

Philosophy of Humor (399)

Syllabus

Fall 2015

Instructor: Jim Thomas

Office Hours: MW 12:00 – 12:50

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Functional Competency Satisfied by this Course: Critical Analysis and Reasoning

Required Readings: The readings for the course will be available on Blackboard in the "Documents" section.

Methods of Evaluation:

Short Papers: You will write three short (3-4 pages) papers. Each paper will be worth 25% of the overall grade. I will return each paper to you with comments. The first two papers will be returned to, in class, within one week of the due date. The third paper, which will be submitted via Blackboard, will be graded within one week of the due date and my comments will be available online.

Short Paper 1: **October 24**

Possible Topics: Difference between Superiority and Incongruity theories; Relief theory as an explanation of laughter but not humor

Short Paper 2: **November 30**

Possible Topics: Definition of Jokes; Importance of Intention versus expectation in identification of a joke; Is laughter required for a joke?

Short Paper 3: **December 14**

Possible Topics: What counts as an offensive joke; If no one is offended, is the joke offensive?

Pop Quizzes: There will be six pop quizzes throughout the semester. Each will be assigned on an upcoming reading. You will be allowed to drop the lowest score of the six quizzes, with the remaining five quizzes making up 25% of your overall grade.

Course Goals and Expectations: Humor is obviously an important element of almost everyone's lives and is therefore worth studying and understanding. The purpose of this class is to discuss the variety of theories proposed to explain humor. Those discussions will serve as a base for us to determine for ourselves what, if anything, creates or designates something as humorous. You will learn about the differences between laughing at and laughing with an individual or group. We will also look at the line between something being funny and the very same thing being offensive and discuss what creates such a dichotomy. By the end of the semester, the papers you write, and the quizzes you take, will give you a better understanding of humor, as well as the ability to discuss and analyze instances of purported humor in the future.

Academic Integrity: Any attempts at cheating or plagiarism will be dealt with severely. To cheat at an exam or an assignment shows a lack of respect for your fellow students and for me. If you use sources in a paper, you should cite them fully; this includes any and all websites that you may visit in the course of your work. Take credit for what you have done, but ensure that others receive the proper credit for their work as well. If you are unsure what constitutes plagiarism or cheating, consult the student handbook or ask me. The following is a quote from the provost about this issue:

"By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UMBC's scholarly community in which everyone's academic work and behavior are held to the

highest standards of honesty. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and helping others to commit these acts are all forms of academic dishonesty, and they are wrong. Academic misconduct could result in disciplinary action that may include, but is not limited to, suspension or dismissal. To read the full Student Academic Conduct Policy, consult the UMBC Student Handbook, the Faculty Handbook, or the UMBC Policies section of the UMBC Directory." .
From: <http://www.umbc.edu/provost/integrity/faculty.html>

Special Note: One of the topics we will spend time on is the question of offensive humor, and such a discussion cannot avoid examples. It should be noted that some examples discussed will be considered offensive by some people, perhaps by everyone in the course. The purpose of such examples will be to determine if, and how, they could be considered humorous and offensive. No person, or persons, will be ever be singled out for ridicule in this course. Furthermore, I expect that each person in class will respect everyone else in this class and see the examples as tools of inquiry and not as personal attacks. Should someone feel differently at any point during the semester, please do not hesitate to talk with me.

Required Readings: Below is a list of the readings for this class, all of which are available on Blackboard. In addition to the readings listed below will be additional examples of the type of humor being examined. Should the example be in written form, it will be provided to the class with the readings or in addition to the readings. However, there will also be examples in other media (video, audio, etc.) which will be played in class. Students are encouraged to suggest possible examples as well.

The readings are collected together under different headings to specify the different subject matters we will be dealing with. Beside each date is the author we will be reading, as well some idea of what to expect from the reading and the class discussion.

First Day of Class

8/26: First day: discuss syllabus, course policies and requirements, grading procedures, basic introduction to three humor theories

The Superiority Theory

8/31 – 9/2: Plato, selection from *Philebus* 48-50; first introduction to Superiority Theory

9/9: Aristotle, selection from *Poetics*, chapter 5, 1449a. selection from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, chapter 8; modification of Superiority Theory to include cognitive and emotive aspects

9/14: Hobbes, selection from *Leviathan*, Part I, chapter 6, selection from *Human Nature*, chapter 8, section 13; Superiority Theory understand as vindictive against others, and future self.

9/16: Descartes, selections from *The Passions of the Soul*; Superiority Theory seen as biological response to stimuli (preview of Relief Theory)

9/21: Francis Hutcheson, selections from *Reflections Upon Laughter*; Superiority Theory understood as weak, hints of Incongruity theory

9/23: Henri Bergson, selection from *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*; first full suggestion of Incongruity theory within Superiority framework

The Incongruity Theory

9/28: Kant, selection from *Critique of Judgment*, Part I, div. 1, 54; First official rendering of Incongruity Theory

9/30 – 10/5: Schopenhauer, selections from *The World as Will and Idea*; Emphasis placed on contradictory ideas with agreeing qualities.

10/7: Kierkegaard, selection from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; Emphasis placed on precise details, unexpected wit, surprising connections between concepts.

10/7 - First Paper Topic Prompt distributed to class via in-class handout and Blackboard

The Relief Theory

10/12: George Santayana, selection from *The Sense of Beauty*; Understanding humor as a physiological response to stimuli

10/14: Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter"; Presenting the Relief theory as a way of seeing humor work in the body in a 'hydraulic' fashion

10/19: Freud, "Humor"; Humor presented as a 'relief valve' for forbidden thoughts.

Contemporary Treatments of Humor

10/21: John Morreall, "Taking Laughter Seriously"; Contemporary treatment of humor with emphasis on incongruity

10/26: Michael Clark, "Humor and Incongruity"; Analytic treatment of the necessary and sufficient properties of humor

10/28: Roger Scruton, "Laughter"; Focus on use of superiority theory and the concept of 'attentive demolition'

10/28 – First Paper Due IN CLASS

11/2: Mike W. Martin, "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities"; Humor treated as a mental concept akin to beauty

11/4: Mary K. Rothbart, "Incongruity, Problem-Solving, and Laughter"; Psychological description of humor as a pleasant problem-solving technique

11/9: Goran Nerhardt, "Incongruity and Funniness: Towards a New Descriptive Model"; Incongruity theory used to describe the mental phenomena of humor,

rather than its stimulus.

11/11: Lawrence La Fave, et. al., "Superiority, Enhanced Self-Esteem, and Perceived Incongruity Humor Theory"; An argument that there is no such thing as a 'joke' or a 'sense of humor'

11/11 - Second Paper Topic Prompt distributed to class via in-class handout and Blackboard

11/16: Dolf Zillman, et. al., "A Disposition Theory of Humor and Mirth" Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Twenty Questions for a Cognitive and Evolutionary Theory of Humor*, chap. 5, 2005. Humor from a cognitive science perspective

Philosophy of Jokes

11/18: Noël Carroll, "On Jokes"; A theory about how to identify jokes

11/23: Ted Cohen, "Jokes"; A much improved theory about how to identify jokes, and the differing types of jokes

November 24 - Thanksgiving Break

Humor and Ethics

11/30: Ronald de Sousa, "When Is It Wrong to Laugh?"; The ethics of humor

11/30 – Second Paper Due IN CLASS

12/2: Joseph Boskin, "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo"; Offensive humor described as ostracization through laughter

12/2 - Third Paper Topic Prompt distributed to class via in-class handout and Blackboard

12/7: Merrie Bergman, "How Many Feminists Does It Take To Make A Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong With It"; Feminist theory of humor, and what makes offensive jokes offensive

12/9: Christopher Wilson, "The Use of Abuse"; Superiority theory and offensive jokes treated as 'self-defense' and coping mechanisms

12/16 – Third Paper Due by Midnight via Blackboard