

2. What We Talk About When We Talk About Humor

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The previous chapter made the assertion that, while most of us laugh regularly, we very rarely think too deeply about that laughter. In general, most people have a sense of humor, but spend very little time thinking about it beyond knowing what does and doesn't amuse them. However, just because most of us don't take the time to analyze our laughter and humor, doesn't mean that others haven't tried. While the serious study of humor has never been the most pressing concern of scholars and thinkers, it has occasionally crossed people's minds and in the 21st-century there has been an increased interest in "humor studies" around the world, but for much of human history, attempting to work out what makes people laugh and why was the work of philosophers. With the birth and development of psychology as a field of academic study in the 19th-century and afterward, more approaches to understanding humor and laughter became available. In the 20th-century, as academic disciplines like literary study began to blend with the study of culture and employ theories from various philosophical and psychological traditions, the study of humor and analysis of comedy became more common in both academic settings and popular journalism.

This book seeks to give readers an introduction to some of this study and inspire questions that will guide students to interesting avenues of independent research. The readings contained in the "Understanding Humor" and "Thinking Deeply About Humor" sections of this book provide a glimpse into how humor study developed from ancient Greece to the present day.

But before we get to all that, it may help to introduce some of the important concepts that will be addressed in those readings. In this chapter, we will consider the connections between humor, philosophy, our selves, and our culture. With a better understanding of these connections, we will be ready to begin examining our own sense of humor and what the readings contained within this book can tell us about it.

Humor & Philosophy

One of the first attempts to develop a textbook collecting writing on humor is John Morreall's edited collection *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987). Its title alone implies what has already been stated: that the study of humor has historically been a philosophical endeavor. Because this is primarily a Composition textbook, let's take a moment to talk about philosophy. What exactly is philosophy?

Some of you may already have an answer to this question. Many of you may have studied philosophy in a class or on your own. Others may be familiar with the word "philosophy" but only have a slight grasp on what it refers to. To try to meet in the middle of these two positions, we will oversimplify things a little.

Side Note: philosophy is a deep and complex field of study, and we will only be scratching the surface of it here, so I highly recommend taking some Philosophy classes during your time at TCC!

To put it simply, philosophy as an academic discipline is the attempt to understand. To understand what?, you may ask. Well, everything. To study philosophy is to study how we study, how we know things, how we learn, how we behave, what we find beautiful, what it all means, and so much more (including what makes us laugh). Various branches of philosophy dive into all of the various things that a human mind might wish to understand about this existence—including whether we exist at all!

If that sounds overwhelming or ridiculous, don't worry, we're going to focus our efforts on some very specific aspects of philosophical pursuit, but it's important to have a general sense of what we're doing. We're trying to understand something: what makes us laugh, yes, but also, why that matters. To do so, we will absolutely need the help of philosophers, and this book will provide that.

But even beyond just knowing that you'll be reading some philosophy, there are other important reasons to think about philosophy here. In his introduction to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Morreall outlines several ways in which humor and philosophy—the comedian and the philosopher—are similar. Indeed, this similarity is one that others have noticed and there are even comedians today like Chris Rock and T. J. Miller who publicly claim that stand-up comedians are the “modern day philosophers” (qtd. in Fox). Whether that's true or not, you can determine for yourself, but I like what the late great Norm Macdonald has to say about that claim (skip to 0:20):



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Regardless of whether comedians are modern philosophers or not, there is undoubtedly some connection between what philosophers do and what happens when we make or appreciate humor. The connection is mostly about our perspective. To find something humorous, we have to look at it in certain ways, and that perspective is often very similar to the perspective that a philosopher takes when seeking to understand something. Morreall identifies the following traits of the perspective that humorists and philosophers share. As you read about these, think about how they help you understand the state of mind you may be in when you find something funny.

According to Morreall, philosophers and humorists have a perspective that is:

- Detached: “To think philosophically or to enjoy the humor in our experience, we must be without urgent practical concerns” (2).
- Imaginative and unusual: “In both philosophy and humor we shift mental gears and look at things in new ways.” Morreall also quotes William James here saying that we “see the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar” (2).
- Flexible: “For both the philosopher and the humorist, nothing is to be taken for granted: everything can be looked at with a questioning, experimental, even irreverent eye” (2-3).
- Open-ended: For philosophers, the search for Truth is never-ending, there is always more thought to be done. For humorists, there's always a joke to be found.

Now that we have a general sense of the philosophical/humorous perspective, we can probably already start to

see some things about our own experiences with humor. For example, the necessity of detachment might help us understand why sometimes we find ourselves making a joke that others don't find funny or vice versa. Our ability to be detached from certain things varies depending on who we are and what we're joking about. As someone who has a home with a functioning air conditioner, it may be a lot easier for me to joke about the heat of an Oklahoma summer than it is for someone who is unhoused or without A/C. Being detached from the potential for suffering, allows me to feel comfortable joking around and being flexible with how I think about heat. However, I assure you that the second my A/C breaks on a July day, such things are no longer funny to me.

We have just begun to scratch the surface of these issues here. As you continue through this book, you will encounter many works of philosophy spanning thousands of years. In each of these works, you will find an active and curious mind attempting to detach itself from the mere experience of humor and really understand it. To do that, these thinkers ask questions, imagine new ways of thinking about humor, try out different theories, and continue to puzzle over what seems like a simple question: why do we laugh? No one theory that you encounter here will explain every example of humor, and that's okay, but perhaps if we put them all together, we can get a clearer understanding of this subject.

Humor & Us

Understanding humor is part of our task here, but it is not all that we're doing. As you read this book, you will also be writing about your own sense of humor. You will be understanding not just how humor works and why people laugh, but why *you* laugh at specific things. As you do this, you will be exploring another important aspect of humor studies, the connection between what we laugh at and who we are.

In her essay "The Funny Thing About Humor is That it is Really Really Important!" Catherine Cucinella expands on this idea by claiming that "what we find funny and how we use humor reflect and shape our identity" both individually and culturally (2). For Cucinella, the things we laugh at can tell us what we value and how we understand others and the world. As you read the various philosophical approaches to humor contained in this book, you will encounter several theories about why we laugh, each of which might reveal things about you and your sense of humor. For example, if you are someone who laughs at fail videos or shows like *Ridiculousness* you might find that part of your humor reveals either a sense of superiority or a desire to be superior to others. On the other hand, if you are someone who loves a good "dad joke" or a pun, you might find that this is related to your cultural awareness and upbringing.

Beyond these general connections between humor and our personal and cultural lives, humor also plays an important role in society as a form of entertainment and cultural critique. After we develop a good sense of the philosophy behind why we laugh, the suggested and linked readings in this book will allow you to explore other important questions about humor related to cultural topics like race, gender, and ethics.

As you can see, there's a lot to study here, and this book is designed to help you get your foot in the door. The best way to really start to dive into this subject, though, is to do so with some clear examples of humor in your mind. So now that you've been introduced to some of the ways in which we think about humor, it's time to begin exploring examples of humor in your life. The next chapter of this book provides a sample essay written in response to the question "what makes you laugh?"

Works Cited

Cucinella, Catherine. "The Funny Thing About Humor is That it is Really Really Important." *Funny*, edited by Catherine Cucinella, Fountainhead Press, 2014, pp. 1-11.

Fox, Jesse David. "Pete Holmes on How the Comedian Became the Modern-day Philosopher." *Vulture*, 1 April 2015, <https://www.vulture.com/2015/03/pete-holmes-on-the-second-comedy-boom.html>. Accessed 7 August 2023.

Morreall, John. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. SUNY Press, 1987.