

The “disembodied thought” paradox in AI and the quantum computer model of the computational unconscious: what future?

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Abstract: This essay explores the philosophical and anthropological dimensions of the TV series *Rick and Morty*, created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland. Drawing from Umberto Eco's insights into mass and popular culture, this analysis investigates the series as a reflective lens that magnifies and interrogates key phenomena of contemporary society. Employing a pop-philosophical framework inspired by Eco's semiotic approach, the study seeks to extend the boundaries of traditional scholarly inquiry by examining the latent meanings embedded within a work of mainstream entertainment. The central hypothesis posits that, as Eco argued, it is both possible and meaningful to uncover layers of significance in cultural products, particularly those aimed at a broad and diverse audience. This analysis foregrounds the interpretive agency of viewers, emphasising their hermeneutic engagement with the series. By merging entertainment with conceptual reflection, *Rick and Morty* exemplifies how television can facilitate understanding of both present and past human experiences, thereby claiming a philosophically relevant role in contemporary life. Through its investigation, this essay elucidates the worldview and human experience articulated in the series' key narratives. It argues that *Rick and Morty* not only reflects major cultural phenomena — such as nihilism, existential multitasking, and cultural remixing or hybridisation — but also reimagines and amplifies these elements. In doing so, the series emerges as a potent cultural artifact that mirrors, critiques, and reconfigures the Zeitgeist.

Keywords: Tv series; *Rick and Morty*; Umberto Eco, pop-philosophy.

1. Introduction

Umberto Eco's research has been profoundly influential for scholars exploring pop-philosophy in Italy, offering a framework that challenges traditional distinctions between so-called “high” and “low” culture. Eco's work underscores the intrinsic value of all cultural artifacts, from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the latest viral internet meme, as meaningful starting points for reflecting on the world. This perspective has reshaped intellectual discourse, fostering a sense of freedom and openness among philosophers and scholars alike.

Building on this foundation, this essay examines one of the most culturally and philosophically significant television series of recent years: *Rick and Morty*. This series, with its layered narratives and existential themes, exemplifies the intersection of entertainment and philosophical inquiry, offering fertile ground for analysing how popular media influences and reflects the viewer's understanding of the human experience.



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2. What is *Rick and Morty* about?

Created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland and first broadcast in 2013, *Rick and Morty* follows the adventures of Rick Sanchez, an eccentric, alcoholic, and brilliant scientist, and his grandson, Morty Smith. From its title alone, the series evokes the iconic duo of Doc and Marty from the 1980s cult classic *Back to the Future*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, signalling its roots in science fiction while setting the stage for its unique reinterpretation of the genre.

Categorising *Rick and Morty* within a single genre proves challenging. Harmon and Roiland distinguish themselves through their relentless experimentation, incorporating intertextual references, breaking the fourth wall, and employing metanarrative techniques that hybridise multiple genres.

This creative ambition results in a truly unique work, driven by authors willing to take risks and defy audience expectations by consistently avoiding repetition and venturing into uncharted narrative territory. Despite its genre-defying nature, the series is fundamentally anchored in science fiction. The protagonists' escapades often unfold on distant planets, alternate dimensions, or within virtual realities populated by alien creatures, advanced technologies, and existential dilemmas.

However, these are merely the springboards for deeply thought-provoking stories that blend elements of cosmic horror, comedy, tragedy, and action. The series' penchant for genre contamination also manifests through its satirical treatment of tropes and homages to diverse cultural sources, ranging from Japanese anime to the works of directors such as David Cronenberg, Christopher Nolan, and M. Night Shyamalan, as well as philosophical and speculative science fiction authors. Since its debut, *Rick and Morty* — which now spans seven seasons — has drawn audiences into a whirlwind of intergalactic and interdimensional escapades.

While the overarching narrative adheres to certain fundamental storylines, each episode is structured to function as a standalone piece, adhering to the procedural format common in animated series such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and *Futurama*. Central to the series is Rick's possession of a powerful technological device, the portal gun, which allows him to traverse countless universes.

His travels often lead back to what is described as the "basic" dimension, a world he disrupted upon his arrival into the otherwise ordinary life of his daughter, Beth (or possibly her clone), and her family. However, the notion of a single "basic" universe is undermined by the characters' frequent migrations across dimensions, often leaving behind irreversible destruction. This multidimensional framework complicates the narrative, particularly regarding the origin of the portal gun and Rick's identity. Was it "our" Rick who created the portal gun? And which version of Rick might that be? The recurrence of clones and alternate versions of characters blurs the lines of continuity, making the plot a labyrinth of possibilities. The core family dynamic revolves around Beth, a horse surgeon, and her husband Jerry, a naïve, often incompetent and frequently unemployed figure.

Their two children, Summer, the older daughter, and Morty, the younger son, complete the dysfunctional family at the heart of the series. Morty, in particular, serves as Rick's primary companion — though more often an unwilling victim — in his chaotic and dangerous experiments. In keeping with the conventions of modern animated television, *Rick and Morty* depicts a family rife with dysfunction, while an expansive cast of secondary characters contributes to an ongoing sequence of absurd, hilarious, and emotionally resonant events.

This seamless interplay of comedy and tragedy has captivated an ever-growing audience, cementing the series' status as both a cultural phenomenon and a rich subject for philosophical and anthropological inquiry.

3. Philosophical relevance, between entertainment and reflection

One of the defining features of *Rick and Morty* that has contributed to its worldwide success is its capacity to operate on multiple interpretative layers. At its surface, the series — often violent and grotesque — can be appreciated purely for its comedic value. Broadcast on Adult Swim, a channel renowned for animated series and live-action programming aimed at adult audiences, the show aligns seamlessly with the network's ethos, which emphasises irreverence, experimentation, and boundary-pushing content. With its explicit language and provocative humour, *Rick and Morty* is a natural fit within this programming context, adhering to the channel's trademark combination of boldness and innovation.

On this level, the series is undoubtedly entertaining, offering clever gags, absurd scenarios, and unconventional characters within a theatrical framework reminiscent of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, to reduce *Rick and Morty* to a low-cognitive-demand animated series akin to *American Dad* (2005–ongoing) would be an oversimplification. Beneath its satirical and humorous exterior lies a sophisticated network of ideas and meanings, marking it as a profoundly philosophical work.

This philosophical dimension is not merely due to its overt references to thinkers such as Nietzsche, Camus, Lovecraft, and Cioran, but rather stems from its ability to weave a coherent, if implicit, worldview throughout its narrative. Unlike the explicit moral lessons or neatly resolved conclusions found in traditional fables, *Rick and Morty* embeds its deeper meanings within the plot's intricacies, the characterisation, and the nuances of dialogue and silence. These elements are further accentuated by the richly detailed settings and scenarios the characters navigate. Often, this subtext is conveyed through fleeting, almost imperceptible moments.

For instance, in the pilot episode (S1, E1), while Rick and Morty are preoccupied with a chaotic escape, an alien creature peacefully residing in a narghile — a womb-like, safe-space environment — is accidentally dislodged. Suddenly exposed to the external world, the creature begins a frantic and disoriented dash, its entire life cycle unfolding in a matter of seconds. The strain of this abrupt and overwhelming transition proves fatal, and the creature collapses, presumably from a stroke. Morty is visibly shaken by the incident, but Rick brushes it off, advising him not to overthink the event. This brief yet poignant moment encapsulates Rick's nihilistic worldview, offering a striking commentary on existence and vulnerability in just a few frames.

Such moments underscore the philosophical richness of *Rick and Morty* and validate the arguments of scholars who regard television series as vehicles for significant philosophical inquiry. As noted by scholars such as L. Bandirali and E. Terrone, the depth of meaning in such works relies not solely on the content itself but on the active interpretative engagement of the viewer. Television series like *Rick and Morty* demand an intellectually participatory audience, inviting viewers to transcend surface-level entertainment and engage in critical reflection. In this way, the act of viewing becomes intertwined with self-reflection.¹

¹ L. Bandirali, E. Terrone. *Filosofia delle serie tv. Dalla Scena del crimine al Trono di Spade*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine, 2012, p. 68.

The depth of engagement, however, depends largely on the viewer's willingness to interpret and analyse the material. As J. Mittell argues in *Complex TV*, the same narrative content can yield vastly different interpretations depending on the audience's approach. This concept aligns with Eco's insistence on the viewer's responsibility in meaning-making. The significance of a work is not determined solely by its inherent quality but also by the intellectual effort the audience invests in its interpretation.

4. Living and dying in a world without meaning

In the world of *Rick and Morty*, the existence of infinite alternative universes and countless versions of every individual fundamentally destabilises conventional notions of identity and value. Loved ones, hated figures, and even oneself are replicated endlessly across these dimensions, creating a profound sense of equivalence that undermines the uniqueness, sacredness, or irreplaceability traditionally attributed to individuals or concepts. In this multiverse, the very ideas of originality, singularity, and meaning are rendered void, dissolving into a framework where everything can be reproduced *ad infinitum*. Reality unfolds at multiple levels, governed by the logic of pure equivalence rather than any hierarchy of values or significance, as portrayed by Rick's words below:

Listen, I'm not the nicest guy in the universe. Because I'm the smartest, and being nice is something stupid people do to hedge their bets. Now I haven't been exactly subtle about how little I trust marriage. I couldn't make it work and I can turn a black hole into a sun, so at a certain point you gotta ask yourself, where are the odds this is legit and not just some big lie we're all telling ourselves because we're afraid to die alone? Because, you know, that's exactly how we all die. Alone.²

The ethos of the series can be closely associated with the worldview of H.P. Lovecraft, whose philosophy — though never systematically articulated — is often referred to as “cosmicism.” As S.T. Joshi explains, Lovecraft's cosmicism revolves around the notion of a universe that is potentially infinite in scope, both spatially and temporally. This vastness renders existence incomprehensible to human beings, who are persistently yet futilely driven to impose meaning, direction, or purpose upon their lives. In this context, humans are mere accidents — insignificant and meaningless actors on an unfathomable cosmic stage. This perspective is central to Rick's worldview and informs his actions throughout the series.

Rick's superior intelligence has granted him an acute awareness of what he perceives as the true nature of existence: a chaotic, amoral, and indifferent universe. For Rick, the constructs of good and evil are human fabrications, devoid of any basis in objective reality. Instead, reality is governed by the laws of nature, which Rick has mastered through his unparalleled grasp of techno-science. In this perspective, there is no God, no moral order, and no ultimate meaning — only the ceaseless cycle of birth, life, and death among an infinite array of living beings, none of whom possess inherent purpose. Reality, as Rick sees it, is a relentless flow of anarchic energy, where existence is fleeting and dignity fleetingly optional.

² *Rick and Morty* (S2, E10).

Two principles emerge as the foundational forces in this cosmos: cosmic disorder and the innate selfishness of living beings. These principles dictate the trajectories of both individual lives and collective destinies. In such a world, Rick, an ultra-intelligent individual unbound by ethical constraints and governed only by his own capricious will, assumes a godlike role. His nearly limitless scientific prowess allows him to perform feats of extraordinary absurdity, such as transforming himself into a pickle, as an exercise of will and intellect divorced from conventional morality.

In this multiverse devoid of divine oversight, it is the “over-beings” — those with superior intellect and will — who reign supreme over the naïve and powerless. These latter beings, described in Nietzschean terms as the herd, lack the resources or the courage to confront the harsh truths of existence or the hollowness of metaphysical pretensions. Oblivious to the ultimate meaninglessness of their lives, they are mere transient entities, destined to perish without understanding their plight. For Rick, their fate is simply part of the natural flow of an anarchic, indifferent cosmos — a reality he not only accepts but, in many ways, dominates.

5. Rick and Morty: a unique narrative

Rick and Morty presents a profoundly cynical, pessimistic, and nihilistic vision of life, reflecting and amplifying a pervasive sentiment that characterises much of contemporary Western culture. This vision is realised through a uniquely inventive approach, with the series functioning as a kind of narrative blender — a “meat-grinder” of references both well-known and obscure, drawn from the collective cultural imagery of its viewers. While its irreverent tone might superficially evoke comparisons to works like *South Park*, labelling its style as merely desecrating would underestimate the series’ complexity and ambition.

The creators, Harmon and Roiland, do not aim solely to dismantle traditions or norms for the sake of deconstruction. Their purpose appears to extend beyond demolition, potentially seeking to reconstruct these fragments into configurations more resonant with the spirit of contemporary Western thought and culture. This ethos reflects a dynamic effort to reassemble the pieces of a shattered puzzle in a way that aligns with the fractured, fluid sensibilities of our time.

At the heart of the series’ narrative structure lies an a-hierarchical blending of diverse elements, a process emblematic of the broader cultural condition in the era of techno capitalism. In a world increasingly detached from moral frameworks, traditional boundaries — whether between ethos, politics, religion, or economy — become blurred, overlapping and dissolving into one another. This convergence is accelerated by the relentless pace of modern life, marked by instant consumerism and the omnipresent, ceaseless flow of digital content. The internet’s viral mechanisms amplify and homogenise all inputs, threatening to engulf everything — ideas, people, and emotions — in an undifferentiated, liquid present.

In line with this cultural landscape, *Rick and Morty* operates as a “narrative vortex,” absorbing and disassembling virtually every facet of existence. As Rick himself might describe it, the process is one of “cronenbergisation,” in which all elements — advertisements, ethics, science, love, emotions, relationships, questions, answers, reality, fiction, farce, and tragedy — are thrown together in a chaotic blend. The series collapses distinctions between aliens and alternate versions of the self, between the

deeply philosophical and the absurdly mundane, crafting a surreal narrative hybrid that mirrors the chaotic and multifaceted nature of contemporary life.

This chaotic hybridisation stands as one of the defining characteristics of the modern condition, and *Rick and Morty* masterfully encapsulates it. The series does not merely display or reflect this complexity; it magnifies and bears witness to it, providing a compelling commentary on the cultural and existential dynamics of the present age.

6. Conclusions

In light of the arguments presented, *Rick and Morty* emerges as a meta-narrative that reflects and critiques the absurdities of our time, offering both a mirror to our present and a lens into a future increasingly shaped by what might be termed the “bricolage effect.” The series magnifies the fragmented and fluid nature of contemporary existence, portraying a world where traditional hierarchies and models have dissolved. In their place, we are left to construct uncertain identities, defined by a kind of “identitarian multitasking” that mirrors the ceaseless transformations and hybridisations found in the characters’ journeys.

Harmon and Roiland’s work embodies the essence of cultural remix, as theorised by scholars such as Jay David Bolter in *Digital Plenitude*. This remixing is epitomised in Rick’s transformations — whether into a pickle, a leg, or an amalgamated entity fused with Jerry. On the surface, these scenarios provoke laughter; beneath this veneer, however, they reveal a profound *Zeitgeist*. No longer is the Hegelian Spirit of Time represented by Napoleon on horseback; instead, it is embodied by Rick dismembering mice in the sewers as Pickle Rick (S3, E3).

Pickle Rick transcends its comedic premise, representing a human being who simultaneously deifies and debases himself. It embodies the dual forces of techno-scientific mastery and existential despair: the power to surpass natural limits juxtaposed with the awareness of life’s ultimate futility. Through Rick’s metamorphoses, the series explores the human drive for self-fashioning — a creative process of assembling disparate elements into new, multifaceted meanings. Yet, in doing so, it underscores an essential paradox: this act of creating meaning often leads to a “meaningless meaning,” which paradoxically becomes significant precisely because of its emptiness. This is highlighted by Rick’s decision to turn himself into a pickle, as justified below:

Rick: I don’t do magic, Morty, I do science. One takes brains, the other takes dark eyeliner.

Morty: Well, can you move? Can you fly?

Rick: Wouldn’t be much of a pickle if I could.

Morty: All right, well, do pickles live forever or...?

Rick: Morty, stop digging for hidden layers and be impressed, I’m a pickle.

Morty: I’m just trying to figure out why you would do this, why anyone would do this.

Rick: The reason anyone would do this, if they could, which they can’t, would be because they could, which they can’t.³

³ *Rick and Morty* (S3, E3).

The pivotal role of technoscience in *Rick and Morty* deserves particular emphasis. Rick, the multiverse's most brilliant scientist, wields near-omnipotent capabilities. He can manipulate matter, defy physics, and reshape reality itself. And yet, his brilliance cannot shield him from despair, dissatisfaction, and the relentless anxiety that pervades his existence. Despite his scientific genius, Rick remains unfulfilled — a poignant reminder that even the most advanced technology cannot resolve humanity's deeper existential questions. This is perhaps the series' most profound insight: science can solve problems, but it cannot resolve the enigma of meaning. Rick's inability to save his beloved wife, Diane, from death stands as a testament to this limitation. In the end, *Rick and Morty*, for all its nihilism, cynicism, and despair, suggests a glimmer of hope. It reminds us that human beings, no matter how advanced their creations, remain in need of something beyond themselves. That "something" lies in genuine affections — the relationships that bring meaning to our fleeting existence. Whether on Earth or in the infinite expanse of the multiverse, it is these bonds that provide solace and purpose amid chaos.

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