

Don't Stop Me If You've Heard This One

So, a Buddhist monk is meditatively strolling down a New York City street (now, these are folks who have achieved enlightenment and have recognized the interconnectedness and interdependence of everything and everyone in the universe, and in doing so, understand the futility and suffering that follows foolish desires of a presumed independent self, separable from everyone and everything else); so this guy says to a hot dog vendor on the street (of course, these purveyors of food-like stuff are typical in large cities, they will sell hot dogs with all the “fixins”, AKA, “with *everything* on it”, which of course does not mean *literally* everything, but just about everything that could go well with a hot dog, not mayonnaise of course, because that shit is objectively disgusting on or near anything), so the monk says, “Make me one with everything.” HA! (here, and only here, it is essential that you laugh at your own joke).

This is one way to open an Introduction to Philosophy class prior to going over that damnable contract called a syllabus. I have presented a joke, but before students have a chance to get it and enjoy it *for themselves*, I have explained how the humor is supposed to have worked, defining all the relevant terms in the set-up and exactly how those premises connect to the now-expected conclusion (punchline); I have given them the answer. They do *not* laugh. Then, immediately after I have ceased guffawing at my own hilarity, I ask whether God exists. Almost in the same breath, I tell them to look at the last few pages of the Philosophical Glossary I have written up for this specific class, wherein *The* answer to this fundamental philosophical query is provided (you must sign up for my class to get that little nugget). Now they are amused and a bit bemused; consequently, they are primed for philosophy.

Philosophy, Like A Good Joke, Requires Collaboration

Both of the activities above are absurd and for similar reasons. I have removed the possibility of collaboration with or among the students. When this essential element of joking (and philosophy) is omitted, there is no humor (and genuine philosophical interest or understanding is less likely). Put in exclamatory terms, with no collaboration there can be no “Ha-ha” nor “Ah-ha!” experience. But with collaboration, in which students are co-contributors to the *conversation*, as Plato succinctly defines “philosophy”, there can be both joy and understanding; indeed, mirth and meaning can reciprocally act upon each other. It is not coincidental that we exclaim “Ah-ha!” upon solving a riddle, crossword puzzle, or even discovering *a* solution to a paradox. Coupled with that eureka shriek is often a laugh, and sometimes the “Ah-ha!” follows the “Ha-ha”, after we have a moment to think about what was in a given joke and possibly find a deeper meaning in it or at least a new way of seeing something.

The comedian Gallagher asks “Why do we drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?” Not a mind-blowing question, but the practice of making and then formulating these observations habituates us to see deeper and broader. It can be practice for making comparisons and contrasts, key elements of arguments by analogy, and assist with inclining us to notice incongruities--a significant skill for knowledge and wisdom seekers. Notice also similarities with philosophical puzzles: “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” (Socrates in Plato’s *Euthyphro*). In these examples we are not given an answer as if there were just one, because that is not necessarily the point. This is, in part, my aim with asking students about God’s existence. The answer provided in a glossary to this type

of question is ludicrous, and students quickly see that philosophy consists mostly of just that sort of query that cannot be answered in a simplistic, singular way for students without any of their own input.

Most instances of humor are economical using only the necessary scaffolding for an audience to be placed into the appropriate frame for them to fill in the purposely omitted data. Humor can invoke a playful attitude in students that elicits a different mindset toward the world and themselves in contrast to the passive indifference that often finds its way into classroom settings. They are now open to struggle and even minor discomfort due to the tension that comes with doubt and confusion, the very motivating emotions found when confronted by a puzzle, riddle, joke, or philosophical paradox.

Granted, arguments that omit essential elements or key premises are considered flawed. In fact there is a very common formal fallacy called an “enthymeme” that describes this very mistake. Aristotle informs us that this rhetorical device relies upon an audience filling in the missing premise. Consider this textbook case: “Socrates is mortal, because he is human.” Logically this is flawed even though most people immediately “get” what is intended, they complete the syllogism implicitly: “all men are mortal.” So, a good joke might be akin to a fallacy or error in reasoning. But this fact does not undermine my claim that humorous and philosophical attitudes can and often should overlap. In fact, jokes and humor might very well constitute a sort of error-detection mechanism, something quite useful in philosophy. The analogy between a humorous and philosophical attitude does not extend to the specific mechanics of jokes and philosophical arguments; rather, the focus is on the desirable frame of mind in both.

Students see the silliness immediately in the opening examples I used because they are so ridiculous that they elicit amusement, which quickly leads to at least the beginnings of curiosity and possibly even discovery. Recognizing absurdity can be enjoyable and fruitful. Why might that be, I ask them. Students want an answer to this, but they want to be able to have an answer of their own, even those who claim to prefer questions that focus on convergent rather than divergent thinking. Philosophy is inherently an exercise in divergent thinking: open-ended questioning that cultivates creative, free-flowing, even *playful* responses, as opposed to convergent thinking which depends upon strict rule-following usually with a singular correct answer that students expect to *converge* upon. So they are motivated to investigate and analyze--they have begun to philosophize, whether they wanted to or not.

The Mind is not a Vessel to be Filled but a Fire to be Kindled, and Education is Not the Filling of Pail But The Lighting of a Fire, and ... Something About a Horse ...

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it smile? Because of the long face and all? (No, that can't be it). Anyway, I have already done a bit of what I want to discuss in this essay, but, like the need to eventually address that insipid syllabus, I should get to more of the details. Borrowing a bit from Plutarch and Yeats (maybe, there is no agreement on whether he said that about pails and fires), and some idiom from 12th Century Old English about horses walking on water, or something, we can glean the following gem: learning requires active participation by learners. It is almost embarrassing to have to write that, but here we are with education today, mostly unloading facts into unlit receptacles. This doesn't work, and not just because the metaphor is mixed.

I am interested in why humor is useful in teaching, particularly in philosophy, not *how* you can be funnier in class. I have no idea how to do that; it sounds a lot like telling someone who's sad, "Turn that frown upside down." This thoughtless slogan has become so cliché that my auto-fill completed it before I typed the first letter of "frown." This makes me, well, sad. The double-edged sword of technology (intentional ironic use of cliché) has made actively thinking for oneself difficult, even undesirable. Why stop, even for a moment, to try to recall a fact or a name or even the meaning of a philosophically loaded concept like "justice" when you can immediately ask Alexa, Siri, or the newest AI program we have fallen in love with? *Literally* (used correctly here). Not only is this fantastical idea explored in the film *Her*, we have real-world examples of people wishing to marry their *virtual assistants*. Progress, I guess; in a less-woke era they were called virtual *secretaries*.

The *newish* technology during Socrates' time was writing, and he wanted nothing to do with it; he was so averse to it that he wouldn't even write it off. He feared his ideas, once etched permanently and the same for all who read them, regardless of those readers' philosophical acumen, would become like "bastard children" undefended by their gadfly-midwife-cuttlefish-father. For Socrates, writing, like much of our comfort-seeking technology, fosters passivity, addiction to immediacy of results from others, and intellectual complacency and lack of creativity. We have more facts available at our fingertips than ever before (it's true, I just googled it), yet we are in greater danger of existential threats than likely any other period in history. Our unfettered access to information is disproportionate to our dearth of wisdom.

Philosophy is a formal discipline *and* a way of living that seeks wisdom. Facts, which we have in abundance, do not amount to wisdom, contrary to our contentment with the regurgitation of statistics via *social-memias*. A “meme” is a unit of cultural transmission or imitation, just as *genes* are inherited over generations, *memes* are passed down culturally but spread far more quickly and widely. Enormous segments of the population appear satisfied with this mode of information transmission, as illustrated with the following surrogates for thought: “These are just *the facts*.” “I’m just giving you the data.” “The numbers don’t lie.” Like cliché, what Gilles Deleuze accurately labels “stupidity masquerading as wisdom,” these phrases are overly-commonplace thought-crutches standing in for actual cerebral labor. It is trivially true that “numbers don’t lie.” But it is equally vapidly veridical that they don’t tell the truth either. Data, numbers, facts, and stats are unhelpful without rational interpretation.

If I have no idea, or importantly, no interest in what to do with the facts, it is likely I lack the requisite knowledge related to them. This mindset could be worse than that of one who is wholly ignorant, yet genuinely curious, willing to think a step or two beyond the brute facts. Ignorance and wisdom are not opposites. Stupidity, willfully wallowing in unknowing is wisdom’s contrary. Ignorance is simply not knowing, and for Socrates, a mark of wisdom was recognizing when one is ignorant, when one has erred. Self-detected errors are much easier for one to repair themselves; if someone else tells me I am wrong, I will likely rudely brush that off. So, actual learning must be more than merely accumulating information, especially if the data is passively received.

Genuine learning requires focus, which requires motivation, which is cultivated by interest, which needs curiosity, which is not something teachable through the typical educational

curricula. I can, as Aristotle tells us, teach students the basics of some ethical theory, but I cannot make them virtuous. Ah-ha! *I can lead a horse to water, but I can't make it abide by the categorical imperative* (No, that's not quite right. Although it's true--most horses are utilitarians). One way that seems to work in piquing student interest in learning philosophy is to use humor *as you make the case* that a philosophical attitude is very similar to a humorous attitude. Both rely heavily on questioning our collective presuppositions, both cultivate rational skepticism, and both are never content with accepting traditions and values that are mindlessly received. I've got it now: *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it an iconoclast!* (still not it).

How to Philosophize With a Hammer; one that squeaks a bit when you hit stuff with it, because its made of squishy plastic, so, quite different than the one Nietzsche had in mind, but ultimately better, because most Idols can best be broken with subtlety and wit

Friedrich Nietzsche published a book in 1889 titled *Twilight of the Idols: Or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. This was during his most frenetic and fecund period, just before the syphilis set in rendering him somewhat less than his lauded *Übermensch*. The "Idols" for Nietzsche were "false gods" or the ubiquitous errors that philosophy should expose. He is likely borrowing (without citation!) from *sir* Francis Bacon, whose "idols" are fetishes which can divert us from the pursuit of truth. These are basically common fallacies, or errors in reasoning, that Bacon found pervasive when he published in 1620. That was a long time ago, so thankfully we have eradicated such mistakes, because we have heeded the advice of philosopher George Santayana: "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." That's sarcasm, and if performed well can help make a point; if executed poorly, it can obliterate your point, and likely

turn students against you. If students don't know you at all, your sarcasm will likely be interpreted as arrogance and just plain dickishness. Don't start a semester with sarcasm.

Back to Nietzsche and Santayana and those idols. Unfortunately, Santayana's quote has become overused and under-thought, as have many of Nietzsche's aphorisms. This means they have been stripped of their original force and nuance, now verging on empty-cliché status. Such comfortable packets of information do not offer truth but they *feel* true. This feeling of truth provides users and audiences alike with a sense of "truthiness" that stands in for thought, deep or shallow, and gives the false impression that we have penetrated the veil covering a conundrum. We have not. Such complacency is a kind of idol of the mind which can be addictive and contagious, rendering entire populations content in their current state of "knowing."

This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's musing: "If someone hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable" (*On Truth and Lies* p. 251). The difference with idols and cliché is that *others* have hidden these verbal treasures so we are not even re-discovering anything for or by ourselves. We are unearthing, through the work of (in most cases) anonymous others, fossils that are derivative, so vague as to be truth-indeterminate, shallow and fallow. But even that is too generous as it implies cognitive effort on our part, digging into a word-repository ("fossil" means *dug up*) and aptly matching a term with an image or concept. We are not. Instead, we are able to receive information from the mental rigors of others, confusing that with having attained enlightenment for ourselves.

This sort of collective complacency is one of the very things that philosophy, when done well, rages against. It is also an adversary of humor, and happily, humor can, like these idols of the mind, be both addictive and contagious. When we laugh the pleasure centers in our brains

“light up”, we receive the equivalent of a drug fix but without all the negative side-effects. In addition, this feeling of mirth, especially when coupled with laughter, spreads rapidly and broadly, positively going viral. This positivity and openness is crucial for individual educational success, but can also spread among pupils, cultivating critical and creative dialogue among peers and professors alike, an ideal for entering philosophy.

Nietzsche offers a couple entry ways into the benefits of humor in a philosophy class, but I will end with only one. In the *Foreword to Twilight* he writes, “To stay cheerful when involved in a gloomy and exceedingly responsible business is no inconsiderable art: yet what could be more necessary than cheerfulness? Nothing succeeds in which high spirits play no part.” We need not accept that “nothing succeeds” without what I would call a humorous attitude, but he is surely on to something. Learning is hard, but it doesn’t have to be gloomy, hence, I advocate for a different sort of hammer to act as a “tuning-fork” sounding out the hollow and dangerous idols handed down to us that have passed for sagacity.

The squeaky plastic hammer, when wielded in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons, to invoke Aristotle, can crack open the most serious attitudes and prime students for philosophical analysis and reflection. This multifaceted mirth-making-mallett can pass pupils through three stages of philosophical enlightenment, not necessarily in this order: students are amused, bemused, and finally disabused of their prior mistaken assumptions. The expression “hammer home the point” exposes the limitations with force-feeding learners facts via direct and blunt force instruments; “hammering” the truth into them is ineffective at best, at worst it kills whatever inclination there might have been to actively learn. The toy hammer championed here,

on the other hand, can act as a prod, not mere prop, an indirect means to stoke the flames of discovery.

That sounds a bit idealistic, but I have no illusions about the purely quantitative value of a humorous attitude--does it even bake bread? But this “failure” is no more a defect than poetry that brings no prosperity. That is a confusion of ends. I am reminded of Bertrand Russell’s take on the efficacy of his profession: “Philosophy, if it cannot answer so many questions as we could wish, has at least the power of asking questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life” (Russell *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 6). Education should not distance us from our frenzied, sponge-like interest in everything, it should refocus us toward that perspective of our youth.

This sentiment is succinctly encapsulated in an anonymous quotation I once read on a tea bag: “Childhood would be an ideal state, if only it happened later in life.” Philosophy and humor individually strive for that state; imagine their force when working together, helping us to maintain our childhood (not childish) curiosity-driven sense of wonder, but tempered with mature, critical reflection.

Philosophical and humorous attitudes are similar in many ways. In general, they both habituate us to be open, actively engaged, rationally skeptical, critically reflective, yet playful with our thoughts about serious issues in the real world. They help us become, often indirectly, cognizant of our own ignorance, which is the starting point of philosophical thinking even when this involves some tension, doubt, or confusion; each of these can spur self-propelled contemplation.

So, maybe the saying is, *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it think!* (I am going with that. At least for the moment). Which reminds me, there is a well-known addendum to the opening joke: After purchasing the hotdog *with everything on it*, the Buddhist monk asks the vendor for his change. The vendor replies: "Change comes from within."

References:

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