Reality television is so ubiquitous today that its most popular programs and characters require no introduction.

Case in point: Not long ago, President Barack Obama told a late-night television host he wasn’t too concerned about presidential primary skirmishes among his opponents in the Republican Party, saying, “I’m going to wait until everyone is voted off the island.” The President knew that voters watching The Tonight Show would easily understand his reference to the long-running reality contest Survivor.

Or consider this case: A recent Seattle Times Sunday magazine piece about the city’s strengths noted, “We breed innovative ideas faster than Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar can spawn a human.” The article was entirely unrelated to reality TV, but its author safely assumed that any reasonably literate newspaper reader would understand a reference to the Arkansas couple made famous by the TLC network’s reality show 19 Kids and Counting. In years past, a writer in search of a reference to a large family might have invoked The Brady Bunch, but today’s readers don’t identify with dated situation comedies. They live in the world of reality television.

Reality TV is popular and pervasive. Reality programs consistently dominate the television landscape. They regularly feature in the Nielsen ratings for most-watched television shows in the United States, and they’re viewed by millions of people around the world. One scholar suggested that a typical weekly episode of American Idol might draw an audience equal in size to the combined populations of Colorado, Maryland, Missouri, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Any form of popular culture that is this popular should be taken seriously as a significant influence on our ethical lives. Popular culture is not simply “low” culture or mere entertainment unworthy of the same level of intellectual scrutiny as “high” culture staples that include opera, literature, and fine paintings. Popular culture may entertain, but it is not “just” entertainment. The messages of popular culture—whether they are the literal texts of paperback novels, the visual texts of magazine advertisements, or the video texts of reality television—constantly tell us who to be as people. Those messages tell us who we are, what we ought to value, and how we should behave. And we apparently do take our cues about those attitudes.
and behaviors from reality television. Recent news wire stories reported that Mason had become the most popular male baby name in the United States in just a year, probably because reality star Kourtney Kardashian of Keeping Up with the Kardashians had given her son the name.

Simply put, popular culture—including the burgeoning reality television genre—helps to shape our reality. Anything with an influence that potentially powerful has ethical implications worth examining.

Reality TV is complicated, broad, and ever-changing. The wide variety of program types that fit into the reality genre include contest shows such as American Idol, family-oriented stories such as 19 Kids and Counting, introductions to offbeat occupations such as Ice Road Truckers, self-improvement shows such as The Biggest Loser, and philanthropy programs such as Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. This complexity is further complicated by the mixture of production techniques a program may use: dramatic behind-the-scenes confessions from contestants on shows like Big Brother; lavish, orchestrated “dates” set up by producers of shows like The Bachelor; or the seemingly straightforward narratives like those of the polygamous family depicted on Sister Wives. The genre becomes even more challenging to analyze because a reality program may change from season to season or may be adapted to global television markets, such as when Bachelor-style dating competitions are altered for the sensibilities of viewers in India or Indonesia.

Reality television can be an overwhelmingly moralistic genre. TIME Magazine TV critic James Poniewozik made that point in an introductory essay for our book, The Ethics of Reality TV: A Philosophical Examination (Continuum Press, 2012). He noted that “many supposedly depraved reality shows are, in fact, among the most moralizing series on TV.” He pointed to the contest depicted by Survivor, suggesting that the series depends on viewers to “have an independent system of moral values that is most likely different from the one rewarded by the game.” Survivor producers then draw upon that conflict between viewers’ values and the game’s values to keep viewers interested in the program’s competition.

Reality TV raises a wide range of ethical issues. But analysis of a complex genre requires more than automatic condemnation. It is too simple to conclude that reality TV is morally bad because it’s sometimes sensational, exploitative, or stereotypical. Reality TV requires a more nuanced ethical analysis. To join us in that analysis for our book, we invited a number of authors from around the world to each address a specific ethical issue raised by reality television (such as privacy, cultural values, deception, and commercialization) and to use a particular ethical perspective to analyze it. So, for instance, we placed the ethical problems of stereotyping by reality programs under the ethical lens offered by duty-based philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Kant’s premise was that ethical decisions stem from a person’s goodwill, which is always and uniquely a moral good. Decisions, according to Kant, must be rooted in that goodwill, which dictates one’s ethical duty. This goodwill-based duty must be performed in all cases, universally, no matter the consequences or motivations. Furthermore, Kant suggested that our goodwill-based duties would respect persons as ends in themselves and never treat them simply as means to ends.

So, let’s see if reality TV stereotypes can survive the ethical scrutiny of Kant’s philosophy. Are television producers motivated by goodwill, in the Kantian sense, when they deliberately present false impressions of people for ratings or...
profit? No. Are TV viewers motivated by goodwill when they are entertained by the misrepresentation of others? No. Can producers or viewers universalize the use of stereotypes—or suggest that stereotypes be employed in every media message? No.

Therefore, based on Kantian principles, the ethical television producer or viewer would reject the stereotypes presented by reality television. For instance, the sex-role stereotypes frequently depicted on The Bachelor are not ethically justifiable. The program presents outdated stereotypes of men as all-powerful and aggressive, and women as passive damsels who exist merely to be romantically swept off their feet. Furthermore, by almost completely failing to include contestants who are not white, these programs suggest that courtship and marriage are the domain of white people. The Bachelor has never been anything but a white man, and the few female contestants on the program who were women of color have been eliminated early on in the competitions.

Groups who are not presented or who are severely under-represented in media may be mentally erased from the minds of audiences. Viewers are likely to dismiss those groups as unimportant to the larger culture—a concept known as symbolic annihilation. Among those who are regularly symbolically annihilated by television are racial and ethnic minority groups. People of color are often missing from the television landscape, and their absence is complicated by negative stereotyping. For instance, Washington Post television writer Paul Fahri has contended that on the occasions that reality television has included African American males it has presented them as the stereotypical “bad black guy.” UC Davis professor Grace Wang analyzed the reality programs Top Chef and Project Runway and concluded that these popular competitions have regularly stereotyped Asian American contestants as “technical robots” rather than fully creative individuals. These sorts of racist stereotypes fail the Kantian principles of goodwill and respect for persons as ends in themselves.

Yet while reality television seems to unethically reinforce stereotypes of race, gender, and class, it also challenges them. Reality shows present characters whose lives have not been seen on mainstream television, and the polyglast family shown on Sister Wives is a good example. Where else on television are viewers offered a straightforward look into the lives of a Mormon man, his four wives, and their sixteen children? The same might be said of 19 Kids and Counting. Fictional television rarely depicts the lives of an evangelical Christian family. Reality television, by comparison, shows Jim Bob and Michelle Duggars home teeming with children and gives all the family members the opportunity to speak directly to viewers about their religious and patriotic values. In this way, reality television offers viewers a glimpse of a community that fictional entertainment often presents as the punch line for a joke.

The work of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that humans have an ethical obligation to learn about other people so they can live together on an increasingly smaller planet. In his 2006 book, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, Appiah writes, “I am urging that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us to get used to one another.” Using the powerful stories provided by reality television, viewers who cannot literally travel around the world may see previously ignored communities of people and become more tolerant of them. To frame the outcome in Kantian terms, viewers might see others as morally worthwhile people when they attempt to understand one another. An ethical good may be achieved when viewers use television—the most powerful storyteller on earth—to understand their fellow people, rather than to persist in stereotypical beliefs about them.

In a ratings-driven television economy, we have ethical obligations for the content of reality TV. Viewers should learn to evaluate the ethics of reality TV, again rejecting the impulse to simply condemn the genre. We should ask questions about the programs we’re watching. We should consider not just producers’ tactics, but work to become critical consumers of reality shows. The genre has fostered an active online community for many of its programs, and viewers could use those online venues to encourage producers to end the most exploitative, stereotypical, harmful programs and instead create more positive messages.

“The concept of goodness is alive and well—and the subject of eager debate—among reality audiences,” says Poniewozik. “The viewers of reality TV are among the first to cite the genre as evidence that our culture is going to hell. But the controversy, argument and snark that it inspires are vital proof that we have not arrived there yet.”

Indeed. Media literate television viewers—those who question, evaluate, and actively engage with media—recognize the ethical implications of popular entertainment provided by reality TV and have the power to help shape the genre for the future.