

**Review of Giorgio Baruchello and Ársæll Már Arnarsson, *Humour and Cruelty*, Vol. 1. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022. (De Gruyter Studies in Philosophy of Humor, edited by Lydia Amir). Pp. 533. ISBN 978-3-11-075976-1; e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-075983-9; e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-076001-9; ISSN 2699-3481**

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The volume represents an accomplishment in the interdisciplinary field termed philosophy of humor, and the reader may acknowledge an original and conceptual research. The two grand landmarks chosen for study and emphasized from the very title are crucial in the mapping and exploration of the versatile but serious topic of humor. Thus, the subject of humor laced with cruelty is as versatile as it is serious and scientific. It is especially relevant in our times of political correctness and restless attempts to curing and to render hygienic via censorship the freedom of expression. The volume contributes to the philosophy of humor analysing significant themes, correlations and implications of humor in personal and social life.<sup>2</sup> The two grand landmarks chosen for study, mentioned in the title—“humor” and “cruelty”—are crucial in this analytic journey of philosophical mapping and exploration of the versatile, yet serious, topic of humor. The examined research does not treat the two concepts enounced in the title as synonyms, however, the analyses realistically register that they often overlap, functioning as special triggering devices in human ontology and phenomenology, with leading roles in the constructions and reconstructions of human reality, or, of the relations and status, with existential, social and political implications.

First, we remark the specific type of *exploration* in this volume, best described for clarification as *Begriffsgeschichte* (as a conceptual history approach). Often, on the path of clarification, there is unavoidable reduction taking place and some important nuances in the

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understanding of the approach may be lost or blurred. The authors are “scouts” drawing their own map as they go, explorers pinpointing the concepts and the main “attractions” on that unique conceptual map, selecting and capitalising a rich and well selected relevant literature.

The value of any conceptual map is the clarity and relevance for the appropriate public. This is the case with this research. Which is the cultural area that is specific to humor? We find out that there are six twists of irony, six anglophone sources and six allophone sources for humor, the valuable result of a daring enterprise, out of the beaten path, the researchers engaging their responsibility in correlating humor and irony with imagination, sympathy and cruelty in apparently paradoxical manners.

The consequence of this correlation is that the complexity of the subjects and initiators of humor, as persons, is not lost in this exploration as well as the very complexity of life is preserved, in a comprehensive manner. Humor is more than an incident or accident on the existential path, since it is a manner of living, a manifestation of a style of existence and socialization. Humor is specific for the human being and it engages everything (and anything) major and profoundly defining for the human universe.

Following the profoundly defining dimension of the human realm, the *Begriffsgeschichte* approach highlights the leading thread of investigation in this volume: it is metaphorical and best described by the insight identified in William Lecky (1890), namely, that sympathy is a vital guiding factor for human imagination and that a dull imagination reduces sympathy and it leads to cruelty (9). All the other explicit and implicit important points made by the authors, in my view, nicely gather around this main aspect. A significant role of good humor is precisely to reject the expressions of this kind of primitive imagination leading most likely to stupid and cruel remarks, to the reinforcement of prejudice, stereotypes and of the most part of unimaginative propaganda. Life experience shows that sophisticate imagination could be found in the service of terrible cruelty. However, in such gruesome situations there is no humor involved, unless there is madness, too.

Interestingly, humor arises from imperfection and sanctions imperfection. The cruelty associated to humor results from depth and precision of criticism; from a perfect snapshot of failure, shortcoming or fault. I appreciated the attitude that explicitly enunciates the philosophical attitude that “Perfection, despite protracted striving, continues to escape us. As to our awareness of not being entirely alone in this regretful condition, it is the cause of further worry, not of

comfort” (20-21). Human realm is imperfect, so humor, imagination, expression, affirmation and human interaction are imperfect, too. However, we appreciate this epistemological approach of the topic of humor, founded on a conceptual investigation: the philosophical material is substantial and well selected and the attentive methodological distinctions and situation of knowledges ensure a significant epistemological result.

The research is engaging genuine literary qualities, too. This literary quality accompanies in a positive manner the philosophical analysis, while grasping reality in human complex (personalist) key, refusing the depersonalised abstract objective truth-finding and pursuing a different intellectual and human path. The authors are examining humor by perceiving the world as a “sized” subjective world, or, as a world that is incessantly rendered human, again and again, via humor. Eventually, we come to realize that this is the majestic human path of overcoming suffering, paradoxically, even with gratitude (89).

Humor should not be superficially dismissed as a minor phenomenon of human subjectivity, sociality and culture. On the one hand, humor is engaging processes cognition, perception and recognition, subjectiveness and identity. On the other hand, humor reveals and to a certain extent humor also negotiates social status and relations of power.

The authors capitalize upon Schopenhauer’s views on laughter and humor, underlining the importance of the contrast between the objective understanding of reality and our subjective, personalized and individualized perception of it. At the same time, the researchers consider to bring to the fore the cognitive dimension in humor. However, humor is based on language, memory, creativity and thought depends upon a complex cognitive structure, as Ulrich Neisser showed. In his work, cognition is defined as the key-term, which refers to “all processes by which the sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used” (193).

Cognition is part of the specificity of subjectiveness and individuality. Therefore, humor is the mark of “stubborn individuality” emphasising limits of thought and language at the individual and social levels. It is specifically this “stubborn individuality” stays at the crossroads of humor and cruelty, indicating the political dimension of this stubbornness, too, as affirmation of the self. Authors comment upon the insights of Deleuze, an important reference:

The principal context in which Deleuze delivers the term “humour” is his ontological and epistemological study of the limits of language, i. e., the point at which the linguistic

articulation of thought falls apart in the face of existing reality. In doing so, Deleuze is following implicitly the advice of G.K. Chesterton, who had already hinted at this critical jointure in a short essay entitled “The Library of the Nursery”: “It is not children who ought to read the words of Lewis Carroll; they are far better employed making mud-pies; it is rather sages and grey-haired philosophers who ought to sit up all night reading Alice in Wonderland in order to study that darkest problem of metaphysics, the borderland between reason and unreason, and the nature of the most erratic of spiritual forces, humour, which eternally dances between the two.” (117)

Humor is a test of subjectivity, personal taste and of solidarity and the quality of togetherness. The interpretation given in this volume insightfully emphasizes that, capitalizing Deleuze’s idea, jokes are not the poor cousin of paradoxes, since they too test the limits of conventions and of the conventional, thus representing genuine philosophical strategies, adventures of the mind vested in humor. Therefore, the “surfacing” humor gains a specific well-deserved comprehensive merit (including the dual philosophical and political ones involved in any movement undertaken against the “void”) against the usual and boring reflexes of thought and everyday politeness:

According to Deleuze, humour operates by descending from the meaningful unit of sense to the meaningless multiplicity of the real, thus annihilating any term aimed at grasping all possible instances of a phenomenon that, once the unifying boundaries of that concept have disappeared, explodes into a myriad of independent, different, novel spatiotemporal phenomena, both ontologically and intellectually. It is not a misunderstanding, but a new understanding. As Deleuze writes, “humour roams across the abolished significations and the lost denotations, the void is the site of sense or of the event which harmonizes with its own nonsense, in the place where the place only takes place (*la ou on n’a plus lieu que lieu*). The void is itself the paradoxical element, the surface nonsense, or the always displaced aleatory point whence the event bursts forth as sense.” (119)

This reviewing quest made a special point to focus on the insights concerning humor based on Deleuze as a suitable opening to the topic of cruelty as paradox, thus discussing a facet of cruelty

which is quite difficult to grasp on its own, and this very facet is as following very important in understanding the complexity of the conceptual connection humor-cruelty, which I consider interesting and worth exploring (although, obviously, it is not a legitimating connection, as some may superficially deem).

When we look at the “West” and interpret it as a focal point for a handful of “curative projects” projected and sustained by the champions of the Enlightenment, we understand its legacy in our empathic and liberal-democratic support for campaigns against cruelty (see Shklar’s and Regan’s definitions of the term [1982]). Despite these anti-cruelty liberal and philosophical frameworks of thought and attitude which are still hegemonic and appealing nowadays, cruelty persists. “If three centuries of global liberalism, culminated with Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ after the conclusion of the Cold War, have not eradicated cruelty, what can we reasonably expect to happen in the future?” (263). In our view, global liberalism is not a certainty of perfection and “end of history,” as long as global liberalism did not imply perfect democracies and/or perfect education, and individuals still compete with each other (for everything) and do not appreciate enough either cooperation or solidarity. Individuals still feel often against one another than together.

Humor is “at home” both in the private and in public spheres. In our view, the Rortian (disputably, selfish) “private perfection,” or aesthetic “self-creation” critically approached in the volume is consonant with cruel-free “justice” and “human solidarity,” albeit the latter of the two notions are not necessarily the concerns of the private sphere. In the private sphere, homely warmth and empathy are often the natural descriptors of life and humor is intended rather disconnected from cruelty. This is true in many cases, but not necessarily in all cases. Siblings are often cruel to each other in their more or less humorous confrontations, on their paths to maturity. Personal relations, in general, are not necessarily outside the realm of powerplay and outside the influence and presence of cruelty through humor and beyond humor.

However, humor often plays with powerlessness, too. Self-irony and even self-derision represent a luminous exercise of freedom of speech and individual freedom. Humor emerges however within the space of *consonance* between private and public desiderates, as different as they may be. People exchange jokes in the virtue of some kind of perceived common ground, as fledgeling, or misrepresented, or imagined, it might be. They might want, though, to maintain that common ground or to limit it. It is in this perspective that we’re placing the Rortian argument for

a liberal (ironist) “restricting, controlling, or censoring art” of rejecting cruelty. The decision and the act of rejecting cruelty are very far from the propagandistic or totalitarian censorship. It is an attitudinal choice of thought and a choice of *Weltanschauung* in this Rortian “censorship” that we are interpreting and it is not a *compromise* of freedom. We agree with the authors that the issue of censorship is central to the theme of the persistence and significance connection of humor and cruelty. Yet this is a complex antagonism and not a deterministic sentence (omen). Humor does not have to be cruel. There is truth in the antagonism of the power and duty as source of both humor and cruelty, yet the openness of thought and interpretation provides the connection with a myriad of meanings and directions.

Ideally, the censorship of cruelty should be an individual free choice, a self-assumed task, a well-established question of taste. The pleasure of the freedom of expression and of self-affirmation via humor should not tilt the scale toward cruelty for no one who takes pride in considering themselves civilized, empathic and able of entertaining healthy social and personal relations enjoys or cultivates cruelty. I tend to advocate that less brutal and more considerate humor can still be effective and amusing. Most people choose their jokes for the same reasons and according to the same criteria employed in choosing their life contexts. In Rorty, private perfection (considered as well in terms of the pursuit of happiness and pleasure) and public solidarity are not that contradictory. When the critics proclaim that private perfection and public solidarity cannot be accommodated “in a single vision,” they ignore the idealization of the two situations (private and public) and they miss that Rorty’s ironist argument is for the relativization of perfection in private and public sphere, without abandoning it, without dismissing it and without renouncing it, but including it in an artistic enterprise of self-actualisation. Ironism ought to be understood as well as the relativization of personal convictions arising from fundamentalist traditions and forbidding metaphysical views, for increased solidarity in the public sphere. This implies assessing the limits of conscious and critical approach of one’s own traditional and metaphysical foundation of being, this critical approach being “turned” to the benefit of understanding otherness and a more solidary form of “othering.”

Is humor important because it is pleasurable? This is the standpoint from which I propose to stop and ponder upon the Rortian idea that “there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness” understood as some sort of priority of pleasure over kindness (264). One should not mistake the (relative) truth of this acknowledgement and the important meaning of both terms (“ecstasy” and

“kindness”) for an equivalence in their (importance and) content in their guiding roles private and public lives. Kindness is a value, an imperative (be it a weak one) and a bridge in both private perfection and public solidarity aims, for any liberal type, and especially for the ironist postliberal; while ecstasy (intense pleasure) is not an imperative and it cannot constitute a goal in itself—at least, not in any meaningful and healthy lead life. However, in all honesty, we should recognize pleasure as important, both in public and in the private realm, especially in our contemporary times, defined by hedonism and the “twilight of duty.” Even so, in normal interactions and contexts, ecstasy is not compulsory to be predicated upon cruelty, neither is humor, as cruelty is not accepted, taught or widely considered as a natural, necessary or unavoidable component of human life.

Is humor deemed to be inescapably cruel? The scorn for the ones deemed odd, inferior, or, for the human sins, such as lust, pride, unfairness and malice, may very well continue to sustain the long tail of cruelty in human humorous interactions. Human life remains *human* (and humane) as long as humor does not become a pretext for the acceptance and perpetuation of cruelty as normalcy. At the same time, human life remains “natural” in terms of traces of a sort of spontaneity, which opposes people to each other and it may function, for better, in creative and/or self-affirming ways (see the “stubborn individuality”) and, for worse, in inconsiderate ways. This is the reason why some people openly classify a cruel joke as a “bad joke.” At the same time, neither the assessment of perfection nor that of imperfection could ever really constitute a purpose in themselves or a satisfying reservoir of happiness. And not even the pursuit of the ideal of perfection and the pretext of critical thought cannot constitute justification for cruelty. These two observations reveal, in our view, the core of the intricate connection between humor and cruelty, which can be either incidental or purposeful.

## References

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