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# Presidential Address: An Existential Philosophy of Humor

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Philosophy in itself is a most serious discipline; indeed, most of us turned to it as a last desperate resort, having lost hope of finding the truth in a test tube, a woman's arms, or the faith of our fathers. But philosophy professors, we found, are not reliable guides. They either advocate one brand of truth so fervently that we grow suspicious, or they play the detached mentor who infuriates by leaving the choice up to us. So as bewildered novices—having every right to anger in this age of instant wisdom—we either turned the quest into a vocation, or plunged into the swamps of journals to scent the trail anew.

Of course, the quest for truth is a most worthwhile activity, but the man who pursues it as an absolute is as dangerous as a Grand Inquisitor. He can be saved from himself and for the quest only by self-directed laughter, and it is fortunate that by its very nature doing philosophy so closely resembles walking on banana peels.

One fine Grecian evening, Thales, while gazing at the stars, tripped and fell into a ditch. This inspired his female companion to be the first in recorded history to recognize that metaphysicians, who study the heavens without watching their feet, are deserving objects of laughter.<sup>1</sup>

Socrates, who most sincerely believed in the innate goodness of man, was trapped by his own assumptions into drinking hemlock tea by the most advanced civilization of his time.<sup>2</sup> Plato could not see the humor in this and advocated genocide for all Athenians over the age of 10.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, however, when accused of the same Socratic crime, commented that he would not give Athens the opportunity to make the same mistake twice, and beat a hasty retreat to the hinterlands.<sup>4</sup>

In contemporary times, the philosopher who best imitated the sure-footedness of Aristotle was G. E. Moore. As a student, he heard his philosophy professors say such things, "Time is not real," and he deftly side-stepped the slippery skins by asking, "I suppose, then, we are not telling the truth when we say we eat breakfast *before* lunch?"<sup>5</sup>

Moore was betrayed, of course, by his disciples—which reminds us of Nietzsche, who said that he could conceive of no worse fate than to

attract followers<sup>6</sup>—and Moore’s disciples have led us into a sea of ethical paradoxes in which we may choose between being swallowed by the whale of empirical verification or nibbled to death by the sardines of action theory.

We should recall that Moore, although he could not define “good,” was not prevented thereby from making evaluations based on a knowledge of good.<sup>7</sup> Just as Achilles, who could not have explained why motion as defined by Zeno was possible, was not prevented thereby from outrunning turtles, Trojans, and other assorted forms of wildlife.

But now I am becoming serious, which in philosophy leads to polemics, the very disease one seeks to cure. Yet to treat philosophy and other important human activities with constant flippancy reduces the relief of laughter to the sourness of skepticism which gives all efforts an equally bad taste. True humor must be a sometime thing, and its time comes when we need rescue from self-entrapment and confidence to try new paths.

Among contemporary philosophers, the most obvious candidate for the title, “Least Humorous,” would seem to be Jean-Paul Sartre, and his *Being and Nothingness* would seem to win him that title hands down. Yet in his later autobiography, *The Words*, Sartre writes that his life of scholarship was motivated by a desire to please his long-dead grandfather.<sup>8</sup> This, I submit, is a very humorous thing for an existentialist to say, and I suggest further that Sartre smiled as he wrote it. In reviewing his life, Sartre paused, looked at his past commitments, and saw a small, precocious, and obnoxious child, who in his passion to be a scholar by his grandfather’s most serious and stuffy standards, had become the high priest of atheistic existentialism—the negation of all seriousness. In this moment of detachment, Sartre laughed at himself, relaxed his commitment to storm the towers of scholarship, and, as his subsequent work reveals, began to deny the absoluteness of absurdity.<sup>9</sup>

Humor, I am suggesting, requires a detachment from seriousness. The serious man—the man with undeviating confidence that his values are absolute<sup>10</sup>—is no more able to laugh at himself than the serious God. In only one place does the Bible mention the laughter of God, and only then in a context that makes such laughter frightening. In Proverbs, God laughs in scorn at those who believe they can evade his righteous judgment: “I will laugh in the day of your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.” Such divine laughter is frightening because we expect God to be serious. We also expect that advocates of absolute values will not find themselves humorous, and we are rarely disappointed.

Now it must be made clear that I am not suggesting that the humorous is the opposite of the serious. The opposite of the serious man is the authentic individual, the man who knows that his values have no other basis than his own shifting and temporary commitments to the range of possibilities his choices project and illuminate.<sup>11</sup>

The authentic individual, believing his relationship to his world to be fundamentally fluid, does not find humor in the tenuousness of his situation, but he does have the capacity, because his commitments are not frozen, to detach himself from his situation, and he may do so when necessary to shift the focus of his actions.

Here, then, is the necessary human context of humor—a detached interlude between commitments, with an underlying need and willingness to be committed to something; an interlude made possible by an existential questioning of the certainty of personal values, a questioning that, while it despairs of absolutes, does not destroy an underlying longing for the security they might provide.

The best humorists—Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Bob Hope, and Mort Sahl—share this mixture of detachment and desire, eagerness to believe, and irreverence concerning the possibility of certainty. And when they become serious about their convictions—as Twain did about colonialism<sup>12</sup> and Hope about Vietnam—they cease to be humorous.

Because humor does require such a context, the two most popular psychological explanations of laughter are incomplete. The Freudian theory held that we laugh because we feel superior to those whose pretensions are shattered,<sup>13</sup> and Bergson believed we laugh because confronted with an unexpected juxtaposition of spiritual and mechanical patterns.<sup>14</sup>

Consider the following story which illustrates both theories: A pretty young girl is invited to an important banquet, but she has a very bad cold. She stuffs her purse with tissues, but just to be safe, she stuffs a couple of spare tissues down the front of her low-cut evening gown. As the evening passes, she converses brightly with the admiral seated on her left and the senator on her right, but her cold does not improve and as dessert is served there are no more dry tissues in her purse. She begins to search for the spare tissues in the front of her dress, but they seem to have disappeared. As she begins to probe with desperation induced by a dripping nose, the people around her notice her actions. Everyone has stopped talking and all eyes are focused on her strange behavior. As she looks up in embarrassment she blurts out, “I know I had two when I came!”

If we find this humorous, this is due in part, as Freud claimed, to a feeling of superiority, but it is also due, as Bergson claimed, to the

young lady's unexpected ambiguous response. However, these two theories, even when combined, do not account for that part of our reaction that is sympathetic, that is due to memories of having been in similar situations which were embarrassing because our sense of certainty was suddenly pulled out from under us. In laughing at the young lady who was certain she had two tissues and whose attempts to prove this appeared to express doubt concerning the fundamental nature of her being, we are laughing at ourselves, at our own previous attempts to make an indifferent universe conform to our seriousness.

Next consider a story which appears more "existential," yet appeals to the same attitudes: An earnest young man has spent many long years searching for the meaning of life and finally locates a wise old man, high in the Himalayas, who has been recommended to him throughout the world. Worn, cold, and hungry, he asks the snowy-haired guru, "What is the meaning of life?" The learned teacher pauses and then slowly intones, "Life is a fountain." The young seeker of wisdom explodes, "You have the nerve, after I have spent years in search, after I pursued you through blizzards and raging rivers—you have the nerve to tell me that life is a fountain?" The old man looks up in surprise and gasps, "You mean life is *not* a fountain!"

We listen to such stories torn between sympathy for all Don Quixotes and scorn for their simple faith. If we laugh, it is because we are skeptical of absolutes, and yet our laughter is tinged with sadness—for, after all, who wants all such quests to be disappointed? We feel superior to the sage who thought he knew the meaning of life and to the young lady who thought she was prepared for all contingencies because we now feel superior to ourselves when in the past we thought we had the truth by the tail. And we also feel relieved when others have their cherished beliefs disappointed because this assures us that our own inability to cling to absolutes is justified—how can we be blamed for failing when no one else succeeds? What finally renders our laughter complete is the knowledge that despite all this, we will forge on in grim pursuit of certainty as soon as our laughter dies. And why not? If all commitments and certainties are only temporary, so too are all detachments and doubts.<sup>15</sup>

Now having sketched in broad outline an "existential" theory of humor, I must consider an obvious objection.<sup>16</sup> So far, I have used the term "humorous" in a very broad sense, as if it might describe any laugh-provoking situation. Certainly we laugh for many reasons other than being suspended between anguish and action and thus being scornfully sympathetic toward those who believe in absolutes. We laugh in cruelty when our enemies fall, in sarcasm at companions who disap-

point us, in recognition at images of self revealed by clowns. We laugh in delight at the antics of infants, in shame to cover our own embarrassments, and in hysteria when frustration is overwhelming.

The many possible kinds of laughter range from the laughter of ridicule and sarcasm at one pole to the laughter of embarrassment and hysteria at the other. In between are found comic laughter, more scornful than sympathetic, and the laughter of delight, more sympathetic than scornful. Between these, at the mid-point of the continuum, is the locus of the humorous with its ambiguous balance of scorn and sympathy for both self and others.

Those who are most serious about their commitments tend to laugh only at their opponents, and the more serious they are, the more such laughter tends to be a weapon of ridicule, but of course, "true believers,"<sup>17</sup> whether of the right or left, are also capable of laughing with others. The concentration camp commandant can chuckle in delight when his two-year-old, lost in papa's boots and cap, imitates in childish piping his barks of command—just as some contemporary Americans can laugh fondly when their cubs throw darts at a target featuring the face of Nixon. Thus, it should not surprise us that often men can be both sentimental and brutal. But this should not cause us to conclude, as Santayana did, that sentimentality is a dangerous emotion.<sup>18</sup> What is dangerous in any man, whether sentimental or not, is the absolute commitment.

In embarrassing situations, if we can succeed in causing others to laugh with us, we take this as a sign of sympathy, as a sign we have been taken back into the group. However, if others laugh at our behavior when we have not acknowledged its impropriety by asking it to be viewed as laughable, we take their laughter as scornful and as a sign of rejection.<sup>19</sup>

In situations of crisis, which may occur because our concern for self makes demands the world cannot satisfy or because our world demands too much of us, we may come to feel completely rejected, completely isolated from all sources of sympathy. In a desperate reaching for some point of contact, we may go back in time or memory to earlier, more secure contexts.<sup>20</sup> In so doing, we are again asking our world to extend to us the sympathy it gave us as children, but the external manifestations of infantile regression, even if only tears, are rarely attractive and provoke hostility more often than sympathy. We may, then, go back farther to the womb of catatonic withdrawal, but other options are also possible.

We may break into hysterical laughter which, because it appears to be beyond our deliberate control, generally gains us the human con-

tact and concern we seek, even if nothing more than a slap. Hysterical laughter evokes sympathy because it is interpreted—quite correctly, I believe—as a report from those who have uncovered reality and a proclamation that the biggest joke of all is that all human hopes are empty and all human values nothing. We are compelled to silence such laughter because if what it seems to reveal is true, few of us can live with such truth, and those who can, cannot live with it as a joke. So we must assure those who are hysterical, and thus ourselves, that what they apprehend is an illusion, that reality is here with us in the community of human sympathy and language, and to give such assurance we must restore them to this community.

Now I believe it is possible to see why there is, as many have detected,<sup>21</sup> a close relationship between comedy and tragedy. The individual who, in the grip of a crisis or by means of reflection, concludes that his values have no objective basis, physical or metaphysical, may respond by forcing others to restore his faith in objective values. But there is another option. He may respond, as Sartre has, by viewing his own belief in the absoluteness of absurdity as in itself a humorous meta-contradiction.

If he can, because he has found that interlude in which detachment and desire are balanced, then it is possible for him to move from that interlude by acting as an authentic individual, one who knows that he must create and make meaningful his own values by acting upon and accepting responsibility for his own commitments. The authentic individual also knows that by such action he cannot create or discover some objective ground for his values, but nevertheless he acts because he does know that otherwise he destroys his humanity. In short, the authentic individual, knowing in advance the outcome, chooses to become a character in a tragedy.

We might even say he chooses to become a tragic hero, except for the fact that he knows he is, at the same time from another perspective, a character in a comedy. We admire, in tragedy, the individual who chooses to struggle against dark powers he cannot overcome because in the struggle he reveals to us what is most truly human. We laugh, in comedy, at man for being a beast who reveals his best features only in tragic defeat. One man's Holy Grail is, after all, only another's windmill.

The authentic individual, whether Galahad or Quixote, is reaching for the Absolute while knowing he must fail. Thus, it seems that his reaching, which is clearly not "serious" as an absolute commitment, cannot be serious even in the ordinary sense of being a matter of importance or interest to him. But this is not so. Indeed, it must be emphasized that individuals can be truly serious, in the ordinary sense,

only to the degree that they do *not* hold their beliefs and values to be absolute.

No one, for example, for whom the question of God's existence is a matter of importance and interest can be an atheist, which constitutes the small portion of truth in the chaplain's proverb, "There are no atheists in foxholes." On the other hand, Tillich was also right in claiming that no one loves God more than the atheist.<sup>22</sup> No one has greater love and longing for the Absolute than one who has reached in vain with finite hands and cried, "My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?"<sup>23</sup> In this His most tragic moment, Jesus was most truly human and thus most truly divine.

But suppose He had not died, suppose after this terrible revelation He would have had to face, as many so enlightened must, year upon year a series of Monday mornings. How then does one avoid being paralyzed by tragic insight? Only by a sense of humor; only by being able, as was Sartre, to say to God, ". . . with the easy amusement of an old beau who meets a former belle: 'Had it not been for that misunderstanding, that mistake . . . that separated us, there might have been something between us.'"<sup>24</sup>

Laughter makes man fit for tragedy by dissolving his presumptive sense of certainty so he may reach for the Absolute with heart and feeling as well as cold reason. Laughter also allows man to retain his humanity in the aftermath of tragic insight by allowing him to accept his own finitude. A life with depth and meaning is not possible without the perspective provided by tragedy, but tragic insight cannot enhance our lives if it destroys the will to live; thus, tragedy must be balanced with comedy and followed by the healing sound of humor.

A young philosophy student from a small college traveled one summer to a distant metropolis. While walking the busy streets, gazing in wonder at the variety of goods offered in many windows, he saw a sign, "Learn your future! Fortunes told for \$5." As he entered the small room, the fortune teller accepted his \$5 bill and asked him to be seated. She could tell he was a serious young man, anxious to know his destiny.

Suppressing a smile, she began to gaze intently into her crystal ball, but from time to time she glanced at his worried countenance. Finally, she could control herself no longer and suddenly began to laugh—whereupon the young man reached across the table and slapped her.

"Why did you do that?" asked the startled gypsy.

"Because," he replied, "my teacher told me to always strike a happy medium."

#### NOTES

1. *The Presocratics*, Phillip Wheelwright, ed. (Odyssey Press, 1966) p. 49.

2. Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito* (Liberal Arts Press, 1956), pp. 51–65.
3. *The Republic of Plato*, tr. F.M. Cornford (Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 262.
4. *Introduction to Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. (Modern Library, 1947), p. x.
5. Barry R. Gross, *Analytic Philosophy* (Pegasus, 1970), pp. 14–15.
6. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968), p. 782.
7. *Ethics and Metaethics*, Raziell Abelson, ed. (St. Martin's Press, 1963), pp. 269–70.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (Braziller, 1964), pp. 40–44, 59–60, 177–80.
9. Cf. Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 248–55, and “An Interview with Sartre,” *The New York Review*, Mar. 26, 1970, pp. 22.
10. This is the way the term “serious” is used by Nietzsche (cf. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 176) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Ethics of Ambiguity* [Philosophical Library, 1948], pp. 46–52), and in terms of such usage, it must be concluded that Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 677–81, was most “seriously” committed to the absolute freedom of consciousness and consequent absolute responsibility.
11. The inspiration for this use of “authentic” is Heidegger (cf. *Being and Time* [Harper & Row, 1962] pp. 341–48). Cf. also, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 589–99, 766–67, where Sartre most nearly approximates Heidegger's view of authenticity as the opposite of seriousness.
12. Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (Berlin, Seven Seas Books, 1961).
13. Sigmund Freud, “Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious,” *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (Modern Library, 1938), pp. 797–803.
14. Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (Macmillan, 1921), pp. 96–131.
15. As Sartre suggests (in *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 82–86), it is the self-transcending nature of all commitments and not the intrinsic good or evil of what is affirmed or denied that causes the serious man to become sub-human—even if he wills to suspend belief.
16. This objection was brought to my attention first by Professor Hannah Levenson, Dep't of Psychology, Texas A & M University, whose research concerning “Cognitive Correlates of Involvement” has been most suggestive and reassuring.
17. This is Eric Hoffer's name for “the serious man” as used in his book, *The True Believer* (Harper, 1951).
18. George Santayana, *The German Mind* (Apollo, 1968), pp. 162–68.
19. Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 310–28, for his famous account of “the look,” by which others determine whether we are “in” or “out.”
20. Cf. Freud, *The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis* (Gateway, 1965), pp. 59–62.
21. For various views of the relationship between comedy and tragedy, see Aristotle, *Poetics* (Gateway, 1961), pp. 6–14; Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook* (University of Nebraska Press, 1949), pp. 371–80; Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (Scribner's, 1953), pp. 326–66; and Danziger and Johnson, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Heath, 1961), pp. 90–116.
22. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper, 1958), pp. 45–46, 126–27.
23. Matthew 27:46.
24. Sartre, *The Words*, pp. 102–103.