

The Unbearable Irreverence of Philosophy

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Teach Philosophy with a Sense of Humor: Why (and How to) Be a Funnier and More Effective Philosophy Teacher and Laugh All the Way to Your Classroom, Kishor Vaidya, editor, 30 July 2021, [Kindle eBooks](#)

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Earnestness Ascendent

The age-old conflict between the irreverent and the earnest presents itself to view mainly in skirmishes, although occasionally these days it threatens to break out into full-scale war. Since

the earnest are more socially and politically powerful than the irreverent, the irreverent need to be stealthy – which isn't easy for them, given their high spirits.

While the irreverent can be admired for their tactical brilliance in keeping the conflict alive despite the odds against them, the earnest always have the upper hand. If either side ever wins, it will, sadly, be the earnest.

To be irreverent is to fail to show proper esteem or deference. It's to fail to show proper respect for a person, a class of people, an institution, a cause, a custom, an emotion, an idea. One can be irreverent towards Justin Trudeau, Joe Biden, Václav Havel, Nelson Mandela, Adolf Hitler or any other political leader. One can be irreverent toward parliament or democracy or science or the experts. One can be irreverent toward Beethoven, Coltrane, Wayne Gretzky, Joni Mitchell, Jesus, Mohammed or *The Simpsons*. One can be irreverent toward friendly handshakes or punctuality, or toward cold shoulders or tardiness. One can be irreverent toward birth, death or taxes, toward abortion or infanticide or pro-life activism, toward calling victims of rape “survivors,” toward sexism or racism or anti-racism, toward Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo Movement, toward mind-body dualism, toward the idea of evidence, toward the categorical imperative, toward loving thy neighbour.

If you, reader, are earnest, you will have been appalled by at least one of the examples in the preceding paragraph. Surely racism, at least, demands to be taken seriously! Caricatures of [Mohammed](#)? How hurtful and offensive! An irreverent take on [Hitler](#)? That's disgusting. Are you mocking Black Lives Matter? You deserve what you're about to get!

The earnest out-number the irreverent everywhere, even in comedy, though certainly the proportion of irreverence is greater in comedy than anywhere else. Number two behind comedy in proportion of irreverence, I'd hazard, is philosophy.

It would be surprising if I'm wrong about that. Philosophy without a lot of irreverence would be only as philosophical as comedy without a lot of irreverence would be funny. Although most philosophers are earnest, all but the very smallest philosophy departments feature at least one or a couple irreverent thinkers. It's the job of irreverent professional philosophers to stir things up in their universities and with their students, and to keep the earnest honest—or at least to help them be more self-aware than they would otherwise be.

Irreverence can be expressed in any number of ways but it would seem greatly to prefer to manifest itself through humour. The irreverent like to make fun of things and to laugh at them. When the earnest take something seriously, the irreverent will want to joke about it. They will certainly joke about being earnest toward whatever the thing under examination is.

At certain times in history, the earnest have taken over an institution or a society almost completely. They then earnestly demand that everyone be earnest. During these times when [incorrect laughter](#) is forbidden and punished, the irreverent might not risk joking, at least not openly.

Under conditions of oppression, irreverence often expresses itself not in humour but in cold irony. What happens is that an irreverent thinker speaks what appears to be yet another earnest declaration or affirmation. But underneath his utterance lurks insouciance or disdain. By pretending earnestness, a philosopher might make his point to those who can perceive it without putting himself in harm's way. Not that irony isn't dangerous. Joking, though, in times of oppression, can be suicidal.

The Importance of *Not* Being Earnest

"I would have you stand from between me and the sun," [Diogenes of Sinope](#) (also known as Diogenes the Cynic) is said to have replied to [Alexander the Great](#). Diogenes was reclining, half-naked, against his tub when Alexander inquired whether there was anything Diogenes would like him (Alexander) to do for him.

Alexander was pleased by Diogenes's insouciance. "If I were not Alexander," the great king announced, "I would like to be Diogenes." Diogenes responded: "If I were not Diogenes, I would like to be Diogenes."

[Aristotle](#) earnestly taught methods by which to determine the category to which a thing belongs. [Pyrrho of Elis](#) (also known as Pyrrho the sceptic) poked fun at Aristotle by arguing that nothing is determinable by us; moreover, Pyrrho said, we cannot even determine whether anything is determinable by us (and so on).

[Diagoras of Melos](#) (also known as Diagoras the Atheist) had an earnest friend who tried to get Diagoras to take the gods seriously. The friend enjoined Diagoras to think of all the people who had been saved at sea by dint of their vows to the gods. "Think of all the pious people who died at sea despite their vows," Diagoras replied.

[David Hume](#), after arguing both that one can never have sufficient reason to believe that something happened miraculously and that all religions are founded on miracles, reasoned that it must be by the grace of a [miracle](#) from God that reasonable people such as himself are nonetheless believing Christians. That's pretty funny, at least to us. In Hume's time, though, one's irony needed to be cold as ice to slip past the earnest, or else.

Irreverence can be found in all areas and styles of philosophy in all ages, but [cynicism](#) and [scepticism](#) would be impossible without it. Cynics such as Diogenes taught, by example as often as in the classroom, that culture and fine things were without significance and that a simple life absent of conventional manners and marked by indifference to social mores was the best life. Irreverent humour and irony could puncture the armour of the earnest, or at least that's how it might seem to those watching from the sidelines. Joking about what people tend to take seriously can help to get a person to see the layers of orthodoxy and narrowness that encrust his or her life.

Pyrrho, Diagoras, Hume and other sceptics needed humour and irony as much as the cynics did. Sceptics seek to upset our common-sense certainties about things. Scepticism denies that we have knowledge – justified true belief – even about matters centrally important to us, such as the

existence or nature of God or the reality of our friends' and lovers' minds. (For all you know, the sceptic says, the woman you love is an unfeeling robot. Not your dog, though.)

Diagoras, for instance, made fun of religion to alert his fellows to its inhuman and stultifying aspects. With his irony he chastised the Athenians for thinking themselves good even as they were engaged in wickedness.

Hume took on such targets as the idea that knowledge of the past justifies our expectations of the future, that we can perceive one event causing another, that we have a substantial self, that the existence of this world portends the existence of another, better world, and that murder is in itself wrong (he argued that it isn't). His scepticism could appear so weird and discomfiting that without his ironic reassurances and little jokes, it would never have received a hearing.

Students taking philosophy courses no doubt appreciate hearing from a funny philosophy professor now and then. Jokes and wry observations can make for a pleasant classroom. As well, humour provides a bit of the diversion students need in order to recharge their batteries and regain focus. And then back to the serious matters at hand.

My point so far, though, goes beyond the pedagogical usefulness of a bit of fun in the classroom. The humour borne of irreverence is much more than a pleasant interlude in one's attempt to fashion a philosophical understanding. The point of the irreverence characteristic of cynicism and scepticism is to demonstrate at an emotional or affective level the falsity and, even, vanity of much of what passes for well-established knowledge and noble ideals. If one has cynical or sceptical leanings, one cannot but chuckle at everyday life and at the respectable values by which so many people attempt to live (or pretend to attempt to live). A sense of humour, these philosophers agree, is necessary if one is to see things aright. The irreverent are sighted while the earnest are blind.

Irreverently Respectful

And yet, often enough, the cynics and the sceptics fail to hold onto their irreverence. They abandon it when they come to their own certainties, virtues and noble values.

Philosophers can become earnest once they reach their favoured bedrock, no matter how irreverent they were while busy digging down to it. The point of life is happiness, Pyrrho taught, and happiness requires tranquility, or selflessness, or an anti-theoretical embrace of the ordinary, and that's nothing to joke about, perhaps even Pyrrho would say. Religion is tragically funny, Diagoras shows us, but atheism is nothing less than clear-headed responsibility to the real. Inductive reasoning is not justificatory reasoning; nevertheless, Hume adds, the wise person conforms his or her belief to the available inductive evidence.

Diogenes was quick to zing Alexander, the Corinthians and anyone else who came his way, but at least one important Cynic, [Antisthenes](#), was zinged himself. "When he turned the rip in his cloak outside, [Socrates](#) seeing it, said to him, 'I see your vanity through the hole in your cloak.'" The jibe is that Antisthenes's haughtiness regarding his refusal to dress comfortably or stylishly reveals that he's earnest about his cynicism.

The irreverent, that is to say, can become earnest about what they themselves value. Martha prefers vanilla while Sally prefers chocolate but vanilla, the irreverent playfully charge, isn't in itself preferable to chocolate and chocolate isn't preferable to vanilla. It's just a matter of taste. So let us make fun of those who prefer vanilla but worry that they might be wrong to do so ("how do I know that chocolate isn't actually superior?").

It's funny to think that people would seek guidance from the wise in the contest between flavours. In the matter of cruelty and kindness, though, with our preference for kindness over cruelty (or cruelty over kindness) we come to human nature or to the reality of value. Kindness really is better than cruelty. There is nothing inflated, doubtful or vain to laugh at regarding our search for justification here. With that final thought, an otherwise irreverent thinker turns earnest.

Some philosophers, happily, are irreverent all the way down. They get a rise out of both dogmatism and scepticism, out of both realism and irrealism, out of both the moral and the amoral. [Paul Feyerabend](#) might be the best example of a thinker who never abandoned irreverence. Despite the forbidding crystalline beauty of his philosophy, [Donald Davidson](#) is another philosopher irreverent all the way down.

Let me summarize the conclusions I've come to so far. I have asserted the importance of humour and irony to philosophy by noting that taking an irreverent stance toward the idols of the tribe, the things that people in a culture invest with significance and value, and toward claims to know the nature of these things, is helpful if not necessary to the project of subjecting ideas and commitments to philosophical scrutiny. Humour and irony loosen the bonds culture has placed on our senses, our desires and our intellect. Without irreverence, I have argued, philosophers would fail to take their inquiries any step further once they were pleased with their results. They would, that is, lapse into dogmatism. When earnestness gains too strong an upper hand, the critical impulse and, thereby, the philosophical endeavour itself, is put at risk. Academics, even philosophers, will tend to rest content with their ideas and commitments should nothing prick them to continue to investigate.

Kids Leave them [Teachers](#) Alone

A practical lesson follows for students of philosophy. The lesson is this: do not complain to a department head or a dean should your professor say something that offends you. Do not file a formal complaint should your professor say something you take to be sexist or racist or homophobic. (By all means, talk to your professor about it and to your classmates, maybe write about it for the campus newspaper, but don't initiate any formal proceeding.)

Each complaint filed is another victory for the earnest. Formal complaints and threats of discipline shut down irreverence and that can inhibit or halt philosophical inquiry. Philosophy should throw into question not only sexism and racism but ideals of equality and equity and inclusion. Philosophy should be just as sceptical and cynical about our current ideologies of non-sexist and anti-racist practices and attitudes as it is about the stuff we don't like.

Not only will the threat of sanction or discipline drain the fun and make your classroom a less effective learning environment; threats will stymie deep thinking about the matters at hand.

How to Kill the Joke

“But the joke just wasn’t funny,” you might say. “It was mean or obscene or belittling or harassing.” Your contention is that because it was mean or obscene, etc., it wasn’t funny—indeed, you are saying, it could not have been funny.

If you think that mean jokes are not (or cannot be) funny jokes, then you subscribe to a popular earnest theory about evaluation sometimes called the interaction model. Begin with our emotional or affective responses to things. We hear something and that something makes us sad. We see something and that something moves us aesthetically. We taste something and we feel disgusted. Our emotional or affective responses fall into various categories, but let’s isolate three: moral emotions, aesthetic emotions, and amusement. The interaction model tells us that we don’t laugh at a cruel joke because the moral wrongness of the joke deprives funniness of any space to occupy. We don’t laugh at an ugly joke because the aesthetic poverty of the joke crowds out the funniness. The upshot is that cruel jokes and ugly jokes simply are not funny, for cruelty or ugliness blocks out humour.

In short, if you laugh at a cruel joke, you have made a mistake, for you are laughing at something that isn’t funny. ([Stephen Mumford](#) and [Jason Holt](#) are contemporary exponents of the interaction model.)

An alternative theory is that a cruel joke (a racist or sexist joke, a joke that makes fun of the disabled, a joke that makes fun of the earnest) might well be a very funny joke. It’s a funny joke but you don’t laugh because you care more about cruelty and kindness than you do about funniness. You would be tickled by it, for it’s surprising and ironic in the way that usually provokes your laughter, except that you’re preoccupied by its cruelty.

Your friend, though, does laugh at it. But he’s not making a mistake in finding something funny that isn’t. The joke is actually funny. Nonetheless, despite his mirth, your friend is appalled by its cruelty. Your friend has the rare and precious ability to appreciate the joke under two aspects at the same time. The joke is a funny bit of cruelty and your friend is alive to both its humour and its malice.

The interaction model proposes that jokes are unfunny and paintings are ugly if they are indifferent to sound moral values (or, worse, if they celebrate unsound moral values). You should not find such jokes funny or such paintings beautiful for, in fact, they are not funny or beautiful.

The alternative theory says that a joke can be both funny and indifferent to sound moral values (or even celebratory of them) at one and the same time. A painting can be both beautiful and expressive of or laudatory toward immoral values at one and the same time. That you laugh at the joke or are moved by the painting does not indicate that you are morally degenerate, for you might well simply be attending to one of its aspects while being perfectly aware of its immoral aspect.

Philistinism is the inability or unwillingness to value something as either funny or beautiful when it is also, in your estimation, morally reprobate. A philistine runs things through his ethical-

propriety detector before laughing or feeling moved. If the detector assigns a negative (or low) value to the ethical propriety of the thing, the philistine won't be amused or be moved by it. The interaction model attempts to redeem philistinism by making it seem an attunement to the facts. In making philistinism seem enlightened, the interaction model encourages earnestness. But earnestness about morality is actually crude and undiscerning, for it diminishes our ability to laugh and to perceive beauty.

Your earnestness about the immorality of sexism or racism can do bad things to your sense of humour. Those who lack a sense of humour are apt to fall into dogmatism, for they are emotionally constituted such as to decline to engage in potentially disturbing investigations. Those earnest about morality and immorality, then, put the philosophical endeavour at risk. So, again, you, reader, who is philosophical in spirit or temperament, must not file formal complaints against people who are just trying to be funny, no matter how offended you might be. To do so is to betray philosophy.

Political Correctness Mugs Philosophy Over and Over Again

Not all cultures are hospitable to philosophy. And not all periods within the history of an otherwise philosophical culture are periods of rich and exciting philosophical inquiry and discussion. Athens, after the days of the [Thirty Tyrants](#), executed Socrates. Roman emperors were prone to [banish](#) the philosophers and to [close](#) the philosophical schools. Religious universities might place great value on students being familiar with one or another great philosopher but not encourage freewheeling criticism, lest students' doubts about the correct philosophy unmoor it.

I fear that our own culture, here in the twenty-first century, has become inhospitable to philosophy. Woke and politically correct culture are earnestness on steroids. Thoughtful and humane people have become terrified of the earnest in their wokeness and the earnest are attacking irreverence, primarily by attacking the irreverent. Attacks on irreverence are central to what has become known as [cancel culture](#). As cancelling becomes more and more widespread and common, irreverence suffers, philistinism grows, and philosophy departments and philosophy courses turn safe and bland. A safe and bland philosophy is a stuffed museum piece not a vibrant object of love.

The humour and irony of your philosophy professors are to be prized not only for making your classroom pleasant and your labours easier. Only the irreverence of your professors can keep the philosophical endeavour alive as we enter a new dark age. Their irreverence keeps the spirit of philosophy aglow by urging you to be irreverent, too. [*Illegitimi non carborundum*](#).