

Editorial Introduction to Special Issue on Kevin Hart

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I recently had a conversation with a friend and colleague of mine who is the father of four young children. He and I were discussing how difficult it is to help our children make the jump between two crucially important texts in our own youthful imaginative development: from C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. During this conversation, he remarked that it was truly amazing that Lewis had not only written the books for which he is so culturally famous (his apologetic and fictional works) but also had published some still widely used and cited works in his own area of academic study. The amazing thing is that Lewis was able to cross both of these audiences without a loss of rigor (though rigor certainly gets understood differently in *The Discarded Image*, say, than it does in *The Great Divorce*, for example).

In an age of increasing academic specialization in which scholars are unable to speak to anyone except other scholars who also work in the same specializations, it is remarkable to consider the possibility that genuine intellectuals might be most effective in their academic identity when they are able to speak beyond an audience that shares that academic identity with them. In a 'post-truth' world in which Donald Trump stands as a threat to the evidenced-based inquiry to which the academy is committed, and in which many legislatures are consistently cutting funds from the arts and humanities in favor of those disciplines that are supposedly better at training students for jobs (without ever asking about why work matters and what jobs should exist, etc.), it is important to realize that the stakes of academic work are high indeed. But, unless academics find ways to speak to different disciplines, different audiences, and in different mediums, we risk impaling ourselves on the sword of our own narrow self-importance. Hence, it is unclear whether the cultural tide can be turned back toward a concern for the value of slowness in thought and nuance in speech—both of which are more likely today to be viewed as political liabilities than as existential virtues.

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It is in this general context that the importance of Kevin Hart's complicated and diverse authorship should be considered. Hart is certainly not best understood as a 'public intellectual' in the sense of primarily writing non-technical essays for a popular audience. In fact, his academic work is consistently difficult for many simply due to the depth of his analysis and the scope of his historical appreciation. However, he absolutely exemplifies the basic traits that my colleague and I found so important about C.S. Lewis. Namely, Hart is not constrained by the particular workings of an academic discipline. Instead, he is an internationally recognized poet, an important constructive Christian theologian, a careful phenomenological philosopher, a detailed historian, a popular and engaging speaker, and someone who is always original and provocative in both thought and speech. Accordingly, we might say that Hart is a 'public intellectual' in the sense that he is always engaging a variety of 'publics,' as it were, that are otherwise too often narrowly and rigidly separated from each other.

This special issue focusing on Kevin Hart's work is a result of two main things. First, in 2014, Indiana University Press published Hart's *Kingdoms of God*, which is a profound and sweeping text of relevance to Christian theology and phenomenological philosophy. Second, in 2015, the Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology (SCPT) held a meeting in conjunction with the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy that featured a panel of scholars from different disciplines all engaging Hart's book. The essays in this issue are revised and expanded versions of those essays presented at that SCPT meeting. Although attempting to raise awareness about the importance of *Kingdoms of God* as a seminal contemporary work, this journal issue is not merely a book review symposium. Instead, it is meant as a multifaceted and substantive engagement with Kevin Hart's overall authorship as a key resource for some of the most important issues of contemporary concern within philosophy, theology, literature, and the arts more broadly. As several of the contributors suggest, however, these academic concerns are not limited only to academic application. Instead, thinking well about the relationship of philosophy and theology, different modes of expression, various styles of argumentation, the moral implications of the example of Jesus, and the way identity is formed in relationship to interpretive frames, are all of utmost importance to social and political existence more broadly. Indeed, when truth is most threatened, thinking well is most required. When social discourse risks becoming not much more than dismissive mockery of those with whom you disagree, carefully interrogating how to say something in a particular way in relation to a specific audience is not merely an academic exercise, but rather becomes a social necessity. Engaging Kevin Hart's work invites us toward patiently developing such virtues.

The essays in this issue move from the specific to the general as follows. First, Tamsin Jones offers a careful reading of Hart's *Kingdoms of God* in which she interrogates who might get forgotten in theological explorations that are seemingly concerned about the oppressed and marginalized. Subsequently, Bradley B. Onishi and J. Aaron Simmons both engage meta-philosophical questions about the status of disciplinary inquiry in philosophy and theology (especially regarding a phenomenological approach to both). Next, B. Keith Putt shifts registers and considers Hart's work as concerns the complicated boundary between philosophy/theology, on the one hand, and poetry, on the other hand. Bruce Ellis Benson rounds out the engagements with Hart by moving away from *Kingdoms of God*, specifically, in order to provide a

possible account of ‘the kingdom’ as a more general category toward which one might be existentially oriented. Finally, Kevin Hart offers an overarching response to these scholarly engagements in a way that is much more than a point by point rejoinder to the criticisms that have been offered. Instead, Hart provides an original essay that does not simply repeat what he has done in his previous books, but rather lays out the stakes of why it is important to continue to do what he is doing. Hart’s essay brings clarity and substance to issues that might otherwise get missed in his longer texts. In doing so, even here in this special journal issue, Hart demonstrates a remarkable ability to speak in such a way that new conversation partners are invited to the discursive table without intellectual rigor being compromised along the way.

In some ways, the conversation that emerges in this special issue is a performative example of what it looks like to inhabit a model of engagement whereby hospitality and charity do not preclude criticism—and where criticism need not foster either dismissive apathy or outright enmity. Perhaps this is minimally what working toward the Kingdom of God requires of us all—whether as philosophers, theologians, poets, artists, citizens, or merely as individuals in relation to each other.