

**Philosophy 343: Philosophy of Art
Taking Humor Seriously
Spring 2014**

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“Actually they’re not funny. They’re art.”

-- Mark, *Love Actually*

“Humor is a pervasive feature of human life which crosses racial, cultural, sexual, and class divisions. Yet its nature is elusive. This elusiveness should have piqued the philosophical imagination; its pervasiveness should have demonstrated its philosophical importance. However, it has generated relatively little theoretical interest. We find that surprising. An analysis of humor could pay handsome dividends. Practically, it could inform aspects of the current debate over political correctness. Theoretically, it could illuminate discussion of significant issues in epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and ethics.”

--LaFollette & Shanks, “Belief and the Basis of Humor”

Course Description: In this course we will investigate various philosophical issues related to laughter and humor. Unlike Mark (quoted above), we will take seriously the idea that humor can be art. Thus, this is a course *in* the philosophy of art, not *about* the philosophy art. *However, no familiarity with the philosophy of art will be presupposed.*

The course is divided into three units:

- 1) Historical and contemporary philosophical theories of humor
- 2) Connections between traditional issues in aesthetics and the philosophy of humor
- 3) Ethics of humor

We will investigate questions such as:

- What is humor? What is the relationship between humor and laughter?
- Is the appreciation of humor an aesthetic experience? How does humor relate to traditional issues in aesthetics and the philosophy of art?
- What makes a joke racist/sexist/homophobic? Is making jokes of these types always wrong? Is laughing at jokes of these types always wrong? What makes these things wrong?

Prerequisite: At least one college level course in philosophy, preferably including Phil 110 or its equivalent. (Please talk with me if you do not meet this prerequisite but would like to take the course.)

Learning Objectives:

- To develop a disposition for finding the philosophical in the familiar.
- To develop explicit understanding of concepts and arguments surrounding humor.
- To develop the skills required to read, understand, and engage critically with difficult texts.
- To develop the skill of discussing philosophy.

Readings: The following text is required:

Comic Relief by John Morreal (CR) ISBN: 1405196122

Purchase it from your favorite online vendor ASAP. All other readings will be posted on Moodle as pdfs. If you want to purchase another book, many of the readings will be drawn from *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreal and there are many interesting readings in that book that we will not cover.

Requirements:

Exam 1	10%
Exam 2	15%
Exam 3	25%
5 Mini Philosophy in Life Papers	25%
Philosophy in Life Presentation	20%
Attendance and Engagement	5%

Notes on Requirements:

I put a lot of thought into the course requirements. They are designed to help you achieve the course's learning objectives. Let me explain the individual requirements and their weightings.

Exams

This course is divided into three units. Each unit has an exam. Notice that the exams increase in grade percentage. This is because the exams are **cumulative**. The second exam is worth more than the first because it covers more material than the first; likewise for the third. Although students tend to dislike cumulative exams, cumulative exams actually **benefit** students and **promote learning**. Cumulative exams allow students (1) to learn from their mistakes, (2) to demonstrate improvement in understanding and (3) to be rewarded for this improvement. Memorization is static and discrete; learning is dynamic and continuous. Cumulative exams assess and reward learning rather than mere memorization.

Mini Philosophy in Life Papers

With an eye to helping you develop a disposition for finding the philosophical in the familiar, you will write 5 "mini" philosophy in life papers. Presumably you experience humor on a daily basis. In each paper, you will describe a humorous experience you have during this course (e.g., viewing a funny segment of a TV show or movie, a humorous interaction with friends/family, etc.) and analyze it in terms of the concepts you have learned in the course. These papers can take many forms (e.g., Compare/Contrast Theories, Use your experience to argue against a theory, etc.). They should be typed and should be no more than 1 page.

These assignments are meant to give you a chance to demonstrate what you're learning in this course. The later papers will be worth more than the earlier papers. This gives you a chance to get a sense of what I'm looking for and to improve by taking my comments into account. **Hold on to returned papers. You will submit all of your papers at the end of the semester, so I can track your improvement.**

Philosophy in Life Presentation

Presentations will be given in groups of two to three students. Each member will receive the same grade for the presentation (except in extraordinary circumstances). Each presentation will be on a short humorous piece of the group's choosing. This can be a scene from a movie or TV show; an excerpt from a poem, play, book, essay, column, or stand-up comedy recording; a cartoon or other visual joke; or humorous material from some other source (please talk to me in advance if your piece doesn't fall into one of the categories listed). Each group is responsible for bringing the relevant material into class on the day of its presentation (e.g., a DVD or photocopies, etc.)

Presentations will be 15-20 minutes in length, followed by a class discussion that the presenting group will lead. Presentations will begin with a reading/playing/presenting of the material to be discussed. The reading/playing/presenting should last no more than 5 minutes (shorter is fine). Each member of the group should participate in the presentation. Presentations should discuss connections between the presented piece and themes from the course readings and earlier class discussions.

Attendance and Engagement

Regular attendance is necessary but not sufficient for receiving full credit here. You should come to class having done and ready to discuss the assigned readings. If you have questions about the readings, feel free to email me or ask at the appropriate times in class.

I think of a college class like a team. I'm the coach or the captain, but we're all members of the team trying to achieve the same goal: critical engagement with the course material. As with other teams, we must all do our part; if any of us regularly fails to do his/her part, the whole team will suffer. You expect me to come to class every day prepared to teach; likewise I expect you to come to class every day prepared to learn. As members of this class, we owe to each other the fulfillment of these expectations. Sometimes you will need motivation and I will do my best to provide it. If I am failing to meet your expectations, please tell me (respectfully). If you are not willing to do your part, you should not take this course.

To help you do your part I have an attendance policy. You are allowed three free absences. After three free absences, each unexcused absence will deduct .5% from your grade. After each exam I will email you letting you know (1) how many total absences you have and (2) my impression of your participation and engagement in the class. (2) is especially important because I weigh improvement heavily here.

Communication

Office Hours

I have regular office hours, listed above. You can stop by during that time and I will be in my office, happy to talk. If that time doesn't work for you and you'd like to meet, just send me an email and we'll make an appointment.

Note: My office is not wheelchair accessible. Please let me know if you would like me to make accommodations regarding meetings.

Contact Policy

Aside from my office hours, I'm most easily reached at the email address above. I check my email frequently and will respond promptly within 24 hours to most inquiries. Please note, while I will most likely read your email within a couple hours of its being sent, I

may not reply immediately. If you do not receive a reply within 24 hours, please talk to me in class or send another email as a reminder.

Laptop Policy

Laptops are permitted in class, but must be used solely for class purposes. I reserve the right to prohibit laptop use if I feel laptops are not being used for class purposes and to count students absent for violating the laptop policy.

Special Needs

Please speak with me as soon as possible if you require special arrangements for attending class or doing assignments. I want you to succeed, so please talk to me about anything you think might be grounds for special arrangements.

Very important: Do not fail to turn in assignments, come to exams, etc. If something prevents you from completing course work by the dates I've set, please talk to me honestly and openly. We will usually be able to work something out. These arrangements will be made on a case by case basis.

Disclaimer: I reserve the right to alter this syllabus at any time

Tentative (and Rough) Schedule

1/22-1/24 Course Introduction

Historical and Contemporary Theories of Humor

1/27: Superiority Theory. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, & Hobbes. Historical Theories Part 1 (Moodle). [Read only the pieces by these philosophers.]

1/29: Against the Superiority Theory. Hutcheson. Historical Theories Part 1 (Moodle)

1/31: Incongruity Theory. Kant, Schopenhauer, & Kierkegaard. Historical Theories Part 2. (Moodle) [Read only the pieces by these philosophers.]

2/3: Incongruity Theory (cont'd.). No new reading.

2/5: Release Theory. Spencer & Freud. Historical Theories Part 3. (Moodle)

2/7: Release Theory (cont'd.). No new reading.

2/10-2/12: "Flickering." Read LaFollette & Shanks, "Belief and the Basis of Humor." (Moodle)

2/14: Play Theory. Read CR chs. 1-3. [Ch. 1 is mostly review, so you can skim this chapter if pressed for time.]

2/17: President's Day. School is closed.

2/18: Monday Schedule. Play Theory (cont'd.).

2/19: Catch-up/Review.

2/21: Exam 1.

Aesthetics of Humor

2/24: Background in Aesthetics. Levinson “Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview.” (Moodle)

2/26: Background in Aesthetics (cont’d). Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste.”

2/28:

3/3: Humor as Aesthetic Experience. Read Iseminger, “Aesthetic Experience” (Moodle)

3/5: Humor as Aesthetic Experience (cont’d). Read Hartz & Hunt, “The Beauty and the Beast” Section IV and CR Chapter 4.

3/7

3/10: Horror and Humor. Read Carroll, “Horror and Humor.”

3/12: Horror and Humor (cont’d).

3/14: Exam 2.

3/15-3/23 Spring Break.

Ethics of Humor

3/24: Aesthetic-Ethical Interaction: Read Stecker, “The Interaction of Ethical and Aesthetic Value”

3/26: Negative Ethics of Humor. Read deSousa, “When is it Wrong to Laugh?” (Moodle) and CR ch. 5.

3/28: Negative Ethics of Humor: Read Bergmann, “How Many Feminists Does it Take to Make a Joke?” (Moodle)

3/31:

4/2: Negative Ethics of Humor: Read Philips, “Racist Acts and Racist Humor” (Moodle)

4/4:

4/7: Blackface and other discriminatory Humor: TBD

4/16: Catch-up Review.

4/18: Exam 3.

4/23-4/30 Presentations.