

PT175

What's So Funny?

The Politics & Philosophy of Humor

Seminar Leader

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Email

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"[Humanity] has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."

—Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*

Course Times

Thursdays, 10 am–1 pm

Office Hours

Online & by appointment

Course Description

How many philosophers does it take to explain a joke? Many, it turns out. Since the concept of humor is itself quite elusive, there have been many different approaches throughout history to explain exactly what makes people laugh. The purpose of this class is to discuss the variety of philosophical theories and types of discourse proposed to explain humor as well as to identify its political significance, since humor has always been a useful resource for taking on politically fraught issues. Our readings take us from an exploration of the nature of humor and the civilizing function of the comic to some of more disturbing strains, as well as towards an analysis of the relationship between humor and the human condition itself. Readings are (among others) by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Addison, Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Kant, Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, Bergson, Freud, Arendt, Scruton, Beckett, Cavell, Carroll, Adorno, Nagel, Morreall.

Course Readings

All readings will be available via Google Classroom.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence from a once-per-week course should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. More than one absence (that is an absence from a once-per-week session of 180 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FALL 2022: Some students may need to begin the semester remotely due to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. In addition, all students and instructors must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill. Instructors should make efforts to offer alternatives to in-person attendance where needed, including remote participation or asynchronous options.

Required Texts

Generally, there will be some compulsory and some recommended readings for each session. These are mainly selected contributions by different authors. All students are responsible for preparing all the required readings in advance of each week (with the exception of the first session). A digital version of all readings will be provided at the beginning of the semester via Google Classroom. However, all texts should be physically printed at best, and be available for reference during our course time. The recommended readings, also uploaded to our Google Classroom, are not mandatory, but highly encouraged.

Assessment

Participation

Students should arrive to each class on time (also during online sessions!) **and prepared**. Being prepared means

- (1) having completed the assigned reading,
- (2) bringing to class a non-electronic copy of the assigned reading, and
- (3) being ready to initiate and to contribute to discussion.

Engagement in class discussion should be regular as well as productive; quantity alone will not favorably affect the participation grade.

Class Presentations

Every student is expected to present on one text as per a sign-up sheet online. Each presentation of about 15 minutes will examine key passages of their choice, ideally using either PowerPoint or a handout for the class. You are encouraged to write your midterm or final paper on the text that you present on. In this manner, your essay can expand on the insights and questions that arose from your class contribution and the discussion that follows your readings.

Writing Assignments

There will be two principal assignments over the course of the term: **a midterm essay of 2000 words due at 23:59 on Oct 16**, and **a final essay of 3000 words due at 23:59 on Dec 16**. All essays are to be **submitted electronically via Google Classroom**.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 25%

Presentation: 20%

Midterm essay (2000 words): 25%

Final essay (3000 words): 30%

Course Schedule


What's So Funny?

The Politics & Philosophy of Humor

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
1 / Sept 1, 2022	INTRODUCTION	<p>I. Preparatory Reading:</p> <p>(1) John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," <i>The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i></p> <p>(2) Noël Carroll, <i>Humor. A Very Short Introduction</i></p> <p>II. Additional Material (recommended):</p> <p>* Joseph Polimeni / Jeffrey P. Reiss, "The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of Humor"</p> <p>* <i>Philosophy East and West</i> 39(3) 1989: Philosophy and Humor (esp. Christoph Harbsmeier, "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy")</p> <p>* <i>The Monist</i> 88(1) 2005: Special Issue on Humor</p> <p>* Franz Rosenthal, <i>Humor in Early Islam</i></p>
2 / Sept 8, 2022	HUMOR IN ANTIQUITY I	<p>(1) Plato, <i>Philebus</i></p> <p>(2) Michel de Montaigne, <i>On Democritus and Heraclitus</i></p>
3 / Sept 15, 2022	HUMOR IN ANTIQUITY II	<p>(1) Aristotle, <i>Poetics</i> 1–5; <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> 4; <i>Rhetoric</i> 3.1, 3.10 & 3.11</p> <p>(2) Cicero, <i>On the Orator</i> 2.51–71</p> <p>(3) Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i> VI.2</p>
4 / Sept 22, 2022	HUMOR IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD	<p>(1) Thomas Hobbes, <i>Human Nature</i> 9.13</p> <p>(2) John Locke, "Of Discerning, and Other Operations of the Mind" (<i>Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> XI)</p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		<p>(3) René Descartes, <i>Passions of the Soul</i> pt. 2, 124–127 & pt. 3 178–181</p> <p>(4) Joseph Addison, <i>Spectator</i> 1711 & <i>On True and False Wit</i> 61 & 62</p> <p>(5) Francis Hutcheson, <i>Reflections Upon Laughter</i></p>
5 / Sept 29, 2022	HUMOR IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD / ENLIGHTENMENT	<p>(1) Lord Shaftesbury, <i>Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour</i> & <i>A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm</i></p> <p>(2) David Hartley, <i>On Wit and Mirth from Observations on Man</i></p> <p>(3) Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Judgment</i> 5.330–335</p> <p>(4) Arthur Schopenhauer, <i>WWR</i> I.1,13 & <i>WWR</i> II.1.8 (<i>On the Theory of the Ludicrous</i>) & <i>Parerga and Paralipomena</i> II.6.96</p>
6 / Oct 6, 2022	THE AESTHETICS OF HUMOR I	<p>(1) Michael Clark, “Humor and Incongruity”</p> <p>(2) Roger Scruton, “Laughter”</p> <p>(3) Jean Paul, <i>School for Aesthetics</i> VI (“On the Ridiculous”), VII (“On Humorous Poetry”), VIII (“On Epic, Dramatic and Lyric Humor”) & IX (“On Wit”)</p> <p>(4) Charles Baudelaire, <i>On the Essence of Laughter</i></p> <p>* Recommended Reading: John W. MacInnes, “Essential Laughter: Baudelaire’s <i>De l’essence du rire</i>”</p>
7 / Oct 13, 2022	THE AESTHETICS OF HUMOR II	<p>(1) Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, <i>Concluding Scientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments. Crumbs on Irony, Pathos, Absurd</i></p> <p>(2) Peter Berger, <i>Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience</i> part 1: “Anatomy of the Comic”</p>

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Sunday, Oct 16, 2022 at 23:59 CEST	Midterm Papers Due	
8 / Oct 20, 2022	HUMOR IN FRENCH COMEDY	(🎵 🎵) <i>Philosophize This!</i> Podcast Episodes #145 & 146: Bergson on Laughter (1) Henri Bergson , <i>Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic</i>
Oct 24 – Oct 30, 2022	FALL BREAK	
9 / Nov 3, 2022	HUMOR & THE UNCONSCIOUS	(1) Sigmund Freud , <i>Humour & Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious</i> (2) Simon Critchley , “Why the Super-Ego is Your Amigo” (<i>On Humour</i> ch. VII) (3) Hannah Arendt , “The Intramural Warfare Between Thought and Common Sense” (<i>The Life of the Mind</i> II.10)
10 / Nov 10, 2022	THE ETHICS OF HUMOR	(1) Ronald de Sousa , “When Is It Wrong to Laugh?” (2) Ted Cohen , “Taste, Morality, and Propriety of Joking” (<i>Jokes. Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters</i> ch. 6) (3) Aaron Smuts , “The Salacious and the Satirical: In Defense of Symmetric Comic Moralism” (4) Berys Gaut , “Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor”
11 / Nov 17, 2022	HUMOR ON STAGE	(1) Samuel Beckett , <i>Endgame</i> (2) Stanley Cavell , <i>On Endgame</i> (3) Theodor W. Adorno , <i>On Endgame</i>
12 / Nov 24, 2022	THE LIMITS OF HUMOR	(1) Simon Critchley , “Laughing at Your Body – Post-Colonial Theory” (<i>On Humour</i> III)

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		<p>(2) Joseph Boskin, <i>Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture</i></p> <p>(3) Michael Philips, "Racist Acts and Racist Humor"</p> <p>(4) Steven Gimbel, "Am I Blue? The Ethics of Dirty (and Other Morally Questionable) Jokes" (<i>Isn't That Clever</i> ch. 7)</p>
13 / Dec 1, 2022	THE ABSURD, THE PHILOSOPHICAL, & THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF HUMOR	<p>(1) Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd"</p> <p>(2) Matthew M. Hurley / Daniel C. Dennett / Reginald B. Adams, Jr., <i>Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind</i></p> <p>(2) Noël Carroll, "Keaton, Chaplin, Lloyd, and Langdon" (<i>Comedy Incarnate. Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping</i> ch. 3)</p> <p>(3) Theodor W. Adorno, "Chaplin Times Two"</p>
14 / Dec 8, 2022	THE POLITICS OF HUMOR	<p>(1) Marjolein 'T Hart, "Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction"</p> <p>(2) Rachel V. Kutz-Flamenbaum, "Humor and Social Movements"</p>
15 / Dec 12 – Dec 16, 2022	COMPLETION WEEK  (No Class) <i>Final Papers Due at 23:59 (CET) on Friday, Dec 16, 2022</i>	

ESSAY DEADLINES

Midterm Paper (2000 words) by **October 16, 2022, 23:59 CEST**

Final Paper (3000 words) by **December 16, 2022, 23:59 CET**