

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 5

4-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Evans, C. Stephen (1987) "Kierkegaard's View of Humor: Must Christians Always be Solemn?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss2/5>

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KIERKEGAARD'S VIEW OF HUMOR: MUST CHRISTIANS ALWAYS BE SOLEMN?

C. Stephen Evans

Many people view humor and a serious religious life as antithetical. This paper attempts to elucidate Kierkegaard's view of humor, and thereby to explain his claims that humor is essentially linked to a religious life, and that the capacity for humor resides in a deep structure of human existence. A distinction is drawn between humor as a general element in life, and a special sense of humor as a "boundary zone" of the religious life. The latter kind of "humorist" embodies a religious perspective which is not Christian, but is closely related to Christianity. Humor itself is a fundamental aspect of Christian faith.

In his writings Kierkegaard offers us a theory of what humor is, and two interesting theses about humor. To begin with the theses, S. K. argues first of all that there is an essential connection between humor and human existence. The idea is that humor is no ephemeral or accidental human characteristic but is grounded in something deep within our nature or our condition. This idea that humor touches something deep is one S. K. shares with many other theorists about humor.

The second thesis is more unusual, however, and consequently more controversial. Kierkegaard also wants to claim that there is an essential connection between humor and the religious life. Quite contrary to the stereotype of the religious life as dour and somber, completely opposed to the carefree wit of the humorist, Kierkegaard holds that the highest and deepest kind of humor is rooted in a life-view which is recognizably religious, and that all humor is at bottom made possible by those very features of human life which make the religious life possible.

Before examining these two theses in detail and seeing what can be said on their behalf, we must first look at Kierkegaard's overall account of what humor is. Before doing that, it will be helpful to take a look at theories of humor generally.

Philosophical Theories of Humor

What is a philosophical theory of humor? Primarily it is an account of what humor is in its essence. The aim is not so much to know what makes us laugh, but why something makes us laugh. And though I just spoke of laughter, and



certainly there is a close connection between humor and laughter, a theory of humor is not identical with a theory of laughter. We find many things humorous which do not actually cause us to laugh; conversely we laugh in many situations where we see nothing humorous, at least at the time, the laugh of nervous embarrassment being a good example.

By and large theories of humor fall into one of three types.¹ These are relief theories, superiority theories, and incongruity theories. These three types are not always mutually exclusive, but are capable of being combined with each other in various ways.

Relief theories, which would include Freud and Spencer as notable examples, generally focus on humor as a pleasurable experience, which consists in or is causally related to a discharge of accumulated tension or energy. Freud, for example, appeals to the fact that so much humor revolves around sex and aggression (often disguised), and theorizes that humor, especially in jokes, provides a way of discharging sexual and aggressive instincts which society forces us to repress.

Superiority theories are actually the oldest of the three and number among their famous proponents Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes. The basic idea is that humor is a pleasant experience of oneself as superior. When we laugh, according to Hobbes, we express "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."²

Though Hobbes does say that the superiority we enjoy in humor is not always over others, it still seems that this is the paradigm case. Some have even theorized that laughter evolved from "the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel,"³ or from the baring of one's teeth as a demonstration of physical prowess.⁴

The third major type of theory, made famous by Kant and Schopenhauer, is the incongruity theory. This view, which is, as we shall see, very much like Kierkegaard's, is that humor arises through some contrast between what we would normally expect and the actual course of our experience. The incongruity must be one that is experienced as pleasant of course. Still, humor is regarded as rooted in something which goes against the normal patterns grounded in our past experience.

Kierkegaard's Theory

Now what is Kierkegaard's theory? How is it different from and related to these traditional types of theories? As I have already said, fundamentally S. K.'s theory is an incongruity theory, with strong similarities to Kant and Schopenhauer. However, Kierkegaard is also able to incorporate significant elements from the relief and superiority theories.

Gaining an understanding of Kierkegaard's view of humor is made more difficult by the fact that S. K. does not really discuss humor for its own sake, but rather to illuminate his theory of the stages or spheres of existence. I shall take a look at the place of humor in the "stages on life's way" presently, but I shall first try to extract Kierkegaard's general theory of humor.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus defines humor in terms of the concept of the comical. A humorist is a person who has mastered the comical, who "has the comical with himself."⁵ The comical in turn is defined in terms of "contradiction." "The tragic and the comic are the same, insofar as both are contradiction; but *the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical the painless contradiction.*"⁶ Climacus follows this definition with a long footnote listing examples of jokes and other humorous situations.

These jokes and situations make it very clear that by "contradiction" Climacus really means "incongruity," certainly not logical or formal contradiction. A caricature is said to be comical because of the "contradiction" between likeness and unlikeness which it contains. In a similar way a person who answers a rhetorical question is said to be comical, the contradiction being that he answers a question for which no answer was expected. My favorite example of humor from this footnote is the story of the German-Danish clergyman who believes he has said "The Word became flesh," because he has been fooled by the false cognates, the German "Fleisch" and the Danish "Flaesk." What he actually has said from the pulpit is "The Word became pork."

In all these examples there is a "contradiction" but what is contradicted is our normal expectation as to what goes with what, and what follows what. The patterns of our experience are disrupted and the result is experienced as incongruous. (Parenthetically, this use of the term "contradiction" as meaning "incongruity" should give pause to those who insist on thinking that when Climacus and Kierkegaard call the incarnation a contradiction they must mean logical or formal contradiction.)

Climacus realizes that not every incongruity is comical, however. A contradiction is comical, rather than tragic, only if it is experienced as pleasant. This is not merely determined by the content of the contradiction, but also by the relationship of the individual to the incongruity. The same event can be tragic to one person and comic to another, and even tragic and comic successively to the same person.

Climacus expresses this by saying that humor demands that one occupy a "higher" or "superior" perspective. The individual who is "trapped" or "caught" by a contradiction experiences it as tragic. To be amusing the contradiction must be one for which the individual knows a "way out." He must be able to distance himself by viewing the whole business from a superior vantage point.

It is clear then that Kierkegaard's view of humor, as developed by his

pseudonym Climacus (and here I see no significant differences between S. K. and Climacus) is a version of the incongruity theory. However, there are significant elements of the other two theories as well in S. K.'s thought. The notion of superiority is significant in relation to humor because it is the possession of a superior position that enables an individual to experience an incongruity as pleasant rather than painful. Also implicit in his view is the notion that humor provides a relief from the vexations of life. Though S. K. would certainly reject the mechanical "discharge of psychic energy" model which is present in Freud, because he would not think that such mechanical concepts could aptly describe a person's mental and spiritual life, he certainly recognizes the common sense experience of relief which gives Freud's view its plausibility. The person who sees something humorously has found "a way out." Temporarily, at least, he has escaped the pain of life.

Humor and Human Existence

With Kierkegaard's basic understanding of humor in mind, we can now look at the theses which I attributed to Kierkegaard at the beginning of this paper: that humor is essentially linked to both existence and religiousness. First we shall look at humor in the context of existence.

Many thinkers are inclined to agree with Kierkegaard that humor is closely linked to something fundamental in human life. A person who had absolutely no capacity to perceive anything as humorous would not be like someone with no capacity for doing algebra or playing the violin. Those capacities seem accidental, and however unfortunate an individual who totally lacked them might be, she could still be fully human. Someone with zero capacity for humor would strike us as fundamentally different from us, so different as to make us wonder whether the person might be an angel, a robot, or an extra-terrestrial, rather than a human being.

I believe, therefore, that Kierkegaard's first thesis—that humor is essentially connected to human existence—is more in need of illumination than defense. What we want to know is why this connection holds, and S. K. does of course have something to say which is helpful here.

The reason humor is basic to human life is simply that contradiction is basic to human life. Several of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, including Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis, and AntiClimacus, speak of human existence as a "synthesis" of contrasting or opposing elements. The self is seen as an attempt to unify temporality and eternity, body and soul, necessity and possibility, finitude and infinitude. In existence, however, the synthesis always remains incomplete, unfinished, and hence an incongruity between the opposing elements always remains.

All of us have ideals, plans, possibilities: goals towards which we strive. We are partly defined by the futures we seek. All of us are, however, equally defined by our pasts, particularly those necessities which we did not choose but are fundamentally a part of us for better or worse. We did not choose our parents, our sex, our early up-bringing. All of us are fundamentally engaged in a movement from what we have been to what we would be. But for none of us is this movement totally serene. No one is a stranger to the tension between reality and ideal. Yet our identity is found in both reality and ideal, or to be more precise, in the movement from one to the other.

If both the comic and the tragic are grounded in contradiction and if human existence itself at its very heart is a "contradiction," then it is clear why the capacity to sense the tragic and comical is basic to human life:

Existence itself . . . is a striving, and is just as pathetic as comical; pathetic, because the striving is infinite, or directed toward the infinite, is infinitizing, which is the highest pathos; comical, because the striving is a self-contradiction.⁷

Two qualifications must be made at this point. First, saying that the capacity for humor is explained by the contradictory structure of human life does not imply that all humor must be rooted directly in the deepest structures of existence. It is true that our deepest humor symbolizes and often directly expresses the gap between the ideal and the actual which is basic to human life. But we also laugh at all kinds of incongruities, trivial ones as well as meaningful ones, silly puns and witty plays on words as well as themes which directly bear on our identity as selves. One might say that the fact that human existence is fundamentally contradictory guarantees that humans will have a sensitivity to the contradictory, whenever it appears. This does not, however, imply that all humor must somehow be deep and profound.

The second qualification is that it is the capacity for humor which the contradictory character of human existence gives the individual. The degree to which that capacity can be realized depends upon several factors. One must recall that to experience a contradiction as comical, one must experience it in a painless manner, which requires a superior, somewhat removed perspective. One's ability to gain such a perspective is partly a matter of how reflective a person is. Hence, Climacus says that education or culture is a pre-requisite for at least some types of humor.⁸ The second factor which affects one's ability to take such a detached perspective is a person's religious orientation. To explain this we must move to Kierkegaard's second thesis.

Humor and Religiousness

One of the oldest stereotypes of the religious individual is that he is humorless,

a person whose serious mind-set precludes levity. This stereotype is not limited to popular films and books, but is held by philosophers as well, Nietzsche being a good illustration. Recently, in a fine book about humor, John Morreall has repeated the charge that religion, especially in the Judeo-Christian form, is incompatible with humor. According to Morreall, from a Christian perspective "everything we think, say, and do brings us closer to eternal happiness or to eternal damnation."⁹ If Christians were to take this seriously and really try to live in this light, "they would undoubtedly be more solemn in everything they do. Activities for mere amusement would be suppressed or eliminated, and it is hard to see how laughter might survive."¹⁰

Kierkegaard agrees with Morreall that the Christian life is a life of earnestness, but he rejects the claim that this earnestness precludes humor. He claims rather that humor is closely connected to a type of religious life, which is in turn closely connected with Christianity though not identical with it. Thus humor is closely linked with Christianity. In the *Journals and Papers* he tells us that "the humorous is present throughout Christianity."¹¹ In another journal entry he says that Christianity is the most humorous view of life in world-history.¹²

To understand Kierkegaard's claims here one must try to understand the place of humor in his theory of the stages or spheres of existence. It is of course a well-known thesis of Kierkegaard's that there are three stages or spheres of existence. The aesthetic life is the natural or immediate kind of life in which everyone begins, where one simply attempts to satisfy one's natural desires or urges. The aesthete lives for the moment. The ethical life is the life in which one grasps the significance of the eternal and by ethical resolve attempts to transcend one's natural desires and create a unified life. The religious life is the life in which one recognizes the impossibility of actualizing the eternal through positive action and instead one attempts to grasp it through repentance and suffering.

This simple or not-so-simple schema of the three stages of existence is complicated by the inclusion of irony and humor as boundary zones or spheres. Irony constitutes the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical while humor constitutes the boundary between the ethical and the religious.

It is very difficult to understand just what it means to regard humor as such a "boundary zone." I think the key to making sense of this is to make a distinction between humor as a general element in life and humor as a zone or sphere of existence in Kierkegaard's special sense. The former is an ordinary sense of humor; the latter involves a technical sense. The humorist in the latter sense, who occupies the boundary zone in Kierkegaard's schema, is someone who has taken the humor which is a general element in life and made it the fundamental ground of his distinctive way of life. Thus "humor" in the ordinary sense is

related to but not identical with “humor” as a boundary zone of existence. Since the two are related, what Kierkegaard says about “humor” as a boundary does shed some light on humor generally.

Everyone who exists has, as we have already seen, a sensitivity for the comic, just by virtue of existing. Everyone is able to see a contradiction here or there and to smile and laugh at it. Not everyone, however, is able to see and face the fundamental contradiction in her own existence—to smile and laugh over herself. Many people can laugh only in the Hobbesian way, at the infirmities of others. The humorist in Kierkegaard’s special sense has learned to smile at the whole of life, because she has learned to smile at herself. She can see the incongruity between her ideals and her actions, the contrast between the eternal love she was created for and the feeble temporal actions through which she attempts to create and express that love.

It should now be plain why humor in this deep, profound sense is so close to the religious life. The heart of the religious life is this very perception of the permanent discrepancy between ideal and actuality. It is this which leads the religious individual in Kierkegaard’s sense to see suffering and repentance as the highest human actions, as opposed to the victorious action of the ethicist. (See especially the *Postscript* in this connection.)¹³

Yet Kierkegaard does not simply identify humor with the religious life. In the *Postscript* Climacus calls humor the *confinium* of the religious life, at least of that natural religiousness called religiousness A. Why is this?

The answer lies in recalling that to perceive a contradiction as humorous one must perceive it from a detached standpoint. The religious individual in the *Postscript*, who is strenuously seeking to existentially realize the resignation, suffering, and guilt which characterize the religious life, has no such perspective. In fact, he comes close in some ways to Morrell’s stereotype of the religious individual as humorless. (Though ultimately Climacus claims he escapes this charge. The religious individual does go to the Deer Park for his outing, and he enjoys himself, but only after fearful anguish and reflection.)

In the *Postscript* humor becomes the “out” to which a person escapes when he can no longer endure the fearful stress of the truly religious life. For the humorist does have that “higher perspective.” The humorist intellectually sees what the religious individual sees. He has a knowledge of the great contradiction which is the heart of the religious life. But the humorist is someone who rests in “recollection.” He believes, like Socrates and Plato, that the eternal is something that all humans possess already. The humorist can smile at the contradictions in life because he sees life itself as fundamentally a jest; the eternal bliss one is seeking is in one’s possession already. “To exist is like walking down a road,” but the remarkable thing about it from the humorist’s perspective is that “the goal lies behind.”¹⁴

One can see from this that humor itself embodies a religious perspective of sorts, one different from yet very close to that which Climacus characterizes as religiousness A. Both humor and religiousness A are characterized as belonging to "immanence" and as resting in "recollection." The difference is that in religiousness A the individual attempts to existentially realize the eternal consciousness which he "recollects;" the humorist sees such earnest striving as a jest and not worth the trouble. For the humorist, however much one strives, we "all get equally far."¹⁵ All of us possess eternity already; nothing one does is of any eternal significance.

So humor and religiousness are not identical. Yet something like humor remains as an element in religiousness A. There is present in religiousness A "an obscurely sensed possibility" that the existential problem of guilt which the individual cannot himself overcome is in some way overcome. The eternal is in some way a possession.¹⁶ Such a sense that the eternal is secure and guilt has been resolved is necessary to "prevent the individual from leaping aside to despair."¹⁷ This seems very close to the humorist's "way out." Humor and religiousness A appear then as the two poles in what Climacus would term mankind's natural religiosity: the pole of serene and contemplative reflection and the pole of feverish, anguished action. Most actual religious lives will contain both elements and will to a degree oscillate between them.

Humor and Christianity

We see then that Kierkegaard has a concept of "humor" as a sphere of existence which embodies a clearly religious view of life, a view which stands in an intimate relationship to what Climacus terms religiousness A. Religiousness A is not, however, identical with Christianity, though it seems to be a transfigured element in Christian faith. Why is it then that Kierkegaard specifically links humor and Christianity?

Here the textual evidence is obscure indeed. The best clue is, I think, the often repeated claim that humor embodies a *knowledge* of Christianity which has not been existentially realized in life.¹⁸ What lies behind this is surely the idea that the humorist has gained a knowledge of the incarnation, that great contradiction which Climacus terms the absolute paradox, and is somehow able to smile about this. At least an apparent "higher perspective" must have been discovered. This apparent "higher perspective," which in the case of the pure humorist is illusory, can only be found in the Christian doctrines of grace and forgiveness.

If there is a place for humor in Christianity, it must surely rest on these two doctrines. Despite the fact that life is earnest for the Christian there is also a place for the humorous smile and even for laughter. (Perhaps it is partly *because*

of the fact that life is earnest; I think that the incongruities which strike us as most deeply humorous usually relate to what we care deeply about.) That place for humor is provided by the grace of God and the forgiveness which is offered freely in Christ. It is this which makes it possible for the earnest individual to smile at the contradiction between his life and the ideal he sees in Christ.

It is this doctrine, I believe, that S. K.'s humorist has acquired a knowledge of. In viewing this doctrine solely as a doctrine, however, the humorist inevitably misunderstands it. For the Christian the grace of God and forgiveness in Christ are found through faith, which is an existential passion with a concrete historical object. His life then becomes a blend of jest and earnestness, a gift and a task. The gift is given with the task and the task with the gift.

The humorist, however, mis-perceives this as a philosophical doctrine, an eternal truth about the human condition. Forgiveness is not something to be grasped in time, but an eternal possession. We are all forgiven eternally. Our forgiveness must simply be "recollected," and we all do get equally far. The task is depreciated and one is left with a sympathetic, jesting attitude toward life.

The Humorist Today

This all too brief account of Kierkegaard's theory of humor bristles with problems and questions.¹⁹ Nothing has been said, for example, of what Kierkegaard called demonic humor, which corresponds closely to what would today be termed nihilistic humor. Kierkegaard views this type of humor as an attack on the eternal meaning which gives existence its depth. Here the "way out" for the laughter is not a positive leap to the eternal, but a negative leap from the eternal—to nothingness. Surely a great deal of humor in the twentieth century would fit this category. But such topics must be left for another essay.

It is worth asking in conclusion, however, whether Kierkegaard's analysis of humor fits our contemporary experience of humor. Are there contemporaries who fit Kierkegaard's description of the humorist? I believe there are. Woody Allen and Garrison Keillor are the names which come to mind.

In his movies Allen has pictured better than anyone else I know the basic incongruity of human life. Yet somehow the incongruities in Allen's films are tempered. We find ourselves able to smile at life and at ourselves. We sense a sympathetic, healing conviction that at bottom our lives mean something, a conviction which sometimes wrestles with darker, more nihilistic overtones, but is hardly ever totally extinguished.

A joke at the end of *Annie Hall* expresses this perfectly. A man is talking to his therapist and says that his brother is crazy. "He thinks he's a chicken!" "Why don't you turn him in?" replies the therapist. "I would, but I need the eggs."

The character Allen plays in the movie then glosses the joke to make an

analogy to human life in general: "I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships. I feel they're totally irrational, crazy, and absurd, but I guess we keep going through it because most of us need the eggs."

Certainly this sort of humor embodies no explicit religious perspective in any conventional sense. But it seems to me to subtly express, precisely through its sympathetic humor, a sense that we are all redeemed. We all get equally far; in a sense we get nowhere. But we nevertheless have an "obscurely sensed possibility," as Climacus would put it, that it all comes right in the end.

Woody Allen, then, seems to be a humorist in Kierkegaard's special sense. Such a humorist is, as Kierkegaard would say, far from being a Christian. Perhaps he is even far from that natural religiousness Climacus terms religiousness A. But such a humorist clearly perceives the existential incongruity which lies at the heart of the religious struggle. And perhaps, as Climacus would say, his sympathetic humor expresses a knowledge of the grace and forgiveness which figure so strongly in both Judaism and Christianity.

Garrison Keillor is, if anything, an even better illustration of the Kierkegaardian view of humor. Keillor nicely vindicates another of Kierkegaard's theses about humor: humor is not only embedded in a type of religiousness A which includes a *knowledge* of Christianity; it can also be a part of a life which is authentically Christian. Humor is the "incognito" of the genuinely religious person. Garrison Keillor's monologues from "Lake Wobegon" exhibit the most profound theological themes of Christian faith. However, those themes are exhibited not as doctrines, but as realized in the lives of the people of Lake Wobegon: guilt, forgiveness, mercy, love—all are there. And much to our surprise when they are thus exhibited, the result is humorous. It's not the humor of a Hobbes which revels in one's own superiority, but the deep humor which binds one more closely to one's own fellow human beings.

In a convocation talk at Luther Northwestern Seminary in 1983, Keillor says explicitly that "a person who follows Christ will never lack for comedy." It's not difficult to grasp his meaning here; someone who takes seriously Christ's teachings about loving one's enemies or giving to the poor cannot help but see her life as incongruous, if she has even a modest degree of honesty. But insofar as she is following Christ the redeemer, the incongruity can be experienced as humorous, for Christ is indeed "the way out." As Keillor himself says, "laughter is a kind of forgiveness."

Perhaps it is appropriate to end with another joke from *Annie Hall*. Two ladies are complaining at a resort in the Catskills. "The food is really terrible here," remarks one. The other replies, "Yeah, and such small portions." Someone who has not cared for the content of my essay at least cannot complain about the smallness of the portion!

NOTES

1. The typology is borrowed from John Morreall's excellent book *Taking Laughter Seriously* (SUNY Press: Albany, N. Y., 1983). Morreall discusses these as theories of laughter, however, while I wish to restrict my discussion to humor.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* in his *Works*, ed. by W. Molesworth (Bohn: London, 1840), vol. 4, ch. 9. Quoted in Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*.
3. Albert Rapp, *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (E. P. Dutton: New York, 1951), p. 21.
4. See Anthony Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (Viking Press: New York, 1933).
5. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 455; p. 436. This reference and others from the *Postscript* will follow this format: First page number given is from Kierkegaard's *Samlede Værker* 1st ed., (Gyldendals: Copenhagen, 1901-1906), volume VII. Second number refers to the old translation of Swenson and Lowrie (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1968).
6. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 447, p. 459.
7. P. 72, p. 84.
8. *Postscript*, p. 437, p. 449. See also p. 149, p. 159.
9. *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 125.
10. *Ibid.* pp. 125-126.
11. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Indiana, 1970), Vol. II, Entry 1682.
12. *Ibid.* Entry 1681.
13. Book II, Chapter IV, Section II, "Existential Pathos."
14. *Postscript*, p. 390-391, p. 402.
15. *Postscript*, p. 391, p. 403.
16. *Postscript*, p. 472, p. 481.
17. *Postscript*, p. 484, pp. 492-492.
18. *Postscript*, p. 231, p. 243.
19. I have said more about some of these things (and less about others) in chapter X of my book *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, (Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: 1983).