The Comic Agon: Comedy and Philosophy

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The First Law of Philosophy
*For every philosopher, there exists an equal and opposite philosopher.*

The Second Law of Philosophy
*They’re both wrong.*

The Absurd Foundations of Philosophy

*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was the break-through play for the British dramatist Tom Stoppard. With his star on the rise, and fame beckoning, Stoppard was asked the inevitable question by a reporter: what was the show about? Stoppard replied: ‘it is about to make me famous’.

That is comedy. Stoppard is a great comic writer, and his quip illustrates perfectly the nature of comedy. Comedy is an *agon*—a contest or war—of logics. It is “illogic” logic. Two “logics” are simultaneously embodied in the playwright's witty answer: the logic of denotation and the logic of causality. What ensues is the *agon* of logics.¹ We expect to be told that *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is about Hamlet seen from the standpoint of two marginal Shakespearean characters. That is what the reporter’s question sets us up to expect. The playwright’s

answer plays with that expectation. What makes the reply funny is that the answer shifts without warning from the expected logic of denotation to the unexpected logic of causality. Suddenly, Stoppard is telling us what effect the play is going to have on his life.

That is how comedy works. It is a highly sophisticated form of metalogic—the logic of antitheses and opposites. Agnes Heller calls this the simultaneous presentation of two contrasting rationalities.²

Agnes Heller’s *Immortal Comedy* is one of the few systematic philosophic treatises on comedy. Tragedy has been widely studied by philosophers and by philosophically inclined students of literature. Comedy, on the other hand, tends to be overlooked. There are some important exceptions like Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* (1901) and Gilles Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* (1969), but they are still exceptions. There is Shaftesbury’s *Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1707) but not much else.³ This is odd considering that philosophy is often the butt of comedy. Of course that might be a reason for philosophers to be wary of the topic. Yet, in point of fact, many comedies, even ones that parody philosophers, have a philosophic undertow.

Many comic playwrights—from Molière to Stoppard, Aristophanes to Shaw—have been well read in philosophy. Aristophanes was probably a friend of Plato. But the familiarity of the comic writer with philosophical themes also presents a problem for philosophy. This is because comedy does something that philosophy is not comfortable with. It plays with logic. It combines incongruous reasons and rationales, logics and topics. That is the soul of humor, wit and whimsy. Comedy segues mercilessly from denotation to causality, freedom to necessity, and back again. Comic writers engage in fabulous lightning-fast leaps across the abyss from the terrain of one kind of logic to another.

There are exceptions of course, but philosophers on the whole feel

²*Immortal Comedy*, pp. 154-155.

³Another philosophical work that thinks of itself as comedic is Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). It draws on the very funny tradition of the philosophical Cynics, but manages—despite this—to turn itself into an ideological tract. Deleuze has his moments of being po-faced in *The Logic of Sense*, but these moments are redeemed by the dazzling reflections on Lewis Carroll, who emerges unscathed and whimsical as ever from the hands of French philosophy.
the need to take sides with either denotation or causality, and certainly not with both at the same time. Philosophers then, for the most part, are partisans of Right Logic.

It was Aristophanes, in The Clouds, who observed what it is that philosophers dislike about Wrong Logic. It creates new maxims by cunning shifts.

UNJUST DISCOURSE
Take me where you will. I seek a throng, so that I may the better annihilate you.
JUST DISCOURSE
Annihilate me! Do you forget who you are?
UNJUST DISCOURSE
I am Reasoning.
JUST DISCOURSE
Yes, the weaker Reasoning.
UNJUST DISCOURSE
But I triumph over you, who claim to be the stronger.
JUST DISCOURSE
By what cunning shifts, pray?
UNJUST DISCOURSE
By the invention of new maxims.
JUST DISCOURSE
...which are received with favor by these fools.
(He points to the audience.)

Of course philosophers themselves create new maxims by cunning shifts. However, philosophy is curiously uneasy with what it actually does. It denies its own behavior because it has always had a problem with “first philosophy,” its own premises. It has never been sure that these are not arbitrary confections. Its instinct therefore is to equate reason not with its own maxims but with “discourse” or “logic.” It is not unusual for philosophers, or for philosophically-minded writers, to think that they can prove anything and justify anything with a long enough “discourse.” Some philosophers go as far as to say that philosophy is without foundation, which is just a re-statement of philosophy’s embarrassment with the maxims on which it rests its arguments.
To create new maxims by cunning shifts is essentially a comic act. When a philosopher announces that it is better to suffer injustice than to cause it, a new maxim has entered the world, and this has happened because of a cunning cognitive shift that has taken place between the idea of suffering and the idea of causing suffering. The traditional moral dignity accorded to suffering is asserted by the philosopher but in the name of the less than traditional idea of alleviating suffering. While this kind of paradox lies at the heart of philosophy, its “logic” is comic, its force is creative, and its effect is unsettling.

There is, therefore, something “absurd” about the maxims on which philosophy rests. But philosophy resists this idea, and quite insistently. A classic example of this resistance is the epistemology of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes uses his great literary mastery of metaphor to denounce the cunning shifts of metaphor in favor of the more methodical “train” of mental discourse.\(^4\) Metaphor is bad because it casts one thing (“thought”) as something else (a ‘train’). In contrast, discourse and logic (those regulated but also remorseless trains of thought) are good.

If we put aside the questions of good and bad, the clear implication of what Hobbes has to say is that philosophy entails contrary notions of reason. There is the kind of reason represented by the enigmatic and comic maxims on which philosophy rests, and then there is the reason of “giving reasons” and the logical procession and progression from one reason to another.

*Comic Reason*

I remember when I was studying philosophy as an undergraduate student. This was the late 1970s. One of the big issues in the professional discipline of philosophy at the time was the problem of rationality. A growing number of philosophers had begun to concede that there was more than one kind of rationality in the world. One of the contemporaries who helped spark a fierce debate over this was the English philosopher Peter Winch (1926-1997). His influential book *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (1958) took

\(^4\)Hobbes discusses the train of thought in chapter three of *Leviathan*. He takes umbrage at metaphor in chapters four, five and six.
its cue from Wittgenstein who had coined the idea of multiple language games. Just as words and things were located in multiple language games, Winch concluded that they were also located in multiple forms of rationality. Thomas Kuhn’s idea of scientific paradigms, introduced in Kuhn’s 1962 book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, echoed this.

Philosophers divided, sometimes bitterly, over the question of whether multiple rationalities existed or not. Some of them—the monists or positivists if you prefer—were insistent that there was only one kind of rationality. This super-rationality tended to go by the name of science. (Before the modern age, it had gone by the name of theology.) The idea that there were several kinds of scientific reasoning—or that Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, and Einstein had developed different and incommensurable models of reasoning—was an anathema to the monist camp. Yet other philosophers—the pluralists—loved the idea that there were multiple rationalities. Effective causality and teleology, reasoning from variable conditions and final ends, were patently different. The pluralists attached a mystique to the idea of difference. This paved the way for the era of postmodernism (1975-2000). It became popular to think that any belief system—from witchcraft to tarot card reading—had its own kind of rationality. This ended up turning into a satirical comedy, as all kinds of quirky fantasies and zealous pedantries were touted as rationalities.

As is often the case, comedic ridicule is the most effective refutation of philosophical fashion. Yet it should also be noted that the impetus to treat rationality as plural rather than singular was not new. Kierkegaard had divided the world into the spheres of aesthetics, ethics and religion. Max Weber had drawn a line between religion, politics and science.

Seemingly, though, neither the monists nor the pluralists had ever heard of comedy. For comedy makes both monism and pluralism redundant.

Valentine: Science and religion

Hannah: No, no, been there, done that, boring
(Stoppard, Arcadia)

Kierkegaard understood this. His idea of religious parable comes very close in spirit to the comic. It does so because parables
and comedy share in kind the simultaneous presentation of two contrasting rationalities. Comedy, in a volte face, segues from one kind of rationality to another. It is a highly intellectual process that shifts a thought from one kind of logic to another in a snap. Comedy is not monist. It always summons up more than one reason and more than one kind of rationality. It has the reasons of male and female, young and old, the arts and sciences, the able and disabled in play, or more exactly, in combat.

This is a delicious, frenetic, spirited combat, in which neither side triumphs. Yet it is not an exercise in simple-minded pluralism either. Via the dazzling swing shift, the warring sides are yoked in matrimony. They are joined in a third-party comic entity. Humor unites them in a paradoxical antithetical union. The hinge, “about,” unites description and causality. It makes one out of two by adding, often by implication, a third linking term that connects the seemingly un-connectable. Putting all the fancy words aside, that is what we laugh at:

Only in America... do they have drive-up ATM machines with Braille lettering.
Only in America... are there handicap parking places in front of a skating rink.

It was Aristophanes who first observed the agon of logics. He observed it by observing and then parodying philosophers in combat with their enemies. Along with the birth of philosophy in Greece came the philosophers bandying different models of discursive reason, and trying to demarcate reason from myth and rhetoric. Philosophy invented Right Logic and Wrong Logic. You can just about imagine Aristophanes’ raised eyebrow as he ponders the ambition of his friend Plato to kick the poets and their pesky gods out of the city, or to put the bad sophists in their proper place.

Comedic theatre was born in response to philosophy—or perhaps more accurately in response to those twin Greek miracles, philosophy and politics. The Clouds was Aristophanes’ response to philosophy. The Assembly of Women was his comedic take on politics. Politics and philosophy, at their best and at their worst, are rationalistic. Comedy

5Immortal Comedy, p. 46.
is their skeptical twin. It is not anti-rational in any sense whatsoever. Comedy is highly intellectual. Indeed, as Agnes Heller suggests, it is born with the instinct of reason. But comic reason is also distinct from regular reason.

The instinct of comedic reason is to take one kind of rationality—say that of denotation—and another one—say that of causality—and find the thing that, in the most unlikely or unexpected way, binds the two together. This is what wit does. It makes one thing out of two things that are unlike each other. That is also a definition of creativity. It is also very difficult to do because it creates something that is both singular and plural at the same time. Acts of creativity should not exist, but they do exist, for that very reason. They are in principle impossible, but comedy overcomes this impossibility by the calculated deployment of absurdity.

One of the principal functions of comedy is to deflate pretension. Mad philosophers and foolish politicos are equally the butt of comedy. But I do not want to suggest that either politics or philosophy is merely a “bad joke.” Both can turn themselves into very bad jokes when, as they do, they invent good reasons for inane and sometimes insane things, and ally themselves with mean-mindedness and cruelty. But this is not always the case. Sometimes politics and philosophy work brilliantly. Yet when they do, they often work best—and surprisingly so—via the medium of wit or humor. They work in a comedic fashion. What I mean by this is that they work through the miscegenation of concepts and the marriage of unlikely bedfellows.

Take just one example from philosophy. In Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, freedom is defined as the opposite of nature. But at a certain point—as the reader reads this great tract—it also becomes evident that moral freedom is a human necessity. The actions of human beings may be determined by their appetites and other kinds of un-freedom but paradoxically nature also determines that humanity is an indeterminate being—one that acts on the pure practical reason of principles. The moment that determinacy determines the indeterminacy of human autonomy is a comic moment.

That is what comedy does. It jokes that our freedom is determined. We who choose have no choice but to choose.

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Immortal Comedy, pp. 11, 30, 60, 62, 66, 154-155.
Augustus: You are not my tutor, sir. I am visiting your lesson by my free will.
Septimus: If you are so determined, my lord.
(Stoppard, Arcadia)

Comedy and Society

The parody of Jean-Paul Sartre by Monty Python's Flying Circus typifies the complex of relationship of comedy to philosophy. It sends up philosophy philosophically.

Question: Is Mr. Sartre free today?
Answer (from Mrs. Jean-Paul Sartre): Ooooh, he's been asking himself that for years!


Bluebottle: What time is it Eccles?
Eccles: Err, just a minute. I've got it written down here on a piece of paper. A nice man wrote the time down for me this morning.
Bluebottle: Then why do you carry it around with you, Eccles?
Eccles: Well, if anybody asks me the time, I can show it to them.

How can we explain such an explosion of comic invention? Agnes Heller suggests that comedy flourishes when the times are out of joint.
She observes that “both tragedy and comedy are born in times when the order or hierarchy of values gets shaken or severely questioned; both arts come about during periods of turbulence in which previously held beliefs and ideals become uncertain, unstable and labile.” When the time is out of joint, what previously may have appeared to be natural, no longer appears to be natural.

Still, caution is required here: for the United Kingdom in the nineteen sixties and seventies was not embroiled in anything like civil war or revolution. The times—from the early 1950s to the late 1980s—were not horribly out of joint. Rather this was more modestly, and even merely, a “turbulent” era. Social values were in transition. The ethos of British society shifted visibly during the period. The British class system declined. Culture was reshaped by youth style and pop arts. The roles of men and women were rewritten.

If this kind of social turbulence sets the stage for comedy, we should warily ask though in what way? One should not conclude from the fact that social upheaval teases out brilliant comedy that comedy is therefore a flag-bearer for such upheaval. Comedy responds to change, yet it is a conservative response to change. This is a classic paradox of the comedic spirit. Comedy has an unusual relationship to society. It is not pious or sanctimonious. It is not saintly, good or proper. One is tempted to say that it does not uphold social norms, though that is not exactly true. In any case, comedy does not seek reform or improvement—or change or utopia—or a better world or anything like it. But that is also not exactly true either—for there are things that the comedic spirit detests. Here we see the dual logic, the inherent incongruity, of comedy at work—or is it at play?

At the very least, comedy is certainly more conservative than it first seems to be. If comedy flourishes in times of change, it is not because it is an agent of change. I do not mean that comedy is reactionary or nostalgic for the past, or that it is a defender of the status quo ante. Rather, and more simply, comedy is a defender of society’s nature. Society has a nature. It has a proportionate shape. Distortion of that shape triggers a comedic response. Comedy parodies social distortions with its own comic distortions. It exaggerates exaggeration for comic effect.

"Immortal Comedy," p. 37.
The most instantly recognizable kind of social distortion is excess. There are various kinds of excess. Firstly, there are the excesses of the intellect. Pomposity, conceit and vanity are the typical comic faults of professors. Then there are material excesses. Avarice is the typical comic failing of the wealthy. There are also the excesses of identity. The envious person wants to be someone else. The jealous person wants to control someone else. Each comic excess brings forth a deficit. Conceit encourages pedantry, avarice produces meanness, and jealousy produces blindness. All these faults seem to inspire around them a lack of courage and a lack of sense. Is there anything more comically disreputable than cowardice or stupidity?

From time to time, in all societies, the social sense of proportion is lost and the inherent shapeliness of society is distorted. This is when the times are “out of joint.” This can occur because the social norms and values that previously gave effect to the proportionate nature of society lose their credibility and need replacing. It can also occur because social actors are tempted to step over the invisible line that separates proportion from excess. In the golden age of twentieth-century British comedy, both of these factors were at play. This was an era when values were questioned and behavior (at times) was excessive. We see a huge outpouring of first-rate comedy in this period. This was not because comedians were “against the class system”—or anything equally lame—but more simply because the comedic instinct of reason incorporates a conservative instinct for proportionality.

Peter Spence, the principal writer of the English television comedy To The Manor Born (1979-1981), embodied that instinct perfectly. He deftly weaved between the mercantile arriviste shopkeeper values of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party and the decidedly anti-mercantile values of the old English Tory landed class. In the witty battles between the indebted Audrey Forbes-Hamilton and the new owner of Audrey’s familial manor house, the self-made supermarket chain magnate and immigrant Richard DeVere, neither protagonist ever manages to completely trump the other. Each represents a limit for the other. Audrey has to learn economic sense and Richard has to learn the close-knit ways of village life.

Or, as Agnes Heller puts it, comedy is played out in the world
of finitude, the world of limits. The nineteenth-century English novelist George Meredith explained the nature of this very well. He observed that whenever people wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate or are self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit individually or in the bulk; the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

Pretty much all of the above—from pedantry to self-deception, bombast to demented plotting—are pilloried in the comic character of Basil Fawlty. In doing so, comedy does not subvert social norms. It does not encourage the transgression of norms. Instead it upholds them. But it does not uphold a particular norm—say honesty, against the act of deceit or thievery. Rather comedy upholds limits—that is to say finitude, against excess. This is a very simple norm. This norm does not demand piety or sentimentality, righteousness or benevolence. The only thing it requires is a sense of proportion.

The Critique of Obsessive Reason

The comic norm of “no excess” implies that other great comedic commandment “no tyranny.” Agnes Heller puts it beautifully: comedy is the enemy of tyranny, fanaticism and cruelty. The classic comic figure is the tyrannical father who wants to prevent the marriage of his daughter or son to their beloved. Another classic comedic target is the controlling, suspicious husband who is wracked by jealousy. From the ridicule of domineering husbands and autocratic fathers, comedy naturally segues into a critique of tyrannical sergeant-majors

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8Immortal Comedy, p. 38.
9George Meredith, ‘On the idea of Comedy and uses of the comic spirit’ (1877). This was first given as a talk on February 1, 1877 at the London Institute and was subsequently published in the April, 1877 issue of The New Quarterly Magazine.
10Immortal Comedy, p. 61.
11Immortal Comedy, p. 59.
and dictatorial presidents. One explanation for political comedy is that tyranny is a form of excess. The comic distaste for bombast and lack of proportion naturally sets it against the behavior of any tyrant.

Does this mean, then, that comedy is a reflex of freedom? Loud laughter is certainly the sign of a free society. But, remember, tyrants also possess a kind of freedom—they are able to do more or less what they please because others are not free. Comedy makes fun of their addled-brained schemes. It satirizes their shortsighted planning and delusional plotting.

Q: What does Saddam want for Thanksgiving?
A: Turkey.

But do not forget that it is not only tyrants that do dumb and insane things. There are plenty of misjudged free acts in free societies that comedy merrily lambastes.

All societies suffer from stupidity, hypocrisy, conceit, avarice, obsession, and the rest of the traditional targets of comedy. Excess and lack of proportion are human failings, period. Tyranny in a way is an exaggeration of the human vice of exaggeration. It is the ludicrous summa of ludicrousness. What comedic intuition most resists is the human capacity for obsession that leads to the fanatical behavior that turns into tyranny. Human obsession appears in many guises. One of these is reason. Reason ought to be antithesis of obsession. Yet often it is little more than the sublimation of it. Reason, without its own comic corrective, all too easily rationalizes extreme behavior and fixated thoughts. Comedy is the critique of obsessive reason. Comedy cuts it short.

This cutting short is built into the very nature of comedy, its capacity for the volte face—the swing shift from one rationale to another. Dramatically this is symbolized by a change of identity. Trading places, confusion of identities (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), cross-dressing (Some Like It Hot, Tootsie), authors denying their authorship (Don Quixote), and shipwreck locales (Gilligan’s Island) where identities are subverted in the very act of trying to maintain them—all are comic devices for exploring how the human self becomes a stranger to itself.
Jerry (as Daphne): 'You don’t understand, Osgood! Aahh... I’m a man!'
Osgood: ‘Well, nobody’s perfect.’

Swing shifts are dramatic pressure points. They are moments in which comic action pivots and turns. The swing shift is what breaks obsessive motion. When reason rushes forward—in a demonic burst—comedy breaks its momentum. You see this in political debate. The earnest speaker prosecutes the case with vehemence. The reasons pile up. Then someone from the gallery breaks the escalating force of reason with a joke. The swing shift has occurred. Other reasons can now be heard. Radical evil arises from such obsession. It is animated by an idée fixe. Fanaticism is the consequence.

Churchill: ‘A fanatic is one who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.’

Comedy is the greatest enemy of extremism because it punctuates the train of fanatical thought and behavior. There is no stopping, no shifting, and no swinging in the mind of the extremist. The comedic mind is the opposite. For it, the world is full of unmoved movers and necessary freedoms. It revels in the enigma of these plural singularities. The mystery of such paradoxical, deeply contradictory, seemingly impossible forms is the antidote to the pedantry, fundamentalism, and ideology of the fanatic.

Comics satirize buffoons who have discovered “the key to the universe.” Comedy dislikes one sidedness. The very structure of humor is multiple, manifold and compound. It segues from one side of a contradictory proposition to the other side, and brings its audience along for the ride. The surprising thing about humor is how universal its judgments are. It speaks in a universal voice. If you are sad, you are sad by yourself. You may get sympathy, if you are lucky, but nobody is ever sad with you. Tear jerking in movies is a contrivance that produces low mawkish art.\(^{13}\) Laughter on the other hand is naturally

\(^{12}\) Some Like It Hot (1959) directed by Billy Wilder, script adapted by Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond from a story by Robert Thoeren and Michael Logan.

\(^{13}\) Immortal Comedy, p. 32.
infectious. Tell a joke at someone's expense and, if it is a good joke, even the person who is being sent up will laugh along.

Churchill on Clement Atlee: A sheep in sheep's clothing.
Churchill on Clement Atlee (again): A modest man, who has much to be modest about.

You will notice that most comedies are about pairs—sometimes pairs of pairs.⁴ In comic dramas and comic novels there are the pairs of father-son, father-daughter, husband-wife, master-son, and masterservant. There are pairs of lovers and pairs of clowns. There is Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Vladimir and Estragon, Felix Ungar and Oscar Madison, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom, Walter Burns and "Hildy" Johnson, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Audrey Forbes-Hamilton and Richard DeVere. So what explains the preoccupation with pairs? Think of comedy as being driven by the logic of pairing. Comedy is the logic of marriage. The essence of comedy is that its pairings are odd couples. Sometimes what comedy is telling us is that successful couplings in life by their nature are odd, and because they are odd, they also surprise us.

In comedy, pairs begin in conflict or else in strange status relationships. Comedy arises out of the conflict of generations, the war of the sexes, marital warfare, and so on. The warfare is verbal—though it often involves throwing things as well. It involves deep misunderstandings and contrary natures. But comedic conflict also always ends in happiness or resolution. In comedy, the most unlikely sniping pairs—Harry Burns and Sally Albright, C.K. Dexter Haven and Tracy Lord—turn out to be couples who are destined to be together.⁵ The warring couples do verbal battle with each other. They trade barbs in fast-talking repartee. They bang heads on a high plane of ingenuity. But, as in the warfare of Heraclitus, contrary opposites turn out to be the true complements of each other. Or to put it another way:

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⁴ Immortal Comedy, pp. 43, 53, 62.
⁵ When Harry Met Sally... (1989) written by Nora Ephron, directed by Rob Reiner; The Philadelphia Story (1940), playwright Philip Barry, screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart and director George Cukor.
Question: What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?

Answer: They surrender.  

All comedic couples, even those who do not go to war, are odd. This is true of those status pairs that subvert status relations. The comedic spirit creates the servant (Jeeves) who is smarter than the ‘mentally negligible’ master (Bertie) or the amateur detective (Miss Marple) who is cleverer than the professional police inspector. Comedy mediates and reconciles the pairs. It creates what the Zen novelist and playwright Gao Xingjian calls the expert amateur.  

Comedy is a creature of oppositions. It produces main characters who are obscure, heroes that are anti-heroes, promises of salvation that will never arrive, communication that is egocentric, metaphors that are literal, dumb orators, and so on. Comedy is a marrying logic. It creates sense out of nonsense. In comedy, a metaphor (“throwing someone into a bin”) is enacted in a literal sense. Comedy yokes a communal request (“Do you know the time?”) to a solipsistic statement (“I do”). It ties the sentimental (“Why do you love me?”) to the brutally realistic (“There is no one else”). It meshes the auditory with the kinetic in the voice that “moves.”

This is not just for fun. For such odd coupling is also the logic of creative science. It is Einstein’s time-space. It is Heisenberg’s wave-particle. It is also Socrates’ learned ignorance and Aristotle’s unmoved mover.

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
Estragon: Yes, let’s go.
They do not move.

16 All Star Superman (DC Comics, 2005), issue 3.
18 Immortal Comedy, pp. 105, 106, 115, 116, 120.
19 Immortal Comedy, p. 156.
20 Immortal Comedy, p. 115.
21 Immortal Comedy, p. 115.
Comedy and Philosophy

What I suppose—in light of the preceding—is that the core of philosophy is comic. It is built on paradoxes that confuse and irritate students, and I'd have to say many philosophers as well. They want hard-line certainty or else slack smug relativism. Comedic paradox satisfies neither. Enigmatic "one hand clapping" double takes are neither relativist nor absolutist.

Comedy, as I have observed, is conservative. It has a built-in preference for proportion. It naturally ridicules exaggeration. Comedy is not tempted, as philosophy repeatedly has been tempted, to replace norms with nothing and finitude with excess. It is tempted neither by nihilism nor tyranny.

No comic followed Sartre in his infatuation with Stalin and Mao—or Plato in his beguilement with the tyrant of Syracuse. Comedy instead is in league with the colleague of Heidegger who, one day, saw the Master Thinker in the street. This story is well known, but like any good joke is worth telling again. Heidegger had just finished his brief term as the Nazi Rector of Freiburg University. He had taken the post in the expectation of creating his own spiritual Reich but was forced back into professorial life having failed miserably in his ambition.

*Passing Heidegger, the colleague turned to him and intoned:*  
'Back from Syracuse, eh?'

Comedy does not like tyranny of any kind. This includes the tyranny of reason. Comedy has its own reason, but it is a very enigmatic reason. No funny man ever created a gulag archipelago or concentration camp. Indeed jokes are among the most powerful weapons directed against tyrants. Jokes about life under communism did more to bring about its collapse in Eastern Europe than any political debate or philosophical argument.

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22I suppose if one wanted to mount a counter case, the work of Slavoj Žižek might be evidence for the prosecution. Žižek is a very witty writer with very ideological and Leninist politics. He is the exception that proves the rule that comedy inoculates against tyranny.
Question: How many times can you tell a good joke in the Soviet Union?
Answer: Three times. Once to a friend, once to a police investigator, and once to your cellmate.

Even as late as 1989 many intellectuals in the West still preferred the promises of dysfunctional tyrannical communism to functional liberal capitalism. Many of those same intellectuals are similarly tempted today by radical Islamism. This is an old form of behavior. Pisistratus the tyrant of Athens and Dionysius the tyrant of Syracuse liked to have literary figures around them. The intellectuals of the day obliged—but why? It is true that intellectuals are flattered by attention but there is also something of themselves that they see in tyrants. This has to do with the obsessive nature of reason.

Thomas Hobbes called reason the ‘train’ of thought, and that metaphor captures something of the implacable nature of philosophical thinking. It doesn’t know when or where to stop. It is ironic then that enlightened despots always end up treating their court philosophers in an arbitrary way. Tyranny is cruel! But intellectuals never learn that lesson. They don’t learn that lesson because reason has its own tyrannical predisposition. Intellectuals exaggerate. For them, a problem is always a crisis, and a crisis is always a catastrophe.

Comedy seems to have been born as reason’s corrective to tyrannical reason. Yet most philosophers are wary of the comedic antidote to their own folly. Agnes Heller’s *Immortal Comedy* is the rare exception to that rule.23

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23 Philosophers who do take comedy seriously seem to be principally influenced by Stoic or Epicurean philosophies—or by the tradition of Cynical philosophy. That is true of Heller and Deleuze, and also Shaftesbury. So, while it is not the norm, you will from time to time come across a philosopher who has a comic touch. I am reminded in this connection of a letter that Hannah Arendt wrote to her friend Mary McCarthy. In the letter she describes some prestigious academic venue in Europe populated by visiting professors with their wives in tow busily typing their husbands’ manuscripts. The image is hilarious. Forget equality of the sexes. What is rib-tickling funny is the pomposity of the professors with their inflated sense of self-importance. They believe they are at work on things of world-historic significance and they have their domestic slaves chained to the enterprise. O comedy—burst the bubble of these idiots. Make fun of them, and restore proportion to the world.