

Article

# Does Philosophy Kill Humor?

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**ABSTRACT:** The title of this paper poses a paradoxical question, relating philosophy and humor, and tries to be humorous itself with the use of the verb “kill”. Against a more common, sometimes even academical, view of philosophy as a tremendously serious, deep, and complex corpus of knowledge—all theory and no praxis—the article challenges this view and will try to explain why humor, when associated with philosophy, can accelerate the understanding of a concept, and reveal unexpected spaces for reflection while donating moments of lightness and entertainment. In this perspective, humor reveals itself as a fundamental anthropological experience strongly connected to human freedom. I am aware that there are many different types of humor—irony, joke, slapstick, double-entendre, pun, deadpan-dry humor, etc., and also that the definition of “sense of humor” may be highly subjective, often related to the cultural profile of the person, and their geographical and historical contexts: what I consider funny, can be neutral or even offensive for another person. Nevertheless, among hundreds of interpretations, I will consider those which are more consistent with the scope of this paper. Moreover, if we think about the contemporary movement called *philosophical counseling* as a praxis that aims to help people in trouble and despair to see human problems from a wider and more rational *Weltanschauung* (view of the world), humor can become a useful tool to re-discover the frolicsome child inside ourselves: while playing with contrasts, metaphors, and metonymies, it induces a sudden, positive change of perspective. A process that is valid for both the counselor and the counselee, the self and the other: humor can provoke in the counselor a new and fresh way to understand the counselee’s difficulty; for the client, it can be a moment of tension release, or the start of a different way to address and approach life’s problems, or, even more, the beginning of a creative, transformative path.

**Keywords:** Humor; Comedy; Tragedy; Thought; Laughter; Freedom



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## 1. Introduction

This paper is not intended to be an extensive description of all types of humor, with a list of its many possible definitions and the analysis of their philosophical implications. Many other distinguished authors have already worked on this, as the references at the end of the paper may partly prove. Instead, its scope is identifying some contact points, some analogies that make humor an extraordinary tool to serve the aim of practical philosophy: to help people reflect on their prejudices, showing them the limit of their beliefs, knowledge, values, and vision of the world—that, most often, are ours as well. Humor playfully does this, utilizing not only thought, logic, and reasoning but the whole human body: the voice, the glance, the gestures, and the ability of the storyteller all work as one to involve the audience in a comic experience. An event which is made—at the same time—either of levity, often expressed with a final liberating laugh, and deepness, proved by an unexpected, sudden awareness about human differences—physique, color, gender, creed, ethnicity, social status, political attitudes, etc.—that make each of us unique and diverse.

When humor is practiced during a session of philosophical counseling, the counselee may feel better and relieved and take a momentary break from their anguish, seeing another side of the matter, introducing lightness and some glimpses of comedy into the Socratic dialogue during the process of reciprocal questioning, can be a harbinger of amazing findings, and new fulfillments.

When it takes place in a classroom of students, it becomes a facilitator of the learning process: the comic experience shared by teachers and pupils consolidates the relationship between them, becomes inclusive, and may be beneficial to

their reciprocal well-being. As for John Morreal (Williamsburg, 1947) [1], the idea that philosophy is not compatible with humor “is not just false but harmful to the teaching and to the doing of philosophy. In the end, philosophy may be the discipline where humor is the most appropriate”<sup>1</sup>.

Here, follow some areas in which philosophy and humor may fruitfully converge.

## 2. Skepticism, Critical Thinking, and the Practice of Doubt

Both philosophy and humor frequently challenge orthodox perspectives and require a certain level of skepticism, critical thinking [2], and, in some circumstances, courage—e.g., when they “unintentionally” provoke the established political power, as in the case of Socrates (Athens, 469 BCE–Athens, 399 BCE) [3], or a consolidated corpus of knowledge, as in the cases of Giordano Bruno (Nola, 1548–Rome, 1600), or Galileo Galilei (Pisa, 1564–Arcetri, 1642), the Italian philosopher, physician, and mathematician, who proved Ptolemy wrong by using a telescope and confirming—while observing Venus—the hypothesis of a heliocentric system put forth by Nicolaus Copernicus, with the Moon travelling around the Earth. While philosophy and humor have different primary endpoints—the first aiming at understanding and wisdom, the second at entertainment, together they can enlighten many hidden parts of our perceived world and lead to a deeper knowledge or a change of paradigm.

Philosophy exhorts continuous questioning, which may be the only method that we, as philosophers and philosophical counsellors, apply in our practice and studies; it helps us to maintain an open-ended point of view with regard to what is generally defined as “true” or “untrue,” “good” or “bad,” “beautiful or ugly”—we examine our beliefs, our aesthetics categories, the words we use, their etymology, and why we use them, sometimes looking beyond the surface to uncover deeper meanings and their intentionality.

An attitude reminiscent of René Descartes’s (La Haye en Toureine, 1596–Stockholm, 1650) First Meditation (1641), in which the French philosopher invites us to call our beliefs into doubt: on the one hand, we must go on exercising our ability to think and to question everything we observe, experience, or believe; but, on the other hand, we must pursue the truth, beginning from the certainty of our existence, our first-person experience: “I am, I exist,” and through our activity of thinking: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (1641)<sup>2</sup>, or “*Je pense, donc je suis*” (1637)<sup>3</sup>. Doubt itself is a form of thinking, and the exercise of doubt must be continuously practiced to check the foundation of our sensations, the validity of our body’s perceptions, and our mental illusions and suppositions; nevertheless, the purpose is to proceed along the pathway of gradual awareness and abstraction, towards the truth.

As for Gerd Achenbach (Hameln, 1947)—the German scholar credited with starting philosophical counselling in 1981 as a profession clearly distinct from psychotherapy<sup>4</sup>—philosophy is a constant “commitment to skepticism,” a sort of alert towards “everything which considers itself right, settled, conclusive, indubitable ... ‘true’” (ibid.).

In Phaedrus (370 BCE), Socrates describes himself as “sick with passion for hearing people speak”<sup>5</sup> in the form of philosophical dialectic. I find the same “sick with passion” attitude, even amplified, in Oscar Brenifier’s dialogic mode to provoke critical thinking unceasingly in his interlocutors. As a contemporary Socrates, Brenifier (Orano, 1954) [4] uses humor as a lockpick: humor becomes thought-provoking; his way of teasing the other person continuously reminds us of Socrates, who compares himself to a gadfly, a fastidious insect that irritates and stings the horse—two metaphors used by the Greek philosopher to represent himself as the horse-trainer, and the young Athenians as the lazy horses who need to be woken up and trained, sometimes through a certain degree of discomfort. In this sense, humor is related to irony [5], albeit in a complex and multifaced way: Socrates uses irony (*Eirōneia*) as a useful tool for showing his intellectual superiority—and superiority has been often described, in the recent past, as one of the three main characteristics of humor, together with incongruity and relief<sup>6</sup>—over his fellow citizens, to gain a rhetoric advantage during the dialogic process, and reach the educational scope of making his interlocutors recognize the fallacy of their reasonings.

Socrates calls this education process “maieutics,” from the Greek word “Maia,” which means midwife, that was his mother’s profession. Maieutics (*Maieuesthai*) is to act as a midwife, through a dialogic and questioning method which helps the person to give birth to the truth, which is already inside the individual, even if deeply hidden and still unknown. Like a midwife of ancient Greece—who could decide whether the child was fit to come to life or not—Socrates aims to liberate people from false ideas and prejudices, those biases that prevent them from creative thinking and true understanding. The Belgian American contemporary philosopher Pierre Grimes (1924–2024) directly refers to Socrates when he recommends philosophical midwifery as “the” method for philosophical counselling<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, *Eirōneia* can be a two-fold form of humor: not only an educational tool within the maieutic process to induce a change in the way of thinking of the interlocutor, thereby facilitating the acceptance of a different

*Weltanschauung*, a new paradigm, but also the exhibition of the superiority (and power) of one individual, or one group of people over another, often based on racial, gender or religious prejudices, as in the following two examples:

“Question: *What is black and white and red all over?*

- Answer: *A crushed nun!*

“Question: *What’s that black stuff between an elephant’s toes?*

- Answer: *Slow natives.*”

With regard to this second aspect, the joke does not promote the truth, with a more intense level of awareness and knowledge, but the opposite—aggressiveness, dullness, and also fear if the listener belongs to the minority or the disadvantaged group hit by the joke [6,7]. The scope is the same: entertainment, but the laugh resulting from this type of irony is not inclusive but, on the contrary, divisive. It is probably for this reason, and for a supposed “loss of control” that Plato in the Republic writes that the Guardian of the ideal state should avoid laughing: “Again, they must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction”<sup>8</sup>.

Even Aristotle (Stagira, 384 BCE-Chalcis, 322 BCE) [8–10], the pupil of Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great, appreciated witticism (*Eutrapelia*, the tenth virtue)<sup>9</sup> as a way to brighten up a conversation and a form of well-mannered insolence (*hubris*), condemns scorn and mockery, which rely on hostility. Therefore, lawgivers should forbid them. Despite these arguments, a contemporary South African philosopher, David Benatar (born 1966), believes that while humor is sometimes unethical, it is wrong much less often than many people think, being always strongly dependent on the context [11].

### 3. Questioning Prejudices and Taboos

Both philosophy and humor challenge prejudices and taboos. Philosophy questions about existing social norms, values, and assumptions, as well as humor often subverts expectations, highlighting incongruities in everyday life.

According to this perspective, in coherence with the reasoning outlined above, humor can play a useful role while helping us to see other sides of a matter or showing different aspects of a commonly accepted opinion, often with the use of wordplay and double senses, as in the next examples:

“*A policeman in New York City stops a lady and asks her for her license.*

- *Policeman: “Lady, here it says that you should be wearing glasses.”*

- *Lady: “Well, I have contacts.”*

- *Policemen: “I don’t care who you know, you are getting a ticket the same!”*

In this case, the source of incongruity is the second sense of the word “contacts” (important people she knows), and not only “eye contact lenses” as meant by the lady in her answer.

Another couple of examples here following:

- *“I’d love to have kids one day.*

*I don’t think I could stand them any longer than that, though.”*

The incongruity here above is based on “one day” in its double sense of “in the future” or, literally, “for one day only.”

- *“I have many jokes about unemployed people, sadly none of them work.”*

The incongruity lays, in this case, on “none of them”—referring both to many jokes and to unemployed people, as well as to the double-sense of the verb “work.”

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wien, 1889-Cambridge, 1951) [12–14] explored verbal ambiguities in the common use of language, recognizing that they can be connected to our incongruities and absurdity, and for this reason, may sound funny. Telling a joke is a language game—affirming “that is a tree” in front of a “real” tree is an obvious statement, but as a joke assumes a different meaning, it becomes nonsense, an absurdity, and for this, it may result humorous. A joke, for Wittgenstein, can use words that do not necessarily give information or describe a phenomenon as it is commonly meant; it can be odd and absurd, therefore hilarious at the same time [15].

Immanuel Kant (Königsberg, 1724-Königsberg, 1804), Georg W. F. Hegel (Stuttgart, 1770-Berlin, 1831) [16], and Arthur Schopenhauer (Danzig, 1788-Frankfurt am Main, 1860), regardless of the differences among their thought, shared almost the same view regarding humor as a sudden recognition of incongruity between an object and its representation, which may be absurd and unexpected, therefore ending in hilarity, as in Schopenhauer [17,18].

Kant combines the three characteristics of humor—superiority, incongruity, and release—in a wider aesthetics theory, where humor becomes a free play between imagination and understanding [19,20]. As for Hegel, learning to

laugh is part of the process towards self-consciousness [21], the conquest of the individual self through a dialectic path that emancipates the person from the universal order and necessity: “What is comical ...is the subjectivity that makes its actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing”<sup>10</sup>.

When a commonly accepted phenomenon is a prejudice, the audience of the joke is pushed to question the validity and the ground of those ideas on which a prejudice forms itself, without risking too much because “It is only a joke!” and the end of the process is generally a laugh.

In the following examples, quoted by Al Gini in an article entitled *Dirty Jokes, Tasteless Jokes, Ethnic Jokes*<sup>11</sup>, the joke becomes an opportunity to play on ethnic prejudices while denouncing them:

*“A man asks another:*

*- How do you call it when an Italian has one arm shorter than the other?*

*The second man answers:*

*- A speech impediment!”*

Prejudice (in this case, maybe more a commonly accepted cultural trait) refers to the Italian habit of using gestures in order to emphasize one’s words; at the same time, it makes fun of a disability.

The next jokes are set in a nazi concentration camp and regard Jewish prisoners; the first joke is simply humorous, showing the superiority of the prisoner over the nazi guard, and the second one—in spite of the de-humanizing context—succeeds in producing a self-deprecating irony:

*“A prisoner bumps into a guard. The guard shouts at him:—Schwein! (Pig!).*

*The prisoner bows and says:—Cohen. Please to meet you.”*

*“A prisoner points to a severe and sadistic ‘capo’ (a collaborationist, a Jewish prisoner-guard) and says to another prisoner:—Imagine! I knew him when he was only the president of a bank!”*

This was one of the roles interpreted by the court jester (*le fou du roi*) in medieval society, who probably had antecedents in the comic actors of ancient Rome<sup>12</sup> called *balatro*<sup>13</sup>; their work was to play comedic acts in front of nobles or people with high social status—mostly military or religious figures, accompanied with music. Kings, queens, and nobles employed them to entertain their guests and bring some cheerfulness into their courts. A jester could use jokes and humor in order to mock (improvising on the spot) without causing offense; but, in practice, nobody wanted to become the subject of a jester’s derision. Laughter, for a jester, was a sort of test for being employed by the noble: make me laugh and you are in! A jester always held a *marotte*, a sort of scepter, meaning that they represented the king or queen’s power and could make fun of other people without being punished.

Satire also shows the faults in social, political, or moral constructs, but often it goes far beyond humor, which is only one of its elements, together with parody, irony, exaggeration, and violence. Satire can be light-hearted, but rarely and not necessarily; it can be directed at political leaders and institutions, as well as national habits and religious traditions, in a very aggressive way, causing general blame, shock, and sometimes unexpected, violent, and condemnable counterreactions.

In this regard, I can quote the example of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which, after making fun of Islamic fundamentalism and Mahomed, became a victim of a terrorist attack that caused the death of 12 members of its staff in January 2015. Since its foundation in 1970, *Charlie Hebdo*’s form of satire has been to attack all religions, countries, and politicians very heavily. They also made fun of the thousands of wounded and dead Italian and Turkish people hit by the earthquakes that took place, respectively, in 2016 and 2023. In the cover of the 24th November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI is drawn with a condom in his hands instead of a sacred host, affirming “This is my body”, with a clear reference to the liturgy of the Catholic Mass.

Again, when Pope Benedict XVI resigned, the magazine’s cover showed the Pope clasping the hands of a Vatican Swiss guard (with hearts drawn in his eyes and a clear allusion to a love affair between the two men) and exclaiming, “*Enfin libre!*”

*Charlie Hebdo* is caustic, frequently obscene, and controversial. Quite often, it shows some form of cruelty towards the objects of its satire, but we should consider that it belongs strongly to the French spirit of absolute (from the Latin word *ab-solutus*, set free, without any limitations) freedom to mock everything and everyone. This type of radical satire goes back to Voltaire (Paris, 1694-Paris, 1778), who wrote *Le Traité sur la Tolérance* in 1763 to criticize in the form of satire any religious fanaticism, particularly that one of the Catholic Inquisition, which the year before had tortured and executed a French Protestant merchant named Jean Calas, accused without any evidence to have murdered his son who wanted to become Catholic [22].

#### 4. Facilitating the Learning Process

Many philosophers, either in the past or in the present day, have used humor to convey complex reasonings and become more comprehensible to the readers; many philosophical concepts contain elements of irony and paradox, and humor frequently involves wordplay and unexpected twists—as we have seen in the examples above mentioned. Some philosophical ideas, when presented in a comic context, can help shed light on obscure concepts and make them more accessible. Humor becomes a tool for philosophers to engage a wider and less educated audience; by contrast, philosophical inquiry can add depth and substance to humor, making it not only entertaining but, again, educational and thought-provoking. Many recent studies have proved the efficacy of using humor as a teaching tool—embedded in the lesson—for its capacity to increase both the students' attention and their positive motivation towards the learning process<sup>14</sup>, also in online learning environments [23].

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (Rocken, 1844-Weimar, 1900) is one of the philosophers who used humor in their writings to make their ideas more approachable, and his style is frequently designed to engage the reader and make them laugh [24]. However, beyond a mere choice of style, for Nietzsche, laughter is also a serious matter, a fundamental topic far from being incidental: a call for joy in response to the terror of existence [25,26]. It is a Dionysian vision of the world that can be traced back to the ancient Greek genres of comedy and tragedy [27]: “How many things are still possible! So, learn to laugh beyond yourself! Lift up your hearts ...high! higher! And do not forget the good laughter! This crown of the laughter, the rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter, have I pronounced holy. You higher men, learn, I pray you—to laugh”<sup>15</sup>.

Generally based on myths, both comedy and tragedy represent fundamental human conditions, both involving our existential finitude, the limits of our knowledge, and our common sins—sometimes displaying them in a comic way, which generally ends with a burst of laughter, other times showing them in a tragic, dramatic way which may evolve in solemn awe, a sense of bewilderment, but also a sort of relief, where the tragic dimension of the human condition is sublimated through theatrical representation. In this sense, comedy and tragedy are linked together; their roots are deep down in our limitedness and possibility of death, and both experiences offer us a cathartic relief. Laughter is not contrary to serious issue; instead, it is part of wisdom. [28]: As Nietzsche wrote: “He who climbeth on the highest mountain, laugheth at all tragic plays and tragic realities”<sup>16</sup>.

#### 5. A Coping Mechanism and a Relief Valve

Both philosophy and humor seek to uncover hidden meanings, albeit with different methods and purposes—often, the juxtaposition of ideas and the unexpected connections between apparently unrelated contents can create both philosophical insights and hilarious moments.

We may find the concept of “hidden meaning,” and the related notion of “intentionality.” in theory elaborated by Sigmund Freud (Freiberg (Moravia, now Czech Republic), 1856-London, 1939) already in *The Interpretation of Dreams* [29], then in *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* [30] and in a short article of 1928 entitled “*Humour*” [31]. Here, the founder of psychoanalysis affirms that the joke transforms socially unacceptable, unrespectable, primitive deep impulses—e.g., aggressiveness, sexism, sexual desire, and violence—into acceptable ones, replacing them with a laugh; thus, laughter becomes a socially accepted way to release tension together with repressed emotions.

The following example was quoted by Freud, who—being Jewish—was a passionate collector of jokes from the repertoire of Viennese and Yiddish humor:

*“A man complains to his friend about a girl he introduced to him:*

*- Why have you brought me here? She is ugly and old, squints, and has bad teeth and bleary eyes.*

*- You don't need to whisper. She is also deaf!”*<sup>17</sup>

As for Freud, the unconscious process that produces a joke is similar to the one that produces a dream: dream-work tends to minimize displeasure, while joke-work aims to maximize pleasure<sup>18</sup>.

According to this perspective, philosophy and humor have a double scope: they can serve as a coping mechanism and a relief valve, which—as we have seen above—is the third characteristic of humor, together with superiority and incongruity. Philosophical insights provide a framework for accepting and dealing with our existential contradictions; humor can offer relief and a different perspective on our impulses and taboos, and both help us to accept our human condition [32].

Likewise, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (Copenhagen, 1813–Copenhagen, 1855) considered irony (“*Ironi*” in Danish may refer to the freedom and outrageousness of the fantasy over its object) and humor both as a

dialectic and an aesthetic experience [33], where everything is shown to be vanity or paradox, and therefore “the cognitive and acting subject becomes free”<sup>19</sup>.

The contemporary French-Israeli philosopher Lydia Amir (Paris, 1955) has developed her reflection on humor within this context of thought: self-referential humor makes us see ourselves as ridiculous (her concept of *homo risibilis*), incongruous, limited, and therefore helps us to cope with our human condition, and to accept the tragedy of our finitude with a smile. “*Homo risibilis* is a skeptical worldview I advance, which is predicated on self-referential laughter. It means the ridiculous human being and its thesis is that being aware of our necessary ridicule liberates us from it”<sup>20</sup>.

For Amir, human beings do not have to renounce their nature, their desires, and their contradictions [34]; on the contrary, they should learn “to love” them. Introducing humor into our existence, we can transform negative experiences into acceptable and universal ones (shared by all). Her message could be summarized as: “We cannot change our tragic human condition, but we can embrace it with a laugh.”

## 6. A Beneficial Change in Everyday Life Perspective

Humor often involves an uncommon or unexpected shift in perspective, and philosophy frequently challenges established perspectives, and both may lead to a new way of perceiving the world.

We have also seen how well-crafted humor makes us laugh at our idiosyncrasies and pains.

I can briefly quote the case of Emma, a woman I counselled, who had recently faced a long, exhausting divorce, which drained a lot of her energy and economic resources. Additionally, she had to convince her three daughters that her decision was right and taken also for their good and well-being—enabling them to live in a more peaceful family environment, giving them the possibility to develop a more serene relationship with both dad and mum.

Our sessions were having a positive effect on her, as I have noticed that only the act of sharing a disturbing or sorrowful matter, being able to speak about it, may open a door through which the philosopher can enter, lightening the darkest corners and most confused thoughts [35,36].

During one of those sessions, we were analyzing how a turbulent moment could turn into an experience of deep and meaningful personal growth for all the members of her “new type of family” and reading together some passages from Marcus Aurelius (Rome, 121 CE-Vindobona (Wien) 180 CE) Meditations [37], where the Roman Emperor and Philosopher reminds us to be prepared to manage conflicts and difficulties in our life, and act in accordance with our moral compass.

Emma was listening attentively when suddenly she said: “Yes, I think that my daughters, my ex-husband, and I, together, can find a wise solution; somehow, we will agree about the right way to go on. It will take time, but we can make it. What do you think?”—she asked me.

*“I believe so too—I answered—I could tell you of another case:*

*“A husband and his wife applied to the Divorce Court.*

*- The Judge said: you have three kids ... how will you divide them?*

*The couple had a long discussion and said:*

*- “Ok, Sir. We will come back next year with one more.”*

We both laughed, and that silly joke represented symbolically the start of a significant change of perspective in her attitude facing those difficult days.

Often, introducing lightness through some glimpses of comedy during the process of reciprocal questioning that characterizes the dialogue between the philosophical counsellor and the counselee can be a harbinger of amazing findings and unforeseen fulfillments. During a humorous act, mind and body are together. While laughing together at that joke, Emma recovered a beneficial state of mind and experienced a momentary sense of unity and relief.

This brings to my mind a quote from the French philosopher Ernest Renan (Tréguier 1823-Paris, 1892): “The more I think of it, the more I find that all philosophy of the world is summarized in good humour”, quoted by Francis Espinasse [38].

## 7. Conclusions

Good humor and laughter seem to be essential traits of the human condition, as they show us the limits of our ideas and possibilities. The history of Western philosophy may prove this: from Ancient Greece to today, many philosophers wrote about them. Humor shows us that we can feel unhappy about our finitude, but we can also laugh at it. Our tragic condition can always be turned into a comic one—through hilarity; we can accept the possibility of our death and go on living with courage and joy.

Humor can also be considered a valuable aid to overcome our resistance to change, our daily life difficulties, and our common existential issues. A comedy, a funny joke, a witty remark, or a clever play on words are mainly social events—that is why, in certain contexts, they may be considered dangerous and subversive. For humor activates both mind and body, it can be either thought provoking or provide mental and physical relief. At school, adding a bit of fun to a serious topic can elevate the quality and the efficacy of a teaching and learning experience. For us, as philosophical counsellors, humor is a vital device to add to our bag of philosophical tools.

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## Footnotes

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