

# KARENS SKETCH

## Revised Edition

(Supplement to Monty Python's Australian Philosophers 'Bruce' Sketch,  
Occasioned by the large number of Australian philosophers called 'Karen')

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### **Dramatis Personae:**

KAREN 1 (*Head of Department: rugged and decisive. Farm animals instinctively obey.*)

KAREN 2 (*Hume Studies: tough lady cop from 'Water Rats'.*)

KAREN 3 (*Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Science: more aggressive – tough lady crime lord from 'Water Rats'.*)

KAREN 4 (*Practical Reasoning: Put upon - still fairly rugged but it is not an accident that she is the one who often ends up mucking out the stables.*)

AISLING (*Young woman with slight Irish accent tempered by some years at the ANU.*)

Any resemblance to actual philosophers called Karen is purely coincidental. This is not a skit *a clef*. I've made use of Aisling's name and her Irish accent but the fictional Aisling is not supposed to resemble the real Aisling in any other way apart from being young, a woman and a philosopher.

**Note:** words in CAPITALS to be pronounced phonetically.

**Scene:** *Department of Philosophy at the University of Wollomooloo. General ambiance: rural, suggestive of 'McCloud's Daughters', only more so.*

[Enter KAREN 2 and KAREN 3 who are engaged in a pre-meeting gossip.]

KAREN 2: How's your daughter Kim doing Karen?

KAREN 3: I keep her nose to the grindstone, Karen. Two hours of fencing every morning with some number eight wire, followed by two hours of probability theory once she's cleaned up.

KAREN 2: [*nodding sagely*] She's got to learn. It's bad enough when the stock get loose, but probability is the guide to life.

KAREN 3: And how's your son Kim doing Karen?

KAREN 2: [*a trifle despondently, since Kim is not the son she had hoped for*] Well Karen, I'm trying to apply a similar regime – two hours fencing in the morning followed by modal logic once he's cleaned up ...

KAREN 3: He's got to learn what's possible and what isn't ...

KAREN 2: But it's shoveling shit uphill ...

KAREN 3: Oh?

KAREN 2: Yes. He gets tangled up in the fencing in wire the morning, and tangled up in scope distinctions in the afternoon. I've tried till I'm blue in the face but I just can't get him to distinguish the necessity of the consequence from the necessity of the consequent. He says the puncture wounds make it hard to concentrate ...

KAREN 3: What a wuss!

KAREN 2: Yes, and he's always dripping blood all over my logic texts. I had to get a new copy of Hughes and Cresswell. He just can't or won't clean up after himself.

KAREN 3: Don't blame yourself Karen. Not ought implies not can. Necessarily if he is the sort of person who can't do logic then he can't do logic. Since he *is* the

sort of person who can't do logic necessarily he can't do logic. It's no use struggling against necessity. What must be, must be.

KAREN 2: *Gives her a funny look but does not have the opportunity to reply.*

*Enter KAREN 1, KAREN 4 and AISLING. KAREN 1 is in full rhetorical flight and the other two are tittering sycophantically at the tales of her dialectical triumphs.*

KAREN 1: .... so I said to Donald 'Do you actually think that to believe X is to believe that X is true? But in that case you can't have a genuine belief unless you have the concept of truth!' He began to mumble something about language and belief but I cut him off. 'So you think dogs have no beliefs?' I said, '*Well fuck me dead!!*'

KAREN 4: There's no answer to that.

KAREN 1: Not from Donald anyway. It shut him up completely. Anyway I'd like to call this meeting of the Philosophy Department to order. Where are the blokes?

KAREN 2: Well, Bruce has been working on Kierkegaard and he says he's been overcome with fear and trembling and the sickness unto death.

KAREN 3: What a wuss.

KAREN 2: Well, you know what he's like. It was either that or . . .

KAREN 1: [*cutting in*] Can we get on? What about Bruce?

KAREN 3: Suffering from linguistic amnesia. He's been reading Russell and thinks that 'this' is a proper name. Caused a Hell of a problem with his latest sprog. He wanted to call the poor kid 'This' on the grounds that the kid really ought to have a proper name. The Registrar of Births turned him down for

exactly the same reason. Since then, well, it's been all down hill...

KAREN 1: [*cutting in*] OK, we get the picture. But where's Bruce?

KAREN 3: A pathetic victim of political philosophy. He's been reading Hobbes and has become convinced that the life of man is nasty poor, brutish and short and he does not want to make it any worse by coming to Departmental meetings.

KAREN 2: What a wuss.

KAREN 1: Tell him that, short or not, his life will become a lot more nasty and brutish if he does not show up. But what about Bruce?

KAREN 2: Well he was part of the Hobbes Study Group too. He discovered or thought he discovered in himself a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. So he is standing for the New South Wales Parliament. He's out pressing the flesh.

KAREN 3: That does not sound like much fun.

KAREN 2: He's not doing it for fun – or at least that's what he says. It is not because he hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or because he cannot be content with a moderate power. It's because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he has present, without the acquisition of more. He thinks that if he does not get elected they might close us down.

KAREN 1: Dismal as it is, that 's the best excuse so far. But that still leaves Bruce.

KAREN 4: Again the Hobbes Study Group. He was doing some empirical work, putting dilemmas to prisoners, when one of them defected and there was, shall we say, a Pareto-inferior outcome. He won't be making any decisions, let alone

theorizing about them, any time soon.

KAREN 1: But that does not explain the absence of Bruce. *He* hasn't been doing any political philosophy – he's been working on Wittgenstein.

KAREN 3: Aren't you forgetting Madam Chair that words are deeds?

KAREN 1: [*with some asperity*] No, Karen I am not. But just because words are deeds it does not follow that they are *political* deeds unless you expand the political to include absolutely everything. And you would have to be a real bloody *Foucault* [*the word is pronounced fiercely with contempt and disgust*] to do something like that. Anyway that does not explain why he's not here.

KAREN 3: He became convinced that joy was nothing, neither any inward nor any outward thing and it rather got him down. He says that world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.

KAREN 4; What a wuss.

KAREN 1: [*Crossly*] Tell him that if I have any of his nonsense whether it is true and definitive nonsense or not, he'll discover that with death the world does not change but comes to an end. I won't even ask about the others. Ever since Bruce failed to catch up with the tortoise, he's had a major problem getting from A to B, let alone turning up on time. Anyway, our first item of business is to welcome our new colleague, who's here on a postdoc. [*with rugged geniality*] I'm Karen, and this is Karen, Karen and Karen. I'm in charge of two-dimensional semantics, Karen is in charge of Hume studies - [*rather sourly*] insofar as a bundle of perceptions can be said to be in charge of anything - Karen here is in charge of Wittgenstein and the philosophy of science, and Karen is in charge of the sheep dip.

KAREN 4: [*a little plaintively*] Why am I in charge of the sheep dip?

KAREN 3: [*firmly*] Well you know it can't be me. I do theoretical reasoning; you do practical reasoning. If you put me in charge, I'd make a frightful mess of it.

KAREN 4: But why can't it be Bruce? Is he afraid of getting his lily-white hands dirty?

KAREN 1: Now you know perfectly well that he's been trying to solve the problem of evil. He says that if *he* had to work on the sheep dip there would be so much evil in the world that he could not get the equations to come out right. The very possibility of a rational theism depends on him *not* doing the sheep dip.

KAREN 4: In other words, he *is* afraid of getting his lily-white hands dirty.

KAREN 3: What a wuss.

KAREN 2: But aren't we missing something here? Why do we have to have a bloody sheep dip in the first place?

KAREN 1: Come on, Karen, try to keep up! You know the Vice Chancellor said the departments would have to pay their way, and that we would all have to diversify. We tried a Centre for Communication Skills, but people round here fancy themselves as strong silent types, so it didn't pay. The sheep dip is very profitable.

KAREN 3: That's enough about the sheep dip! For God's sake! It comes up every bloody meeting. You'd think we had nothing else to worry about. It really is a pain. I think we ought to be welcoming our new colleague.

KAREN 2: [*pointedly*] I cannot forbear to remark that too many people proceed in the ordinary manner of reasoning with propositions copulated by an 'is' as in 'the sheep dip really *is* a pain' when, of a sudden, I find no proposition that is not copulated with an 'ought' or an 'ought not' as in 'we ought to be welcoming our new colleague'. And it seems to me inconceivable how this new relation or

affirmation can be a deduction from another which is entirely different from it.

KAREN 4: Again with the copulations! For God's sake, woman, you've got copulation on the brain.

KAREN 3: [*to KAREN 2 pointedly*] I wasn't making a *deduction*, Karen: I was changing the subject. But if reason won't get you from one to the other, by all means use your moral sense or force of habit or whatever else you employ when - as often happens in your case - reason fails.

KAREN 1: For God's sake can we get on? We've been rabbiting on like a bunch of old blokes. Now we've introduced ourselves, after a fashion, let's welcome AISLING.

AISLING: [*a little shyly*] It's ASHLING, actually: everybody mispronounces it.

KAREN 2: Come on, AISLING, that really won't wash. Names are a matter of social convention, and social conventions are determined by what people do. If everybody pronounces your name AISLING then that is the way it is pronounced.

KAREN 3: But hang on, Karen, there is also a convention that if someone says their name is pronounced X, then absent deliberate deception, that's how it is pronounced. If I say my name is pronounced KAREN, then it is pronounced KAREN and not KIEREN or KRISTEN. I'm with Humpty Dumpty on this one. My name is pronounced how I choose it is pronounced. The only question is, 'Who is mistress?' That's all.

KAREN 1: It seems to me we are at an impasse. We have a compelling argument - one supplied by yourself AISLING - that your name is pronounced AISLING, and another that it is pronounced ASHLING. But unless we are prepared to resort to paraconsistent logic, this just can't be. Your name can't be both pronounced ASHLING and *not* pronounced ASHLING. Even that sleazebag

Priest wouldn't want to add this to his list of true contradictions.

KAREN 3: But we don't want to wind up logically committed to believing everything just because there is a problem about how ASHLING pronounces her name.

KAREN 4: Can I make a suggestion, Madam Chair? Why don't we call her KAREN, to save confusion?

KAREN 1: An excellent suggestion, Karen. 'Karen' it is. Karen, we are very pleased to welcome you to the new department. We like to make it easy for our postdocs. You'll only have to work the sheep dip one day a week.

AISLING: Glad to be here. Do I get special gloves?

KAREN 1: Absolutely. Now unless there is any other business, I think we can adjourn for a beer.

KAREN 3: Sorry to be a pain, Karen, but there is a point I'd like to raise: sexism.

KAREN 1: Sexism?

KAREN 3: Yes, sexism. Or at least something which suggests a sexist attitude. I don't think the blokes can tell us apart.

KAREN 2: Why not?

KAREN 3: Well, yesterday, Bruce called me 'Karen', and I had a distinct impression that this 'Karen' was a token designed to refer to some other Karen.

KAREN 2 : Given that his intentions are inaccessible, Karen, I really don't see how you could know this.

KAREN 3: On the contrary, Karen, our communicative intentions are manifest *in* language. Otherwise we could not know what anyone else meant, or even what *we* mean. And it was manifest to me that when he called me 'Karen' he meant to token a type which did not refer to me.

KAREN 1: Karen, Karen, you do him too much credit. He does not rise to types. He just speaks Tokenese. Every individual token of the word 'Karen' refers in his mouth to whichever Karen happens to be around. It may be that he can't tell us apart, but blimey, girl, don't tell me it's manifest in his communicative intentions. If there ever was a candidate for eliminative materialism it's Bruce. It's not at all clear that he has any intentions to communicate.

KAREN 3: Well if you're sure ....

KAREN 1: Sure I'm sure.

KAREN 2; I'm sorry Madam Chair but if you're sure you're sure, that suggests a commitment to the KK principle and we all know where *that* leads. I don't think Karen here can rely on the word of a woman who claims *both* to be a material and therefore finite being *and* to possess an infinite series of arbitrarily complex intentional states.

KAREN 1: All right Karen give me a break. I'm not sure that I'm sure – I'm just *sure*. Bruce does not have the intentions Karen attributes to him. [*to KAREN 3*] Is that good enough for you Karen?

KAREN 3: [*mulishly*] Well, I don't think I can rely on an assurance which you yourself are not sure of.

KAREN 1: [*crossly*] For God's sake, Karen why do you always have to everything so bloody difficult! Karen here says you can't trust me if I *am* sure I'm sure because I would be committing myself to the KK principle and thereby laying claim to an infinite brain. And you say you can't trust me if I'm *not* sure I'm

sure! Who'd be a bloody HOD?!

KAREN 3: [*with frosty formality*] I'm sorry Madam Chair if my high moral and epistemic standards inconvenience you.

KAREN 4: But Madam Chair! Can't you be sure that Bruce had no intentions of the relevant kind, and sure that you are sure without being sure that you are sure that you are sure? You can make assurance doubly sure without committing yourself to the principle that you are also triply, quadruply and quintuply sure up to arbitrarily large n-tuples.

KAREN 1: [*frostily*] Are you suggesting Karen that I should conduct my epistemic affairs in an unprincipled manner? This is a philosophy department after all!

AISLING: [*a little nervously*] Can I make a suggestion Madam Chair?

KAREN 1: Go ahead Karen.

AISLING: [*flattered at this sign of acceptance but still nervous*] Well can't you assure Karen that you're sure – and in a principled way too - without committing to the KK Principle? It seems to me – if Karen will forgive me - that what she wants from you is a certain kind of *speech-act* – an assurance that you are sure. And you can perform this speech-act sincerely - and in an .. er *principled* manner - without describing or purporting to describe the third order mental state of being sure that you are sure that Bruce has no communicative intentions of an objectionably sexist kind. So it doesn't matter that you may be in no such state.

KAREN 1: [*suspiciously*] So let me get this straight. What you are saying, Karen, is that I can be in the mental state of being sure that Bruce has no communicative intentions of the relevant kind and I can *say* that I am sure that I am in this state *sincerely* even though I am not in fact in the state of being sure that I am in the state of being sure that Bruce has no sexist intentions to communicate. Is that

right?

AISLING: Er .. yes.

KAREN 1: [*to KAREN 3*] Is that good enough for you Karen?

KAREN 3: [*prepared to be mollified but still on her dignity*] Perfectly, Karen. I wanted an assurance, not an episode from your intellectual autobiography.

KAREN 1: [*to KAREN 2*] And is it good enough for you too Karen? Are you ready to concede that your Head of Department is not laying claim to mental states of arbitrarily large complexity despite the fact that she only has a finite brain?

KAREN 2: Well Karen if you are willing to perform the speech act of assuring me that one of your two speech acts of assuring Karen was devoid of cognitive content, then I am willing to perform the speech act of accepting your assurance.

KAREN 1: Well bugger me! This speech-act stuff has its uses after all!

AISLING [*now KAREN 5 and beginning to get into the rugged Aussie swing of things*]: Never let it be said that philosophy can't solve moral and political problems. If we've finished, Madam Chair, can we go for that beer? I'd like to get some drinking done before I investigate the sheep-dip.

*Exuent Omnes*