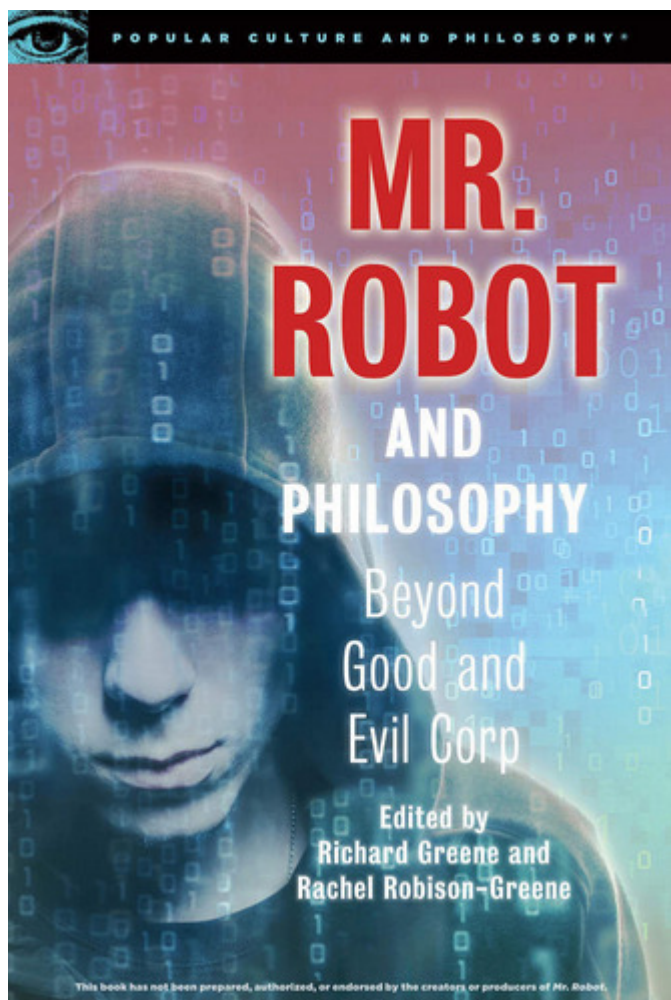


# INNOVATIVE & IMPRESSIVE 'Mr. Robot' fans need to read this

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*"Mr. Robot and Philosophy: Beyond Good and Evil Corp."* edited by Richard Greene and Rachel Robison-Greene. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2017, 256 pages, \$19.95.



"If you wrestle with monsters, take care you don't become a monster yourself. Keep staring into the abyss and the abyss will stare right back into you." – Friedrich Nietzsche.

In many ways, this quote, which is found at the beginning of "Mr. Robot and Philosophy: Beyond Good and Evil Corp.," the new book co-edited by Richard Greene and Rachel Robison-Greene, perfectly encapsulates both the appeal and the significance of the critically acclaimed drama on USA Network. The show has been a commercial as well as a critical success since it debuted in 2015, and fans were recently notified that the series has been renewed for a fourth season.

"Mr. Robot" is innovative on many levels. Just like the proverbial "real world," very seldom can anything in the narrative be taken at face value. Sam Esmail, the creator and chief architect of the series, knows his subject matter intimately. He strives for accuracy in virtually every detail associated with producing the complex and often deceptively multi-layered plot lines that continually intertwine as the action unfolds week after week. When computer screens are shown on camera, for example, a lot of effort goes into

making the displays as realistic as possible. The code depicted often features real commands and execution sequences that emulate the interactions most of us have with our devices on a daily basis – although much of this occurs behind the scenes for a majority of users.

As alluded to in the title, the book is heavy on the deep philosophical implications that inherently stem from the proceedings that are constantly unfolding on "Mr. Robot." Without spoiling it for those who may have not yet been introduced to this wonderfully written series, a massive hack that threatens to take down the global financial system serves as the pivotal incident that precipitates most of the self-reflection and angst that characterize the main protagonists.

But as history has repeatedly demonstrated, unanticipated events and the unintended consequences they precipitate often interject themselves at the most inopportune moments. The dystopian universe in

which “Mr. Robot” takes place is eerily similar to what most of us experience in our daily lives, which speaks to the universal themes that have dominated human culture since we first began to use language to express our thoughts and feelings. The rise of the digital era, however, has renewed and reinvigorated many of these age-old debates and cast them in an entirely new light. Technological innovation has always been both a blessing and a curse. Take the concept of “power” for instance. A question that surfaces again and again is “who actually has the power?” Heidi Samuelson, a visiting assistant professor of philosophy at Sweet Briar College in Virginia, has some interesting and enlightening things to say about this in the sixth chapter “Who Has the Power?”

“What Phillip Price (the chief executive of E-Corp., a large multinational corporation central to ‘Mr. Robot’) fails to recognize is that the people at the head of these institutions that operate with disciplinary power don’t really matter,” Samuelson writes. “Power operates through E Corp. and their products, which infiltrate people’s lives to the point of their dependence on them. Power is in the act of hacking anonymously that causes social disruption. Power is in the surveillance that anyone can perform. Power is what makes you feel like you’re being watched. Power is in the health industry and in the way our body interacts with the world. Power is an operation and a relation that permeates our lives and the social institutions we rely on in immeasurable ways. Power itself doesn’t really exist independently of these processes. So long as we are in a disciplinary regime, power isn’t something that anyone can possess.”

“Mr. Robot” is Volume 109 in the “Popular Culture and Philosophy” series; it consists of 19 chapters arranged in seven major sections: “We’re All Living in Each Other’s Paranoia,” “Control is an Illusion,” “They All Think I’m the Ringleader,” “Politics is for Puppets,” “Power Belongs to the People Who Take It” and “Is Any of It Real?” Each chapter is authored by someone with an interest in philosophy – generally a faculty member who teaches the subject or a graduate student who is majoring in it. I was impressed by the international flavor represented by those selected to contribute to the book; the finished product is obviously the result of a global collaborative effort by those who follow the show religiously.

The eighth chapter, “Mr. Robot, Mad Son of Noir,” is undoubtedly one of my favorites. Written by Christopher Hoyt, a software engineer from Chicago who currently teaches philosophy at Western Carolina University, the essay views the series through the lens of the classic “film noir” perspective; a genre and school of thought that had its genesis around the time of World War II. I was particularly intrigued by Hoyt’s interpretation of the feelings and behaviors of the characters who populate “Mr. Robot,” especially since I am somewhat familiar with the framework he uses to critically dissect the storyline. It was the author’s references to similar theatrical productions, however, that really piqued my interest.

“Sam Esmail has said that a chief source of inspiration for ‘Mr. Robot’ was ‘Fight Club,’ the 1999 David Fincher neo-noir picture about another anarchist collective, Project Mayhem, which, like fsociety, is committed to a violent rebellion against crony capitalism,” Hoyt explains. “In ‘Fight Club,’ as in ‘Mr. Robot,’ the narrator loses his mind in his fight against the world. Like Elliot, the nameless narrator of ‘Fight Club’ suffers what psychologists call ‘dissociative identity disorder,’ a condition in which the mind fragments and the core self attributes certain of its own thoughts, feelings, and actions to another person or persons. Modern life is just too much for him.”

If you are addicted to the saga that revolves around a conflicted hacker and would-be revolutionary Elliot Alderson – and you have found yourself wondering “what does it all mean?” – then this is a book you really need to add to your reading list. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.