A Sober Kind of Cheerfulness: On Jokes and Their Relation to Philosophy

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“A Sober Kind of Cheerfulness”

On Jokes and Their Relation to Philosophy

“Philosophy is the most serious thing of all, but then again not so serious”

_Theodor W. Adorno_¹

I

It is rare to find a person whose historical survival depends on a single remark, although it certainly raises the odds if that remark was made to Dr Johnson in the presence of Boswell. Oliver Edwards was a lawyer who knew Johnson as a fellow-student in Oxford. Many years later they happened to meet in London after church and Edwards came home with Johnson. As recorded by Boswell, Edwards made the following observation in the course of their conversation: “You are a philosopher, Dr Johnson. I have tried too to be a philosopher; but, I don’t know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in.”²

This is a puzzling remark in so many ways. We know that “philosopher” did not always mean in the eighteenth century what it does today. Still, in what way (if any) could one possibly think that Johnson was a philosopher? Boswell records that the “eminent men” (Burke, Reynolds, Malone, Courtenay) to whom he related the remark thought it to be an “exquisite trait of character” for (Boswell writes): “The truth is that philosophy, like religion,

¹ _Negative Dialektik_ (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1966) p.26
² James Boswell, _The Life of Samuel Johnson LL. D._ , Boston, 1807, III, p.24
is too generally supposed to be hard and severe, at least so grave as to exclude all gaiety”.

But is philosophy really “like religion”? And is that the reason for its presumed severity? It seems to have been characteristic of the British eighteenth century to contrast the gloominess of religion and philosophy with “good humour”. One might remember Shaftesbury, who wrote that: “if we are afraid of bringing good Humour into Religion, or thinking with Freedom and Pleasantness on such a Subject as God; ’tis because we conceive the Subject so like our-selves, and can hardly have a Notion of Majesty and Greatness, without Stateliness and Moroseness accompanying it.” Still, what is plain is that many non-religious philosophers deserve their reputation for being less than merry.

I love John Stuart Mill. I got to know him better than I ever expected to because – such is the fate of the Oxford Tutorial Fellow – I found myself obliged to teach his Utilitarianism to first-year students. I expected them to like Mill. Not only does Mill connect philosophy with politics and economics, but his defence of individuality and personal experiment would, surely, appeal to the young. Indeed (I made sure they read the Autobiography) many of them would sympathize, I thought, with the sad predicament of a precocious child trying to please an emotionally unresponsive parent by his intellectual achievements.

But no. I remember one grey, wintry afternoon, doing my level best to explain the Proof of the Principle of Utility or whatever it was, being interrupted by one of our chirpier students. “Dr Rosen,” he said, “can you tell us, please: did Mill ever make a joke?” I have to admit that I couldn’t remember one, but one of the advantages of long service in the profession is that

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you get to know a lot of people, so I put my question to various Mill experts. Thanks to John Skorupski, I got an answer. In an article written in 1832 (“Pledges”) Mill quoted the saying (it comes, apparently, from Smollett) that “some are wise and some are otherwise”. And, er, as they say in Private Eye … that’s it.

Which does not mean that philosophers don’t figure in jokes – their very seriousness, surely, is a large part of what makes them such inviting targets. As Orwell noted, the incongruity between gravity and humiliation is paradigmatically funny:

If you had to define humour in a single phrase, you might define it as dignity sitting on a tin-tack. Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny.⁵

Philosophers have been mocked in that way from the very beginning. As we have the story from Socrates in Plato’s *Thaetetus*, Thales fell into a well while looking upwards to study the stars and was jeered at by a Thracian slave-girl “because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was before him at his feet” [174a] The story of Thales and the well has been told many times since – so many that Professor Blumenberg (whom God preserve) of Münster has written a learned article (“Der Sturz des Proto-Philosophen”) and a no less learned book (*Das Lachen der Thrakerin*) on its Rezeptionsgeschichte.⁶

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Stargazing, nowadays at least, is the province of scientists, not philosophers. Yet Socrates gives an argument that the story about Thales is relevant to all philosophers. What sets the philosopher apart is not her curiosity about remote and unprofitable matters but, more fundamentally, the way she turns away from outward particulars towards what is inward and essential:

The same joke applies to all who spend their lives on philosophy. Such a person pays no attention to his next-door neighbor. He doesn’t know what he is up to; indeed, he hardly knows whether he is a human being or some other kind of creature. Yet the question what a human being is and what it is proper for such a nature to do or bear different from any other – that is something he inquires into and exerts himself to find out about. [174a]

If you are running an academic institution, telling prospective students (or their parents, who will, most likely, be paying their fees) that they will emerge unfit for practical matters is not likely to be good for business. So you won’t be surprised that Aristotle (whom I always think of as the quintessential President of the American Philosophical Association – or, indeed, Secretary of the Aristotelian Society) chips in on the subject.

His story is that Thales used his astronomical knowledge to foresee an abundant olive harvest and to buy up oil presses in advance, thereby making a lot of money. So the philosopher’s response to that familiar question “If you’re so smart, how come you ain’t

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7 Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, section 1259a
rich?” is that we are not poor because we have to be poor. We could be hedge-fund managers, arbitraging market failures with the best of them, had philosophy not filled us with contemptus mundi.

II

The image I have given so far is of philosophers as grave and unworldly, but – in philosophy there is always a “but”, isn’t there?, and this one is now overdue – seen from another angle, the connection between philosophy and humour looks much closer.

We need only to look again at the dawn of philosophy – this time, not to Thales but, even earlier, to Epimenides. Very little is known about Epimenides except that he was a Cretan and that he was, if he is to be believed, like all Cretans, a liar. And with that, Epimenides gave us a paradox that preoccupies philosophers to our own day.8

Of course, not all jokes are paradoxical and not all paradoxes are funny. But there is an affinity. Not for nothing is the most consistently admired form of philosophical argument called the reductio ad absurdum.

In the shtetls of Eastern Europe Jews would not have access to the courts so business disputes would often be resolved by the local rabbi. One day a rabbi was faced with a very complex dispute that he couldn’t resolve. So he travelled to the yeshivah where he’d been trained to see his own teacher. He laid the dispute out and,

when he’d done, the old man thought for a long time. Finally, he said “they’re both right”. “What do you mean?”, said the rabbi, “Either one’s right or the other one’s right” The teacher thought deeply again and said: “You know, you’re right too.”

Closely related are infinite regress arguments. One that everyone will know already appears in Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689).

If any one should be asked … what is it that solidity and extension adhere in, he would not be in a much better case than the Indian … who, saying that the world was supported by a great elephant, was asked what the elephant rested on; to which his answer was - a great tortoise: but being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-backed tortoise, replied- something, he knew not what.  

To which there is a modern response. The story goes that a famous philosopher – it may have been William James – was giving a lecture and compared the position he was attacking to the idea that the world stands on the back of four elephants which stand on the back of a giant turtle. At the end of his talk a lady got up and said: “Young man, you think you’re very clever, but let me tell you: it’s turtles all the way down.”

A great deal of humour exploits incongruities – the incongruity that comes from taking things for granted and inversions of expectation. It is the land of Topsy-Turvy, as W.S.

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9 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Ch. 23, section 2
Gilbert called it.\textsuperscript{10} And philosophy too is full of speculative “what ifs” – what if a shepherd found a ring that gave the property of invisibility?\textsuperscript{11} What if all one’s beliefs were the result of a malicious demon?\textsuperscript{12} What if one were a brain in a vat?\textsuperscript{13} And so on.

Admittedly, not all philosophers write the pedestrian prose that made it so hard for me to persuade my students to share my love of Mill. Some of Russell’s sentences are as brilliant as Voltaire. My own favourite:

\begin{quote}
The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a bygone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Or there are Nelson Goodman’s memorable comments in \textit{Fact, Fiction and Forecast} (which I have also heard framed as a story about A.J. Ayer responding to a bishop). He writes:

\begin{quote}
You may decry some of these scruples and protest that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy. I am concerned, rather, that
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10}“The other night, from cares exempt,/I slept and what d'you think I dreamt ?/I dreamt that somehow I had come/To dwell in Topsy-Turvydom/Where vice is virtue virtue, vice:/Where nice is nasty nasty, nice :/Where right is wrong and wrong is right, /Where white is black and black is white.- “My Dream” in "The Bab Ballads and Songs of a Savoyard." Macmillan.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 2.359a
\item \textsuperscript{12} See R. Descartes, \textit{Meditations on First Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996)
\item \textsuperscript{14} Bertrand Russell, “On the Notion of Cause”, \textit{Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society} 13 (1913) 1-26, p.1
\end{itemize}
there should not be more things dreamt of in my philosophy than there are in heaven or earth.\textsuperscript{15}

And then there is, of course, the crushing donnish put-down, of which, oddly enough, the hermit-like F.H. Bradley was a supreme practitioner. Here is Bradley on Herbert Spencer:

Reading so few books, Mr. Spencer was naturally more at the mercy of those he did read.\textsuperscript{16}

Such witticisms, entertaining though they may be to some of the more mean-spirited among us, however, are extraneous to the philosophical arguments being made. A more profound question, I think, is: can jokes themselves be philosophical?

Wittgenstein once remarked to Norman Malcolm that “a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist only of jokes.”\textsuperscript{17} Note the word “serious” here! According to Malcolm again, when Wittgenstein taught he would often grin at the absurdity of some of the examples he chose, but, if any of the students started to laugh along, he would become severe and exclaim: “No, no! I’m serious.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} N. Goodman, \textit{Fact, Fiction and Forecast} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1983) p. 34
I am not curious about the song that the sirens sang or what name Achilles assumed when he hid among women, but I should love to know what jokes might Wittgenstein have had in mind. I shall make one guess. In the Zettel (the box of fragments that Wittgenstein kept in the 30s and 40s) one of the things that Wittgenstein explores is how language is articulated. In one snippet he imagines a case:

“Say ‘a b c d’ and mean: the weather is fine.” – Should I say, then, that the utterance of a sentence in a familiar language is a quite different experience from the utterance of sounds which are not familiar to us as a sentence?” (Zettel, 6)

And, in another one:

A language may easily be imagined in which people use a single word for the exclamation. But what about one word for the sentence: “If the train [does not arrive punctually he will miss the connection].”? In what kind of case should we say that the word actually stood for that sentence? Say in this one: people begin by using a sentence like ours, but then circumstances arise in which the sentence has to be uttered so often that they contract it to a single word. So these people could still explain the word by means of the sentence. But is the further case possible in which people possess only a single word with that sense, that is for that use?” (Zettel, 154)

And here (with apologies to you all, since I can’t imagine you haven’t heard it before) is what I believe is the corresponding joke.
A group of salesmen had been travelling the country for many years, always sharing the same carriage in the train and always telling one another jokes. Over the years, they had become so familiar with them that they just used numbers. One of them would say “142” and they’d all laugh. Or “89”. A young man joined them and after a few journeys decided he’d take part. So, when there was a lull, he said “187”. There was a lot of laughter and one of the older men turned to him and said: “That’s a good one – we hadn’t heard it before.”

Published examples of philosophers using jokes to make their point are rare, however (I suspect that this has a lot to do with the increasing professionalization of philosophy and the rise of peer-reviewed journals). Most of those known to me are anecdotal. Wittgenstein’s pupil, Elizabeth Anscombe (who, as anyone who ever saw her in action will know, took her philosophy pretty seriously) is supposed to have reacted to Saul Kripke’s theory of rigid designators by saying that it reminded her of the joke that Homer didn’t write the Iliad but someone else of the same name. Michael Dummett liked to explain his views about what it was to know a language with the joke of the man who, when asked if he knows how to play the violin replies “I don’t know, I’ve never tried”.19

And then there is Sidney Morgenbesser – one of those figures whose wit is so celebrated that, like Wilde or Winston Churchill, good remarks are attributed to them whether they

19 A.W. Moore corrects me about this anecdote. It was, he says, about speaking Spanish, not playing the violin, and taken from P.G. Wodehouse. I have a clear and distinct recollection of hearing Dummett tell it in the way I recall – but Moore’s memory is probably better than mine.
made them or not. This one comes from the obituary of Morgenbesser in the *New York Times*.

Dr. Morgenbesser …[became] something of a Columbia legend at the time of the student uprising in 1968 for being beaten when he joined a human chain against the police… He was once asked if it was unfair that the police hit him on the head during the riot.

“It was unfair but not unjust,” he pronounced.

Why?

“It's unfair to be hit over the head, but it was not unjust since they hit everybody else over the head.”

The fact checkers for the New York Times are, of course, legendary. Nevertheless, this version of the story is clearly the wrong way round. It would make far better sense for Morgenbesser to have said that using violence against demonstrators was an injustice, yet that behaving unjustly to some people but not to everyone is unfair. Personally, I am particularly fond of this story. I believe that it illustrates that there is indeed a problem of fairness that isn’t the same as the one that political philosophers usually think of under the heading of distributive justice (even those who use the slogan “justice as fairness”). I also like it because it corresponds to one of my friend, the famous philosopher and noted humourist, Jerry Cohen’s favourite jokes.

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20 *New York Times*, 4 August 2004
Dimitri and Yuri, two party members are sitting in a packed auditorium as Stalin is giving a long speech. Someone sneezes. Stalin pauses in the middle of a sentence, and asks: "Who sneezed?" Silence. Stalin motions to the NKVD men standing at the sides and they herd everyone in the back row outside. A little while later, they hear the sound of gunfire. Stalin asks again, "Who sneezed?" Again, there is silence. Stalin motions to the NKVD men and they herd out the next row. Again, shots are heard. Stalin asks a third time, "Who sneezed??" This time a little man raises his hand and says, “I did, Comrade Stalin.” Stalin says, "Gesundheit!" Dmitri turns to Yuri and says: "You see, that’s Comrade Stalin. He’s strict but fair."

III

Which, then, is it to be – philosophy as grave and forbidding or philosophy as light-hearted and playful? Is it just that some philosophers go in one direction and others in the other?

Which way they go is not just a matter of temperament, however, or so I believe; it depends on how they see the practice of philosophy itself.

If we go back to Plato, we find a conception of philosophy that is hugely ambitious, a dream of reason. Philosophy, in the Platonic version of it, starts in the everyday and hooks on to the dilemmas and conflicts that arise there. Yet, unlike ordinary disputes or disagreements, Platonic dialectic is a method of ascent and initiation: a form of knowledge that is rigorous and binding – at least as rigorous as geometry, if we are to believe The Republic. Philosophy puts us into contact with a realm that transcends mundane reality yet, at the same time, structures and explains it. True knowledge of the good is personally transformative, however, not merely inert and passive. It places reason in control of the passions. That is
why Plato, his own comic gifts notwithstanding (who has read the *Symposium* without laughing?) requires the Guardians of his ideal *polis* to be above laughter – for laughter is an emotion that overcomes rational self-control (*Republic* 388c).

The Platonic conception thus unites three very distinct conceptions of philosophy and philosophers. There is the philosopher who is like a mathematician, engaged in an impersonal activity, whose principle is that “wherever the argument, like a wind, tends, there we must go” (*Republic* 394d). Then there is the philosopher as sage or even saint, meeting injustice with calmness, prepared to follow the example of the philosopher-martyr, Socrates himself. But finally, there is the philosopher as subversive: the gadfly, as Socrates describes himself in the *Apology*, who refuses to let well alone and allow the lazy Athenian *polis* to slumber. If humour has a place in philosophy it is, I think, to the extent that it takes on that third role of challenging received ideas.

In the modern academy – at least, in the English-speaking countries – it is the first conception that dominates, however. Philosophers are most likely to be cargo-cultish worshippers of mathematics and the natural sciences. And that draws them to a conception of philosophical argument that is, like Plato’s, rigouristic. Here, for example, is Robert Nozick:

The terminology of philosophical art is coercive: arguments are *powerful* and best when they are *knockdown*, arguments *force* you to a conclusion, if you believe the premises you *have to* or *must* believe the conclusion, some arguments do not carry much *punch*, and so forth. A philosophical argument is an attempt to get someone to
believe something, whether he wants to believe it or not. A successful philosophical argument, a strong argument, forces someone to a belief.\textsuperscript{21}

To my mind, however, such a rigouristic conception of philosophy is implausible – indeed, pernicious. Let us concede – and that, in itself, is a big assumption – that philosophy contains deductive arguments. What about their premises? How are they supposed to be established? Yet, unless we are certain of its starting point, a valid argument can go both ways. As Hilary Putnam has pointed out, “one philosopher’s modus ponens is another philosopher’s modus tollens”.\textsuperscript{22}

My own view, like Plato’s, is that philosophy arises when plausible beliefs that are held outside philosophy come into conflict with one another. Yet, unlike Plato, I do not think that there is a single rationally compelling response to such dilemmas. On the contrary, philosophical positions can rarely be demonstrated because the alternatives to them are rarely wholly refuted – gaps can almost always be plugged, even if the intellectual price of doing so may seem to reasonably open-minded people absurdly high. In consequence, “proof” in the strict sense used by mathematicians has very little role in the practice of philosophy.

Moreover, the search for such arguments can be the enemy of reason itself. Is the best way to respond to eristic – pointless wrangling – to look for even more coercive arguments – arguments so forceful as to be irresistible? Argumentative combativeness, the desire to

prevail, the fear of humiliation – of being “exposed” – leads us to hang on to positions we might otherwise abandon or to assert them beyond their reasonable warrant. Good humour, on the other hand, expresses openness and the willingness to be persuaded. It gives even our beliefs on deep and important subjects a degree of detachment.

I am with Shaftesbury when he writes:

A jest often decides weighty matters better and more forcibly than can asperity. This, … I may safely aver, is so true in it-self, and so well known for Truth by the cunning Formalists of the Age, that they can better bear to have their Impostures rail’d at, with all the Bitterness and Vehemence imaginable, than to have them touch’d ever so gently in this other way. They know very well, that as Modes and Fashions, so Opinions, tho ever so ridiculous, are kept up by Solemnity: and that those formal Notions which grew up probably in an ill Mood, and have been conceiv’d in sober Sadness, are never to be remov’d but in a sober kind of Cheerfulness, and by a more easy and pleasant way of Thought.  

So in that spirit I’m going to close with a jest to express the hope that philosophy, if it’s done subtly and skilfully, does not have to be aggressive to be deep.

In ancient China a man was sentenced to death by beheading and he was visited the day before the execution by the executioner. “Honoured Sir”, the executioner said,  

“I sympathize most deeply with your predicament, but, if I may very humbly make one remark in consolation, it is that I am acknowledged to be the greatest of all executioners and I promise you that you will not feel a thing.” The day comes and the execution proceeds as expected – a scaffold, a block, a terrible sword, a swishing sound through the air – and then silence. The prisoner is surprised. “What happened?” he asks. “Ah sir”, says the executioner, “wait until you laugh”.

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