

Review of Giorgio Baruchello, *Thinking and Laughing*, Northwest Passage Books, 2025.

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Philosophers are usually unfunny people, in print anyway. True, there was an edge of humor in Socratic irony and Nietzsche was wittily acerbic, but for the most part those intellectuals purporting to tell a big truth do so with neither smile nor frown. They/we apparently regard the smiles and frowns garnishing truth as emotional distractions from it.

This is philosophically curious. We humans stand out from all other creatures not only because we think better, but because we're the only funny ones. We and only we deliver and get jokes. It would seem that there is something distinctive about how we understand the truth, an understanding that provides the condition for laughter. Now then, how are thinking and laughing related? Could it be that truth is intrinsically funny?

Giorgio Baruchello has leaned into this question in various ways during his already prolific career. A few years ago, I read some essays of his in a book called *Why Believe: Approaches to Religion* (Barden and Baruchello, 2018). They were some of the most unfunny essays I have ever read, and I've read lots of unfunny essays. But then, along came his multi-volume book series entitled *Humour and Cruelty* (Baruchello and Arnarsson, 2022-2024). It was vastly different in tone as well as topic. To be sure, it has an oh-so-serious format, exploring every crevice and sinkhole on the interface between cruel and funny, exploring Addison's 18th-century London daily, *The Spectator*, the Isotopy-Disjunctive model of how jokes work and to

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any number of other exhibitions of evidence for our thoughtful consideration. Since no effective discussion of humor functions well without examples, Baruchello provided them in abundance. Of course, in the long course of storytelling not everything meant as funny sounds funny today, yet enough of it does, both to lighten up his serious study and enliven its seriousness. In short, the smiles that cross this reader's lips made him think more seriously about humor.

Now, Baruchello has taken another step, a giant one rhetorically, toward demonstrating the role humor plays in telling the truth. *Thinking and Laughing* plunges into its topic with a phantasmagoric eighty-page introduction that comes across like one of those standup comedy performances where you laugh so hard it takes a while to recognize that something serious is being said. With a firehose of comic relief, this standup philosopher riffs on film criticism, political screeds, past philosophy, memories of bartending at parties. It takes on Sisyphus, Freud, university faculties, and a thousand other matters. But, look sharp! A truth about truth begins to emerge. "There hides a peculiar logic behind the peculiar rhetoric." It's not a logic that can be made explicit, "lest the joy of the philosophical humourist become illogical and, *de facto*, impossible." We are going to have to discover it ourselves.

Fourteen essays follow, each a humorous exploration of its topic. Let me give you a taste of them and the variety of their strategies. One uses a perfectly serious way of thinking—evolutionary biology—to reveal something hilarious about the academic world. Anyone familiar with university life knows that the individuals who enliven its ecosystem behave in characteristic ways, each way appropriate to its evolutionary niche. They thus reveal unique adaptations to what is, for most living beings, a very harsh environment. Some survive, even flourish; other perish. We have presented to us a *Bestiarium Achademicum*, wherein the wisdom of those who study beasts sheds revealing light on how the survivors survive. If you have known that world,

you will easily recognize real life specimens in your domain for each of the twenty-six species described. Take, for instance, *Vulpes berlinesis belinesis*. It is “known in zoology for having the second shortest attention span after the common goldfish. As such, in recent decades, it has been hunted mercilessly by Youtubers and social-media influencers. In North America, the adult male individuals exhibit a characteristic bright orange fur and a diversified investment portfolio.”

Or, *Taenia miseranda*, particularly common in the North American continent, and most of all in Canada, this parasite is proactively looked for, ingested, kept alive, and paraded publicly by its host. Depending on the season, special groups are singled out and favored by their willing hosts, in accordance with the former’s gender, epithelial pigmentation, native habitat, or mating preferences. Researchers have concluded that these lucky worms may be “the beneficiaries of misdirected parental instincts driving their hosts’ self-harming behaviour.”

The question is: do we look at ourselves (students, deans, department heads, adjuncts, and all the rest) through the lens of evolutionary biology just to amuse ourselves, or do we also see some otherwise hidden truths as well?

In chapter fourteen, the homage to Wittgenstein has a different strategy. Imagine that young Ludwig was actually a humorist whose audience was the Oxonian twits who sponsored him. They never got the joke and they never understood that the joke was on them. “*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann...*” was simply his way of telling them to shut up. The more I entertained this view of the young Wittgenstein, the more entertaining it became and the more I became convinced that even the autistic genius himself might have heard some ring of truth in it. This happy speculation sets us up for an ingenious parody of the *Tractatus* itself, a romp, a *tour de force*, a hoot, and a far nicer experience than the original.

Using still another strategy, Baruchello demonstrates how humorless thinking can systematically obliterate the humor it purports to study. He does this by elaborating a typology of sight gags, derived “with a modicum of analogical creativity” from prosaic rhetorical tropes. These tropes purport to catalogue possible comic set-ups. He then applies them to Monty Python’s *Flying Circus*. Do these device types capture what makes the skits funny? “Yes and no,” he says. The tropes represent necessary conditions but not sufficient ones. They cannot convey—and the gap is crucial—something irreducibly human in the force of what transpires when someone is funny, some quality of creativity we cannot capture explicitly.

Has Baruchello broken new ground in humor studies? Has he found a new, backdoor entrance for reasoning about it? Or is this the belated recognition of a comic genius who has finally, in the fullness of his maturity, realized his true calling? I read and appreciate it both ways; it’s a deeply thought-provoking yet immensely funny book.

References

- Barden, Garrett, and Giorgio Baruchello. (2018). *Why Believe? Approaches to Religion*. Akureyri: University of Akureyri Press.
- Baruchello, Giorgio, and Ársæll Már Arnarsson. (2022-2024). *Humour and Cruelty*. 4 vols. Berlin: De Gruyter.