The European Journal of
Humour Research 12 (2) 221–224
www.europeanjournalofhumour.org

Book review

Peone, Dustin (2023). *Making Philosophy Laugh: Humor, Irony, and Folly in Philosophical Thought*. Cascade.

Philosophy is typically perceived as a discipline disconnected from humour. Philosophers are seen as 'serious' thinkers, interpreting reality with methodical, rigorous analysis and logical argumentation, not as individuals who make jokes about the world. However, humour has indeed played a significant role in the development of Western metaphysics as it challenges conventional interpretations of reality and reveals the contradictions hidden beneath norms, values, beliefs, and ideological certainties. In this context, Dustin Peone's latest book, *Making Philosophy Laugh: Humour, Irony, and Folly in Philosophical Thought* (2023), is worth discussing. As the title suggests, the essay examines how humour is a crucial tool in developing a philosophical perspective that considers "the perennial tension" between the tragic, the comic, and absurd aspects of human existence (p. 4). Peone observes that contemporary philosophy often emphasises the tragic elements of life — such as death, angst, conflict, and nothingness — "to the great detriment of the comic sense of life" (p. 5). In contrast to this trend, he recounts a different history of philosophy, highlighting how both ancient and modern authors have employed humour for social, political, and educational purposes.

Peone's commentary spans a wide array of authors from literature and philosophy. This extensive list includes Aristophanes, Beckett, Cicero, Camus, Diogenes, Erasmus, Euripides, Homer, Ionesco, Molière, Montaigne, Pirandello, Plautus, Plutarch, Rabelais, Rousseau, Shakespeare, Singer, Sophocles, Twain, and Yeats. It also features prominent philosophical figures such as Aristotle, Bakhtin, Bergson, Butler, Cassirer, Descartes, Eco, Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Heraclitus, Hobbes, Hume, Jaspers, Kant, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Parmenides, Plato, Shaftesbury, Socrates, Stirner, Unamuno, Vico, Voltaire, Wittgenstein, and others. Peone's aim is neither to examine these authors in alphabetical or chronological order, nor to label them as 'comic writers' or 'satirical thinkers.' Instead, he investigates the relationships between humour, rhetorical strategies, and speculative thinking in their works. This approach allows him to demonstrate that dialectical philosophy involves not simply the traditional dichotomies of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, and good and bad but also of *foolishness and seriousness* as well. What does this mean?

According to Peone, speculative thinking begins when the ordinary view of reality is questioned. When we philosophically interpret the world, we refuse to accept it *as it appears*. The act of interpreting implies the ability to hypothesise *alternative perspectives* from which the world can be seen in a different light. From some of these perspectives, the world may even look as 'turned upside down': a place where traditional distinctions between reality and appearance, truth and fiction, seriousness and facetiousness are destabilised. It is precisely at this juncture that philosophical dialectic reveals its profound affinity with symbolic inversions that characterise the works of humour. Philosophers, like humourists, assume that things may be the opposite of what they appear to be, which is why they can imagine a reality in which things work 'backward.' Indeed, philosophers risk appearing ridiculous in the eyes of those who consider this kind of assumption a 'joke' in bad taste, as if they were unreliable humourists.

Peone insists on this point, specifying that he does not use the term *foolishness* in its common meaning, that is, as the opposite of *wisdom*; rather, he uses it as the opposite of *seriousness*. In Peone's analysis, the fool and the serious person represent "the two extreme limits of comedy" (p. 105). The fool is the character who makes us laugh because his paradoxical logic and behaviour show the absurdity of our world in a comic way. On the contrary, the serious person is the character who makes us laugh for his absolute inability to laugh and to accept the existence of different perspectives than his own (indeed, Peone describes the serious character as a dogmatic ideologue). In other words, the serious person is comfortable only with his own interpretation of reality while the fool "forces us to admit the possibility of a different order of things than that with which we are comfortable" (p. 107). From this premise, Peone introduces a third character, namely the philosopher, who is portrayed as the middle ground between the serious and the fool. Like the fool, the philosopher denounces the logic of the ordinary world but through a speculative process that leads to a rational interpretation of the world. However, unlike the serious person, the philosopher does not end up believing that his/her interpretation of the world is the only one possible. A true philosopher, in fact, resembles the fool more than the serious person, since seriousness (understood as dogmatic crystallisation of thought) is the very negation of philosophy. Peone interprets folly as the beginning of philosophical thought, given that he defines foolishness as the source of a dialectic approach to reality.

The countless works cited by Peone serve precisely to confirm the speculative value of the perspective reversals staged by both comedy writers and philosophers. Here, however, a problem arises: in several passages of the text, the argument resembles more a collage of quotations than a detailed demonstration. A quotation from one author is explained through a quotation from another, which in turn triggers a passage from yet another author, and so on, but without dwelling on any of the texts in question. One often has the feeling that Peone is rushing towards the next quotation, without devoting the necessary time to the previous one. To give an example: when discussing the role of the fool, Peone mentions the name of Thomas More, who kept a fool in his household. Peone does not deem it necessary to spend a few words on More's masterwork, that is, *Utopia* (More, 2010), focusing instead his attention on to the role played by professional jesters in the courts of European princes during the Renaissance. He writes:

> It was common practice for the powerful persons of the world to listen well the ridiculous speech of fools, […] whereas such ridicule from any other person would be punished by merciless violence. The fool, oracle of an inverted world, was permitted to speak truth to power when wise men were compelled to practice silence" (p. 109).

Peone does not further comment on this sentence, thus implying that Renaissance princes took seriously their fool's opinions about truth. However, this is not the case, as explained by More himself in his *Utopia*, which is both a fictional book and a meditation on politics. In the context of a fictional dialogue, More focuses on the dilemma faced by a philosopher when engaging in politics and trying to become a counsellor to a prince. Indeed, when philosophers speak truth to a prince, they risk being punished or treated as traitors. Therefore, they are left with two choices: either to become flattering buffoons, who give up on truth and only say what the prince wants to hear; or to play the part of the fool, who can tell the truth but under the condition that they will never be taken seriously. More humorously ponders this dramatic conflict between truth and power, portraying the philosopher either as a traitor of truth or as a fool forced to dissimulate their wisdom to survive. In either case, More suggests that it is quite difficult to distinguish the fool from the wise or to believe that philosophical wisdom can effectively inform politics.

This tragicomic portrayal of philosophers, as unable to enter politics without becoming a caricature of themselves, does not only connote More's thinking but constitutes a recurring theme in Renaissance thought, which can also be found in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (Erasmus, 2015). Peone quotes a passage from the *Praise* shortly after referring to More, yet he does not mention any comparison between the two authors and their respective works, despite the fundamental points of contact between them. Instead, to comment on Erasmus, he quotes a passage from Nietzsche on friendship (Nietzsche, 1984, p. 352) and one from Vico on religion, marriage, and funerals (Vico, 1988, p. 333), concluding with a vague reflection on foolishness as the foundation of these human institutions (pp. 111-113). One wonders why Vico and Nietzsche are mentioned at this point, in a section ostensibly dedicated to the link between philosophy and humour in Renaissance thought. It seems particularly odd to discuss Thomas More and Erasmus without addressing *Utopia* or the deep personal and intellectual relationship between More and Erasmus. A more thorough analysis of More's and Erasmus' texts would presumably have enabled Peone to elaborate on the opposition between philosophy and seriousness, or the apologia of humour as an effective instrument of political emancipation, in a less schematic way.

That being said, Peone's essay has the merit of highlighting how humour is a key element in understanding certain classical texts of philosophy that are often judged immune to the comic element. For instance, in Chapter 3 (pp. 50-52), the author illustrates how Descartes was a thinker particularly sensitive to the world of theatre and comedy, before revealing some unexpected connections between his *Meditations* (Descartes, 1985) and Plautus's *Amphitryon* (Plautus, 1964). In the sixth chapter, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* takes centre stage (Hegel, 1976). According to Peone, the Hegelian dialectic stages an "inverted world" aiming to denounce the claim of many philosophers to interpret the real world through pure abstractions, which, in the name of seriousness, censor the essentially contradictory character of historical becoming (pp. 133-138). Additionally, the entire essay is interspersed with numerous references to the works of Vico, of whom Peone is a careful student and who constitutes an indispensable point of reference for his theoretical approach.

In this regard, one concluding remark. Following in the footsteps of Vico, Peone does not simply aim to write an essay on humour and philosophy; he also attempts to sketch a brief account of Western culture, in which poetic language, mythology, and historical dimensions intertwine. This ambition perhaps explains the need to cite such a large number of writers, poets, philosophers, and critics, carrying with it the risk mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, it is a risk the author is willing to take in his endeavour to tell this long story of the friendship between philosophy and humour in his own distinctive way.

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