Welcome to the world of tomorrow!

—Terry, "Space Pilot 3000"

_Futurama_ as a series is obsessed with the theme of time. The foundation of the series is based upon the implicit relationship between identity and time. The phrase Fry first encounters when he awakes from his thousand-year slumber—“Welcome to the world of tomorrow. . . . Come, your destiny awaits”—is emblematic of this fact, in that it makes the assumption that Fry is who he once was and still is that person. Take note, however, that for Fry those thousand years aren’t experienced at all, to him they are completely blank.

Themes regarding the relationship between the passage of time and the role consciousness plays in time’s passing are presented throughout the series. In one of my favorite scenes to date, Fry nonchalantly rescues the attendees of an art exhibition from a fire about to engulf them all (“Three Hundred Big Boys,” Season Four). Fry achieves his cool and calm composure as a result of consuming one hundred cups of coffee, which is just enough to endow him with superhuman abilities, thus enabling him to quickly escort everyone out of the building unharmed.

What’s most interesting about this scene isn’t Fry’s super-speed, but the two perspectives of events with which we’re
presented. The first perspective is Fry’s own experience of what occurs. With Fry we can follow precisely the trajectory of a cork popping from a bottle, or trace the flapping wings of a hummingbird in flight. The second perspective is that of a third-person perspective; from this view things are a blur, a “mysterious orange blur” to be precise, in which nobody has any knowledge of Fry’s heroism, besides Fry himself.

An example of the same phenomenon comes from the Season Three episode “Time Keeps on Slippin’,” in which the Earth is subjected to intervals of global “time skips”—produced by chronotons, of course! Although time seems to pass and happenings of various kinds occur, the characters can’t recollect the events taking place within these skips. Professor Farnsworth observes: “Interesting. It’s as if we all behave normally during the time skips but then we have no memory of it.”

What’s most interesting in these examples are the breaks in experience. They seem to contradict normal human experience in which time, as an essential feature for making sense of the world, progresses from one event to the next. For instance, the time it takes for me to ponder time skips, to the time it takes for me to get naked and participate in a conga line is understandable because both have a linking of moments that allow me to make sense of them. However, if I can’t remember the linkage, then I’m unable to make sense of how both events fit together. To me and the Planet Express gang, us doing the conga naked is immediate and unexplainable. What I’m missing is the essential time linkage that explains the occurrence of Hermes’s and the gang’s impressive naked-conga skills. With the help of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophy, we can come to a better understanding and, perhaps, resolution of the riddles presented by Futurama.

**I Exist but I Don’t Know It**

Hegel wrote a great deal on consciousness in relation to time, and these writings continue to generate much contention among philosophers. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel
Hegel and the Phenomenology of Futurama

introduces his idea of consciousness as a process of division between two objects in no time at all, similar to the crazy conga line example above. As Hegel puts it,

Consciousness simultaneously distinguishes itself from something, and at the same time relates itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists for consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this relating is knowing. (Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 52)

Simply put, relating is always an essential part of consciousness, and, in turn, consciousness is always knowledge—simple, right?! Hegel’s concept of Identity lies within this description of consciousness as simply the unity present in the relation of a subject (you, the experiencer) to an object (the thing being experienced). We call this consciousness. Consciousness, for Hegel, then is simply knowledge. This may seem contrary to how we commonly refer to knowledge. We usually think of knowledge in terms of statements. For instance, I know that the creator of Futurama is Matt Groening and David X. Cohen. For Hegel, however, knowledge just is what we are conscious of. We can’t question it, we can’t confirm it, nor can we deny it—it just is.

In his Meditations on First Philosophy, René Descartes famously deduces his existence from his ability to be a conscious thinking thing—hence, his famous postulation “I think therefore I am.” Hegel sees Descartes’s deduction as problematic because it wrongly postulates the existence of something that’s not actually there. For Hegel, we shouldn’t infer the existence of an “I”—as a separate thinking entity. Instead, consciousness simply exists, and the apparent existence of a separate “I” is the result of its functioning. In other words, it feels as if there’s something existing above and beyond my experience of the world, but consciousness is simply the way we take the world to be. According to Hegel, the nature of consciousness is to split and unite an experiencer and a thing being experienced, which is why there seems to be a separate thinking entity. If Hegel is correct, then the “strange” time skips that occur in the episodes mentioned
above are in fact representative of how consciousness actually works.

To make sure Hegel’s unity of consciousness makes sense, think about picking up your box-set of *Futurama* DVDs. You, the conscious being you are, simply gets up, walks across the room, and picks up the box. If you describe your actions to others, you would say: “I did this and I did that.” But what and where is the “I”? It’s not as though something other than yourself—the conscious thinking being—is doing something. It’s just you. There’s no “I” apart from consciousness. Consciousness simply uses the mechanism of relating the subject (you as “I”) to the object (the box-set), which creates the illusion of a separate “I.”

To help further explain why we think there’s an “I,” imagine the following. If I change my focus from the box-set to the second disc of said box-set, then to the laptop I’m about to insert the disc into, at each moment in time I duplicate the “here” and “there” of myself and the separate objects. Throughout the process I have a here¹, here², here³ (all the way to infinity) that’s always in relation to the objects. Consciousness is such that I combine this repetition into the concept of an “I.” It’s this feature of consciousness that will help us make sense of the time-skips of *Futurama*.

**To the Bend of the Universe! The Beginning Is the End**

If you’re still not convinced, think about Season Six’s “The Late Philip J. Fry.” Take U to signify Universe. Now, if we assume that the multiple universes in the episode are the same, as is suggested, then U₁, U₂ (not the band), and U₃ all share the same attributes—the same suns and Slurm Worms, rocks and rivers, mammals and mountains—in their deepest and darkest regions, from the Earth to Omicron Persei 8, they’re identical.

If we were to stand back and view each of them in succession, as we do when we watch the episode, each of the universes is equal to the following extremely straightforward
Hegel and the Phenomenology of Futurama

equation: \( U_1 = U_2 = U_3 = U_4 \ldots \) Because every universe is completely invariant in terms of its attributes and properties, their differences as wholes collapse. The difference between \( U_1 \) and \( U_{84,587} \) would be no difference at all. If this is the case, we can strip each universe of its numerical value. Because they’re all identical, we can’t legitimately claim \( U_1 \) to be the first, the fifth, or the last—they’re all the same! The numbers we assign the universes are fictions we add onto the account, but logically they don’t make sense, because they don’t denote anything different—again, they’re all the same! Hegel shows us that the same thing happens in consciousness. It’s just that we’re more intimately tied to our experiences, and so, combining them into a single unified “I” is much easier.

I Am Knowledge, Please Insert Experience

We’ve finally got to the point where we can make sense of our initial examples of gaps in experience; time skips on one side and Fry’s super-speed on the other.

In the case of the time skips, we’re missing the interior or immanent appearance of the event. For this reason, the skips become external to the normal characterization of consciousness. Even though Hegel shows us consciousness operates in a similar manner to these skips, the skips in Futurama seem abnormal because we try to relate them to absent events. In other words, these time skips bother us because we don’t know what went on within them. However, as Hegel illustrates, we experience time skips all of the time via our consciousness; we’re just used to it. If our conscious experience was spread out more, like the time skips seen in Futurama, we wouldn’t find them abnormal. We would be used to them, as we’re currently used to the gaps in our own consciousness.

As for the other example, Fry’s experience is aided by the hundred coffees, which give him an enhanced consciousness. He has full knowledge of the events taking place in the soon-
to-be-engulfed gallery. Everyone else experiences a set of
gaps as Fry saves them—at one moment they’re inside the
gallery, the next they’re outside. Like the previous case of
time skips, everyone besides Fry is aware of a gap in experi-
ence. Fry shows us that they don’t actually lack the experi-
ence of being saved; they just experience it much faster than
usual. Their consciousness is simply slower, so to speak, than
Fry’s. If they were to experience such gaps over a period of
time, their consciousness would become used to it and they
would cease to notice the gaps. So, just like the time skips,
Hegel shows us that the example of the party goers’ gaps is
representative of our conscious experience of the world—
we’re just used to our “speed” of existence.

So, we began by looking at some abnormal examples of
experience that exist in the world of Futurama. With the
help of Hegel we see that such examples aren’t that strange
after all. They’re, in fact, representative of natural human
conscious experience. Now that you’re aware of how con-
sciousness actually works, what do you plan on doing to test
this new knowledge? Maybe you will use chronotons to cre-
ate mutant atomic supermen, or drink a hundred cups of cof-
fee? Or maybe you’ll reflect on the many gaps in your own
experience. Of my slumber before I wake, is this not a gap?
Of my not noticing Nibbler’s shadow in the cryogenics lab in
the first ever episode (go ahead and look for it if you have
never noticed it), is this not a gap also? There are gaps every-
where in experience, emanating from the most fundamental
levels of life. We’re just so good at tying them all together (at
least most of the time) that we don’t notice or question them.
For instance, I don’t question the existence of the ground as
I step upon it, nor do I normally question the existence of the
stars that I gaze upon. In the same way, I don’t question the
existence of my “I” as I experience each conscious event—
that would be one hell of a laborious journey . . . or maybe a
journey that never begins at all.
Good news everyone! A billion years late and right on time, here’s Futurama and Philosophy. Now at last you can activate your pleasure unit by jacking on to the universe’s deep thought generator! This may be counter-indicated by your operations manual and denounced by Fathers Against Rude Television but at least it won’t make you your own grandfather. And according to the Hypnotoad... ALL GLORY TO THE HYPNOTOAD!

“A lot of people consume their entertainment like mindless animals, bestially guzzling down whatever is blasted at them, but not the authors of Futurama and Philosophy. Instead they have chosen to give viewers the opportunity to reflect upon their favorite animated television show about robots and crab monsters and mutants, and then use it as a tool for becoming more autonomous, free, rational beings. Good for them!”

—ERIC KAPLAN, former writer for Futurama, writer and producer for The Big Bang Theory, creator of Love Me Cat, and author of the forthcoming Does Santa Exist? A Careful Philosophical Investigation

“Who knew such a fun show could be this smart? With vivid context and just the right amount of humor, the authors of Futurama and Philosophy masterfully deploy the insights of classic and contemporary philosophy to illuminate issues raised by the show. I look forward to using Futurama and Philosophy in the classroom—and simply reading it with my kids for fun.”

—MATT DEATON, philosophy professor, Ethics Bowl organizer, and author of The Best Public Speaking Book

“I was hooked on Futurama the first time I saw Nixon’s head in a jar, not only because it was funny as hell, but it got me to thinking about the so-called brain-in-a-vat experiment. From then on, I started looking for philosophical themes in Futurama, and I was pleasantly surprised to find them everywhere I looked. You don’t need to be Professor Farnsworth to hail Futurama and Philosophy as good news!”

—ROBERT ARP, co-author of What’s Good on TV: Teaching Ethics through Television

“Funny, intelligent, insightful, and deeply geeky, Futurama and Philosophy is a must-have for any fan of the show with an interest in the universe around them. Twenty-four philosophers explore the notions of freedom, morality, personal identity, the meaning of life and death, and much more in the company of the Planet Express crew.”

—GREG LITTMANN, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville


SHAUN P. YOUNG is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Manager for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of Toronto. He edited Jeopardy! and Philosophy: What Is Knowledge in the Form of a Question? (2012) and wrote Beyond Rawls (2002).