

## Robert R. Clewis, *Kant's Humorous Writings. An Illustrated Guide* London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021 Pp. xxiv + 256 ISBN 9781350112780 (hbk), \$68.00

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### Abstract

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### BOOK REVIEW

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A closer acquaintance with Kant's writings and biography reveals that he had an acute sense of humour. His texts display mastery of irony, parody and sarcasm, and his contemporaries considered him a witty interlocutor. The 'humorous writings' featured in the title of Robert Clewis' book are entertaining short texts that Kant employs in writings and lectures to convey his views on aesthetics, anthropology and morals. The subtitle reads 'an illustrated guide', which is to be taken in the literal sense as Kant's jokes are paired with pictorial illustrations by Nicholas Ilic. More

figuratively, however, Clewis elucidates what Kant finds comically amusing by reconstructing Kant's theory of humour. Clewis' treatment is divided into three parts. In part one, he develops a reconstruction of Kant's theory of humour and considers the application of Kant's ethics to humour. In parts two and three, he exemplifies Kant's understanding of humour by discussing thirty entertaining texts employed by Kant in his writings and lectures.

Part one, 'Kant's Theory of Humor', consists of three chapters. In chapter 1, Clewis examines Kant's theory in light of the most prominent approaches to humour: the theories of superiority, release and incongruity. Kant's theory of humour encompasses the three aspects singled out by these major theories. So, on the superiority theory, 'we feel comic amusement because we feel we are better than the object of our laughter' (p. 7). This aspect figures in Kant's theory as it strikes a balance between 'setting ethical bounds on ridicule' and 'allowing a great deal of room for satirical jest' (p. 21). According to the release theory, 'we laugh . . . in order to release pent-up psychological energy' (p. 12). The presence of this aspect in Kant's theory of humour is shown by numerous passages in which Kant describes laughter as the mental and bodily relaxation following a mental and bodily tension (pp. 16–19). On the incongruity theory, 'we are amused . . . because we enjoy a mismatch between what we perceive and our ordinary expectations' (p. 9). The author locates this aspect in Kant's recurring characterization of '*laughter [as] an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing*' (CPJ, 5: 332–3; Kant's emphasis). On Clewis' interpretation, Kant holds that many jokes are structured so as to generate an expectation just in order to disappoint it. When the expectation reveals itself as an illusion, it disappears – it turns into nothing. Provided that no intellectual, moral or emotional interest is attached to the illusory expectations, their turning into nothing elicits comical amusement.

In addition to incorporating aspects of these traditional theories, Clewis contends that Kant's theory of humour contains a distinctive component of play. The author's argument is that Kant's account refers to distinct moments in a process of mental play with thoughts and with aesthetic ideas. The play with thoughts is explained as a

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