Westworld and Philosophy: Mind Equals Blown

Robert J. Creedon


WESTWORLD is an HBO series that goes beyond the Westworld (1973) and Futureworld (1976) movies and the short-lived Westworld (1980) TV series with their format of sex and violence over strong writing. We see the evolution of AI to the emergence of a new species by the end of the first season. This series is rich with philosophical concepts with episode titles like “The Bicameral Mind” and “Dissonance Theory” as well as its intertextual elements, notably its many Shakespearean references. Such a series screams out to be included in the Popular Culture and Philosophy series.

As I prepared for this review, I wrote a list of the topics to expect while watching the series and waiting for the book to arrive. This is volume 122, which makes it the ninth I have read. This volume didn’t disappoint as it covers all the topics I expected from the Westworld series and previous volumes of this philosophy series. The chapters were well-written and edited to be clear and concise within their standard 10 page format. Each addresses classical and modern philosophy as reflected in the actions and dialogue of the Westworld characters. The book is an easy read and employs an effective and distinct formula of introducing a concept in each chapter and exploring it in relation to the series. This formula is a great aid for teaching and provides with each chapter the basis of a good lesson. Furthermore, the ten-page essays can provide students with bite size lessons that make reading more enjoyable and palatable.

The first half of the book focuses on the first season primarily. The first six chapters delve directly into the concepts of identity, self-awareness and shared reality that are the essential to any discussion of AI. While there are a couple of minor editing errors, the writing and the arguments remain clear. These chapters cover in detail the familiar topics I expected to see addressed and are extremely well done. However, the chapter on evil, “When Bad Things Happen to Good Hosts (and Good Things
to Bad Guests),” is confusing, as the chapter does not provide bridging support between the concepts of Susan Neiman and the concept of evil. The writer seems to want readers to discover the connection on their own, without the guidance that the earlier chapters provide. This technique doesn’t work well in this format and is very jarring to readers who have bought into the format of previous chapters. It is very unclear whether this is an editing or a writing issue as the chapter seems to have missing information.

The chapter “Justice or Pleasure” changes things up delightfully, as it dives into the world of Westworld by relating it to the 1980 Westworld TV series. The chapter “Just Desserts or Just Rebellion” provides an insightful treatment of the just war philosophical argument. It is especially valuable, as Westworld is not a grand epic war but instead explores conflict on a smaller scale, offering a useful venue for discussing themes of war, rebellion and revolution in grittier environments and situations. This deeper look at the conflict as explored in the series will be a highlight to anyone interested in military science fiction, fiction or nonfiction. The rest of the book explores newer ideas, including the significance of the Hosts as Simulacra in relation to the concept of slavery. The final few chapters expand on the format with topics not often seen in the series. Although it felt like everything is covered earlier, these later chapters are a wonderful surprise with these enlightening unique treatments of those concepts.

This volume is a great read for anyone who has followed this HBO series, as it goes beneath the action to explore the ideas and issues raised as the characters evolve. It is clear that all the individual writers did their homework and reviewed some of the interviews with the cast and creators to delve deeper into their concepts before writing. This book would be useful for for any first year philosophy or drama/writing student to explore how the show addresses concepts of consciousness, free will, and the mechanics of change. It carries readers beyond HBO’s ‘sexposition’ form of storytelling to get to the real adult content of thoughts, ideas and concepts. The ten-page chapter format makes these chapters great ways of introducing larger concepts, providing common ground for readers who lack expertise in philosophy. The majority of the chapter writers have used the formula effectively and crafted essays that provide useful lessons. One of the basic theories of learning is to relate new ideas to previous knowledge; these chapters do so effectively, thereby creating or improving understanding for all readers, whether scholars or new learners,
though the book is more useful for such novices. Most chapters could be used in a classroom setting above grade 11, although the show content is adult. This book covers large concepts such as self-identity, person versus non-person, pain creating change, freedom of choice, ability to have self-knowledge, just wars, and shared reality. Different chapters could therefore be useful across a wide range of classes and disciplines.

For anyone who is truly interested in philosophy, science fiction, writing or the Westworld TV series specifically, this is a great book for studying philosophical concepts. This is one of the strongest of the books I have read in this series; it will go on my shelves prized not only for the clarity of its chapters but also for the clarity it has brought to me after reading them. This volume is an excellent first step into this series.