Introduction
The Philosophy of Comedy

SIMON KIRCHIN

1. Starting Thoughts

Previous writers and comedians have observed, in their various ways, that analyzing humour is like dissecting a frog. You might end up learning something, but the thing is dead in the end.[1] This might not be the most original way to start an introduction to a special edition on the philosophy of comedy, nor indeed the most hopeful, but it does capture a worry that a group of us were aware of as we began a project that resulted in the papers collected here, of which more in a moment.

The philosophy of humour has a significant history, with different theories or stances of how we should understand what humour is. Several of our authors are aware of this. In her contribution, for example, Rebecca Roache outlines the main stances, namely: release theory, superiority theory, and the incongruity theory. Each has its advantages and faults and each, particularly the last, can be sharpened in different ways.

Whilst these theories or stances each have lengthy histories, it is surprising that humour has not been more central to philosophical theorizing across different cultures and eras, given how significant it is to human life. Indeed, laughter itself and the causes of laughter seem to be part and parcel both of everyday life and of what it is to be a human being. Of course, this special edition of *Philosophy* is not on the general topic of laughter and humour but on the narrower topic of philosophy and comedy, be that comedy performed by professionals in a staged setting or jokes and skits thrown together on the hoof by amateurs. With that said, however, the intentional activity

[1] Various authors have had the original link between humour analysis and frog dissection attributed to them, notably Mark Twain, Marty Feldman, and Barry Cryer. My own research reckons that the original link is best attributed to E. B. White and Katherine S. White (White and White, 1941).

doi:10.1017/S1358246124000195 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of making others laugh (or failing to make others laugh) is still a common enough human activity that one might be surprised that there has not been more philosophical treatment of it.

In a modest way, the pieces collected here aim to correct this and stimulate further debates and discussions. The format I have chosen for this special edition is also slightly unusual, or at least differs from much of modern academic philosophy. I have gathered six papers on various topics within comedy. Each of these is paired with a discussion, where the writer, me, and a different cast of one or two others (including professional comedians) both debate some of the ideas in the paper and use this as an opportunity to talk about the topic generally. Or, in other words, our discussions do not slavishly follow the papers point by point; the discussions are better seen as accompanying pieces about the general issue. The discussions also reflect the fact that these were actual conversations that I have then transcribed and edited. Whilst I cannot promise that there are no dead frogs at the end, as it were, I do hope that our discussions are entertaining enough to bring to life some of the issues that animated us.

The material collected here comes from a project I ran at the University of Kent between 2019 and 2023; these papers were first presented at an event in May 2023. I gathered various philosophers and comedians together to discuss a range of issues. Some of the events were invite only, whilst others were open to others including the general public. What was interesting to see in these gatherings was that the manner of speaking and the style of thinking had by the philosophers and professional comedians were highly similar, if not identical. Whilst there are differences, it is notable that people from both groups are thinking about words and expressions that aim to communicate ideas to an audience, and sometimes convince them, and in doing so people in both parties are often trying to build and convey a broader picture or worldview. It was lovely to see people from these two distinct groups explore ideas of common concern together in a very open spirit. The events and conversations I helped to organise were some of the most satisfying of my professional career. I am particularly grateful to *The Royal Institute of Philosophy*, the *British Society for Aesthetics*, and the University of Kent for sponsoring our activities. As well as the contributors to this special issue, I am also grateful to the following comedians for taking part: Daphna Baram, Keith Carter and Ruth Cockburn ('Black Liver'), Alexis Dubus, Robin Ince, Mark Thomas, and Andy White. I am particularly grateful to Olly Double and Graeme A. Forbes who helped me to organise the events from which these

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pieces flowed. Lastly, I am grateful to Hannah Laurens for assisting me in the production of this volume.

2. The Papers and Discussions

Julian Baggini begins our set of papers by making the case that comedy can be a form of philosophy, taking his inspiration from the claim and ensuing debate that films can be a form of philosophy. Baggini focuses on *The Simpsons*, as well as *Mony Python*, and he straightforwardly asserts that some forms of comedy can be philosophy. This does not mean that all comedy or all comedians are philosophers (or are doing philosophy), nor that all philosophical ideas are ripe for comedic treatment, although one might venture that in a mind that is creative enough, even the most obscure and dry philosophical idea can be made funny. This calls to mind the point from above: that the ways in which some philosophers and some comedians think and express their ideas have significant similarities.

There are, of course, differences: philosophy or most philosophy is not aiming to make people laugh or to entertain, whereas this is precisely what comedy, or a lot of comedy, is aiming at. In the debate about whether film can be a form of philosophy, much of the discussion has turned on what the proper or core aims of film as an artistic and entertainment medium are, and how they compare with the proper or core aims of philosophy. (Some trivial examples are excluded from the debate, such as films of philosophers giving lectures. The debate focuses on common-or-garden big budget movies and arthouse cinema.) Some commentators think that the aims of film and of philosophy are in such tension that the former cannot be a form of the latter, whilst others disagree. In our discussion of Baggini's paper we start with this idea, thinking about the core or proper aims of comedy and of philosophy. Even if comedy is trying to make people laugh and/or entertain, is that such as to rule out the idea that comedy can be a form of philosophy? From here other ideas come in. We return to the thought from above that both comedians and philosophers are often creating and communicating worldviews: getting us to see the world in a certain way and even trying to persuade us of the merits of their perspective. Both a comedic perspective and a philosophical perspective can help one to make sense of things and to live a better life. But alongside that we wonder if there is anything special here about comedy and philosophy. After all, other academic disciplines and other artistic forms articulate worldviews. From here we turn back in our discussion and wonder

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which other artforms might be said to be forms of philosophy and which types of artform, including comedy, can be clustered in line with this idea. In the end, as with the debate as to whether film can be philosophy, as well as asking if comedy can be a form of philosophy, we also wonder about the aims and forms of philosophy itself.

We then have two papers and accompanying discussions that in different ways grapple with the idea of comedy and freedom of expression. First, Piers Benn explores the issue of freedom of expression and comedy in a straightforward manner, thinking about the boundary between offence and harm framed at the start by thoughts derived from J. S. Mill. He then goes on to think about authoritarian and other demands to shut down comedy on the grounds of offence, and reflects near the end on the familiar and popular distinction between 'punching up' and 'punching down' when it comes to comedy and freedom of expression.

In our discussion we reflect on Benn's thoughts and his many examples. Having practising comedians discuss the issues from their point of view is instructive in itself and we discuss the phenomenon of self-censorship, for example, and how this issue plays out in different media. We also think about further questions. For example, comedy often involves insult, parody, and caustic wit. These and other modes can be put in service of targeting an individual or groups, and some might find the material offensive. Over time, and with enough such examples, we might have a steady 'drip-drip-drip' feed of hostile taunts and jokes that create and encourage hatred towards the target, which in turn can lead to harm, even if no one such joke was the cause or can even be identified as the 'last straw'. There are many such examples in the modern age of Western comedy. How should we consider this phenomenon in the light of the traditional distinction between offence and harm? Is this an age-old problem or does comedy add anything to the issue given its mixture of seduction and challenge?

We also consider another interesting aspect of modern comedic expression. Comedians are aware that they can be filmed by others or produce films themselves. Often their carefully crafted material is or can be 'clipped' with short excerpts produced and then posted on social media by others, often without the comedian knowing that it has been done, let alone sanctioning it. There is the real risk that what the comedian says is then taken out of context and they can be made to 'say' all sorts of things that they did not intend. In this case, where does the responsibility lie for what is said in a social media clip? Who exactly is causing offence and who is potentially harming others? How might we apportion blame?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Emily McTernan also thinks about comedy and freedom of expression, but she homes in on a particular topic. There seems more to say to comedians who are engaged in offensive comedy than merely offering the advice of 'Don't punch down!'. There also seems to be more to say than simply thinking that comedians are in a special context or artistic space where they can say whatever they want. In introducing matters in this way, McTernan explores the idea of subversive, offensive comedy that nevertheless steers clear of being harmful. In doing so she thinks more about the aforementioned distinction between 'punching up' and 'punching down'. She thinks that this distinction *roughly* tracks the right sorts of moral action and offers *roughly* the right sort of guidance, but this distinction can mislead us and the comedian because we are normally inclined to focus on the *target* of the humour when invoking this distinction. In contrast, McTernan says we should also be paying attention to the effects on the *audience*.

In our discussion we alight on several aspects of her paper. First, we raise the issue of who is in the targeted group and what it means to say that people are marginalised and lacking in power (and the like), and who therefore should not be subject to certain forms of comedy, particularly directed, offensive comedy. We discuss various types of example – such as (potentially) powerful mothers-in-law and posh, monied politicians – to get clarity on which groups we should be talking about and why. We then move on to discuss whether McTernan's ideas get equal purchase and expression when we compare the professional context with the context where friends are joking with one another. Can I say things to my trusted friends about certain groups that I could not and should not get away with if I were on a public stage? Throughout we discuss McTernan's thoughts about the audience. After all, a modern comedian might not know exactly who their audience is. This thought echoes the previous discussion's example of comedy clips produced by others appearing on social media.

Laughter, comedy, and humour often feature swearing. But what is it that makes swearing (often) so funny? This is the question posed to us by Rebecca Roache in our next paper. Roache begins with a simple question: on those occasions where swearing is funny, why is it funny? To get a handle on how we might answer this question, she thinks about the aforementioned three main theories of humour: release theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. She thinks that all of them can help to answer the question, but also all of them have flaws, at least when it comes to swearing and humour. She ends with some considerations as to what makes funny swearing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

funny, by focusing on the idea of non-threatening unpredictability, and offers further reflections.

In our discussion we think about a range of topics. We contrast children with adults, and certain sorts of adult with others. Why do children find swearing so funny? Is it just subversion? When adults find swearing funny, is this merely a sophisticated version of subversion, or is something else going on? Echoing our discussion with McTernan, is there a marked difference between swearing in the professional context and swearing when we are with our friends? A central part of our discussion concerns what role funny swearing has. Can it be funny on its own or is it (often) only playing an amplifying function of other funny things? Clearly a sensible approach will dismiss this distinction as too crude and simplistic. Context will matter enormously when asking what role swearing has in funny utterances. However, this distinction prompts us to ask the more substantial question of which contexts matter to which forms of funny swearing. Which cases can one think of where swearing can rightly be said to be funny itself and not merely something that adds to something that is already funny?

Modern professional comedy can seem to be a curious yet precious cultural artefact for a number of reasons. In her contribution, Lucy O'Brien draws attention to the following. We routinely see professional comedians go on stage and self-deprecate and even belittle themselves. They do so to gain laughs and entertain, encouraged by an audience, indeed sometimes encouraged by multiple audiences across a career. This seems strange: what purpose does such activity serve? Why do we encourage people to do this? O'Brien's philosophical task is twofold. First, she has an aim of simply drawing attention to this phenomenon and describing it so that its curious nature shines through. Second, she puts forward the hypothesis that what professional comedians are doing when they self-deprecate is exploring existential absurdity on behalf of their audience. This is why, says O'Brien, we value certain forms of modern comedy in the way we do.

Our discussion starts by thinking about the mode in which O'Brien writes: through reflection and nuance she tries to bring out the strange nature of what she is interested in. We then move to the nub of her discussion to understand better her central phenomenon. When a comedian self-deprecates and points to their failures, they can do this in many ways and point out several flaws. Some flaws are 'safe slapstick', the sort of common, everyday mistakes we all make, such as failing at doing the laundry or mangling our words when someone asks us the time. Bar any more details, these examples seem safe territory and perhaps less in need of philosophical diagnosis. On the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other hand, sometimes comedians reveal flaws of themselves that expose core parts of who they are and which show themselves in a significantly uncomfortable and challenging light. What more details can we provide that show the sorts of example that fit O'Brien's mould and why do they fit? We also discuss the types of power a performer has. One might think they have formal power: they are the ones on stage with a mic, after all. But very quickly an audience can turn and the performer who seems to have a lot of power suddenly has very little. That can make the self-deprecating performer even more vulnerable and can add richness to the phenomenon that O'Brien is encouraging us to notice and reflect on. Of course, this also means that the audience has their part to play in the performance, as we draw attention to. Near the end of our discussion, we compare the phenomenon O'Brien is interested in with the confessions of flaws and failures witnessed in some religious gatherings, such as services at charismatic churches. (It is notable that O'Brien's paper is called 'Priests of the Absurd …'.) How similar is a sinner's confession to a self-deprecating comedian's routine?

Lastly, we come to an issue familiar in philosophy of art and art criticism generally, made more specific for our purposes. It is often asked whether the life and moral activity of an artist can and should affect how one views their art. Julian Dodd's paper focuses on the issue of whether the activity of a comedian or comic artist, and people's moral views of such behaviour, can affect how funny one considers their art, and he makes the issue more specific by focusing on the life and activity of Woody Allen and his film *Manhattan*. Many people report finding *Manhattan* less funny than they did because of Allen's relationship with Soon-Yi Previn, which started after *Manhattan* was made. Several commentators and philosophers think this is perfectly straightforward to explain: Allen's behaviour makes the film less funny. Dodd casts doubt on exactly how one might explain this: whilst it is true that people do find the film less funny and they do so because of Allen's behaviour, it is not so obvious for Dodd that one explains that by saying the film has changed because of Allen's behaviour and that the film itself is now less funny or unfunny.

In the subsequent discussion of Dodd's paper, we raise a range of questions and examples. For example, if one entertains the idea that an artwork such as a film changes or does not change its artistic merits, such as its funniness, one has to understand what constitutes the artwork in the first place and hence which parts can change. Is a film merely its manifest properties? Can one talk of the film also encompassing other properties and features? Are the social and cultural

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mores in which a film is made also part of the artwork itself, and if these change over time does the film therefore also change? In a different vein, we discuss a range of cases where an artist pursues morally dubious activity but where this activity has little to do with the artwork itself. This stands in contrast to *Manhattan*, arguably, since the film focuses on a relationship between a middle-aged man and a teenage woman. (Soon-Yi was in her early 20s when she began her relationship with Allen.) To what extent can we draw the same conclusions for all these examples?

Other questions are posed, some just in passing. The case of *Manhattan* focuses on morally dubious behaviour and something becoming less funny or not funny at all. But what of cases where subsequent to the artwork an artist is a moral hero or one finds out that they are? Can that make an artwork *funnier*? Near the end of the discussion there are two further debates. First, the focus switches from *Manhattan* and films, and considers what happens in the case of stand-up comedy itself. We raise the example of famed comedian Louis CK and subsequent views about whether his current and previous routines are as funny as people thought they were given the revelations about his behaviour. Second and lastly, we ask whether there is something special about funniness as a property of an artwork. Do the same or very similar ideas apply if one considers other aesthetic properties such as elegance or joy, and if one considers other artworks such as romantic films?

Reference

E. B. White and Katherine S. White, 'The Preaching Humorist', 18 October 1941, *The Saturday Review of Literature* (New York: The Saturday Review Company Inc., 1941).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000195 Published online by Cambridge University Press