It’s about time tattoos got a philosophical treatment like this!

Michelle ‘Bombshell’ McGee

Body art or eyesore, a celebration of individuality, or at very least a conversation piece, tattoos provide fertile ground for philosophical discussion, raising intriguing questions about subjects ranging from aesthetics to feminism and from semiotics to the philosophy of the person. The abundance of tattooed religious symbols also raises questions surrounding the belief in and worship of God, and even the stigma associated with tattoos can initiate discussion on moral and political philosophy. Providing a broad arena for philosophical dialogue, essays include:

• Tattoos as an expression of freedom
• Confessions of a tattooed Buddhist philosopher
• Women and tattoos
• Tattoos and personal identity

Papers, animatedly inked by philosophers (most with tattoos), tattoo artists, and tattoo enthusiasts, offer enlightening insights into the nature of tattoos and the tattooing arts and the rich philosophical analysis that can be drawn from them.

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ROBERT ARP has taught and published in many areas of philosophy and ontology in the information science sense. He also has done a lot of work in the philosophy and popular culture realm, and has regularly flashed his half smiley face, half skull tattoo (located on his right arm, thank goodness!) to make a point about the distinction between appearance and reality in ‘introduction to philosophy’ courses.

SERIES EDITOR

FRITZ ALLHOFF is an associate professor in the philosophy department at Western Michigan University, as well as a senior research fellow at the Australian National University’s Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. In addition to editing the Philosophy for Everyone series, he is also the volume editor or co-editor for several titles, including Wine & Philosophy (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), Whiskey & Philosophy (with Marcus P. Adams, Wiley, 2009), and Food & Philosophy (with Dave Monroe, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007). His academic research interests engage various facets of applied ethics, ethical theory, and the history and philosophy of science.
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Edited by Patrick Goold
This book is dedicated to Susan, Zoe, and Lexi Arp, and Bill Drake.
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Tattoos were a harbinger of Twitter. If I were to tweet that message, it wouldn’t reach the right audience. Twitterers have opinions (lots!), but for someone to see my tweet they would have to follow me, and you mostly follow people whose opinions you share. Also, there are those who don’t get tattoos or tweets; for instance, my mother is not on Twitter.

‘You’re what?’ was my mom’s response when I told her I was leaving my job at a major publication to take editorial control of *Inked* – a tattoo lifestyle magazine. If this were a sitcom I would have just repeated myself, but it wasn’t, so I paused to give her a moment to reflect on my decision. ‘I don’t like tattoos,’ she continued (though that phrase could use an exclamation point, my mother doesn’t exclaim; at times like this her voice reflects a loving worry and there’s no punctuation mark for that). ‘Do you have tattoos?’

When I told my former journalism professor, Amy Kiste Nyberg, she mused, ‘What can you write about tattoos?’ Indeed, tattoos evoke questions that can be mundane, or even deeply philosophical. When I was in college, that same professor hammered home the journalistic maxim, ‘in a city of eight million people there are eight million stories.’ So, the simplistic response to her question was that in a city of eight million people who each have two tattoos there are sixteen million stories. Ink is that important to the wearer. The marks on their skin signify an important time in their life – even if someone just got a tattoo on a whim because they were ‘young and crazy,’ that’s an entry point into talking about what else they did when they were reckless.
To answer my mother’s first question, the timing was right for both myself and for tattooing. She was born in the first half of the twentieth century – a time when the only people who got inked were sailors and scofflaws. Now we see tattoos on a few doctors, mayors, priests, and even academics such as those who have contributed to this book.

For older generations, the American Dream was to conform. The goal in life included a nine-to-five job, khakis, two-point-five kids, a golden retriever, and ambrosia salad. Anyone who deviated – the hipsters, hippies, mods, punks, and then a different iteration of hipsters – was labeled as weird. But suburban fatigue set in, and, when a younger generation was told that they could be anything they wanted to be when they grow up, they no longer aspired to be businessmen or lawyers – they wanted to be themselves.

At that time, the tattoo landscape was dangerous, filthy, and devoid of talent. Most shops were strategically located a beer-bottle’s throw from the skeeviest dive bars, the insides resembled Soviet-era doctors’ offices, and the purveyors either looked like or were the kind of guys you’d meet in prison. The tattoo parlor was a hangout for the usual suspects, where you could easily score drugs or a girl for hire. Naturally, in the tear-down-the-picket-fence era, this lifestyle attracted throngs of young talent. Creative teenagers who before had the choice of being a starving artist or selling their soul by going into advertising now had a third choice: become a tattoo artist. Akin to being a commissioned painter, tattooing offered a variety in projects, though it is arguable that ink has a steadier stream of customers. But, most importantly, tattooing was lucrative: it was, and still is, a cash-in-hand business (i.e., ‘If the IRS wants their money they can come down here and try to take it from us’). This new crop was not interested in tracing stencils of staid hearts and hula girls – they wanted to create their own designs. With their deft hands, they perfected composition, color schemes, and shading in the medium. Before, tattooists were people who could operate a piece of machinery – mere craftsmen. Now they were artisans.

Maybe it was the new guard, or perhaps it was the AIDS hysteria, but tattoo shops started cleaning up their act. Back in the day, your crude skull tattoo might have come with a bonus of hepatitis or something else off dirty needles. Now, hygiene was as much a crusade as the movement to progress the art form, with the buzz around the autoclave being that they would never expand their clientele if it weren’t safe to get inked. One shop gets a customer sick and the rest of the shops in the city lose. Some tattoo artists even implored their local governments to enact health
codes and inspections, and because, as you remember, the government didn’t often step foot into shops, some tattooers even helped write the codes.

With new, interesting art and a sterile environment, the free-from-conformity youth at large began exploring the idea of getting tattoos. One of the pillars of individualism is fashion; when prisoners are stripped of almost all of their rights and freedoms, the moment they are able to make a free decision, they pick out their own clothes. In the new ‘be yourself’ environment, what was Dockers’ loss became tattoos’ gain. Fundamentally, ink is fashion: you pick it out, it’s worn on you, and it tells people something about you. At first, a brazen few started altering their look with tattoos; those early adopters were looked at with envy by their peers, as well as with flippant distain by the mainstream. The style went through the same periods of cultural introduction and acceptance that women’s makeup and then hair dye had earlier in the century, only tattoos seemed stranger and more severe due to their permanence (confounding those who see it as a passing fad). And, though tattoos weren’t alone in the brave new world of body alteration thanks to the rise in nose jobs, face lifts, tummy tucks, and breast implants, those procedures were meant to make a person fit in (well, maybe not in the case of some extreme breast implants), while the only purpose of tattoos was to make one stand out.

Again, at first it was the edgy, bombastic youth who tried out tattoos; but then Kat Von D, the face that launched a thousand tramp stamps, became Middle America’s liaison to the tattoo world. Kat’s shows – TLC’s *Miami Ink* and *LA Ink* – took the tattoo shop experience and beamed it into the homes of soccer moms in Ohio. The nuclear family that would have never dared peek into the window of a tattoo parlor could safely play a fly on the wall thanks to reality television. Not only did they like what they saw, they wanted in – they wanted ink. The producers of the *Ink* programs made shrewd choices in casting not only charming, personable tattooers but also some of the best working artists. Had they gone with the scary, crusty old guard of workman-like inkers, tattooing would have never embedded itself into the skin of the mainstream.

I don’t believe that tattooing is *underground* – it’s not even a subculture any more. Numbers vary, but most of the hard data agree with a 2006 Pew Research poll that found that forty percent of Americans between the ages of twenty-six and forty are tattooed. That means that there are more people with tattoos then there are blondes in the United States. Let that sink in. And, speaking of the popularity of tattoo art, in a highly
unscientific study, conducted by yours truly, I cold called a bunch of phone numbers in Lebanon, Kansas, the geographic center of mainland America. I asked the person who picked up on the other end if they could identify any of the following artists: Jeff Koons, Shepard Fairey, and Kat Von D. Guess which name they knew?

Tattoos and reality television – two celebrations of everyman individualism – have helped each other grow to prominence. The rise of these two have occurred thanks to people who were told they were special, told they could be themselves: the ‘me generation.’ The people of our generation wanted to scream their identity on their skin and shout their opinions from the rooftops. When the craft of tattooing bettered itself through aesthetics, safety, and public relations, we went under the tattoo gun. Then, when technology finally caught up with our need to self-express, we logged onto Twitter.

When Robert Arp, the editor of this book, contacted me about the project, I was a little shaky about the idea, despite the fact that the book is loaded with readable and thought-provoking chapters. I know that Joe Sixpack likes tattoos and will pick up a publication to read about them, but it wasn’t clear to me that the philosophers, academics, and more ‘thoughtful’ people would appreciate, or even want, ink on ink. These thinkers seem to float above pop culture, not in it: do they perceive tattoos to be nothing more than the mark of a deviant?

During my mulling-over period, I received an email from my old professor, who wanted to send me one her brightest students to intern at Inked. Well, this indicated to me that, by her sending a future bright light of journalism to cover tattoos, a part of the intellectual elite was investing in the culture’s relevance. In order to reach a more highbrow audience about my belief that tattooing is the new modern art, as well as an important symbol of my generation, I concluded that the message should be in this heady book rather than tweeted to my circle. The only other question I had was whether I was right person to write this Foreword. I wasn’t sure whether my immersion in the tattoo scene had tainted my perspective of the current acceptance of ink. Damn the Pew numbers – were tattoos still perceived as scary and weird?

Then my mother called. She started, ‘You should see this woman at my job, she has the niftiest tattoo.’