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PHILOSOPHICAL PRESENTATION AND THE IMPLICITLY HUMOROUS STRUCTURE OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: Philosophy often at least implicitly includes and depends on a logical structure which is also that of jokes. This is the case when philosophy involves questioning or establishing concepts in their own right, and when it involves the kinds of metaphysics which ask about reality and the world as a whole or as such. Taking this humour-like structure into account in presenting philosophy helps, among other things, to lay open part of the character of philosophy itself, to underscore the radical self-perspective that is constitutive of philosophy, and to contextualise the often confusing experience of coming to grips with an unfamiliar philosophical framework.

Keywords: philosophy; humour; jokes; presentation of philosophy; nonsense.

I shall try to show that many, often methodologically requisite, forms of philosophy inherently share the logical structure of jokes, and that this has important consequences for philosophy's presentation. Philosophy shares this structure when it involves questioning concepts or establishing them in their own right, and also when it involves the kinds of metaphysics which ask about reality and the world as a whole or as such. Although this structure is usually only implicit, there are philosophical practices in which it is fully explicit.

I am not suggesting that philosophy is a kind of joke but that one frequent element of its character, among other contrasting elements, is a kind of joke. This does not mean, for example, that philosophy is condemned to relative triviality or limited depth. Even on its own, this humour-like element of philosophy, like many kinds of humour themselves, is entirely capable of acknowledging, articulating, and engaging with the fully serious and even tragic dimensions of life. In fact, as I shall discuss, this element is an inherent part of the profound self-perspective that allows philosophy to address and rectify its limiting presuppositions.

The Frequent Implicitly Humorous Structure of Philosophy

Wittgenstein famously commented that a philosophical work could be written entirely in the form of jokes (Malcolm, 1958, p. 29). This idea is intimately connected with his view that

philosophy is a matter of bumping up against the limits of sense, and in this way discovering that certain attempted articulations of sense are, after all, literal nonsense. This discovery is what allows us to delineate the relevant forms of sense in their own right. So, for example, Wittgenstein writes that, "The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery" (1958, p. 48e). More generally, he insists in the *Tractatus* that, "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them" (1961, p. 74, prop. 6.54). And in his later work, I think similarly, he comments that, "the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear" (1958, p. 51e). This happens, again, because it emerges that the sense itself of these problems fails.

Philosophers typically reflect specifically on concepts, and they do so in order to revise them or at least to reconsider whether they adequately express their claimed content. That is, they reconsider whether these concepts are in fact the concepts they claim to be. As a result, philosophical practice necessarily consists partly in discussing concepts in terms that are not limited to and so do not coincide with their current semantic boundaries. Very often, it further results in "engineering" or transforming concepts so as to say what they currently do not say. In either case, this practice necessarily involves incongruous shifts of sense. Since it is a reconsideration and refinement precisely of the scrutinised concepts, however, it is carried out according to the constraints established by these concepts themselves. That is, it is presented as a consistent development of the sense at issue itself. This is another way of saying that in these contexts this shift of sense in the carrying out and presentation of conceptual analysis is logically necessary.

Let me clarify that conceptual analysis in the sense under consideration here consists in reflection on the concept as such. That is, it is not a matter of simply spelling out the contents of the concept, as in simply semantic or philological analysis, but of investigating, establishing, or disconfirming which contents are essential to the concept in its unity as the concept it is. Otherwise, it is not analysis of the concept as such, or in its own right, but is instead explication of the concept as already given and so unanalysed in its own right. Consequently, the conclusions of this kind of analysis follow from what constitutes the concept, and so follow from it with logical necessity. As I have argued, however, this kind of inference involves an incongruous shift of sense. That is, the analysis of the concept involves a shift to a sense in important respects incongruent with the sense of which it is an analysis. This is part of what it means to analyse a concept in terms that, as I argued above, do not coincide with the concept's current semantic boundaries. It is precisely this incongruous and so in some respects incoherent shift of sense, then, which is logically necessary.

But this incongruous shift of sense, necessary in the case of the relevant aspects of philosophy, is exactly the structure of jokes: incongruity presented under the guise of an outcome to be expected, and so striking us by surprise.

In order to arrive at the philosopher's conclusions about the concepts under philosophical consideration, then, we—and the philosopher herself—are necessarily taken through the turns of this joke-like logic.

As Cathcart and Klein (2007) note, "The construction and payoff of jokes and […] of philosophical concepts are made out of the same stuff. They tease the mind in similar ways" because they "proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are […] and to ferret out hidden […] truths" (p. 2). In this connection, Bertrand Russell (1956) argues of conceptual analysis that, "you never get back to the acorn in the oak […] It will not really be the same as the thing we started from because it will be so much more analytic and precise" (pp. 188-189). This is one form of the "paradox of analysis": that if what we infer from a set of statements tells us anything that was not already evident in those statements without inference, then it does not follow logically from those statements, but instead has imported something they do not authorise.[1] Russell goes on to comment that, "The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it" (p. 193).

Here is an example of whimsical humour from A. A. Milne (1955) that should help to show this connection between philosophy, nonsense, and humour:

> If I were John and John were Me,
> Then he'd be six and I'd be three.
> If John were Me and I were John,
> I shouldn't have these trousers on. (p. 67)

Christopher Robin is struck by his self-identity, by the fact of being himself. In order to articulate—and in fact just to recognise—his being himself, he has to delineate it by contrasting it with the alternative of his not being himself. But this alternative is nonsensical: if he were someone other than himself, it would not be he who was that someone else. Engaging in this nonsense, however, allows him to wrestle with and so grasp the concept and with it the fact of being himself. In this way he "climbs up beyond" the nonsense and, as it were, uses its leverage to grasp the concept. Here is a sort of distant, and less warming, analogue from Wittgenstein (1969):

> I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree," pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy." (p. 61e, no. 467)

Wittgenstein's point, I think, is that it is part of philosophy's character to appear insane in the context of everyday procedures and meanings. That this appearance, as his narrative suggests, is natural to a philosophical line of thought points to the kind of inherent element of incoherence I am proposing.

Analogously to the case of conceptual analysis, when we reflect on reality as a whole, we necessarily transgress the constraints of all possible sense, since those constraints themselves are included in what we are attempting to get a perspective on.[2] Of course, this necessity can be and often is taken as a reason to reject this kind of attempt as simply unintelligible. I shall not argue the point here, except to note that, as I have just discussed, what is essentially the

[1] On the paradox of analysis, see, for example, Engel (1991), pp. 100, 137f.

[2] This is the context of the quotation from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* above, about using his nonsensical propositions as steps to climb beyond them.

same problem occurs with indispensable forms of conceptual analysis. Consequently, the attempt is not so easy to dismiss.[3] In the meantime, philosophers often have and do engage in this kind of reflection.

Karl Jaspers (1997), for example, notes of his own method of seeking the ultimate nature of reality, "we have used words and concepts which had their original meaning for definite things in the world; now however they are used to go beyond the limits and are not to be understood in their original sense" (pp. 111-112). Consequently, "through reason I catch sight of something which is only communicable in the form of contradiction and paradox. Here a rational a-logic arises, a true reason which reaches its goal through the shattering of the logic of the understanding" (p. 112).

What is more, and perhaps less controversially, fundamentally different philosophical frameworks each offer a unique account of reality as a whole. Because this is an account of reality as a whole, each entirely excludes the content of any fundamentally different account. That is, it excludes even the sense of any other account. Consequently, when we compare different comprehensive philosophies, we necessarily try to relate each of them to a context that is entirely beyond the constraints of its own sense. This is a context, in other words, in which the philosophy's own sense does not exist and reference to that context, for it, is sheer nonsense. Nonetheless, we necessarily evoke this context. And for the same reason, we also necessarily evoke such a context whenever we develop, reflect on, or present a comprehensive philosophical framework on its own. Each of these activities requires us to work in some way outside the limits of the philosophy; but in its terms there is nothing meaningful outside those limits.

As Henry Johnstone (1978), for example, argues, because a philosophical position is all-embracing in this way, any attempt to appeal to facts or evidence independent of the addressed philosophical position "is doomed, because a philosophical position always is, or implies, a decision as to what is to count as facts or evidence" (p. 55).[4] As a result, Johnstone argues, the philosopher who reflects critically on and presents a philosophical standpoint is necessarily capable of being "both totally immersed in his point of view and not totally immersed in it" (p. 121).

Ortega y Gasset (2002) connects a related insight with humour:

> there are certain ridiculous things that have to be said, and philosophers exist for that purpose. At least, Plato literally stated—in the most formal of ways and in the most solemn of occasions—that the philosopher's mission is to be ridiculous. Don't you think that it is a task easy to discharge. It demands a courage of a sort that great warriors and the cruelest of revolutionaries have usually lacked. Both [groups] have usually [consisted of] rather vain people who got cold feet when, simply, it was a question of becoming ridiculous. Hence, it would be advisable for humanity to take advantage of the philosopher's special brand of heroism. (p. 190, translator's insertions)[5]

[3] For defenses of the necessity and logical legitimacy of this kind of violation of relevant sense see, for example, Barris (2012, 2015); Livingston (2012). In Barris (2012), I also address the "resolute reading" of the *Tractatus*.

[4] For other detailed presentations of this point see, for example, Collingwood (1940); Goodman (1984); Hall (1960).

[5] The reference to Plato is to the *Parmenides*, where Parmenides tells the young Socrates that when

Metaphysics deals, as well, with the more limited issue of the being as such of particular things, and in this case this structure of moving outside the sense of the relevant reality as such in order to gain insight into that sense coincides with that of violating or moving outside the constraints of a particular concept in order to gain insight into those constraints. One example is implicit in the terminology of the essence or being of a thing. This means, in one arguable formulation, what the thing truly is. But what the thing truly is must be simply the same as the thing. And yet the thing cannot be entirely the same as its being, or else there is no meaning to identifying its being in its own right. Here we have a concept whose own sense does not fully coincide with what it necessarily fully coincides with.

Aryeh Kosman (2013) makes a helpful analogous point in discussing metaphysics as enquiry into being as a whole. As Jaspers and Wittgenstein both also argue, we can only use the concepts and language developed in and given their meaning by our life within the whole and so among its parts. Consequently, Kosman writes, "Metaphysics […] by its very project of explanation, is doomed to traffic in […] synecdoche, calling upon this or that part of being to figure being as a whole." Since what is expressed here is specifically being as a whole, however, this is a part whose "being as a part depends upon its not being the whole that it is called upon to figure" (p. 254). Analogously to the case of enquiry into the being of particular things, a discriminable part or aspect of being is necessarily the medium of expression of being as a whole: that is, of being as expressly without any such qualifying discrimination.

This point in turn helps us to see more fully what happens in conceptual analysis. The same logic of conceiving a thing in terms that are expressly not relevant to its concept occurs more generally in revising a concept so as to say *this* concept really means *that*, different concept. This is not the same kind of thing as saying that a referent which was identified in this way needs to be identified in that way instead. Here, we are saying that a concept or, equivalently, a meaning, needs to be identified differently. But unlike a referent, the identification of a meaning is given by nothing but the constraints of that meaning. Consequently, this revision says that this meaning itself—that is, necessarily identified as precisely this meaning it currently is—is really that different meaning. And this in turn is to say that this meaning is really not the meaning it is.

For example, if we say that mind really is brain, or that the solidity of physical things really is a massing of unsolid energy, we are saying that what we meant—exactly as we meant it—is not what we meant. If we are not saying this, then we are not able to pick out what it is that we are saying is really brain or really energy.

Again, the distinction between sense and reference does not help us to get around this problem. In discussing the concept as such, we are discussing sense. Further, we cannot identify the referent without the sense already in place, so the referent plays no role in establishing the concept as such. As Robert Brandom (2000), for example, puts a more general version of this point,

> it may be questioned whether the concept *particular object* can be made intelligible without appeal to the concept *singular term*. Frege, for instance, implicitly denies this when […] he

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philosophy takes hold of him, he will not despise following his thought to places which now strike him as laughable (1939, 130C-E).

> explains the ontological category of particular objects […] in effect as comprising whatever can be referred to by using singular terms. (pp. 123-4)

Once we have the concept, of course, we can only establish its contingent details with reference to the referent; but we cannot explore the match of the very concept with the referent in this way since there is no specified referent without the concept.

Philosophy, then, often inherently involves a reconsideration of the very sense it is identifying and communicating. Consequently, on those frequent occasions, it involves a joke-like paradoxical element of semantic inconsistency.

I should clarify that this element of (or passage through) nonsense does not eliminate the sense or the cogency of philosophical thought. Instead, as the philosophers I have mentioned argue, it produces genuine insight into the relevant forms of sense themselves. But the nature of this type of insight, and hence with it the nature of its logic and method, are very different from those of most other types. This is a kind of insight that distinctively results from movement in reflective depth, not in extension or detail, and so constantly puts its own logic in question. As a result, its consequent violations of its own sense constitute not a straightforward contradiction but a legitimate self-referential paradox, as in "I am lying."[6] It therefore does not lose its meaning but instead partly presents puzzles about its meaning and about the meanings of its components. After all, in the clashes of sense in jokes, too, a recognition of the clear sense of each side of the clash is necessary to the grasp of its incoherence and its effects of surprise. The incoherence of the clash and the sense of its elements reinforce each other, rather than simply disintegrating into unmeaning chaos.[7]

Some Consequences for the Presentation and Particularly for the Teaching of Philosophy

Philosophers typically do not notice that this incongruity of sense is the case. Presumably this is partly because we are institutionally indisposed to consider the possibility of problematic paradox in the very medium of our activity, and partly because we are so habituated to this state of affairs that it no longer strikes us. Our introductory students, however, frequently do notice it, and often initially register philosophical thought as gibberish or as trivially playing with words. People new to philosophy often have to be taught to understand philosophical reasoning as being a form of reasoning at all, and even as having coherent meaning. In some important contexts, then, this joke-like incongruity of sense is part of the presentation of philosophy whether we actively make it so or not.

More generally, the presentation and teaching of philosophy are often necessarily inadequate and confused to the extent that they do not recognise this joke-like partial incoherence of philosophy. Conversely, they are clarified and otherwise enhanced by taking it into account.

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[6] On the validity of this kind of paradox, see, for example, Livingston (2012), e.g., pp. 30–2; Sainsbury (1995), chapter 6.

[7] For detailed accounts of the way the philosophical form of this kind of paradox can produce unqualified insight, see Barris (2012, 2015, 2018).

Among the benefits of taking this humour-like structure into account in presenting philosophy is that doing so makes explicit and underscores the self-perspective that is constitutive of philosophy. One form this self-perspective takes is awareness of the constant possibility of meaningful reconsideration of philosophical insights. This quality of philosophical thought is brought home by the recognition that each relevant philosophical claim depends for its development, presentation, and defense on a partly nonsensical transition of meanings.

Another benefit of taking this humorous structure into account in the presentation of philosophy concerns a further consequence of philosophy's characteristic deep reconsideration of familiar sense. Because of this reconsideration, philosophy necessarily presents forms of sense that are wholly unfamiliar to its interlocutors: that is, forms of sense which the new reader or hearer does not yet have the conceptual resources to grasp. As a result, the encounter with an unfamiliar philosophy is necessarily attended by deep confusion. Recognition of the joke-like character of philosophy makes explicit preparation and room for this kind of necessary confusion. Further, it gives it a context that can make sense of it for the reader or student. As a result, it also offers perspective that can help in coping with this confusion's demoralising effects.

As I have argued, however, the conceptual confusion often inherent in encountering a new philosophy or a new philosophical issue is not simply an effect of its unfamiliarity, but also of an element of incoherence inherent in the relevant philosophical thought itself. Consequently, this confusion is not only something to be negotiated, but something to be engaged in as part of the texture of successfully achieved philosophical thought. That is, it is to be taken up as an inherent part of the procedure of thinking philosophically.

In other words, thinking philosophically often *is* partly the living out of a humour-related attitude and practice.

Explicit recognition of philosophy's humour-like structure, then, is in fact often essential to laying open to view part of the character of the relevant philosophical argument or explication, and so is then essential to more adequate philosophy.

Further, because this humor-like structure is often inherent in philosophical procedure, its explicit recognition is also essential to laying open to view part of the frequent character of philosophy itself in general. For both of these reasons, this explicit recognition is essential to introducing the student to the nature and practice of philosophy in general.

Some Examples of Explicitly Humorous Philosophy

Philosophy, then, is not only better presented by acknowledging its humour-like structure but is better philosophy for doing so. It is for both of these reasons, I think, that some philosophers have made the humour-like structure of their thought an explicit part of their philosophising. Wittgenstein sometimes did this, and Nietzsche and Plato often, as did Daoist and Zen teachers. I shall give some examples from Plato and, very briefly, from Zen teaching.

In Plato's *Charmides*, Socrates, having returned to Athens after some time away, asks "how philosophy was doing at present, and whether any of the rising young men had distinguished themselves for wisdom or beauty or both" (153d). He is told that Charmides had. When the latter arrives with a crowd of admirers, Socrates' informant comments that

while Charmides' face is admirable: "Yet if he would consent to strip […] you would think he had no face, he has such beauty of form" (153d). And in fact, a little later Socrates "saw inside his cloak and caught fire," and momentarily "could possess myself no longer" (155d). In the meantime, Charmides had

> caused much laughter, because each of us who were seated made room for him by pushing hard at his neighbour so as to have him sitting beside himself, until at either end of the seat one had to stand up, and we tumbled the other off sideways. (155b-c)

Not coincidentally, the topic of the conversation between Socrates and Charmides is self-control (*sophrosyne*). In the ancient Greek context, I would say this means, roughly, appropriate self-guidance and comportment.

The conjoining of wisdom and beauty in Socrates' initial question is not arbitrary either, nor that of their effects in the encounter between Socrates and Charmides. Here I shall take some perhaps alarming hermeneutic leaps, but I think the consequent interpretation is sound. The word which "beautiful" translates, *kalos,* is also translatable by, for example, "admirable," "fine," and "estimable." Consequently, I suggest that it is well translated by "appreciable." *Sophrosyne*, or appropriate self-guidance and comportment, clearly depends on recognising and behaving appropriately towards what is to be appreciated in the specific ways that it is to be appreciated. That is, this virtue and form of wisdom ("wisdom" being s*ophia,* one of the roots of *sophrosyne*) depends on the appreciation of what is *kalon,* whose meaning embraces "beautiful."

Personal beauty, then, as something which powerfully calls forth appreciation, is an important reminder of the kind of thing that a well-guided life is guided by. Certainly, beauty can lead us astray, attended to carelessly and out of context; but it is a powerful reminder that there is what is appreciable in the world, and so of what it is that we need to attend to. In this respect, appreciation of beauty is partly a specifically philosophical recognition: it partly recognises appreciability as such. Something like this is explicitly the theme of the great myth about love in the *Phaedrus*, for example: "beauty [*kallos*] alone has this privilege" of retaining the radiance of its ultimate reality and so of reminding us of that ultimate reality (1914, 249d-250d).[8]

The events of the meeting between Socrates and Charmides, for their part, graphically remind us that the appreciation on which wise self-guidance depends is inherently disorienting. Fully registered, it stops us in our tracks, momentarily blinds us to anything else and so makes us lose perspective, makes us lose dignity and fall about. This is true not only of potentially superficial personal beauty, but of anything powerfully appreciable. And it is especially true of what we appreciate philosophically, because there we appreciate the

[8] It is noteworthy here that both Wittgenstein and Plato took "reminders" or "recollection" of what is ultimate as one formulation of what philosophy essentially does.

It is also interesting in this connection that in the "beauty of form" Charmides is said to have, "form" translates *eidos.* This is or becomes Plato's term of art for his famous Forms or Ideas, the ultimate realities of things. Even if this was not yet Plato's usage when he wrote the *Charmides*, however, it is relevant here that the same term that comes to apply to ultimate reality readily applies to evident and even physical structure.

depths of its appreciability or, in other words, the underpinnings of that appreciability. That is, we are, as it were, constantly turning to appreciate the rug beneath our feet, or the wheels of the bicycle we are riding on. Philosophy, as the love and so the seeking of wisdom (*philosophia*), is often in part inherently a falling about, guided by and partly comprising the act of grasping meaning and meaningfulness in their own right.

Plato's humorous presentation of his philosophy, then, shows us that wise self-guidance, as understood by and practised in the philosophical life, inherently includes intellectual stumbling about, absence of control, and being bewildered. This humorous presentation does not merely cast self-guidance in that light but offers, in the context of the ancient Greek meanings, some significant immediate justification for the point. Plato's humour, consequently, is not just sugar to sweeten the message and process but is part of the substance of the message itself. The philosophical life of loving, appreciating, and seeking wisdom partly comprises or embodies humorous or humour-like confusion.

Just so, in the *Meno*, when Meno accuses Socrates of being "both in your appearance and in other respects […] extremely like the flat torpedo sea-fish; for […] I feel my soul and my tongue quite benumbed, and I am at a loss what answer to give you" (80a), Socrates explains that "it is from being more in doubt [*aporon*: "being at a loss"] than anyone else that I cause doubt in others" (80c-d).

I suggest that a similar insight is enacted at the end of the *Symposium*, when Alcibiades arrives drunk and disrupts the previously orderly proceedings to give a heartfelt speech castigating Socrates for the inhuman self-discipline Alcibiades is in love with. This mixed-up disorderliness exhibits a very real side of love, which is the theme of the dialogue and also the guiding motive of philosophy. Significantly, it is a bewildered disorderliness with which Socrates is entirely at home. Sonja Tanner (2018) gives a very interesting extended account of Plato's humour and its intrinsic relevance to his philosophy, including chapters on the *Charmides* and the *Symposium*."

Finally, let me give a very brief illustration from Zen teaching.[9] In the Zen understanding everything is exactly as it should be, and it is our task to come to recognise and appreciate this. But this necessarily means that we equally need to come to recognise and appreciate the irrelevance of changing ourselves by carrying out this task. As a result, Master Sun-chi writes that, "Those who do not understand that mind itself is [already] Buddha are as if mounted on a donkey looking for a donkey" (in Cleary, 1997, pp. 34-5, my insertion). Accordingly, Master Yun-men said in one of his talks,

> To begin with, I have no choice but to make a fuss in front of you, but if I were seen by someone with clear eyes, I'd be a laughing stock. Right now I can't avoid it, so let me ask you all: What has ever been the matter? What do you lack?
> Even if I tell you there's nothing the matter, I've already burdened you, and yet you must arrive at this state before you will realize it. (In Cleary, 1997, p. 105)

This comment has bearing, I think, on the following story about Shunryu Suzuki:

[9] On the central role of humour in Zen, see, for example, Hyers (1973).

A student, who had just concluded a thirty-day zazen retreat … asked Suzuki Roshi how to maintain the extraordinary state of mind he'd attained.
"Concentrate on your breathing, and it will go away," Suzuki said. (Chadwick, 2007, p. 119)[10]

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