

The Importance of Humor in Teaching Philosophy

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Abstract: Philosophy and joke telling do not share the same pedigree, but both can have an allied function and purpose. Philosophy and joke telling can help us to organize, interpret, possibly understand, or, at least, hopefully face and confront the fundamental issues of existence.

Let me be more precise about what I mean by using humor and jokes in teaching philosophy. Humor, joke telling, can serve as a narrative playlet to metaphorically illuminate a complex philosophical concept. However, every class should not simply be played for laughs and comedic effect. Rather, through the judicious use of joke telling, the instructor needs to create an atmosphere of “respectful playfulness” which allows students an opportunity to comfortably address some of the complexities, confusions, and conundrums of the human condition.

Serious things cannot be understood without laughable things, nor opposites at all without opposites.—Plato

I have been teaching philosophy as a required course for over four decades. Over the years my general experience has been that my students approach the class with a sense of “fear and loathing.” You can see it in their eyes, and in the expressions on their faces. “Why do I have to take this class? What does it have to do with my major? The meaning of meaning! How do you even begin to answer questions like that? I just want to get out of here with a degree that will get me a job!” I try to point out to them that philosophy may not be a requirement in their particular majors, but it is an absolute requirement for all those attending the “University of Life.”¹

Having said that, my students are, of course, right. Studying philosophy is difficult and challenging. Philosophy tries to address the perennial and unavoidable questions and problems of life. “Why am I?” “Who am I?” “What do I owe others?” These kinds of questions are daunting, intimidating, and, at times, disheartening. Their resolutions are not easily captured in a simple syllogism or in a straightforward

power-point presentation. Moreover, their size and scope often tend to blunt our interest and willingness to pursue them.

Friedrich Nietzsche has suggested that to try too hard to answer the elemental and eternal problems of life, to gaze too long into the “gaping abyss,” leads to despair and futility.² So what I try to do in the classroom is to disarm the situation by offering a humorous comment or an appropriate joke. Personally and pedagogically, I am convinced that humor, laughter, and joke-telling are a way to gaze into the abyss, confront the unknowable and unanswerable, and perhaps find comfort and perspective even if no absolute answers are to be found. Humor can sometimes offer alternative insights and perspective, some relief from our existential crises and fears, and it can also help us bear the unbearable and deal with the insoluble. Humor allows us to gaze into the abyss and not be defeated.³

For me, the essence of humor, both in and out of the classroom, is the ability to laugh with and at life. It is the ability to appreciate the whimsical, the comical, the silly, as well as the absolutely ludicrous and absurdly incongruous aspects of life. It is the ability to step back and be amused, delighted, or surprised by life.

Humor, like philosophy, prevents us from perceiving reality as a personal attack or a personal affront. Like philosophy, humor is about the ability to transcend self. The ability to celebrate our collective experience and essential sameness. Humor allows us to laugh at our personal and collective vulnerability. The humorless person is too self-absorbed, too aggressively self-centered, too myopic to see beyond the needs, wants, and desires of self. Humor has to do with transcending the ambivalence, absurdity, despair, fragility, narcissism, and nonsense of life.⁴

French philosopher André Comte-Sponville argues that humor is a kind of mourning and mocking of the human condition. “[Humor] accepts the human condition as sad—scary, and then talks about it, pokes fun at it, laughs at it, and laughs at our feeble response to it. In so doing, it frees us from dread. It softens the blow of reality.”⁵ Perhaps, Nietzsche captured it best: “I know . . . why it is man alone who laughs—he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter.”⁶ At bottom, “humor is a form of joyful disillusionment”; that is, humor allows us to endure without false illusion or fear the paradoxes and perils of life.⁷

Metaphysically speaking, perhaps the most important attribute of laughter and joke-telling is that humor can act as both a sword and a shield to defend ourselves against overwhelming issues in life. According to University of Chicago epistemologist and erstwhile stand-up comic Ted Cohen, jokes can detox the perennial, unsolvable, intolerable, and unavoidable problems of life. To joke about—illness, death,

God, sex, age—is a way of defanging or domesticating something that essentially cannot be tamed. It is a way, says Cohen, of being in charge of something that we really cannot control. Joking about a “deep topic” or a “dangerous topic” is a way of talking about it, examining it in a way that doesn’t scare us, numb us, and rob us of our joy for life. Jokes allow us to dwell on the incomprehensible without dying from fear or going mad. Laughter and joke-telling are a way to speak of the unspeakable. Humor gives us the courage to endure that which we cannot understand or avoid.⁸ In other words, humor allows us to wax philosophical.

Let me be more precise about what I mean by using jokes and humor in the classroom. Clearly, the purpose of joke-telling in the classroom is not the joke per se. My intention is heuristic, not comic. To begin with, not all jokes are philosophically interesting or loaded with fascinating philosophical content. Jokes that are satirical, sexual, scatological, or about race, ethnicity, or gender, may be good or bad, funny or not funny, but they are not necessarily philosophical. The instructor needs to distinguish between telling a joke just to be funny and using jokes to illustrate a specific philosophical idea.

Sometimes I use a joke to introduce a concept, or as an example of the topic under consideration. Jokes can serve as a narrative platelet to metaphorically better illuminate a complex concept. As the comedian Steve Martin has suggested, joke-telling can be used as a gentle way of speaking and dealing with difficult truths.⁹ However, in the classroom, different from stand-up comedy, after the laughter the instructor is obligated to explicate the text and “deconstruct” the joke to get to its philosophical core. From a comedic point of view, of course, to over analyze a joke is to destroy the humorous content. However it has been my experience, that students quickly grasp the drill. The joke is a *bonum delectabile* (“a good thing in itself), but not the purpose of the exercise. The purpose of the exercise is to use the joke to probe the nuances of a complex, confusing philosophical concept or conundrum.

Two writers who agree with my general thesis, Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, met as undergraduate philosophy majors in the 1960s at Harvard. Over the next forty-odd years Cathcart and Klein remained close friends, went about their lives, and continued to reflect on the intersection between philosophy and joke-telling. Finally, fearing that death or dementia would overtake them, they put pen to paper and produced the profoundly funny and charming text *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy through Jokes*.

Their thesis is elegantly simple and straightforward. “The construction and payoff of jokes and the construction and payoff of philosophical concepts are made out of the same stuff. They tease the mind in similar ways. That’s because philosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our world upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable, truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger!”¹⁰ They call their new way of approaching the perennial problems of humankind *Philogagging* (wisdom through joke-telling). Although the authors did not write this book as a pedagogical guide for professors who want to try a new tactical approach to the teaching of philosophy, they are convinced that, occasional joke-telling and the careful use of humor can be a catalyst for creative reflection. Drawing on Cathcart and Klein’s insights and their rich storehouse of humor, I have put together a standard list of philosophy classes with examples of the kinds of “introductory jokes” that I think best reveal and exemplify the essential subject matter of the class in question. These jokes are not enough in themselves to unpack everything that will be handled in the class, but they are a good beginning.

1. Logic: The Art of Reasoning (*Inductive Reasoning: Moving from a particular to a general*)

Holmes and Watson are on a camping trip. In the middle of the night Holmes wakes up and gives Dr. Watson a nudge. “Watson,” he says, “look up in the sky and tell me what you see.” “I see millions of stars, Holmes,” says Watson. “And what do you conclude from that, Watson?” Watson thinks for a moment. “Well,” he says, “astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I see that God is all-powerful, and we are small and insignificant. Uh, what does it tell you, Holmes?” “Watson, you idiot! Someone has stolen our tent!”¹¹

2. Metaphysics: The Nature of Reality (*Martin Heidegger: “Being and Time”*)

A woman is told by her doctor that she has six months to live. “Is there anything I can do?” she asks. “Yes, there is,” the doctor replies. “You could marry a tax accountant.” “How will that help my illness?” the woman asks. “Oh, it won’t help your illness,” says the doctor, “but it will make that six months seem like an eternity!”¹²

3. Epistemology: The Theory of Knowledge (*George Berkeley: "Esse est percipi"—To be is to be perceived*)

Three women are in a locker room dressing to play racquetball when a man runs through wearing nothing but a bag over his head. The first woman looks at his _____ and says, "Well, it's not my husband." The second woman says, "No, it isn't." The third woman says, "He's not even a member of this club."¹³

4. Ethics: Doing the Right Thing (*Honesty and Truth-Telling*)

A man wins \$100,000 in Las Vegas and, not wanting anyone to know about it, he takes it home and buries it in his backyard. The next morning he goes out back and finds only an empty hole. He sees footprints leading to the house next door, which belongs to a deaf-mute, so he asks the professor down the street, who knows sign language, to help him confront his neighbor. The man takes his pistol, and he and the professor knock on the neighbor's door. When the neighbor answers, the man waves the pistol at him and says to the professor, "You tell this guy that if he doesn't give me back my \$100,000, I'm going to kill him right now!" The professor conveys the message to the neighbor, who responds that he hid the money in his own backyard under the cherry tree. The professor turns to the man and says, "He refuses to tell you. He says he'd rather die first."¹⁴

5. Philosophy of Religion (*Pluralism and Diversity*)

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, "Religion?"

The man says "Methodist." St. Peter looks down his list, and says, "Go to room twenty-eight, but be very quiet as you pass room eight."

Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. "Religion?"

"Baptist"

"Go to room eighteen, but be very quiet as you pass room eight."

A third man arrives at the gates. "Religion?"

"Jewish."

"Go to room eleven, but be very quiet as you pass room eight."

The man says, "I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass room eight?"

St. Peter says, "The Jehovah's Witnesses are in room eight, and they think they're the only ones here."¹⁵

6. Philosophy of Human Nature (*Ultimate Wisdom*)

At a meeting of the college faculty, an angel suddenly appears and tells the head of the philosophy department, "I will grant you whichever of three blessings you choose: Wisdom, Beauty—or ten million dollars." Immediately, the professor chooses Wisdom. There is a flash of lightning, and the professor appears transformed, but he just sits there, staring down at the table. One of his colleagues whispers, "Say something." The professor says, "I should have taken the money."¹⁶

But seriously, ladies and gentlemen! From a pedagogical point of view, "truth through joke-telling" is no joke! Both jokes and philosophy ask us to look at the world from a different perspective. Both force us out of our usual, more comfortable, safe perspectives on reality. And, in the process, both can jar us out of "our dogmatic slumber" (the words of Immanuel Kant, who was not a very funny guy!).

I very much like Cathcart and Klein's book. Nevertheless, I'm not at all sure that the book should ever be used in the classroom. Rather, I think, it should be required reading for junior and senior faculty members alike. Too often, in every academic field, but especially in philosophy, we take ourselves too seriously. Too often, we get caught up in third-levels of abstraction. Too often, we use language and references that only similarly trained *cognoscenti* are privy to. We forget who our real audience is. We forget that we're supposed to be effective communicators and translators of an important tradition.

In my first ten years in the classroom, I dutifully marched my students through the history of philosophy. I gave them facts, dates, the central theories of the philosopher in question, as well as all the major counter-theories and critiques. My hope was that the ideas themselves would be enough to hook them. I also hoped that by being prepared, detailed, and deliberate in my lectures I would communicate my own personal interest and enthusiasm in the subject matter and thereby infect them as well. They listened. They (seemingly) liked me. They were even convinced (I think) of my sincerity. And, they got through the course. But, I'm not at all sure I ever really got through to them. I wanted them to wrestle with issues of meaning, value, and purpose. They wanted to pass the class. The disconnect was painful for me.

And then one day, out of desperation more than inspiration, I began to tell stories and jokes as a prop, a ploy to get students involved and interested. I soon found out, of course, that there is a real danger of losing your credibility in telling too many jokes, and I didn't want to be known as Dr. Funny. Eventually, through trial and error, I learned

that joke-telling was a way to create a sense of community in the classroom. My ability to elicit laughter became a bond between us. More importantly, it was a way to get the students involved and interested in material that was *prima facie* confusing and obtuse. Over time, I learned to judiciously use *ridere* (laughter) in the pursuit of *sapientia* (wisdom).

Finally, I am also convinced that Cathcart and Klein are on to a much larger thesis than just telling jokes in philosophy classes. A sense of humor, joke-telling, and laughter play a vital role in all of life, whether inside or outside the classroom. We all need to laugh at both the little and the big issues in life in order to find balance and moments of peace. Of course, there is a caveat: Humor is not a cure for life, but it can be a helpful anesthesia. I am convinced that laughter reinforces our humanity, encourages hope, and allows us to endure with dignity. Both seriousness and silliness are critical parts of a meaningful life. In the words of yet another comedian, Joan Rivers, "If you can laugh at it, you can live with it."¹⁷

Notes

1. Al Gini, *Seeking The Truth of Things*. (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2010), 13.
2. Eugene Fink, *Nietzsche's Philosophy* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 157.
3. André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl Books, 2001), 212.
4. *Ibid.*, 217.
5. *Ibid.*, 221.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche and Christopher Middleton, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 278.
7. Comte-Sponville, *Small Treatise*, 221.
8. Ted Cohen, *Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 45.
9. Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 192.
10. Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar* (New York: Abrams Image, 2007), 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 30, 31.
12. *Ibid.*, 20.
13. *Ibid.*, 59.
14. *Ibid.*, 149.
15. *Ibid.*, 106, 107.
16. *Ibid.*, 79.
17. *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, directed by Ricki Stern, IFC Films, www.IFCFilms.com, 2010.