

Guest Editor's Introduction

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As Humor Studies writ large has continued to develop and blossom into a recognized and respected interdisciplinary field over the last two decades, so too the subfield Philosophy of Humor has gained a foothold of respectability in its disciplinary milieu. Professional organizations such as the International Association for the Philosophy of Humor and the Lighthearted Philosophers' Society hold annual meetings, attracting both senior philosophers from more established corners of philosophic discourse who have begun to work on humor-related questions as well as younger scholars, junior faculty members, and graduate students who see philosophy of humor as their area of specialization.

It is from this position of growth that a conference was organized at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania from April 5th through 8th by Professor Sheila Linttot focusing on the ethics and aesthetics of stand-up comedy. Attracting some of the most well-known scholars in the field as well as earlier career researchers, the conference was unique in moving away from general discussions of humorous utterances in standard conversational contexts and instead sought to examine the philosophical ramifications of a specific aesthetic context, stand-up comedy. Drawing thinkers from North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia, topics of talks and panels ranged over linguistic, epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, social-political, and ontological themes.

Ever aware that stand-up comedy a practice, the philosophical work was interspersed with active participation in the art form. Two top name comedians, Paula Poundstone and Hari Kondobolu, performed on separate nights in front of large audiences sprinkled with philosophers. Talks on the writing and performing of comedy were presented by professionals such as David Misch (writer for *The Flip Wilson Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Mork and Mindy*) and Tom Cathcart and Dan Klein (authors of *Plato and a Platypus Walk into A Bar*). *The New York Times'* comedy critic, Jason Zinoman spoke on his means of assessing the quality of contemporary stand-up comedy. Workshops were led by experienced stand-up comedians Mitch Alexander, Cory Healy, Amy Seham, Alex Skitolsky, and Oliver Double. The philosophers themselves, some no stranger to the mic stand and stool while others were complete novices, took to the stage for an evening's open mic performance mc'ed by Professor Gary Hardcastle of Bloomsburg University.

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Featured speakers who addressed the assembled participants included Noël Carroll whose paper “Timings” reflected on the place of time in comedy, Cynthia Willett whose paper “On Humor: Feminist Makeovers from Sluts and Other Misfits” examined the development of personae of female comedians in cultural context, Luvell Anderson’s “Roasting Ethics” examined the ethical limits of humor in situations where the moral boundaries are intentionally stretched, and Eva Dadlez whose paper “Comedy and Tragedy: Two Sides, Same Coin” placed comedy in a literary framework. Break-out panels focused on general questions about the nature of stand-up as a particular type of speech act with papers such as Tobyn DeMarco’s “A Theory of Improvisation for Stand-Up Comedy” and Jake Quilty-Dunn and Jesse Rappaport’s “Do Stand-Up Comedians Make Assertions.” The ethics of the comedy club were discussed in papers such as Lauren Olin’s “Responsibility on Either Side of the Mic,” Matthew Kotzen’s “Subversion of Stereotypes and the Ethics of Stand-Up,” and Steven Gimbel’s “A Social Contractarian Approach to the Ethics of Dealing with Hecklers.” The thought of thinkers generally held not to be working on issues of humor were applied to the context of stand-up comedy in papers such as “Comedy, Trump, and Political Myth” in which Jenn Marra used Ernst Cassirer’s thought to unpack the presuppositions beneath contemporary presidential humor and Patrick Giamario’s “Adorno’s Critical theory of Laughter and the Politics of Stand-Up Comedy.” Many of the other papers focused on questions arising from the particular bodies of work of specific comedians as with Phillip Deen’s “Was Dave Chappelle Morally Obligated to Leave Stand-Up,” Darryl Scriven’s “The Comedy of Race: Dave Chappelle & the Use of Character as Satirical Pedagogy,” and Mark Ralkowski’s “Why Jerry Seinfeld Can’t Cover Louie C.K.”

Included in this volume are four papers from the conference. Papers were selected to provide a sense of the range of topics, the range of methodological approach, and the range of topics addressed.

Christine James’ “The Neurological Research on laughter: Social Context, Joys, and Taunts” examines the peculiar place of the stand-up comedian with regard to the way the brain processes humor. Contemporary neurological research allows us to ground the laughing at/laughing with distinction on physiological grounds. We know what portions of the brain are triggered by self-congratulatory other-demeaning laughter and what portions of the brain are triggered by communal cleverness-appreciative laughter. How then to make sense of the work of

entertainers who manipulate the brain within the communal context of the comedy club by creating false laughing-at situations? Ought we say we are laughing-at someone who intentionally creates the conditions for mutual laughter because of the neurological effect or is it to be contextually label a laughing-with situation?

Frank Boardman's "The Strange Case of the Stand-Up Special" poses an ontological question for philosophers of film concerning the recordings of stand-up routines. Filmic realism contends that films are transparent to viewers in being faithful representations of what an observer would have seen if she were occupying the perspective of the camera. Instead of being an artistic medium manipulated by the film-maker as artist, it is a mere window into another place at another time. Footage from a surveillance camera behind the counter at a convenience store ought to be interpreted in this way, but surely *Citizen Kane* ought not. In which category ought we place Richard Pryor's *Live on the Sunset Strip*? Is the film a mere documentation of a comic performance or is it its own work of art distinct from the performance it shows?

Stephen Sullivan's "Teacher as Stand-Up Comic" compares and contrasts the performative acts of humor delivery on stage with a microphone and in the classroom with chalk. Where the two acts require and directly engage live audiences convened to listen to the authority commanding attention, the two cases differ teleologically. Amusement of the audience is an end for the comedian, but only a means for the teacher. The comedian wants the audience to leave his performance happier, but the professor seeks to have his audience leave smarter or wiser. This distinction implies that there are requirements on the teacher not laid on the comic. As such, the social contract of the comedy club grants a loosening of moral restraint on certain sorts of speech acts that is not granted to the teacher. The teacher has less leeway with which to be funny and thus fails more often. Many professors wish that they could respond to certain students the way comedians handle hecklers, but the different contexts allow different sets of possible comic responses.

Zeynep Neslihan Arol's "Welcome to the Jungle": Questioning the Notion of Subversive Laughter through the Analysis of Kristen Schaal's Performance" examines the ways in which feminist content can be conveyed in a stand-up context. While the rise of stand-up comedy as an art-form has paralleled the rise of the feminist movement in time, stand-up comedy has long been hostile to women's issues and female performers. Yet, a new generation of female comedians has

begun to use the stool and mic to create comedy designed to question traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Kristen Schaal combines such material with a contrasting childlike delivery accenting the incongruity of the observations concerning relations and gender-roles in the contemporary world. This allows for the philosophical consideration of subversive laughter at elements that have been used in other comic contexts to reinforce patriarchal structures.

As a sample of the papers that were delivered at Bucknell University's Conference on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Stand-Up Comedy, it becomes clear that the field of Philosophy of Humor stands at a point in time where its legitimacy as a recognized subfield of the discipline is taken as settled. Long-maligned as insufficiently serious, the scholars in the area are producing quality work that has forced their way onto the philosophical map.