build and dark, closely cropped hair with inoffensive sideburns. His brown eyes always appear — no metaphor too easy — wide open. Tonight he keeps an arm around Tonia, who writes and edits copy for marketing publications and, when it comes to her husband's philosophical musings, offers a vital layperson's perspective. When talking philosophy, Kimbrough is puckish, liable to burst into laughter at any moment. I've heard him call a passage of Hume "hilarious."

A native of Abilene, Texas, which has been rated the second-most progressive — sorry — conservative city in America, Kimbrough honed early philosophical skills as a tyke on the playground: "You gotta understand where other people are coming from when you're the little guy, you know?" (I know.) Then, seeking extra credit in a high-school world-lit class, he stumbled upon "Being and Nothingness," a Sartre tome that makes "Nausea" look like "Goodnight Moon."

Perversely, the existentialist jargon excited him. "It kind of hooked me in

that way, and — part of this is coming from West Texas — I kept thinking if I could catch up to what these people are doing, then I'll figure out what the answers are," he recalls. "What I learned, and what partly informs how I go about philosophy now, is that people build these complicated systems, and they can be good for this or that, but what philosophy is really about is seeing the limits of systems. I think that's where its real value is, because in politics and other parts of life, people tend to have their one little framework they can look at things through. They need to have the skills to see the limits of that framework. [Philosophy] enables you to have a firm footing but still see it from this way, from that way, and I think the world would be a much better place if people were better able to do that."

To that end, Kimbrough, Bold City brew in hand, introduces the slam's guest speaker, FSCJ's Carl Colavito, calling him "a Socratic kind of guy." He is also bald, bearded and exudes a level of serenity otherwise seen only in Operating Thetans. He takes the stage and begins the discussion by leading the audience in singing the '90s dance-club refrain, "What is love? / Baby, don't hurt me / don't hurt me no more." Socratic, all right.

We're not just *talking* about love tonight, Colavito insists — we're out to define the term once and for all. Again with the defining. Over the next hour-and-a-half, slammers take turns saying

what they think love is, or isn't. Colavito engages each contributor; the philosophical ping-pong is no more or less aggressive than the actual game being played on a table across the room. The dialogue is perfectly sensible — perhaps a little too so when a middle-aged woman, whose bottle of wine is empty, shouts from her table, "You tell people you love them so they'll have sex with you." In a spirit of moderation, Kimbrough steps in to share William Ian Miller's heartwarming definition of love, "the suspension of disgust." Later, a student quotes Jane Austen's "There are as many forms of love as there are moments in time," which complicates our goal of settling on a single definition for the ages. A cook yells "order up" from the kitchen. A Galaga machine bloop.

Regrettably, the evening's most serviceable definition of love is kept private — Kimbrough turns to me with a highly accessible Magnetic Fields reference: "If you don't cry, it isn't love." When's the next slam?



Kimbrough has in the past performed philosophically inclined stand-up comedy at Springfield's Three Layers Café but refused to give Folio Weekly the tapes.



Carl Colavito (top left) leads a Socratic probe of the topic of love. Kimbrough (right) says engaging in philosophical discussion is a matter of social progress.



Damon Phillips (right), president of JU's philosophy club, recently led a forum on gun rights. "Philosophy isn't just for philosophers," he says.

Viewing Nazis as evil feels like a fair thing to do. Not so fast, says Kimbrough. As part of the traveling exhibit "Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race," which was recently featured at Jacksonville's Main Library and included lectures at local campuses, JU's philosophy department explored "Complicity and Resistance in a Controlled Society" — how and why people either go along with or find the strength to resist an established order.

Kimbrough, who somehow isn't an alcoholic, spoke on "The Capacity for Evil," a topic often probed from the victim's viewpoint, but rarely from the side of the evildoer. Taking this tack stems from having "had it pretty easy" in his own life, he explains. "I'm more interested in the perpetrators than the victims, but on the level of understanding where that kind of thing comes from," he says, referring to otherwise-decent people's enabling the Holocaust. "When you see how many people do things like that, you have to start to ask about yourself. It comes back around to understanding yourself. Obviously I've been lucky in not ever having to face a situation like that on either end, but you kind of wonder, what would you do? What if something like that comes up?"

Deeming an opposing group inherently evil, no matter how heinous their crimes, is precisely what allows the original party to fulfill its capacity for evil, Kimbrough argues. The solution is to be "very wary of our own psychological tendencies" — to resist the temptation to caricature those with opposing views, and realize "we're at our worst when we're most convinced of the evil and inhumanity of our opponents," even Nazi eugenicists.

"Once you paint the other as 'evil,' then they deserve whatever is coming to them," he says, pointing to the vitriol of current political discourse. "[But] maybe you're not living up to the best standards yourself."

Such questions of moral psychology have weighed foremost on Kimbrough's mind — he's teaching an upper-level class on the subject. On a Tuesday morning in February, a small group of students parsed the raging battle between virtue ethicists, who believe a person makes moral decisions based on his or

her character, and situationists, who believe one's course of action depends on the situation at hand. One of the debating students, situationist-leaning Kasey Sousa, decided to major in philosophy only after taking the requisite Intro course with Kimbrough, saying of the professor, "He's absurdly enthusiastic about the philosophical process."

So are his kids, apparently. On their days off from school, Kimbrough recruits Emi, 11, and Cal, 8, to help instruct university students in the ways of philosophy. The duo's lecture topics have included Descartes's Theory of Actions and Passions, "semantics of the quantifiers in formal predicate logic" and, adorably, Darwinian evolution, slideshow and all. (Asked if this draws pushback from the creationist camp, Kimbrough says, "For the most part, the people who are super closed-minded about it will just be quiet because they've already conceptualized me as the heir of Satan.") If his students grasp the concepts, great, and if they don't, even better. As he tells a recent Intro class — which, at the rooster-crowning hour of 10:30 a.m., seems on balance half-awake — "Everyone is confused? Good, that means you're making progress." Throw the book across the room, expand your mind.

Kimbrough isn't the only local academic pushing the limits of his discipline, of course, but he still seems anomalous in Northeast Florida. In fact, how he identifies himself professionally depends on with whom he's speaking. "If I'm feeling mischievous, I introduce myself as a philosopher. Otherwise, I say 'philosophy professor.' Or just 'professor,' and then they say, 'In what?,' and I tell them, and that usually stops them short."

He may want to also introduce himself as a terrible person, at least in Platonic terms, which dictate that a good person is one whose reason controls his appetite. If the measure is coffee consumption, Kimbrough admits he doesn't make the cut. "I judge it would be rationally best to have less, but I like the feel of my cup, so I keep going," he tells me in his office, where he keeps an overworked four-cup pot. I ask what kind of coffee we're drinking and, after he tells me, mention playfully that I thought I'd detected that blend's earthy notes. "I like earthiness," he responds. Earthiness — the opposite of bullshit. Either that, or its direct descendant. □

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