

What's the Deal with Standup Comedy and Philosophy?

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“When a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth.”¹
-George Bernard Shaw

I. Introduction

The artform of standup comedy can be seen as having much in common with the discipline of philosophy, particularly with the way philosophy is carried out or “performed,” whether professionally or otherwise. There are, for instance, certain basic similarities between how standup comedians and philosophers value certain ideals of clarity and precision when it comes to the issue of determining what kind of language is best to employ if one seeks to either effectively deliver a funny joke, as in the case of standup comedy, or if one seeks to effectively articulate and present an argument that can later be assessed as sound, as in the case of philosophy. The reason this is of note is because it is rooted in another similarity that serves not only to bring these two activities significantly closer but to isolate standup comedy from most artforms when it comes to how it conceives of matters pertaining to interpretation and purpose. More specifically, this is the fact that standup comedians and philosophers alike hope, and even expect on some level, that, in the best of cases, their respective jokes and reasoned arguments will compel some form of unanimous approval from those who properly understand and engage with their content. When this observation is combined with the additional observation that jokes can also serve as vehicles for imparting wisdom of a genuinely philosophical nature despite the fact that generating laughter rather than seeking truth per se represents standup comedy’s ostensive primary goal, this leads one to wonder how porous the boundaries that otherwise serve to distinguish these two activities might be. In particular, in light of the nature and scope of the many similarities that can be said to exist between them, ones which I will lay out and discuss throughout in what follows, it seems that standup comedy could even be reasonably argued to be the artform that is closest to philosophy.

II. The Role of Language in Standup Comedy and Philosophy

To properly begin addressing the issue of the relation between standup comedy and philosophy, it makes sense to first make note of some of the most basic points they have in common. Both activities are, for starters, clearly heavily writing-centered, and they both give much importance to the power of words as well as the general limitations and potential of what language can capture and express. The language employed by both standup comedians and philosophers is also, as just mentioned, often of a similar kind as well, for standup comedians and philosophers equally value the use of everyday or ordinary language for what can also ultimately be viewed as different versions of the same motivation.

Standup comedians value such language because they aim to successfully deliver their jokes to as many audience members as they can, meaning they cannot afford to be too abstract or

¹ George Bernard Shaw, “Back to Methuselah,” in *Complete Plays with Prefaces Vols I-VI* (Vol. II), (New York: Dodd Meade & Company, 1963), 247.

sophisticated in their references, descriptions, and word choice, as this would only serve to conceal whatever might be funny about a joke from its ever being appreciated as such. That standup comedians operate like this is particularly worth noting because, generally speaking, artforms that heavily emphasize language and writing tend to approach things quite differently, or with more authorial freedom of choice, if one likes, since technically nothing would stop a poet, for instance, from making use of the same kind of language that standup comedians tend to use. By and large, it is clear, of course, that the language of standup comedy manifestly tends to differ, from, say, the kind of “language in orbit” with which the Irish poet Seamus Heaney notably identifies the art of poetry, and one can equally say similar things when it comes to the differences that exist between the language of standup comedy and that which is usually employed by novelists, playwrights, and so on.

If Samuel Beckett is correct to insinuate, then, that “art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear, any more than the light of day (or night) makes the subsolar, -lunar, and -stellar excrement,”² it would seem this first point about language’s employment in standup comedy already serves to make it a bit of an odd case as an artform. In line with what I mean to say, standup comedian Norm Macdonald once noted in an interview Larry King that while, generally speaking, all art is open to interpretation, the work that is produced by standup comedians does not intend for this. One can say that by distancing itself from other artforms in this respect, standup comedy’s approach very much ends up resembling that of an activity like philosophy instead, for, in that case, any ambiguities and imprecisions in a philosopher’s employment of language when it comes to the arguments she constructs or engages with makes them much more difficult to understand and evaluate, which is undesirable to a philosopher in her search for truth. That philosophy values clarity and precision in argumentation is something rather obvious, for, if the attainment of truth represents philosophy’s primary goal, they are also aware that, as standup comedian George Carlin once said, “language is a tool for concealing the truth,” which means philosophers really have no alternative but to uphold whatever ideals offer them their best and only chance of ever getting at something like the truth about things.

To claim that standup comedy and philosophy use roughly the same kind of language for what are similar purposes at that might seem like an overgeneralization of things from a few different perspectives. One could retort, for instance, that, in the case of standup comedy, there is technically no fundamental dependence on any use of language, at least, certainly not in the same way that philosophical practice clearly depends on the use of language. Even if our usual image of a standup comedian is, then, of someone uttering a laughter-inducing flurry of words into a microphone, like the fast-talking Midge Maisel played by actress Rachel Brosnahan in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, a large part of a standup comedian’s act is undeniably of a physical or non-verbal nature. This might involve, for instance, the use of certain facial gestures, well-timed silences, bodily movements, or whatever else might be needed to elevate a joke and make it as funny as possible (and, indeed, as the fan of Carrot Top who is reading this will be quick to point out, even props can play a role in standup comedy). Beyond this, one could also retort that much of philosophy is in fact quite unreadable and even overly technical at times, for logic, which employs mathematical formalisms and so on, is and has long been a major part of philosophy.

While these objections are all legitimate, it is still evident that, in practice, standup comedy by and large strongly relies, even if not fully depend, on the use of language, and, in particular, language of an ordinary and understandable kind that allows the content of jokes to be understood univocally by their audiences. That many philosophers fail to express their own thoughts in a sufficiently intelligible manner when presenting their arguments is, of course, an unfortunate thing, but this might

² Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 94.

partly be a sign that many who call themselves philosophers are doing something different, or a sign that many lack the capacity or training to write and express things in a less convoluted or highfalutin-sounding ways. Despite all this, it still seems fair to say that philosophers do generally and *ideally* aim for clarity and simplicity in all matters related to language and presentation to the extent that such a thing is possible, even though sometimes, it should be noted, the content of philosophical discussions can be too abstract to be easily accessible by all but the most dedicated of specialists. Lastly, one can say that, as far the special case of logic is concerned, it only uses the formalisms that it does because logicians working in philosophy value such ideals too.

III. The Purpose of Delivering Jokes and Presenting Philosophical Arguments

The claim that the language of standup comedy and philosophy is usually, or, in the latter case, ideally, of a similar kind is critical to underscore because it is rooted in a somewhat less obvious convergence that serves to not only further unite these two activities but to further separate standup comedy from most other artforms. More specifically, this is the idea that standup comedians and philosophers alike operate under the idea that their material, or the content they create and presumably eventually prepare for some public to consume in some form, will and should be able to be understood not only in a unanimous and univocal fashion by any intended future audiences, as just discussed, but that, because of this, they will also appreciate and approve of it, whether this be through laughter, as happens when a joke is deemed funny, or through rational assenting to some philosophical argument that is deemed sound.

This makes standup comedy especially unusual as an artform because one cannot easily claim without generating much controversy that the creative products of artforms have any kind of basic or general purpose, as when thinking something like “the purpose of a painting is to imitate some aspect of nature,” especially if this purpose is also one like eliciting a kind of unanimous response of approval from an audience, which is clearly what motivates a standup comedian’s decision to tell a joke. To be even more technical, though, the point of delivering a joke in front of an audience is not just that the people hearing it laugh, but that they laugh simultaneously as well as similarly in intensity at all of the right points which make up the joke, for it is clear that a joke’s setup-punchline structure is designed in such a way that the audience is supposed to laugh the hardest at the end, or upon hearing the punchline, which surprises them on some level by subverting their prior expectations once delivered.

If standup comedians thought their jokes were only possibly or likely to be funny to them or to a handful of potential audience members, they would probably not bother telling them, it seems clear. One reason this matters is because it means they also assume that what is funny is also objectively so on a certain level, even if this sense of objectivity does not extend beyond the universe of people who usually who attend their shows, who share in a standup comedian’s style of humor (for if subjectivity reigns in the context of standup comedy, it is in how some might like a style like dark comedy or roasts, but strongly dislike cringe comedy, and so on). Of course, the unanimous approval a philosopher would expect after presenting an argument is of a different sort than that which a standup comedian expects after delivering a joke, because logic is what guarantees, beyond the truth of their premises, that an argument they present is valid and sound. Consequently, when a philosopher presents an argument under the assumption that it must be true, their hope and expectation is really that *all* who properly understand it should have no choice but to agree with it and with the truth of its conclusion. While imperfect, the analogy here between standup comedy and philosophy is striking nonetheless, however, because it indicates there might be something like a logic to joking, as I will proceed to explain.

IV. The Logic of Joking

In philosophy's case, logic, as mentioned, is what creates the bridge linking a valid argument's premises to its conclusion, and the truth of its premises is what guarantees this validity implies soundness. Logic is the bridge because there are certain rules of inference which philosophers implicitly accept and employ in order to be able to devise their arguments in such a way that, if the argument's premises happen to be true, then the argument's conclusion will also necessarily be true. This, in turn, means that all who understand the argument should agree that the philosopher's argument is sound (if they are thinking in a standard logical way). What, however, is it about the simple structure of jokes that allows them to work so well, even if not as perfectly, and what might the answer to this question tell us, if anything, about standup comedy's relation and seeming resemblance to the activity of philosophy?

The issue of the manner in which the setup and punchline order of a joke can trigger a very specific kind of uncontrollable collective response from an audience, as evidenced by the clearly non-coincidental quasi-unanimity of many an audience's reactions to a standup comedian's jokes, connects to our larger discussion concerning standup comedy's relation to philosophy because, whatever the exact explanation for this is, it seems that one can, at the very least, clearly glean a notion curiously analogous to the idea of logical validity in philosophy in the context of standup comedy. In particular, an analogy with logic's role in argumentation seems to be appropriate in standup comedy because the rules at play in coming up with any good mostly language-centered joke are presumably of a sort that must significantly take into account the structure of human reason, or of how the usual patterns and the laws of thinking work, as this seems to be the key that allows a punchline to possibly surprise an audience enough so as to bring it to laughter despite the fact it only consist of a small string of words being uttered or delivered in a specific order and fashion.

In particular, it seems these implicit rules must consider, for instance, how we tend to interpret the meaning of certain words, how we let one word or idea stand in for another while in the middle of some train of thought, and so on. That such rules exist seems to be the only thing that might also possibly explain why standup comedians, even if not ever explicitly aware as to the content of these rules, are ever able to come up regularly with jokes which they can also be somewhat reasonably confident will receive laughs across the board from the audiences they deliver them to. In a discussion with comedic peers, standup comedian Chris Rock curiously said, "If I set the premises right, this joke will always work," which is something that, if true, certainly mirrors the aforementioned idea of logical validity philosophers rely on, for this would imply that some rule-based conditions must be met by the premises in order for the punchline that follows it to be able to work reliably and as intended. If nothing like this applies, writing a joke that might be funny to an entire audience would amount to a guessing game aiming at lucky shots in the dark.

V. The Creative Process

Another context in which standup comedy curiously resembles philosophy while standing further apart from other artforms concerns the unique role audiences or spectators play in a standup comedian's creative process. As an artform, standup comedy is uniquely "dialectical" in this context by virtue of the peculiar way in which it conceives of a feedback and progress loop that precedes any joke's completion, and this does not seem to apply in the context of the creative processes that account for how the products of other artforms, e.g. songs, poems, dances, paintings, sculptures, films, plays, novels, and so on, come into being and are made.

After all, when, say, a musical artist performs a song in front of a crowd, it is generally a song

that has been written and composed beforehand and which is therefore set in stone insofar as how it will continue to be performed for time immemorial. Musicians will normally not try to change the lyrics, melody, and so on when performing it for a crowd, for instance, and if they do such a thing it is probably not for the purpose of refining the song for future purposes, but as a kind of one-off to placate the people they are performing for that day, or for some other informal and inconsequential reason. Things are somewhat similar in the case of, say, a sculptor who is unveiling her latest sculpture, or in a painter's first showing at the local art gallery, for, once their works are presented, the artists in either case are tacitly expressing that since their works are finally ready for public consumption, they will not be modified going forward (and one could easily offer countless more comparable examples that concern the many other artforms that exist).

To sum things up, then, one can say that artistic creations are typically assumed to be completed works, and rarely, if ever, works-in-progress, for, when incomplete, they are still in the process of becoming the eventual artwork the artist has decided worthy of creating and producing, which is not how things work in the context of standup comedy at all. Indeed, one can say that the process of writing jokes in standup comedy almost perfectly parallels the vastly different process of coming up with philosophical arguments instead, at least when it comes to the case of professional or academic philosophy. To see why, one can first think of a professional philosopher's keynote lecture or submission of a final manuscript prior to its publication. In particular, these are, for the philosopher, special events or moments relative to most others because, on other occasions, what she essentially does is present in a more uncooked form the same ideas she will present there at the various seminars, colloquia, and conferences which precede them, and which serve as a sort of leadup or testing ground to help her arguments develop properly. This means, then, that the text of a philosopher's keynote lecture or final manuscript, which fundamentally consists of various arguments put together in a certain way, is really a product that is very much analogous to what a standup comedian's "official" version of an act consists of, where one can think here of a one-hour Netflix special or equivalent in the most elite of cases. The analogy holds because both are, in the end, the result of months or years adding, cutting, peddling and refining specific bits and pieces of material until all is finally united and optimally structured in a way that ensures all is truly ready for public consumption and representative of the standup comedian or philosopher's creative capacities.

VI. The Dialogue that Drives Standup Comedy

Reflecting on the unique way in which standup comedy takes feedback and such into account when it comes to the creative process allows for yet another point of convergence between standup comedy and philosophy to come into sharp relief. This is, more specifically, the idea that standup comedy is, at bottom, an activity that, much like philosophy does, relies on a kind of dialogue to get things going. To refer to standup comedy as dialogical might surprise those who think of standup comedy as a monologue-based activity. The idea I wish to advance here, though, is not that a standup comedian's audience members should be acknowledged as far more pivotal participants or interlocutors in the creative process of coming up with jokes than they are often given credit for, to the point that they are almost colleagues or specialists in funniness in the eyes of the standup comedian writing a joke, for their role can be seen as almost analogous to that played by interlocutors like journal reviewers in a philosopher's own process of articulating or devising a coming up with some argument or set of arguments in favor or against a given position, for instance as these presented in an academic article.

In particular, I say this because laughter, which the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once

described as the language of the soul, can be seen as a way of expressing either assent or approval at a certain something which has clearly surprised the laughing individual on some level, even if said judgment is partly based on instinctual and not purely rational considerations (considering the immediacy with which it follows the end of a joke's delivery). The reason laughter, as mentioned, can be seen as a mode of judging is because a loud laugh is clearly a sign of approval that mixed kinds of laughter, silence, or booing is not, and standup comedians interpret the content of audience feedback in a collective way and makes it an indispensable element throughout the entirety of their creative process. "Dialogue" between a standup comedian and an audience does not only have to occur in a protracted fashion, of course, for it can also be direct and occur as a real back-and-forth during a live act, and interaction with the audience in some form, it is worth noting, might very well be the most important element of standup comedy, as Norm Macdonald told Larry King a few years ago.

VII. Philosophical Comedy

If joking can be said to involve dialogue, how fruitful and philosophical can this dialogue possibly be, however? Those most amenable or sympathetic to the idea that standup comedy and philosophy possibly share a meaningful relation in this respect will likely be quick to point out that standup comedians often challenge certain societal norms and assumptions which we generally take for granted in ways reminiscent of how philosophers often do the same. Standup comedians, for instance, often deftly address taboo subjects in deceptively subversive ways with what almost seems to be a complete lack of prejudice, and hardly any topic seems off-limits to them as they display their ability to pick apart the logic of the conventional distinctions and dogmas through which we classify and conceive of the world around us. This, in turn, is something that can serve to expose some of the collective anxieties and irrationalities that define us, as any fan of Lenny Bruce's work will easily attest to (as when Simon and Garfunkel sing "I learned the truth from Lenny Bruce"). As such, standup comedians often appear to be possessed by the spirit of a Socratic gadfly, and this not only by opening our eyes to the truth of certain issues through their humorous analyses thereof, but by creating and sharing with their audiences new concepts and categories which might help them better grasp their own identities and the way they understand the world.

That genuine and hearty laughter can also, for instance, ever follow something like shock, disgust, or a feeling of moral indignation in the space of a few minutes before a punchline is delivered, as seems to happen often, speaks to something important about standup comedy's potential to lead one to the kind of enlightenment that philosophers aspire to in their search for truth. This is because, when such a thing happens, it seems to indicate that some pre-existing inner tension within the mind of the laughing individual, perhaps one having to do with ignorance, nagging doubts, or a lack of prior reflection on some topic, has finally found some resolution, or, at least, that some progress might have been made which will affect how the person will think about related topics going forward. This, in turn, certainly resembles what can happen when one comes across a convincing philosophical argument where the rigor of its argumentative structure and truth of its premises gives one no choice but to have to assent to the implications of some bold or ambitious conclusion. If standup comedians can indeed resolve inner tensions within the minds of audience members in the ways just described, which might allow them to think better for themselves going forward, as seems fair to suppose happens often, it would be what explains why attending or watching a great set or act often feels like a revelatory experience in general, if not a therapeutic or humbling one at that.

Of course, one could make the comparison to philosophy here not only about other types of comedy, but also about other artforms, since experiencing certain songs, paintings, films, and so on,

can affect an individual in similar ways as well, and often in stronger ways than most good jokes can. However, that standup comedians can compel us to rethink what we thought we knew and impart wisdom of a philosophical kind specifically through their use of language and through the creation of new concepts of the sort which can help reveal or underscore some of the contradictions or absurdities underlying dominant ways of making sense of the world is something that makes the relation that exists between standup comedy and philosophy of special relevance. This is especially so if the French poststructuralist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are right in claiming that philosophy itself is all about conceptual creation,³ in particular conceptual creation of the sort that can help engender radically new ways of thinking which will later allow one to pose better questions and thus make genuine philosophical progress going forward into the future.

VIII. Is Laughter the Only Aim of Standup Comedy?

It should be clear, of course, that standup comedians do not always care to impart wisdom, spiritually edify audience members, create new concepts or reveal any contradictions about identity, society, reality, etc., through the medium of jokes, nor does it seem reasonable to say that this somehow happens indirectly or subconsciously all the time either. Indeed, standup comedians would probably be the first to tell one there is no artistic requirement that standup comedy must somehow consciously aim for this kind of thing, for the main point of telling a joke is to make others laugh, and a cheap laugh, even if cheap, is still an earned laugh, at least in the context of standup comedy. To admit this, however, also makes it seem like there is a massive gulf between standup comedy and philosophy when it comes to the relatability of their respective aims, since the latter seeks truth, which is seen as quite serious and generally unrelated to laughter, which is something that only seems to restrict or put a ceiling to the meaningfulness of any possible relation the two activities might have despite all that has been said so far about them.

Perhaps however, one should acknowledge that it is perhaps misleading in some sense to say laughter is all there is to joking, for many of the greatest standup comedians of all time, who are the individuals one imagines have the best grasp of what their activity consists in, often exploit standup comedy's philosophical potential, so to speak, by managing the challenging feat of being both humorous and insightful at once, which indicates there is more to things than just laughter. Lenny Bruce, arguably the most important figure in the history of standup comedy, seemed aware of this possibility when he said, in 1959, that he would not qualify as a comedian if that meant that his only role was to make audiences laugh every fifteen to twenty-five seconds for some set minimum number of minutes, for that simplifies things in a way that does not do standup comedy justice. This kind of leads one to wonder, then, if perhaps high-level standup comedians act on an implicit assumption that there are in fact different tiers of standup comedy, as when overtly commercial popular music is compared to avant-garde classical music and seen as a lower form of art, but still acknowledged as music.

In the context of standup comedy, the tiers here would be divided according to the nature, and not the intensity, of the laughter their best jokes can produce. This might be a hierarchy, then, where the lowest form of standup comedy is probably the one that mostly seeks the aforementioned cheap kinds of laughs through crassness of a certain kind or because the jokes pick on easy targets and are easy to come up with by virtue of their utter hollowness in terms of substance, whereas the highest form would be the one elite standup comedians often opt for, which often seeks a kind of laughter that only jokes that are also rich in content and philosophical value can produce. As speculative as this might all sound, such a stratified view of laughter, if appropriate to mark out, would

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 8.

at least find some precedent in the words of Mark Twain, the great American humorist, who noted that “laughter without a tinge of philosophy is but a sneeze of humor,” right before proceeding to claim that “Genuine humor is replete with wisdom.”⁴

In light of this possible distinction between the kinds of laughter that exist, it seems a bit too facile, then, to claim that the search for laughter is all there is to standup comedy, or to say that this holds without any remainder, as it creates the impression that all laughter is the same and that laughter of any sort is all standup comedians care to achieve, regardless of the cheapness of the laughs their jokes might generate in the process, which is something that only conceals the prospects of any possible relation joking might have to matters of wisdom and truth. Assuming this fine-grained account of kinds of laughter, of course, only further narrows the gap that otherwise seems to limit the potential of the relationship that exists between standup comedy and philosophy, one whose extent some might have remained skeptical of due to the primary nature and purpose of joking, which seems to differ so much from philosophy’s, but ultimately need not be seen that way at all.

IX. Comedic Philosophy

It is worth noting, in a somewhat related vein that Ludwig Wittgenstein, arguably the preeminent philosopher of the last century, seemed to agree in a rather extreme way with the idea that jokes were in no way incompatible with the achievement of genuinely meaningful philosophical aims, and that one could just philosophize through jokes, for, according to Norman Malcolm, he once said non-facetiously that “a serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.”⁵ One reason to think joking and philosophizing are perfectly compatible has to do with the wide palette of options one can make recourse to when producing either something that is able to be deemed as funny or as philosophical. It is clear, for instance, that, in the case of standup comedy, there are countless types of styles, topics to write jokes about, and ways to deliver these jokes. In the case of philosophy, there are also many topics to discuss and many ways to do things which are available at one’s disposal, for an argument technically need only heed the limits and conventions of language as well as the laws of logic, as these are the most minimal strictures which our nature as rational beings requires of our ideas if they are ever going to lay any claims to intelligibility, impartiality, coherence, and objectivity, especially in a communal context with interlocutors who value dialogue. That philosophers have a freedom here akin to that of standup comedians in terms of being able to choose how to construct and present their ideas is, however, the most important idea to take from all this, because it accounts for why using humor is one possibility they will always have available to them.

Indeed, one can even state without much controversy that philosophical recourse to the realm of the humorous and comedic in general is something has been taking place since around the time philosophers first began putting into writing their ideas on whatever topic under the sun they have deemed worthy of addressing, including the sun and what is beyond it as well. For instance, from among the ancient Greeks, one could say that Plato, who, despite not being an enthusiast of laughter himself (apparently quite unlike the pre-Socratic atomist Democritus, who was even known as the Laughing Philosopher), is among those who valued how the humorous or comedic could effectively be bridged with the philosophical when it came to the presentation of arguments whose primary goal was still (or only) the attainment of truth. When reading Plato, one sees, after all, that his punctiliously presented philosophical points, while not making use of setups and punchlines in the way a standup comedian does when telling a joke, are still often punctuated by puns upon puns and riddled with all sorts of riddles and the like, and all this without it ridding or expunging his writings of their unquestionably

⁴ Opie Read, *Mark Twain and I* (Chicago: Reilly & Lee, 1940), 17.

⁵ Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 27.

philosophical bona fides.

The thoroughly humorous tenor of Plato's writings is one that, being quite difficult to impugn, was thus rather aptly described by the Irish novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch when she observed that, "Plato's work is in fact full of pleasing jokes and is pervaded by a light of humor and sweet-tempered amusement."⁶ While it is not perfectly clear that Plato was friends with the playwright Aristophanes, the father of comedy, he was known to at least appreciate his work, and he even notably made him an important character with a rather prominent contribution in one of his most famous philosophical dialogues, the *Symposium*, which only further proves just how much the father of Western philosophy himself believed that what was humorous and philosophical could sit together at the same table and work harmoniously in the search for truth. This is but one example, of course, of a philosopher doing such a thing, though he is an especially important example, but one could easily offer up others if necessary.⁷

Beyond this, one could also say that, historically speaking, various philosophers have made use of diverse devices and techniques related to the worlds of humor and comedy not only in order to better or more interestingly present their ideas or see where they might lead, but in order to arrive at their conclusions in more powerful and persuasive ways than might otherwise have been possible. Remaining with the ancients, one could, for instance, take the example of Socrates himself, Plato's mentor and presumably the wisest man in Athens because he neither knew nor thought he knew. Socrates is a paradigmatic example here because he is famously associated with what is seen as the adoption of an ironic stance, one whereby he would feign ignorance on some topic in order to make progress in his dialogical explorations of said topic. While devices or techniques like irony (and satire) are, strictly speaking, separate from humor *per se*, there is no doubt that these are important aspects of much of humor and comedy, including standup comedy as practiced today. In any case, assuming this ironic stance is something that was supposed to allow Socrates to drive discussions in specific directions that could enable him to later shatter the implicit or hidden fundamental pretensions and preconceptions of his interlocutors' views, which, in turn, would be done with the purpose of getting the conversation's participants closer to a better understanding of the heart of what was being discussed (and, once more, he is but one influential example among many one could offer from throughout philosophy's long history who have done similar things).⁸

⁶ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 450.

⁷ The equally prominent Aristotle, while known for often writing in a terse and dense manner which makes his work appear to lack any innate kind of humorousness, and which is thus far more representative of how philosophers tend to present their arguments today, still made use of jocose wordplay of various forms in same manner his mentor Plato did, and this without ceasing to rigorously address the many matters of substance that otherwise represent the peerlessly wide-ranging scope and influence of his philosophical output. Perhaps such tendencies explains why the Roman orator and philosopher Cicero, whose own writings, speeches, and letters, are known to be littered with litanies of alliterations, which, while more literary than humorous as devices *per se*, are literally at the heart of many of the humorous tongue-twisters we once enjoyed as little children, interestingly called Aristotle's prose "a river of flowing gold." Beyond this kind of thing, Aristotle also grappled with humor and comedy head-on from a philosophical point of view. He explicitly argued in favor of wit's value, for instance, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and addressed the nature of comedy in general in his literary treatise, the *Poetics*. As such, even Aristotle, arguably the philosopher par excellence, or "The Philosopher," as the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri calls him in his *Divine Comedy*, a work that seems to reflect the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* in its title, can also be counted alongside his mentor as being among those who have looked at humor comedy for inspiration and taken it seriously for philosophical purposes.

⁸ For instance, centuries later, the French philosopher Voltaire notably criticized G.W. Leibniz' view that this was the best of all possible worlds in his novel *Candide*, which involved a heavy and over-the-top use of satire

Philosophy's historical employment of techniques and devices linked to humor and comedy is important to acknowledge for various reasons, even if this does not say much about its relation to standup comedy *per se* that could not be said about other forms of comedy. However, acknowledging this does serve as further proof that their relation must be, at the very least, an especially meaningful one, and I say this even relative to most other forms of comedy. It is safe to say, after all, that, considering all that has been said, as deep as comedy's own relation to philosophy seems to be, standup comedy appears, for almost obvious reasons, to bear a much closer relation to philosophy and its practice than most other forms of comedy, e.g., opera bouffes, sitcoms, sketch comedies, can be said to do.

X. Conclusion

In closing, considering all of the similarities that exist between standup comedy and philosophy, the idea that standup comedy might be the most philosophical of all artforms represents a thesis that, upon closer inspection, sounds less and less like a bad joke and much more like a defensible philosophical conclusion which one could argue in favor of from a wide variety of different angles. These are ones which, in their conjunction, should even incline us to suspect that this is more likely the case than not. After all, not only do standup comedy and philosophy both make use of language in more or less the same ways, and for the same purpose of being understood in a manner that eliminates all ambiguities and reduces any plurality of divergent interpretations, but they also similarly incorporate the idea of audience feedback as well as the notion of dialogue into the very process of creating the final version of their respective creative byproducts, which are the jokes and philosophical arguments that define their activities. Beyond this, a standup comedian's joke, like a philosopher's argument, can even be said to feature a form or structure which takes into account whatever rules it is that govern our understanding of things, and this would explain why punchlines to deliver those unanimous-type responses of approval intended by the comedian when delivering a good joke.

All of this, in turn, explains why it should be no surprise at all that standup comedians are often able to impart wisdom of both a philosophical character and genuine import in the process of trying to generate laughter and why philosophers have made so much recourse to humor and comedy in coming to grips with the matters that occupy them. In the end, then, one can even say the idea of a "standup philosopher" like that Mel Brooks makes fun of in *History of the World Part I*, with his grandiose-sounding ability to "coalesce the vapors of human experience into a viable and logical comprehension," ceases to sound like too absurd a concept.

that allowed him to drive home his philosophical objections to this theory in a way that very likely would not have been as effective had he dealt with it in the usual dry and abstract way philosophers often prefer when articulating their positions, for this would have partly defeated the purpose of what he was going in his decision to write a novel in the first place. Similarly, the Danish Søren Kierkegaard, known as the father of existentialism, was not all doom and gloom when it came to the nature of the philosophical strategies he adopted. In particular, it is interesting to note that his most famous pseudonymous authorial voice, Johannes Climacus, was himself a humorist and, beyond this, one of the more notable things Kierkegaard's work is known for is his trenchant use of irony to advance his philosophical positions, which served him plenty when dealing with especially thorny issues of the sort that abound with paradoxes and the like, as are the many questions relating to the nature of religious faith and how it relates to reason which he dealt with so creatively.