

PT175

What's So Funny?

The Politics & Philosophy of Laughter

Seminar Leader

Sinem Derya Kılıç

*“No hay nada más hermoso que la risa. Es tener la fortaleza de reír y abandonarse. Ser iluminado. /
Nothing is worth more than laughter. It is strength to laugh and to abandon oneself, to be light.”*

—Frida Kahlo

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Course Times

Thursdays,
10:45 am–1:45 pm

Office Hours

By appointment only

Course Description

How many philosophers does it take to explain a joke? Apparently, quite a few, since the question of why we actually laugh has been answered differently over the course of the history of philosophy: sometimes we laugh out of superiority, sometimes out of embarrassment, then again out of *Schadenfreude* or confusion. We laugh with others or at others, but also just at ourselves.

The purpose of this class is to provide an overview of the most important theories on the subject of humor and to identify its political significance, since laughter has always been a useful resource for taking on politically fraught issues. We will begin with texts from Chinese and Greek antiquity and then discuss chronologically the most important authors up to the current century.

All texts will be made available in a course reader, but to get started on the topic, purchasing Noël Carroll's *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* is highly recommended.

Course Readings

All required readings will be available in a Course Reader (print version), which will be distributed in the library. All additional readings will be available via Google Classroom.

* Recommended Books:

(1) **Noël Carroll (2014) *Humour: A Very Short Introduction***, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press (ISBN 978-0-19-955222-1)

(2) **Matthew Bevis (2012) *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction***, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press (ISBN 978-0-19960-171-4)

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 two unexcused absences** (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.

Required Texts

Generally, there will be some compulsory and some recommended readings for each session. These are mainly selected contributions by different authors on humor. All students are responsible for preparing all the required readings in advance of each week (with the exception of the first session). In addition to the printed course reader, a digital reader 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 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 presentation slides or a handout for the class. You are encouraged to write your midterm or final paper on the text that you presented 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 26**, and **a final essay of 3000 words due at 23:59 on Dec 7 for graduating students** and 23:59 on **Dec 21** for other students. All essays are to be **submitted as a Google document electronically via Google Classroom**. All sources must be quoted to avoid plagiarism. **ChatGPT or other AI tools may not be used under any circumstances.**

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 Laughter

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
1 / Sept 4, 2025	INTRODUCTION: WHY DO WE LAUGH? PROTO-GAGS: CHINA & ANCIENT GREECE	(🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 7 “Uncrowned King: Kongzi (Confucius) and the Analects”, 13 “The Trembling Ox: Mengzi and the Compassionate Heart” & 53 “Beware of the Philosopher: The Cynics” (1) Text Selection on <i>Humor in Ancient China</i> (2) Diogenes Laertius (3rd century CE) “Diogenes of Sinope” (from: <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i> VI)
2 / Sept 11, 2025	ATTIC COMEDY: ARISTOPHANES	(🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 15 “Socrates without Plato: The Accounts of Aristophanes and Xenophon” (1) Aristophanes (423 BCE) <i>The Clouds</i> 
3 / Sept 18, 2025	ATTIC & ROMAN HUMOR: ARISTOTLE & CICERO	(🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 34 “Mr. Know It All: Aristotle’s Life and Works”, 49 “Stage Directions: Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics” & 71 “Rhetorical Questions: Cicero”

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		<p>(1) Aristotle (c. 335 BCE), <i>Poetics</i> 1–5</p> <p>(2) Ibid. (c. 350 BCE), <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> IV.8 1128a–1128b</p> <p>(3) Cicero (55 BCE), <i>De oratore</i> II.51–71</p>
4 / Sept 25, 2025	HUMOR & RELIGION: JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY & ISLAM	<p>(1) Jeremy Dauber (2017) “The Wit of the Jews”</p> <p>(2) Irven Resnick (1987) “‘Risus monasticus’. Laughter and Medieval Monastic Culture”</p> <p>(3) Franz Rosenthal (2011) “On Laughter”</p> <p>(4) Selected Stories of Nasreddin Hoca (13th century)</p>
5 / Oct 2, 2025	HUMOR IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD	<p>(🎵) <i>In Our Time</i> Podcast Episode “Hobbes”, <i>Philosophize This!</i> Podcast Episodes 35 & 36 “John Locke” & <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 466 “Well Hidden: Descartes’ Life and Works” & 474 “States of the Union: Descartes on the Passions”</p> <p>(1) Thomas Hobbes (1650) <i>Human Nature: or The Fundamental Elements of Policy</i> 9.13</p> <p>(2) John Locke (1689) “Of Discerning, and Other Operations of the Mind” (<i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> XI)</p> <p>(3) René Descartes (1649) <i>Passions of the Soul</i> II §§ 91–95, 99, 104, 109, 124–127 & III §§ 178–181, 210</p> <p>(4) Francis Hutcheson (1750) <i>Reflections Upon Laughter</i></p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
6 / Oct 9, 2025	HUMOR IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD & IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT	<p>(🎵) <i>Philosophize This!</i> Podcast Episodes 56 & 57 “Kant”</p> <p>(1) David Hartley (1749) “Of Wit and Humor” (<i>Observations on Man</i> I.4.1)</p> <p>(2) Immanuel Kant (1790) <i>Critique of Judgment</i> I.1.54</p> <p>(3) Arthur Schopenhauer (1819) <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> I.1.13 & II.1.8 (“On the Theory of the Ludicrous”)</p>
7 / Oct 16, 2025	THE AESTHETICS OF HUMOR I	<p>(🎵) <i>In Our Time</i> Podcast Episode “Kierkegaard”</p> <p>(1) Jean Paul (1804/13) “On Epic, Dramatic & Lyric Humor” (<i>School for Aesthetics</i> VIII)</p> <p>(2) Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1846) <i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments</i></p> <p>(3) Peter Berger (2014) “Philosophers of the Comic, and the Comedy of Philosophy” (<i>Redeeming Laughter. The Comic Dimension of Human Experience</i> I.2)</p>
Oct 20 – Oct 26, 2025	FALL BREAK	
		
Sunday, Oct 26, 2025	Midterm Papers Due	
8 / Oct 30, 2025	THE AESTHETICS OF HUMOR II	<p>(🎵) <i>Philosophy Bites</i> Podcast Episode “Roger Scruton on Human Nature”</p> <p>(1) Michael Clark (1970) “Humor and Incongruity”</p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		(2) Roger Scruton (1982) “Laughter”
9 / Nov 6, 2025	À LA FRANÇAISE: HUMOR IN FRANCE	<p>(🎵) <i>Philosophize This!</i> Podcast Episodes 145 & 146 “Bergson on Laughter”</p> <p>(1) Henri Bergson (1900) <i>Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic</i></p> <p>(2) Charles Baudelaire (1956) “On the Essence of Laughter”</p>
10 / Nov 13, 2025	HUMOR ON STAGE	<p>(🎵) <i>In Our Time</i> Podcast Episode “Samuel Beckett” & <i>Drunken Philosophy</i> Episode 251 “Stanley Cavell”</p> <p>(1) Samuel Beckett (1957) <i>Endgame</i></p> <p></p> <p>* Stanley Cavell (1969) “Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett’s <i>Endgame</i>”</p> <p>* Theodor W. Adorno (1961/82) “Trying to Understand <i>Endgame</i>”</p>
11 / Nov 20, 2025	HUMOR & THE UNCONSCIOUS	<p>(🎵) <i>In Our Time</i> Podcast Episode “Psychoanalysis and Its Legacy”</p> <p>(1) Sigmund Freud (1927) “Humor”</p> <p>(2) Simon Critchley (2002) “Why the Super-Ego Is Your Amigo” (<i>On Humour</i> VII)</p>
12 / Nov 27, 2025	CROSSING THE LINE: THE LIMITS OF HUMOR	<p>(🎵) <i>In Our Time</i> Podcast Episode “Hannah Arendt”</p>

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		<p>(1) Hannah Arendt (1977/78) “The Intramural Warfare Between Thought and Common Sense” <i>(The Life of the Mind</i> I.2.10)</p> <p>(2) George Orwell (1944/45) “Funny, but Not Vulgar”</p> <p>(3) Ronald de Sousa (1987) “When Is It Wrong to Laugh?”</p>
13 / Dec 4, 2025	THE ABSURD, THE PHILOSOPHICAL, & THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF HUMOR	<p>(🎵🎵) <i>In Our Time</i> Podcast Episode “Camus”</p> <p>(1) Albert Camus (1942) “The Myth of Sisyphus”</p> <p>(2) Thomas Nagel (1971) “The Absurd”</p> <p>(3) Matthew M. Hurley / Daniel C. Dennett / Reginald B. Adams, Jr. (1977/2011) “But Why Do We Laugh?”</p>
Sunday, Dec 7, 2025	Final Papers Due for Graduating Students	
14 / Dec 11, 2025	THE POWER OF LAUGHTER: THE POLITICS OF HUMOR	<p>(🎵🎵) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 84 “Live Long and Protest: W.E.B. Du Bois”</p> <p>(1) W.E.B. Du Bois (1942/43) “The Humor of Negroes”</p> <p>(2) Achille Mbembe (2001) “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly” (<i>On the Postcolony</i> III)</p> <p>(3) Cynthia Willett / Julie Willett (2019) “A Catharsis of Shame: The Belly Laugh and SlutWalk”</p>
15 / Dec 15 – Dec 19, 2025	COMPLETION WEEK (No Class)	 

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
Sunday, Dec 21, 2025	<i>Final Papers Due</i>	

ESSAY DEADLINES

Midterm Paper (2000 words) by **Oct 26, 2025, 23:59 CET**

Final Paper (3000 words) by **Dec 7, 2025, 23:59 CET** for graduating students & **Dec 21, 2025, 23:59 CET** for everyone else