The Efficacy of Comedy

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The Efficacy of Comedy

by

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Abstract

The Efficacy of Comedy: Focusing on the efficacy of comedy as a genre, utilizing Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger’s philosophy. It begins with a historical analysis of the efficacy of comedy in Ancient 4th and 5th century Athens focusing on Aristotle’s conceptions of comedy. It analyses what Aristotle wrote about comedy and attempts a reconstruction of what his book on comedy from the poetics may have said. It then examines the shift to aesthetics rather than the Philosophy of Art with a focus on Kant and the Critique of Judgment. Comedy here is used as an interpretive tool in order to highlight the shortcomings of Aesthetics. It then examines comedy and its potential for being a truly great art form and explicates a Heideggerian interpretation of comedy. This novel interpretation describes two types of comedy: True comedy and Fallen comedy. Finally, it provides a Nietzschean perspective, particularly as it pertains to the power of comedy and laughter and its ability to overcome the exclusive mono-perspective found in the ascetic ideal and its overestimation of the efficacy of truth in our contemporary context.
Introduction: The Efficacy of Comedy

Philosophy on comedy, humor, and laughter is sparse and fragmentary throughout the history of the canon. There is a lacuna of sorts until the twentieth century in the area of philosophy. The first monographs solely devoted to comedy and laughter are Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* and Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. The only notable exceptions are the alleged lost work by Aristotle on comedy that should belong in the *Poetics* mirroring his section on tragedy, and the Earl of Shaftsbury’s (Anthony Ashley Cooper’s) *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* from 1709, where the term “humor” first starts to mean something “funny” rather than the medical term for the humors of the body. The latter half of the twentieth century has seen a greater proliferation of books and articles dealing with the topics of comedy, laughter, and humor, and I attribute this to the prevalence of the now preeminent genre of comedy in our society.

The primary arts of our culture (in the US) are television, film, and popular music. It has been said that if all poetry, sculpture, and painting stopped in this country, few would even notice, but if there were a halt in film, television, and streaming media, there would be an uproar. Our world (in the Heideggerian sense) or culture’s art has lost its sense of the tragic. Very rarely are tragic movies produced by major film studios, and still more rarely are these films major blockbusters. As it turns out, many movies have their endings changed to be more “upbeat” or “uplifting” or “even funny” if they do not “test well” with focus groups. Most of our films are comedies in the sense either that they are meant to be humorous or that they have a “happy
ending.” Rather than trying to recapture a sense of the tragic, I would like to examine this comedic phenomenon genealogically.

I intend to craft a counterhistory of comedy that discloses the countenance of its efficacy while simultaneously addressing a major problem within the philosophy of art. Though comedy may be the US’s preeminent genre, it falls into an odd space when we consider it aesthetically. Aesthetics is what we currently refer to as the philosophy of art. This is problematic for many reasons. First, aesthetics as a field is really only a few hundred years old and is myopic in its view toward art. Second, and more importantly, it really does not adequately address or assess comedy, especially comedy considered as a concrete, theatrical art form and not just as joking or general humor. This is especially troubling given that comedy along with tragedy are two of the West’s oldest forms of “art,” if we can even call them that. The term art itself is not without its own genealogical problems. I plan to use comedy as an interpretive tool in dismantling the dualistic aesthetic framework and to show how it falls short of its transcendental and universalist aims. Even if aesthetic experience were to achieve its end, it would still ring hollow when compared to “art” in a context.

Before I begin, I must tersely adumbrate the leading theories on the philosophy of humor and laughter. This work deals more with the topic of comedy than with either humor or laughter, but it is not feasible to talk about comedy or comedic acts without at least an initial understanding of what we have come to think of as the predominant theories of humor and

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1 See Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967). Nietzsche claims at the end of section 5 of Birth of Tragedy that “the entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author [the will?], and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified … [we are not] as the sole author and spectator of this comedy of art, [which] prepares a perpetual entertainment for itself.” By the “comedy of art” I believe Nietzsche is pointing out that all art is an illusion that has a “happy ending.” Even when viewing a tragedy, we are not literally hurt by it; in fact, we feel better after and applaud it.
laughter. The first and perhaps oldest is standardly referred to as the superiority theory, which is attributed to Hobbes but has its roots in Plato, as most things do. In book 10 of Plato’s *Republic*, as well as in *Philebus* lines 48–50, it appears, at least according to the assent of the interlocutors, that laughter is somehow malicious. We laugh at absurdities or at other people’s misunderstandings of themselves. Hobbes, on the other hand, has been oft quoted for his general explication of the comic or laughable as “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”

This theory has been criticized often and quite well for being very myopic or incomplete. Perhaps it is an instance of why we laugh or why we find things humorous, but certainly not the *form*. I doubt that there is any universal form or complete, all-encompassing theory for what we find humorous or laughable.

The second prominent theory is the relief theory, which is mostly popularized by and attributed to Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer. The main idea is that our *nervous energy* is released or relieved through humor or laughter, as a sort of “release valve.” Mostly this is thought to take our pent-up, malicious desires, anxieties, and sexual tensions and release or relieve them through jokes, humor, and laughter. Aside from issues with what exactly this *nervous energy* is, the precise mechanisms surrounding this seemingly hydraulic system are also unclear. Much like the superiority theory, relief theory seems to only describe one instance and is thus equally myopic.

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3 Francis Hutcheson was perhaps the first to criticize this theory well and at length in his 1750 work *Reflections upon Laughter*.

The third and most prominent theory is the incongruity theory. This theory in its many forms basically states that when we find something suddenly incongruous and we are not in a fearful state and we find this incongruity pleasant, we may find the phenomena humorous or laughable. This theory seems to stem from many sources, including the aforementioned Platonic dialogue the *Philebus*; Immanuel Kant’s *Third Critique*, division 1, section 54; Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, book 1, section 3; and Henri Bergson’s *Laughter*. Contemporary philosophers such as John Morreall and Noël Carroll also promote this theory as the most prominent and preeminent theory of comedy.

Morreall espouses an aesthetic interpretation of comedy, humor, and laughter. Morreall technically claims he has a “new theory of laughter,” but it is more or less a nuanced version of the incongruity theory. He claims that what causes laughter or humor is “a sudden pleasant psychological/cognitive shift.” Carroll also strongly supports the incongruity theory and attempts to overcome some of its problems related to its broadness of scope. Things that are too congruent seem incongruent, like identical twins dressed the same, excellent impersonations, caricature art, and general repetitions. He and Morreall, along with Bergson, argue that these things are perceived as incongruent with our understanding of the world. But this still seems problematic. If the “too congruent” seems “incongruent” it would appear that the definition of incongruity must grow so vague as to no longer be meaningful. Everything can thus be perceived as incongruity. I agree with Carroll and Morreall that incongruity is the best of the three theories, but it too seems to fall short of a properly a priori or formal definition. Frankly, I do not think it is possible to provide this kind of definition for humor, laughter, or comedy. Comedy, at least, is

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always an a posteriori endeavor. Comedy is always contextual in its form. All of these theories on comedy get something right given certain shared contexts.

I will start by examining the roots of comedy in ancient Greece, focusing on Aristotle and Aristophanes. Next I will move to an analysis of modern aesthetics that focuses on Kant’s influence in this field owing to his contributions from the Third Critique. I will claim that Kant or at least neo-Kantian philosophers have led us astray from much of what I take to be important in a history’s or culture’s art (because of his claims about universal aesthetic taste). I will use Heidegger to provide an interpretation of how comedy can be both an inauthentic art that is just an idle curiosity, or what I call “fallen comedy”; or it can alternatively be world-creating and truth-disclosing art that I call “true comedy.” Finally, I will delve into Nietzsche’s corpus to show what efficacy he thinks comedy and laughter have.

It should be noted from the outset that in this project, no hard and fast universals about comedy are to be drawn, since part of the project of genealogy is to uncover or unmask these as being historically contingent. However, the greater claim of this project is that, though comedy has been mostly ignored or misunderstood by “serious” thinkers and has been thought of as mere amusement or diversion, it still has had and does have a greater efficacy on people than it generally gets credit for. Comedy, when it appears in a historical milieu, is an important part of cultural discourse. Just because comedy is not “serious,” this does not mean that it is not impactful, meaningful, or useful for further meditation (though Kant claims that it is not). Comedy can spur us to meaningful action and thought without needing to rely on a “serious” attitude. To quote Nietzsche from The Gay Science, “The lovely human beast always seems to lose its good spirits when it thinks well; it becomes ‘serious.’ And ‘where laughter and gaiety are
found, thinking does not amount to anything’: that is the prejudice of this serious beast against all ‘gay science.’—Well then, let us prove this is a prejudice.”

In chapter 1, “The Birth of Comedy,” I plan to examine the ancient Greek roots of comedy from the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. I will be examining them to discover what theories of comedy prevailed, and to see whether those theories appropriately characterize the comedy of that era. I will first address the issue of katharsis in Aristotle’s texts, mostly by appealing to scholarship from Lear and Golden. This chapter will primarily focus on Aristotle and attempt a reconstruction of Aristotle’s lost book on comedy that is supposed to comprise a large portion of the Poetics. This reconstruction is necessary in order to describe a possible perspective of comedy using the resources of that era and not attempting to retrofit a modern, universal interpretation of comedy where it does not belong. We will first attend to other attempted reconstructions from Cooper, Janko, and Golden. I will endorse Golden’s interpretation over the others, especially those that rely on the Tractate.

If Leon Golden is correct in his interpretation of katharsis as an “intellectual clarification” of concepts of fear and pity for tragedy or indignation and confidence for comedy, then we can see in what ways comedy was meant to be efficacious for that era. Golden examines the Rhetoric and the Poetics to determine that righteous indignation is the cathartic aim of comedy for Aristotle. Following his method, I claim that cathartic confidence (θάπσος) is also the aim of Aristotle’s lost work. Aristotelian concepts tend to have a reciprocal balance with each other. Confidence is the opposite of fear in the Rhetoric. Thus, confidence would be the state of mind that comedy addresses, along with righteous indignation.

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9 Rhetoric 1383a–b is about the state of mind of confidence
Finally, this chapter concludes by assessing how poorly aesthetics fits into this ancient framework. It appears utterly anachronistic to insert an aesthetic interpretation of comedy here or to even try and make an interpretation about “art” in this era. This will lead us to examine why we would even begin to assess these forms of mimēsis in such a way, which inevitably leads us to the late modern theories of aesthetics found most prominently in Kant’s *Third Critique*.

In chapter 2, “This Kant Be Funny: Aesthetics, Beauty, and Comedy,” I examine Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, part 1, division 1. This chapter will outline how Kant attempts to divorce all contexts from art in order to allow room for “pure aesthetic judgments,” which must always be about form devoid of content. Further, instead of allowing for a people to take a stand on a meaningful decision allowing for a happening of truth (in the Heideggerian sense, this is what counts as good art), a universal judgment devoid of concepts rears its “beautiful” head. This chapter will also analyze why we give preference to the “beautiful” rather than the “comedic.” Late modern philosophers of aesthetics often tend to rest their arguments for beauty in the camp of intelligent design. Perhaps absurdity and unintelligent design seems to be at least equipollent in argument if not fully aporetic.

Kant’s *Third Critique* takes out all elements of the conceptual cultural context of what makes art meaningful and replaces them with “subjective universal” judgment divorced from these concepts.¹⁰ Art is not about the world that it opens up and instantiates but about the individual within a dualistic framework of mind/soul and body. This dualism simultaneously denigrates the body and divides aesthetics from that which makes it possible, i.e., sensation coming from the body. According to Kant, art is about each individual being capable of making judgments on beauty that has only to do with the free play of the imagination with our

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¹⁰ Technically, Kant is only addressing the beautiful and the sublime, but in general his work is taken as a critique of art and nature.
understanding and its universal communicability. In fact, it seems in terms of this judgment that the only standard by which art is judged is in how long we linger over the artwork owing to the free play and universal communicability of our imagination and judgment’s free play and its universal communicability.

I will then investigate how Kant denigrates comedy further through his claim that it has only to do with bodily health (which from Kant is a criticism, since health cannot be universal, nor anything bodily), that it lacks the dignity that the “fine arts” are supposed to have, and that it is not something that anyone wants to be held accountable for or something that one would meditate on for later judgment. Comedy is relegated to that which is merely “agreeable,” which means it cannot be a purely aesthetic judgment of reflective taste.

Finally, I will address the most contemporary attempt at an aesthetics of comedy, produced by John Morreall. I will show how his understanding of comedy is myopic and how aesthetics in turn is problematic for comedy even in its very terminology. The concept of “comic amusement,” which is used by many philosophers, including Morreall, begs the question of its own aesthetic experience. I conclude by pointing out further nonaesthetic investigations that might be pursued in the works of both Nietzsche and Heidegger. According to Nietzsche, when we make art only about the feeling of aesthesis, we turn art into a narcotic or drug simply for the alleviation of our own personal suffering and the nihilistic quelling of our will to power. Drawing from Heidegger, we will then attempt to examine art in a nonaesthetic way that relies heavily on interpretations from both Being and Time and The Origin of the Work of Art.

In chapter 3, “Heidegger’s Neglect of Comedy, but a Heideggerian Interpretation of Comedy Nonetheless,” and following from what was said in the previous chapter, I will examine why Heidegger neglects comedy and what a Heideggerian interpretation of comedy would look
like. This chapter will deal heavily with Heidegger’s *Origin of the Work of Art* and *Being and Time*, along with some reference to the late works of Heidegger. It will also talk about what comedy qualifies as a “great work” or what I will come to call true comedy, and what comedy exists only to help us continue to be involved in inauthentic falling, which I will call fallen comedy.\(^{11}\) This chapter will also talk about truth as a happening that occurs because of the meaningful working out of the decisions of a people. This truth arises as a direct result of art—in this case, as a result of comedy being efficacious within the context of that community. The political in comedy can be continuously used as the working out of a decision only if the context is broad enough to encompass more than one fixed situation in time. This is also why we see bodily humor as the only truly eternal comic element. The body is always something being put into question and is up for decision in a meaningful context. We cannot escape the body’s sexual, excretory, and uncoordinated facets, yet these facets come up in comic speech as something that must be put up for a decision about what is “holy and unholy,” or more likely, what is “humorous and unhumorous.” As Bergson points out, there is a mind/body disconnect wherein we would like all of our actions to accord with a perfect mental grace and agility, but our bodies are clumsy and uncontrollable at times.

Heidegger’s own neglect of the body contributes to his missing this vital role of comedy taken as the genre, which is the genre of art *par excellence* for dealing with bodies and their functions. In comedy, we can see that we must take a stand for or against particular social and political phenomena. It is also through this working out of truth that certain works of comedy fall into such world-decay, as Heidegger puts it, that they become irrelevant and are lost. Some

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works of comedy become “unfunny,” obscure, or unethical, and are again made irrelevant.\textsuperscript{12}

Works like \textit{Lysistrata} today put into question different decisions than they had in their original contexts. These works open up different worlds and instantiate new truths as they are worked out by a people. These works are efficacious in the social and political spheres to the extent that they transform speech and thought in such a way that puts up for decision the phenomena which they deal with. Further, the community that comedy addresses is very particular. Part of comedy’s hypercontextualization has to do with its directedness toward a particular audience. Comedy is crafted to communicate with a very particular audience and becomes great when it can communicate beyond these bounds.

Finally, in chapter 4, “The Conclusion; the Use and Abuse of Comedy for Life—Notes for a Nietzschean Philosophy of Comedy,” I will explicate Nietzsche’s perceived threat of nihilism. This threat of nihilism is found throughout his corpus as a problem of utmost importance. Chapter 4 will look at his attempts at trying to achieve “Gay Science.” It will also deal with the importance of fictions as opposed to the exclusive monoperspectives found in the ascetic ideal. Comedy and genealogy are a way of taking the world less “seriously” so that we can more easily change our traditions and beliefs when they no longer serve us well.\textsuperscript{13}

Any dogmatic ethics has an inured quality about it; every ethics based on honor and purity has a level of pride that will not allow them to be changed without shame. When you hold some set of beliefs as apodictically true, you appear foolish when it comes up short. People generally hate appearing foolish, but an ethics that embraces or at the very least accepts foolishness would not have to respond with hatred. When we hold our beliefs to the standard of a

\textsuperscript{12} Sometimes when a work of comedy is deemed “unethical” it is preserved as an example of what was once thought funny, but is now considered unethical.

supreme fiction, we have a back door to escape shame. And just because something is comic
does not mean that it is less valuable or that it has less meaning.

The comic can be of great importance to our lives and the way that we comport
ourselves. The comic can have just as great an impact on us as anything considered under the
guise of “seriousness.” As Nietzsche points out, there are just better interpretations and
descriptions.\[^14\] Why is it then the case that in ethics it is so hard to take the same approach? We
have a long history of trying the same experiments with the same results in the field of ethics. As
Nietzsche points out, perhaps we should consider another perspective for this field; perhaps a
less serious and more comic approach.\[^15\]

These four chapters serve to explicate a novel genealogical approach to the genre of
comedy in the West. They serve to scrutinize comedy philosophically as it has emerged in
different eras in the West, particularly in ancient Athens, the late modern period, and the
nineteenth through twenty-first centuries. This dissertation attempts to unearth missed
opportunities for engaging in comedy in a “serious” way, in the philosophies of Aristotle, Kant,
Nietzsche, and Heidegger. It engages with comedy in the historically anchored, contingent
philosophies of particular eras. Comedy as a concrete theatrical genre has always been present in
the West but has with few exceptions constantly been ignored.

This dissertation addresses particular philosophers in particular eras and shows what
additional philosophical work could be done and how it can be done. This work aims to give
comedy the due diligence it deserves. It aims to break down the dualistic divisions of aesthetics
that have been a serious stopgap for the proper study of comedy’s efficacy. I claim Aristotle

\[^15\] This portion of the dissertation will cover a plethora of works by Nietzsche, and Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*
series. This portion will also cover Cynthia Willet’s work *Irony in the Age of Empire* (2008) which is where the idea
for this libidinal ethics started.
shows a way that comedy was efficacious before aesthetics. I show how Kant and neo-Kantian aesthetics cannot engage with comedy in a way that can take it as efficacious, but instead relegate it to “mere amusement.” This dissertation describes a Heideggerian way of interpreting comedy in a Late Modern to post-Modern way such that it is efficacious. Finally, this work points to a novel way to interpret future comedy in an efficacious way using a Nietzschean interpretation. Thus, through this dissertation we can see how to more effectively address comedy’s efficacy in a historical light devoid of the myopic aesthetic lens that has, until this point, dominated the discourse of the philosophy of art. This work provides an interpretive tool to help address the greater enfranchisement of comedy’s place in history. These novel interpretations of the philosophers I have addressed herein can provide the grounding for new counterhistorical narratives, in the Foucauldian sense, the likes of which have not yet been attempted.
Chapter 1: The Birth of Comedy

1.1. Aesthetics and the Art before Art

I will identify and examine Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophical views on comedy from their extant works. I will then explicate the kathartic view of art found in the Poetics and Politics of Aristotle. I point out why the kathartic view is not the most important way of engaging with drama for Aristotle. I then look at others’ attempts to reconstruct Aristotle’s lost book on comedy. I argue that the Tractatus Coislinianus is not a good starting point for this, as Janko and Cooper have claimed. I side with Golden on his interpretation of Aristotelian comedy and add to his interpretation, using resources from the Rhetoric as he does. I use several examples from Aristophanes to explicate my interpretation of Aristotelian comedy. Finally, I argue the functions of comedy and tragedy for Aristotle are to persuade and educate, as they are for Aristophanes. This chapter serves to show how to genealogically engage in drama and particularly comedy without being engaged in anything that resembles aesthetic philosophy. Thus, we can examine the comedy of the ancient Athenians in a new way as a result of this analysis.

That art should issue an aesthetic judgment has been the predominant point of view for the philosophy of art since roughly the eighteenth century. The field itself is most often called aesthetics rather than the wordier philosophy of art. Starting with Baumgarten, Burke, Shaftesbury, and Kant, aesthetic judgment has been the raison d’etre for our experiences, encounters, and interpretations of art. Art is made to elicit feelings or sensations that lead to judgments of the beautiful, the sublime, and perhaps, at least since last century, the ugly and the

shocking. The body has an awkward relation to aesthetic judgments that claim to be both universal and a priori. For Kant, the body must necessarily play its part in the subjective end of the sought out universal subjective judgment. In all cases individual bodies must make their subjective judgments through an individual’s bodily sensation. Terry Eagleton, amongst others, makes a valiant attempt to bring the body back into the fold.\textsuperscript{17} While this solves some of the salient problems for aesthetics, it does not serve as a solution for the system as a whole.

Comedy is one of the oldest genres of art in the West, typically understood as emerging as a genre only slightly after tragedy in the public festivals of ancient Athens.\textsuperscript{18} An alternative history places comedy first, such that tragedy emerged from the satyr plays and phallic processions as a type of comic festive occurrence.\textsuperscript{19} Comedy or the comedic is always contextual and thus requires an experiential a posteriori understanding that excludes it necessarily from the a priori realm that is the prerequisite of a pure and proper universal subjective aesthetic judgment.\textsuperscript{20} It is true that comedy often involves the body or has the body as its object.

Moreover, it deals with a body deeply inscribed in a context, in a culture, and in a world. The judgments being made about a comedic work do not often fit into the categories of the beautiful or the sublime. An argument could be made that the bodily elements involved in the sublime could be reconciled with comedy, but really a comedy is not like the starry sky, the heaved-up ocean or the pyramids.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{18} Evidence suggests that official public funding started in 486 BCE for the City Dionysia and in 440 BCE for the Lenaea.

\textsuperscript{19} Assuming that Aristotle is correct in claiming that the tragedies were an outgrowth from the phallic processions and satyr plays (\textit{Poetics} 1449a).

\textsuperscript{20} I am only talking about comedy here and not laughter as that may be spawned by various occurrences not related to comedy, such as tickling or nervous laughter.

\textsuperscript{21} These are all examples of the sublime from Kant in the \textit{Third Critique}. I will address this issue thoroughly in the next chapter.
\end{flushleft}
As Hans Belting has pointed out in his book *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, there was a time before art (or at least what we now call art and especially the “fine arts”). This was an era where the image reigned supreme in its influence over the area we now call art. In the ancient Greek world, they had no word, properly speaking, for art. We encounter only technē (τέχνη) or craft, poiesis (ποίησις) or making/doing, and poetry broadly construed, and finally mimēsis (μίμησις) or imitation/representation. Mimēsis was the general focal point of what we might now call the philosophy of art for the ancient Greeks. This representation of the world through art was the focus of both Plato and Aristotle’s accounts as regards the major genres of “art” of their day. Plato and Aristotle also played a major role in creating the very categories of genres, many of which we still use today.

Plato looked at mimēsis as being extremely efficacious, influential, and most of all dangerous because of its primary pedagogical role in traditional Athenian paideia. In Plato’s dialogues, mimēsis showed up as especially dangerous in its dramatic forms of tragedy and comedy. Plato’s Socrates suggests that if philosophy were to take the place of poetry in Greek paideia, that the audience could learn how to deal with the emotional appeals of the world. In the *Republic* it is stated that “[t]he poet’s power to corrupt even the best man—with rare exceptions—is surely the most serious cause for alarm.” The *Republic* points out that through affecting the irrational parts of the soul the poet can corrupt the soul and character of a man, and we do specifically mean men, by making him behave in a way befitting only a woman. Aside from the sexist and militaristic implications of the statement, we see that irrational behavior in

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poetry should not be praised. This is because it “nourishes” the irrational parts of the soul such that when we are affected by tragedy in our own lives rather than on the stage we will be hard pressed to act in what Plato’s Socrates claims is the appropriate way. This part of Plato’s *The Republic* is commonly recognized and referenced, but what is not often recognized or referenced is that in one short paragraph immediately following this discussion is the *Republic’s* take on comedy. Plato has Socrates state:

> must we not apply the same principle to the things that make us laugh? … Here, too, your reason is at work admonishing the comic in you so that you will not gain the reputation of a buffoon. But when others joke, you let your comic sense run loose. Indulging it, you return to your own affairs and discover that you have unwittingly become a comic poet.  

It is rather clear from the context that becoming a “comic poet” is a term of reproach and not one of honor. What matters here is that Plato considers comedy on equal footing with tragedy in its ability to corrupt and in its efficacy to shape one’s character. Essentially, Plato has Socrates claiming that both of these types of poetry are inappropriately persuading and educating the polis.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, does not just simply examine tragedy, comedy, and epic in order to judge their value according to Plato’s particular understanding of paideia. In addition, Aristotle attempts to articulate the technical essence of a good epic, tragedy, or comedy. By essence I mean the necessary components that make the genre the genre it is and not something else. By good I mean the work flourishing in its function and best achieving its end/telos. The proper function for mimēsis in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is to produce particular emotions or feelings in its audience. When this function achieves its full fruition, i.e., when it is optimally fulfilling its

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28 Some dispute over this could be made if we make reference to the end of Plato’s *Symposium*. There Socrates is questioning whether or not the best poets/playwrights are the ones who can write both tragedy and comedy well, although if we consider Socrates’ remarks about various comic and tragic poets throughout the dialogues, it’s not clear that being able to write either genre is considered in a very positive light.
telos, it does not just elicit emotions; it educates. This particular function is one that the aesthetic understanding of art cannot recover, as aesthetic judgments do not serve this educational function, at least not according to Kant from the *Critique of Judgment.* Kant points this out in the *Third Critique* when he explains that you cannot convince someone that something is beautiful; Kant’s examples are garments, houses and flowers. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 59 [215–216].

The Poetics appears to explain how to best produce pleasant, relaxing, and, when flourishing in its function, educational modes of mimēsis. To this end the Poetics appears to be an excellent manual for achieving this.

Some scholars, such as Jonathan Lear, disparage the idea that Aristotle is writing simply a technical manual in his *Poetics*. Lear believes that this work must have been a defense of poetics against Plato, a sort of rejoinder to the censorship of the *Republic*, but this does not seem evident. Aristotel wrote some technical manuals, such as the *Categories* (which contains a treatise on Logic) and the *Rhetoric*, both of which are, strictly speaking, didactic. The *Nicomachean Ethics* proclaims that it is a technical manual for becoming good rather than a theoretical study of the good (which he claims does not do anyone any good). The *Poetics* may have a greater purpose, but I see no reason to claim that it is not also Aristotle’s idea of how to produce a proper epic, tragedy, or comedy such that it is appropriately efficacious to its audience. Lear points out Aristotle’s claim in the *Politics* that the poets/musicians ought to cater to the masses for their benefit.

Aristotle, following Anarcharsis, claims that relaxation and respite from toilsome or serious work is necessary, since we cannot work continuously. Even serious work for Aristotle must be moderated. An excess of this would seem to still lead to ruin. For instance, a surgeon who continuously works double shifts will become too tired to function at her best and will make mistakes that may cost lives. Thus, amusement (παιδιά) and things that are

29 Kant points this out in the *Third Critique* when he explains that you cannot convince someone that something is beautiful; Kant’s examples are garments, houses and flowers. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 59 [215–216].
laughable (γελοιόν) are not the aim of the good life, but are instead a necessary part of it. Aristotle goes so far as to include wit (eutrapelos, or well turning)\(^{34}\) as one of the core virtues enumerated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.\(^{35}\) Wit and comedy are certainly neither equivalent to nor mutually inclusive of each other, but it would seem absurd if wit were not an essential part of a properly functioning and flourishing dramatic comedy. Aristotle points out in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Old Comedy is inferior to New Comedy in its lack of subtlety and its excessive abuse of others. While it may seem obvious, it is necessary to point out that he directly links wit to comedy and also points to better and worse functioning comedies due to their ability to achieve a proper mean of wit and also according to their context, i.e., they are used at the right place, in the right time, with the right people.

While Lear exhibits excellent critical scholarship in examining a large range of prevalent interpretations of *katharsis* for Aristotle, his interpretation seems to rest on two critical assumptions: first, that *katharsis*, as interpreted through Aristotle’s *Politics*,\(^{36}\) needs to be singular in purpose, and second, that it must be unique in kind. This is an overly narrow description of *katharsis* needs to be for Aristotle, and it hinders the interpretation of it because comedy and Tragedy are not the sort of thing that can be described in this exactitude. These assumptions rest on Aristotle’s claim that we should learn the distinct types of melodies that are in certain modes. The issue here is that while the melodies may have distinct modes, those distinct modes need not be singular in purpose. I see no reason why *katharsis* cannot purify, relieve, and clarify intellectually the emotions proper to tragedy and comedy.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{34}\) “Well turning” is perhaps a certain sort of versatility or nimbleness with one’s words. Perhaps having the exact right quip, at the exact right time, in the exact right way. I often think of this as having the exact right retort or repartee in the moment. Also, the virtue of wit seems to be not too vulgar or effete, but just right for one’s audience.


\(^{37}\) I agree with Lear on his critique that *katharsis* as “purification” seems out of place for Aristotle, and I claim that it should be excluded as an inferior interpretation.
words are notoriously polysemic, and attempting to force katharsis into only one definition seems not only unnecessary but also myopic given Attic Greek, especially during the era preceding and during the time of Aristotle. Aristotle makes a particular point about the problem of precision at the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Some things like “the good” do not admit of a single science. There are many sciences that pertain to “the good,” and, in a similar way, it may be the case that the *Politics*’ reference to katharsis from music to relieve religious frenzy would be a different science than the katharsis of a play or the katharsis of the body in the form of discharge. Just as “the good” for horsemanship, medicine, and politics are all different sciences, so too it might be the case for katharsis in music, drama, and biology. Aristotle claims that he will explain further what he means by katharsis in the *Poetics*, but, much like the situation surrounding comedy in the *Poetics*, we do not possess an extant text to further explicate this promissory note. It could be the case that Aristotle explicated katharsis as described above in the lost texts of the *Poetics*.

In this section on katharsis from the *Politics*, Aristotle talks about different melodies being used for different singular purposes, particularly for education, katharsis and entertainment, but that does not mean that tragedy or comedy must follow these narrow classifications. Melodies seem sufficiently different in kind from dramas; they need not follow the same rules. Tangentially, the actual music and melodies in a comedy would likely have shifted between these different melodies. It seems likely in that there would be a difference in melodies for the chorus in the middle of a play, like *Lysistrata*, where things are more relaxed.

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and funny than at the end of the play where the “moral of the story,” so to speak, might be learned.

Further, we should not expect the precision of mathematics in sciences that do not admit of that kind of precision. Aristotle claims, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that “the type of accounts we demand should accord with the subject matter; the questions about actions [πράξεως] and expediency, like questions about health, have no fixed answers.”\(^{40}\) The production of katharsis through mimēsis in tragedy and comedy must also count as an inexact science, especially since Aristotle highlights that tragedies are about actions [πράξεως] and life rather than about persons.\(^{41}\) By Aristotle’s own account, this places tragedies and comedies in the category of an inexact science. This lack of exactitude seems especially true of comedy because all comedy is contextualized and requires an audience either real or imagined. It is impossible to craft a joke or comic scene that everyone would perceive as comic, let alone will make everyone laugh. For these reasons, it seems overly severe for Lear to limit katharsis in these ways for comedy if not also for Tragedy.

Despite Lear’s rather thorough focus on katharsis, the focus of the *Poetics* is elsewhere. As both G. F. Else and Leon Golden point out, “Aristotle does not tell us that catharsis is so important, that it is the “biggest” idea about tragedy [or in our case comedy].”\(^{42}\) Aristotle only mentions it once in section 6 of the *Poetics*. He brings up the specific tragic pleasure a few times, but he most frequently focuses on how to properly elicit fear and pity. That the dramatic performance produces a katharsis is one of its better effects, but that does not seem to be the “end all be all,” so to speak, of what is going on in the *Poetics*. What does seem of the utmost

\(^{40}\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104a1–12.
importance is producing a proper mimēsis of fear and pity for a tragedy, and, as I will claim, indignation and confidence for comedy.

In order to explain why comedy for Aristotle should be about indignation and confidence, we should first look at some scholarship about what Aristotle would have said in the lost second book of the Poetics and what Aristotle himself did say in the extant texts. While we could just as well try to show how mimēsis is an entirely different way of considering art from the viewpoint of tragedy, we will follow the path of comedy, since it seems to be at the furthest possible point away from an aesthetic interpretation; polemically speaking, it is, perhaps, its polar opposite.

1.2: The Tractate and the Point of Poetry

We will speak later about imitation [mimēsis] in epic poetry and about Comedy. Let us now resume our discussion of Tragedy by deducing the definition of its essential nature which follows from what we have said. 43

This promissory note made by Aristotle, at the beginning of his section on tragedy in the Poetics, has tantalized scholars for over two millennia. This treatise on comedy, which most scholars agree has been lost rather than never written, has been the topic of much scholarly debate. No less than three well respected scholars in the last hundred years have attempted reconstructions of this lost treatise. Lane Cooper produced An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 44 Richard Janko wrote Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II, 45 and Leon Golden wrote various articles on the topic including “Aristotle on Comedy.” 46 All three of these authors’

43 Aristotle, Poetics, 6.1449b.
44 Lane Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy with an Adaptation of the Poetics and a Translation of the “Tractatus Coislinianus” (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922).
creative reconstructions have their various strengths and weaknesses, and my intention is to address Janko and Golden’s works in my own attempt to reconstruct what the lost treatise on comedy would have said. This reconstruction will show how the function of good dramatic art, and, particularly comedy at this point in time, is primarily efficacious in a nonaesthetic way. This reconstruction will exemplify the efficacy of comedy in the era before aesthetics. My main method mimics Golden’s by focusing on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* postulating a parallel and polar relation of comedy to what pertains to tragedy in both works. Further, I follow Golden’s suspicions about the Aristotelian authenticity of the *Tractatus Coislinianus*.

The *Tractatus Coislinianus*47 (Tractate) is a tenth-century document, “which Cramer first brought to light in 1839. This untitled and anonymous document has been variously hailed as the key to Aristotle’s views on comedy and denounced as a sorry Byzantine fabrication.”48 The Tractate is a four-page document that some claim is an epitome for Aristotle’s lost treatise on comedy. The document has a definition for comedy and a few other short passages but mostly reads like an outline for a larger work on comedy. Some authors attribute the text to the later Peripatetics and others to Theophrastus. Even Cooper, who pays special heed to the Tractate, claims that “whatever the authenticity of the Tractate, by far the greater part of an Aristotelian theory of comedy is to be found in the *Poetics* itself.”49 Only Janko attempts to actually reconstruct the entirety of the treatise on comedy in Aristotelian language from the Tractate (and of course the *Poetics*).50 While this is a very intriguing endeavor, there are two serious points of contention that I have with the use of the Tractate.

47 Codex no. 120 in the de Coislin collection.
50 Janko does produce a laudable mimesis of Aristotle’s style as evidenced by many of my students confusing Janko’s same reconstruction in the 1987 Hackett translation of the *Poetics with the Tractatus Coislinianus, Reconstruction of the Poetics II, and the Fragments of the On Poets* as authentic Aristotle. See Aristotle, *Poetics*
The first has to do with the opening line of the Tractate. It claims that “poetry is either nonmimetic or mimetic.”\(^\text{51}\) It seems apparent from the *Poetics*’ opening lines that *poiesis* is mimetic,\(^\text{52}\) even though the topics of history and instruction, which are the nonmimetic poetries according to the Tractate, are not really discussed by the *Poetics*. Indeed, context clues about the topic of history seem to indicate that, for Aristotle, history is also a form of mimēsis. Even Cooper, who wishes to use the Tractate, notes that “it contradicts one of the central doctrines of the *Poetics*, that a man is a poet only in so far as he is ‘mimetic.’”\(^\text{53}\) He points out that the extant copies of the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* have some internal contradictions and some language that postdates Aristotle, so this “contradicting” of one of *Poetics* central doctrines should not be a major concern. However, the “contradictions” in the extant texts are not quite as “glaring” as this. Golden claims that “the passages from the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* are both relevant to, and consistent with, each other, and when taken together, provide a persuasive basis for an Aristotelian theory of comedy.”\(^\text{54}\)

My second point of contention, which is of much greater import, follows Golden’s critique of the Tractate’s definition for comedy. Janko’s translation of this definition reads:

> Comedy is an imitation [mimesis/μίμησις] of an action that is absurd [geloias/γελοίας] and lacking in magnitude, complete [with embellished language], the several kinds (of embellishment being found) separately in the (several) parts (or the play); (directly represented) by person[s] acting, and [not] by means of narration; through pleasure and laughter [gelotos/γέλωτος] achieving the purgation [katharsin/καθαρσία] of the like emotions. It has laughter [gelota/γέλωτα] or its mother.\(^\text{55}\)

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\(^{52}\) Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1.1447a.

\(^{53}\) Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy*, 12.


\(^{55}\) Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy*, 25. Also, the word γελοίας or γέλοιος is often translated as the adjective for laughable, amusing or mirth-provoking rather than absurd and has a strong etymological relation to γέλω the verb for laughing. Γελοῖας is also the word that is often translated as ‘absurd’ for both Plato and Aristotle.
The part that both I and Golden take issue with is the “through pleasure and laughter achieving katharsis” section. This is an attempt to parallel what is said about tragedy in the Poetics at 6.1449b: “Tragedy, then, is an imitation [mimēsis] … through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [katharsin] of these emotions.”56 The first issue is that “pleasure and laughter” do not map onto “pity and fear” as polar opposite or reciprocal terms. They are not even categorically similar. Pedagogically speaking, Aristotle regularly defines terms through their opposites and frequently says that this is obvious, evident, or clear from what has been said before.57 That which makes us cry is more likely the opposite of laughter, and nowhere does Aristotle claim in the Poetics that the intent of tragedy is to make us cry nor is crying its mother. The Tractate actually has a definition of tragedy that does not exactly map onto the definition that we find in the canonical version of the Poetics, which even Janko points out as problematic.58 The Tractate claims that pain, grief, or distress (lypēn/λύπην) is the mother of tragedy. Again, it does not seem like pain, grief, or distress is the exact opposite of laughter.

Also, Golden claims that the comic emotions elicited through a proper comedy may or may not be “accompanied by laughter.”59 A proper comedy may evoke a smirk or wry smile just as readily as a laugh. Further, tragedy is also supposed to elicit pleasurable emotions just like all forms of mimēsis. Tragedy is not supposed to evoke serious pain, revulsion, or horror but a certain pleasure proper to it. To quote the Poetics “we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation [mimēsis], it is evident

56 In both translations the term katharsin or katharsis is misleadingly translated as purgation, but I shall attend to that below.
57 There are many instances of this, but to cite one example look to the Rhetoric that states “Let this much be said about pleasurable things; and painful things are clear from their opposites” (Book I.11; 1371a).
58 Janko, Aristotle on Comedy, 151.
that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents.”\textsuperscript{60} Thus, the “pleasure” found in comedy, according to the Tractate, does not seem to find its proper opposite in tragedy. Further, it seems like Aristotle would have had a more specific “pleasure” to be found from comedy than the oddly circular “pleasure from the katharsis of pleasure.” It seems just as odd if not odder that laughter is being called an emotion here rather than an activity.

Aristotle does not purport that laughter is an emotion anywhere in the \textit{Rhetoric}, which would seem like the place for him to discuss it if it were. Seeking a katharsis of laughter, whether as relief or intellectual clarification, makes little sense. Even Freud and Spencer, who have a relief theory of comedy/laughter, claim that this is a kind of sublimation or transformation of other “nervous energies” or emotions into laughter rather than some sort of unleashing of pent up laughter. Finally, if we take the purgation model of katharsis seriously here, why would we want to use pleasure to purge pleasure or laughter from ourselves? While Aristotle does spend considerable time talking about different kinds of pleasure in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}\textsuperscript{61} and of the particular pleasures that tragedy can bring in the \textit{Poetics}, it still seems odd to have comedy’s function be to purge one kind of pleasure for another. At best this might equate to some kind of pleasure replacement therapy or a sort of croquet of pleasure for the soul. I have never once thought or heard anyone say anything to the effect that “I have too much base pleasure going on in my life, I think I need to purge or relieve some of that by watching a comedy.” I have conversely heard people say that they need to watch a tragedy to get a good cry out or that they want to watch a comedy to lift their mood and bring them pleasure when they are lacking it. While this is perhaps an anachronistic example or a certain sort of hearsay, this thought still resonates. What the Tractate really lacks is the identification of the particular kinds of pleasure

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{60} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, 14.1453b.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Particularly books I, II, and especially X.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
associated with comedy or the exact emotions that ought to relate to katharsis in comedy. The issue here pertains to “pleasure.” Golden rightly points out that in the *Poetics:*

> Aristotle tells us (1448b15–17) that we take pleasure in viewing all mimetic representations because it turns out that we learn and make inferences from them … As I have argued elsewhere, only an interpretation of *katharsis* as ‘intellectual clarification’ can establish a harmony between this term and the telos of *mimēsis* which Aristotle explicitly defines for us in this passage.  

Themes internal to the *Poetics* suggest that Golden is right about katharsis being “intellectual clarification” that is pleasurable due to our learning about and viewing excellent imitations of various phenomena. Golden claims that “the essential pleasure of art is an intellectual one derived from learning about human existence through the medium of art, it follows that all artistic endeavors which achieve the illumination of human experience will be pleasant whether their objects are, in reality, pleasant or painful.” Thus, there is a pleasure caused by *mimēsis* when the author “gets things right” as it were.

As stated earlier, Jonathan Lear rejects the possibility that the *Poetics* is about producing katharsis as “intellectual clarification.” He claims that trying to educate either the vulgar demos or the well-educated elite would be pointless. Lear states “in each case [with either the vulgar or the educated audience] the characters of the audience have been formed and ethical education would be either futile or superfluous.” Aristotle does claim that after a certain point in our lifetime our character is mostly formed. However, we might perhaps think of our character like gelatin in a mold; once it is set its shape is mostly determined, but that does not mean that

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63 See Leon Golden, “The Purgation Theory of Catharsis,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1973): 473–479; and Leon Golden, “The Clarification Theory of Katharsis,” *Hermes* 104 (1976): 443–446. In short, he believes that the purgation theory rests on dubious foundations due to cross-reference from the *Politics,* which does not have the same topic as either the *Poetics* or *Rhetoric,* and that Bernays’ reading from 1857 is flawed and has had a great effect on subsequent interpretations of the term.
65 In *Poetics* 1448b, Aristotle claims that things like scary animals and dead bodies properly imitated causes pleasure. See also Aristotle, *Rhetoric,* I.11:1371b.
66 Lear, “Katharsis,” 305.
alterations cannot still be made to it. Certainly there are limits to what poetry might teach you after a certain age, but that does not make it “either futile or superfluous.” This claim denigrates all art from a particular society as “futile or superfluous” in educating its people in any way. I accept that katharsis may also serve the purpose that Lear lays out in his “relief” theory but that is just one function katharsis may have. After some comedies the demos might feel relieved; after others, especially politically charged comedies the likes of which were very popular amongst the ancient Athenians of this era, the demos might feel agitated, though perhaps more clearly focused as to why. Aristophanes, a comic playwright of this era, points out a purpose for poetry in his play Frogs, which claims that the plays of these public festivals are instructive and/or educational. In the play Frogs when asked what qualities we should admire in the poet, the shade of Euripides says “skill and good counsel, and because we make people better members of their community.”67 Euripides claims that he educated the demos with this play.68

The question then becomes whether this education was good or bad. Most scholars seem to agree that paideia is the point of these plays. Aristophanes and Plato both seem to agree on this point, and earlier evidence from this chapter suggests that Aristotle does too. These plays, at the very least, attempt to persuade their audience, according to these ancient Greek authors.

If we look at the greater context of not just Aristotle and ancient Athens but also the whole of the ancient Greek world, we can see a people who believe that the poets are educators and the locus of truth. This is why Plato spends so much time with the topic of poets and poetry. This is perhaps what motivates Heraclitus of Ephesus to lash out at Homer, Hesiod, and


68 Aristophanes, Frogs. Assemblywomen. Wealth, lines 954, 971–75.
Archilochus in his aphorisms. This is why Parmenides writes in poetry rather than prose to present his philosophy. When a rhapsode would begin the Homeric epics, he would always start with the invocation of the muses. He literally invokes the muses to speak through him as though he were a mouthpiece for the gods. The standard education for an elite male Athenian in the fifth and sixth centuries was to be taught in poetry, a musical instrument, gymnastics, hunting, sports of all kinds, military training, moral education and the like. The poetry and musical instrument seem striking to some contemporary ears as a primary component of education, rather than just some ancillary enrichment. Aristophanes provides great evidence for how much of a standard this must have been in his play Wasps, in which a defendant claims that the jurors should take pity on him because he is uneducated. The literal way he expresses his ignorance is by saying that he does not know how to play the Kithara. Even if this was meant to be a joke, it would seem like the audience would have had to have the shared understanding that musical training would be what people might consider being part of a proper education.

1.3. What Aristotle Would Have Said with Righteous Indignation and Confidence

If the Tractate is wrong about comedy’s emotional objects for katharsis, then what would these properly imitated objects be? If we consider what is written in the Poetics about comedy as well as look to the Rhetoric for the opposite terms to pair with fear and pity, we can come to what I think is a reasonable reconstruction of the lost treatise on comedy. Let us begin by looking at Aristotle’s provisional definition of comedy from the Poetics:

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70 Aristophanes, Clouds. Wasps. Peace, trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), lines 957–959. The kithara is close to a lyre or a harp which was a common ancient Greek instrument.
Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation [mimēsis] of characters of a lower [φαῦλος/phaulos] type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous [γέλοιος/geloion] being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.71

Comedy then seems to be about characters of this lower, or ignoble (φαῦλος/phaulos) type rather than its typical contrast class of the serious/good in the spoudaios. The phaulos character is depicted doing ludicrous, absurd, or laughable (γέλοιος/geloios) actions that achieve a katharsis from the aroused emotions of indignation (νεμεσᾶν/nemesan) and confidence (θάρσος/tharsos).72

Golden derives a similar definition but fails to bring in the emotion of confidence or tharsos. He relies entirely, on the emotion of indignation or nemesan from the Rhetoric. Golden states that “at Rhetoric 1386b9 Aristotle explicitly designates nemesan as the emotion directly opposed to pity. Since tragedy and comedy are placed by Aristotle in polar opposition concerning the kind of action and character they represent, the identification of nemesan as the antonym of pity [is appropriate].”73 The antonym of fear in that same work, however, is confidence or tharsos.74 Golden’s justification for this comes from Aristotle’s definition of nemesan “as the painful feeling that arises because of the occurrence of undeserved good fortune … nemesan has the same reverse side as pity, i.e., fear (1387a31–32) [sic 1386b]. He [Aristotle] notes that both envy and nemesan become fear when something harmful threatens oneself from the good fortune of another.”75 This is not so much a “reverse side” of pity as it is a modification of envy or the similar but not equivalent word nemesan. Aristotle’s explicit opposite to fear is confidence/tharsos.

71 Aristotle, Poetics, 5.1449a.
72 Compare this definition also with Poetics 13.1452b, where tragedy is defined as “an imitation of actions which arouse pity and fear.”
74 Aristotle, Rhetoric, II.5:1383a–b.
Aristotle states that from what we know about fear [phobos] it is evident what we know about confidence, its objects, and the state of mind of the confident:

for confidence [tharsos] is opposed [to fear, and what inspires confidence] to what is fearful. Thus, hope of safety is accompanied by an imagination that it is near, while fearful things either do not exist or are far away … and if antagonists do not exist at all or do not have power … [then people are confident]. Or if those with the same interests are numerous or stronger or both [people are confident] … And [people become confident] when something is not a source of fear to those like them, nor to those [who are] inferior and whose superiors they think themselves to be.76

Most likely we are not threatened due to this being mimēsis rather than “real life.” Therefore we can feel safety from our position and have hope that “things will work out” in comedy, as they usually do almost by definition. In opposition to tragedy, comedies traditionally have “happy endings,” thus providing its viewers with a sense of hope that inspires confidence. Mikhail Bakhtin, while primarily concerned with the medieval French literature, pays special attention to the ancient Greek and Roman traditions in his introduction to his eponymous book about François Rabelais. In this work, he points out that laughter and moreover premodern comedies dispel fear. Bakhtin states “[f]ear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter.”77 Our extant evidence supports the fact that there is no true fear or terror in the comedies of the ancient Greek world.

There is also a sense of confidence that arises while watching a comedy because we feel strength in numbers due to the laugher of the audience. We may also point out the interesting phenomenon that we tend to laugh at things we may not normally find funny due to the confidence inspired by numerous people with the same interests laughing or when someone “stronger” like a boss or superior laughs at something. This is likely the reason for comedies

76 Aristotle, Rhetoric, II.5:1383a–b.
being filmed in front of a live studio audience or having “laugh tracks” in contemporary comedies. The canned laughter attunes one or puts one in a mood more prone to laughing.78

The last line of the above quotation is of special interest since it seems to support one of the dominant theories of comedy, namely the superiority theory. Various authors on comedy claim that Aristotle and Plato both present a version of the superiority theory of comedy in their work. Morreall states that “[a]ccording to the Superiority Theory, represented by selections from Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position.”79 Comedy, for Aristotle, has to do with a mimēsis of people who are phaulos, i.e., lower, ignoble, or inferior to us and thus, who do not threaten us with either serious pain or destruction. For Aristotle, confidence would appear to be a required feeling or emotion for an appropriately pleasurable comedy.

We might now claim that in comedy a properly comic katharsis clarifies or teaches us about the feeling or emotion of confidence (tharsos) with regards to us feeling secure, hopeful, and, in a sense, superior through our experience of comedy. I cite Golden who claims that “comic catharsis is the ‘indignation’ (nemesan) we feel in regard to those incidents of unjustified good fortune and those examples of inappropriate … behavior in human existence which do not cause pain.”80 Indignation may seem inappropriate to comedy since laughter seems to be inspired by a jovial state, which is the opposite of anger.81 However, Golden points out examples from Aristophanes that may help “clarify” why indignation (even without laughter) is appropriate for comedy. Golden claims that:

78 While I find “laugh tracks” annoying and a bit insulting, I recognize the above phenomena as their function.
81 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II.3:1308b. Though anger (thumos) is closely related to the word indignation (tharsos) they are not the same. In fact, according to Golden, there is no proper English term to really match tharsos.
there are a number of places in Aristophanes where indignation, but not laughter, is appropriate. We have such a scene in the *Clouds* (1476–1477) when Strepsiades comes to the realization that he made a profound mistake in renouncing the gods and entrusting himself to Socrates and goes on to atone for his error by burning down the Phrontisterion [Socrates’ School] … Thus it appears that indignation with or without laughter is intimately involved in our apprehension of ‘the ridiculous.’

Golden has a great insight into the comedy of the time, if not comedy in general, because there are often “lessons to be learnt” or a “moral to the story” in comedy, and those lessons are taught through ridicule and clarification of our righteous indignation. We only have to think of Plato’s liberal use of irony throughout his dialogues to come to this point. Though we may not always burst out laughing at these, and I sometimes do, they provide us with a certain kind of pleasure associated with our indignation at some other dramatic character in the dialogue. In these cases, a certain level of confidence ought to accompany these feelings of righteous indignation.

Confidence and indignation about comic characters and their actions is an appropriate reconstruction due to its polar parallel in tragedy. According to Aristotle in *The Poetics*, the characters of tragedy are said to be:

*spoudaios* (“noble”) while the hero of comedy is the human being who is *phaulos* (“ignoble”) {Poetics 1449a32–33}. We see that *spoudaios* and *phaulos* are precise antonyms… [and] just as the emotions of pity and fear are appropriate responses to the *spoudaios* hero of tragedy, so *nemesan* [and *tharsos* I claim] [are] an appropriate response to the *phaulos* hero of comedy.

*Tharsos*, as it regards comedy here, is not just a feeling of superiority to the *phaulos* character and his ignoble actions but is also a secure sense of hope for a happy ending. Also the term *spoudaios* is often translated as “serious” rather than “noble” and seriousness is perhaps

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82 Golden, “Aristotle on the Pleasure of Comedy,” 381.
83 Even contemporary comedies such as *South Park* regularly end with a moral stating the phrase, “You know, I learned something today.” See Robert Arp, ed., *South Park and Philosophy: You Know, I Learned Something Today* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).
historically the most juxtaposed term to comedy. There is never anything to fear in comedy so long as you are part of its audience and not its target. If Aristotle is correct, then *tharsos* also makes the *demos* imagine that the hope of safety is nearby.

In fifth-century Athenian comedy served democratic political purposes. Aristophanes’ plays may have tried to inspire confidence in *demos* sufficient to make them vote to end the wars. *Lysistrata, Peace, Acharnians,* and *Birds* are all on the topic of the Peloponnesian War. Though these did not inspire enough confidence to end the war, one interpretation of *Birds,* according to Henderson, claims that the plot urges the Athenians to embark on the disastrous Sicilian Expedition of 415 BCE. *Clouds* may have inspired the Athenians to convict Socrates for impiety and corrupting the youth. Aristophanes’ play *Frogs* directs the demos to change the laws so that this play can be performed again at the next year’s festival, and it was so wildly popular that that is exactly what the demos did. In fact, they even present him with the laurel wreath normally given to an Olympic victor. While comedy can be efficacious, it can also help us to imagine a secure and pleasurable *telos,* even if that *telos* is fantastic, not actualized, or even possible. Comedy frequently involves a lot of fantasy.

Fantasy in comedy can come in many forms, but one of the most common is in ignoble characters leading lives absorbed in the momentary and bodily pleasures. If we once again attempt a parallel and polar understanding of tragedy to comedy in Aristotle’s *Poetics,* we see how well it works with Aristophanes. The consistent use of Aristophanes here is due to his being

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our only extant author of the era with complete works. According to Aristotle, the first quality of characters in tragedies are that they are supposed to be “good” or “useful” (χρηστὴ/ chreste). Aristotle says this is possible for women, though difficult to attain, but, in the case of slaves, they are inconsequential and cannot be “good.” Aristotle alleges that “the second quality demanded is that the character be fitting; for there is such a thing as a manly character, but it is not fitting for a woman to be manly or clever.” In comedy, however, characters such as slaves are clever, and women are often portrayed as both manly and clever, such as Lysistrata in her eponymous play, Praxagora (literally meaning efficacy in public) from Assemblywomen, and many others. According to Aristotle (though certainly not by contemporary standards), women (and slaves) should generally be clumped in with other lower, ignoble, or phaulos types of humans, thus making them the perfect candidates for characters in comedies. No less than half of Aristophanes’ extant plays feature strong female or slave roles. The constraints of “likeness” and “consistency” from the Poetics seem as though they could be followed just as well as not followed, since characters like Socrates and Dionysus, in Clouds and Frogs respectively, show some “likenesses” to their appropriate counterparts, but not faithful likenesses (we at least generally assume this for the character of Socrates). Consistency also seems to be of little technical importance for comedy, since inconsistency seems to elicit laughter. Inconsistent characters would have also likely elicited confident indignation about the phaulos plot or character trait or traits. This may be the one character trait that should be the same, as Aristotle claims that it is consistent to have a “consistently inconsistent character.” Evidence to the

87 For all other comic playwrights of the era of Old Comedy we only have fragments, the longest of these is by Pherecrates and is only 28 lines long. For a more in depth look at this, see G. W. Dobrov and E. Urios-Aparisi, “The Maculate Music: Gender, Genre, and the Chiron of Pherecrates,” in Beyond Aristophanes: Transition and Diversity in Greek Comedy, ed. G. W. Dobrov (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).
88 Aristotle, Poetics, 15.1454a.
89 Aristotle, Poetics, 15.1454a.
contrary suggests that the characters of comedies often have reversals in positions or dynamic changes as part of the climax of the drama (such as Strepsiades coming to his senses in *Clouds*). Once again in comedy we see an often fantastic changing of ways for the better; this is the opposite in tragedy, unless you *really* enjoy the mimēsis of dead bodies.\(^9\) Aristotle believes that one proper role of *mimetic* poetry is to teach us about (or to reach a clarifying katharsis about) certain important emotions such as fear, pity, confidence and indignation. It can also be the relief of emotions as a respite or point of relaxation. This seems to be the lower bar for katharsis whereas the higher telos of katharsis should be education or instruction in dramatic performances. These four emotional states are great motivators for action, and gaining a clear understanding of them is of tantamount importance. It would seem far easier to arouse the emotions of fear and pity than those of indignation and confidence in an audience in some unifying way.\(^1\) It also seems that pity and especially fear are greater motivators to action than righteous indignation and/or confidence. This may be a reason that historically more time is devoted to tragedy than to comedy and perhaps also why Aristotle chooses to address tragedy first.

Further, since comedies of Aristophanes’ era were so overtly socially and politically charged, it seems they had more direct influence on their audiences’ actions than tragedy. This is likely why they started strictly censoring the plays for political content in 388 BCE after Phillip II of Macedon took control of Athens (This had been done to lesser extents during different periods of the Peloponnesian War as well). These emotions of confidence and indignation at the

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\(^9\) See footnote 44.

\(^1\) Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*. Longinus: *On the Sublime*. Demetrius: *On Style*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, W. Hamilton Fyfe, Doreen C. Innes, and W. Rhys Roberts, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). While some translations of the *Poetics* claim that both comedy and tragedy need to be universal in scope, the word being translated is καθόλου, which probably means something more like “overall structure,” as Stephen Halliwell translates it early on (1449b, p. 45) rather than a “truly universal” (i.e., holding everywhere always atemporally) universal when he translates it later on with that word (1451b, pp. 59–61).
ludicrous character make up the core of what would be in Aristotle’s lost treatise on comedy, just as much as fear and pity for the unfortunate noble character are at the core of his treatise on tragedy.

1.4. Conclusion

The function of a good comedy or tragedy for Aristotle is less to persuade, though it serves this function as well, than to educate or to bring to light a certain issue(s) or person(s), and, in the case of comedy, sometimes very specific and powerful people. This bringing to light puts into question often unresolved issues in need of decision. Jeffrey Henderson, claims that “the comic poets were contributing to debates and divisions of opinion that were yet unresolved.”92 The old comedies of ancient Athens, at least in so far as the evidence we have suggests, were very political in both the broad and narrow sense of the word. Aristophanes suggests, in his play Frogs, that the purpose of the poet/dramatic writer is to instruct and educate the demos.

Aristotle, however, seems more concerned with how to properly pull off this effect rather than with whether it serves “the good” (in a way that seems similar to his stance in the Rhetoric).93 In the Nicomachean Ethics, he disparages on the idea of there is one good. In Book X of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle points out that wit and relaxation are but a respite from our serious labors, albeit necessary ones, none the less, since excess even in serious work or labor always leads to vice and ruination. The way to relax pleasantly, appropriately, and at its best even educationally may be what Aristotle is trying to describe or achieve in his Poetics.

93 That is to say that Aristotle is not unconcerned it is more to say that he is just not overly concerned.
Chapter 2: This Kant Be Funny: Aesthetics, Beauty, and Comedy

2.1. What about Comedy in Art?

Scholars since the 1950s have been critiquing the category of aesthetics as myopic in regards to the philosophy of art and in some cases even critiquing the very possibility of aesthetic judgment itself, but the problem with aesthetics being the privileged theme of the philosophy of art still persists. Strictly speaking, the critical Kant does not want to engage in the a posteriori cultural taste of art. He is only interested in the purely a priori transcendental forms of aesthetic judgment, specifically about the beautiful and the sublime. And so my account may in fact be a glancing blow to a purely Kantian critique, but it does not exonerate the Kantians and neo-Kantians that turned theories of beauty into theories of art, or the privileging of aesthetic judgments above all else in the realm of the philosophy of art. Nor does it come close to properly dealing with the art form that is comedy.

Comedy, for being a very popular art form, has received very little scholarly attention until very recently. While many scholars have tersely addressed the topic, serious attention was not paid to the topic until the turn of the twentieth century by Bergson and Freud in their works

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94 See Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Scholars such as George Dickie, Morris Weitz, Arthur Danto, and Carroll all critique aesthetics and/or the aesthetic attitude.

95 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 7 [170], 57–58 [214]. Here are examples of Kant in excusing himself from taste that is cultivated, i.e., from experience, and in differentiating the merely agreeable taste of sense, versus the transcendental taste of reflection which is about the beautiful.
Laughter (1900) and Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905) respectively.96 There is another serious lapse in the attention given to the topic of comedy, likely due to two world wars.97 As of late there has been a blossoming of works on comedy especially in the field of continental philosophy.98 This blossoming is likely due to the movement away from Kantian and neo-Kantian theories of aesthetics and perhaps toward something more akin to a postmodern perspective.99

Theories of art have most often been theories of the beautiful. The last three centuries while focused on aesthetics have also had those that fought against it from Hegel to Heidegger. None the less, beauty and more so aesthetic judgment maintained the majority share in the field of the philosophy of art. It is worth noting that this is likely the reason that comedy has been neglected for so long. Since Plato and especially Aristotle, Western philosophers have contrasted serious, noble, good actions and faces, the spoudaios in tragedy with the ignoble, ugly or base actions and faces, the phaulos in comedy.100 This is practically the difference between a tragedy that we might call beautiful and a comedy that would never be called spoudaios/serious or kalos/beautiful by these philosophers. Comedy pertained to geloias which roughly translates to the adjective for laughable, amusing, mirth-provoking or absurd. Both Plato and Aristotle frequently used the word to mean absurd, and many translators almost exclusively translate the word this way in their works.

96 The Earl of Shaftsbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper) also had a short treatise on comedy entitled Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour from 1709, where he first started using the term “humor” to mean something “funny” rather than the medical term for the humors of the body.
97 This will be addressed further in chapter 3 of this dissertation.
99 The postmodern claim will be partially addressed in chapter 3 and a bit more in chapter 4 of this dissertation. Also, see Iain Thomson, Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
Comedy, which is standardly neither beautiful nor sublime, sits awkwardly positioned in its relation to aesthetics. In this chapter I will present a reductio ad absurdum argument of sorts to complicate the position of the relation between aesthetics and the beautiful. This argument is explicates equipollent evidence within aesthetics in its relation to comedy. This will bring us to examine some critical issues involving the subject/object divide inherent in problematic accounts of aesthetic experience, or, perhaps in the notion of the aesthetic itself. Then I will examine the Kantian understanding of aesthetics and why comedy is so poorly positioned to be part of his transcendental project. Finally, I will critique the best contemporary argument in favor of an aesthetics of humor produced by John Morreall. Aesthetics, with its focus on beauty, is a poor concept for assessing comedy, which has led to its neglect in the field of the philosophy of art. If we understand why this is the case, we can move beyond this sort of analysis, and assess comedy in a more fruitful way. If we are going to properly understand comedy and its efficacy in relation to aesthetics, a look at the history of aesthetics and its relation to comedy is in order. It is in examining the roots and genealogy of this concept then we can see how it is either systematically excluded or oddly intertwined.

This chapter assesses the shortcomings of aesthetics from a comedic lens. I will assess why comedy is so often left outside of the aesthetic framework and why attempts at bringing it into the fold particularly by John Morreall have been less than successful. Part of the reason for using comedy as an interpretive lens banks on a near constant tradition of focusing on beauty and as such order, form, proportion, and purposiveness. In comedy, since at least the time of Aristotle, it has been about the ugly or the shameful (phaulos), as well as, a constant transgression of order, form, proportion, laws, norms, and customs, and often having a focus on

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the absurd or ridiculous. The progenitors of aesthetics in the 1700s such as the Earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper) and Kant want to point to evidence of intelligent design and thus God through the pleasure found in beauty and our natural inclination to seek it out. Kant, as always, does not go so far as to directly claim intelligent design or God, but does point toward it. Nietzsche may have most accurately described Kant when he called him a “sneaky Christian.” Kant always “rides the fence” on this issue, but certainly leans in this direction. One could claim, comically, that our want for and pleasure found in the lack of proportion, in the transgressing of order and law, and other general absurdities gives us good evidence of unintelligent design and thus that there is no God. Perhaps that is why we love comedy and laughing so much, and that furthermore we seek it out even at great cost to ourselves (as an inappropriate joke or insult can be very costly, and an inappropriate laugh at another can be as well). This evidence seems equipollent to me and should thus produce a proper a poria or a reductio ad absurdum of sorts. This argument will not push the theories of beauty to their extreme limit, but will push the arguments and evidence in the opposite direction to show its equipollent and aporetic end in comedy using the same aesthetic rules.

2.2. Unintelligent Design and Alterity

The aesthetic in its very roots is about certain orders and proportions that assume a standard of beauty, that does not exist for the comic in a certain sense. Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World points out the excessive superlative style that often appears in comic works. Comic proportions are the anti-proportions, but do not depend on proportion as a binary. The comic excessiveness is a matter of alterity that need not be binary. When things lack order or proper

proportion they can be comic, laughable, absurd, or *geloiōs/γέλοιος*. It is not that they need be actual reciprocals or opposites; they just need some alterity or difference; Bakhtin claims that there are “[n]o clearly defined boundaries … [it is all] blended with the world.”

Perhaps the comic perception of the lack of order, proportion, or purposiveness is akin to Bergson’s “gesture” instead of “action” found in his *Laughter*, i.e., that “actions” are intentional, purposive and consciously willed and that comedy is banked on “gesture,” which is unconscious, unintentional and mechanistic rather than “willed.” There seems to be a lack of design behind those “gestures” we find comic.

If there are arguments for intelligent design due to our aesthetic judgment of the beautiful can we make arguments for unintelligent design because of comedy and laughter? Is not the laughter of man proof that there is no divine intelligence? There is as much “proof” in the last sentence as there is in the intuitions we have to see order in everything. Perhaps it is as the anthropologist and scientist say that we tend to see order everywhere due to its utility for survival, but perhaps true or ultimate order does not exist. Humans love to categorize and find patterns and/or order, but whenever we create a final category, concept, or order, something like the platypus shows up. We can see other examples of this in the wave/particle duality of light or the total reevaluation of taxonomy of living organisms favoring genetics over the phenotypic categorizations of yesteryear. These breaks often occur in our seemingly well-ordered distinctions. Apparently there is no such thing as fish. The category of fish is so broad that some organisms we call fish are so genetically disparate that a human and a rhino are closer in

103 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 27.
106 Evolutionary anthropologist Stephen Jay Gould was famed for making this claim.
genetic relation. But alas, we have traditionally spent far more time working on beauty and the order of things than the comic, laughable, and absurd disorder of things.

Nietzsche may be right that this focus is due to a desire for logic, calmness, tranquility, and hope, things of concern to both Epicureans and Christians.¹⁰⁷ This may relate to “freedom from” (negative freedom) order and proportion in the comic and a “freedom for” (positive freedom) imaginative novel creation (as most people do not care for stale jokes/punchlines. An example of this is when going to a music concert people tend to want to hear the songs they have already heard regularly, but at a comedy special people tend to want to hear new material rather than the old).¹⁰⁸ The comic is precisely where we can transgress our ordinary borders, limits, orders, proportions, norms, and sacred concepts. For Kant, the beautiful is a “relation between our cognitive faculties and the formal qualities of objects … [a]lthough it is only subjective, the purposiveness exhibited by natural beauty in particular may be interpreted as a sign that nature is hospitable to our moral interests (5:300).”¹⁰⁹ We might equally take the “relation” that we find in a comic context (though not subjective nor objective) as sign or anti-sign, if you will, that nature is hospitable to amorality.

In a Bakhtinian sense, comedy seems to be extramoral or amoral and finds itself in a context that is festive, “a second life,” or a “second order.”¹¹⁰ We might call this “second order” of life not an order at all but perhaps an alterity. During festive times like Carnival or Mardi Gras and the like he did not polarize the position people were in when engaging in these comedic spectacles; he claimed that they were “on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar

¹¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 8–11.
midzone as it were." Art and life are not generally juxtaposed as opposites and in this comedic
carnivalesque; we do not juxtapose order and disorder in a merely dualistic framework.

Comedy need not have a binary or opposite a priori. It also need not be a priori different,
opposite or incongruent. Absurdity and disproportion are not a priori categories nor is
incongruity, which itself relies on congruity. Alterity is merely difference in a nondualistic frame
of reference or context. All a posteriori contexts are rooted in the material culture of a social
body. Alterity itself is not a priori ‘funny’ either;” once again, context is the difference. A
context for comedy must be shared in an a posteriori way for it to come off as comedic, and,
perhaps, shared by more than one person. When someone laughs at something that no one
around them finds comic he or she looks foolish, and someone who laughs alone is viewed with
suspicion and sometimes is thought to be mad. That the comedic occurs a posteriori may be the
reason that Kant spends so little time on it in the *Critique of Judgment*.

2.3. Kant on Comedy
In Kant’s defense, the beautiful in its “purposive purposelessness that looks arranged by a will
but need not be” is not the opposite of the ugly or comic. The ugly or comic are not set up in that
manner, because they look unpurposive or purposively unarranged. Both Plato and Aristotle
appear to fall short in their purported descriptions of comedy because they attempt to define what
comedy or the laughable ought to be rather than how it is. Plato in his dialogue the *Philebus* (48–
50) defines the laughable or comedic as more or less a mockery of those who do not know
themselves well; this is a sort of insult humor similar to the Hobbesian superiority theory.
Aristotle, on the other hand, purports that this lowbrow insult humor is the vice of being
buffoonish rather than the virtue of wit or *eutrapelos* (i.e., well turning in the ancient Greek, or a

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certain sort of versatility with language). These assessments of the comedic fall short because comedy can be comprised of many other components, and, though at its best it can be civilized and refined, comedy simply does not need to be either. It can be uncouth, unsubtle, and malicious, and oftentimes is.

Kant does not attempt a system of opposites or binaries when it comes to beauty, but he still divides the world in two: the subjective and objective, though beauty happens in the relation between the two. When Kant does actually address comedy and laughter, he does so in the very last section of division 1, section 54 of the Critique of Judgment, which is simply entitled “Comments.”

Kant noticed that comedy and laughter did not quite fit in his Third Critique, since he could not quite place comedy into either the category of the sublime or the beautiful. He clumps it together with games of chance, i.e., gaming or gambling and the play of tone or color. These things merely gratify and are good for bodily health, i.e., are individual and particular to a specific body as not everyone likes the same music, colors, or jokes. Those things are gratifying according to Kant because of the individual’s particular composure, and they therefore are not a priori and thus not part of his transcendental project. Further, he relegates all of these merely gratifying goods for bodily health in a very dualistic manner. To quote Kant at some length:

the quickening [due to laughter or music] is merely bodily, even though it is aroused by ideas of the mind, and shows that all the gratification {we find} at a lively party, extolled as being so refined and inspired, consists in the feeling of health that is produced by an intestinal agitation corresponding to such play. It is not our judging of the harmony we find in tones or in flashes of wit—this harmony, with its beauty, merely serves as a necessary vehicle—but the furtherance of the vital processes in the body, the affect that agitates the intestines and the diaphragm, in a word the feeling of health (which we cannot feel without such prompting), which constitutes the gratification we find in the fact that we can reach the body through the soul as well, and use the soul as the physician of the body.\(^{113}\)

\(^{112}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 202 [331].
\(^{113}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 202–203 [332].
This brings laughter and music into a merely physical realm (i.e., the body), but also implies an odd dualism at the very end of this passage. We find Kant falling into a dualistic framework of mind/soul and body. That the mind/soul can be the “physician of the body” harkens back to the problems of dualism that we have faced since the Modern Era.

If mind/soul and body are separate, how do they interact or influence each other? On this point Kant does not provide any more explanation. The closest he comes in attempting to explain what is taking place here is when he claims that the mind and body have a “reciprocal effect … which produces in the body an equilibrium of the vital forces.”\footnote{Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 203 [333].} This still does not adequately explain how they interact though, and also there is no explanation of these “vital forces” save for them being good for one’s health.

The “merely gratifying” is for the most part left out of not only the scope of the critiques but out of most neo-Kantian philosophy. The “merely gratifying” must come from subjective sensation but should not relate to an a posteriori communal understanding or context if it is to be within the scope of aesthetics. Without shared a posteriori communal understanding, the comedic would likely not exist or even be explicable. Alterity from shared communal understanding or what I am calling a shared context seems at its root \textit{difference} but perhaps not, strictly speaking, incongruity.

By context I mean something structurally similar to Heidegger’s concept of world.\footnote{See chapter 3 for much greater detail on Heidegger’s concept of “world” as it relates to comedy.} There is always a context in which we are engaged. Noël Carroll, while not a Heideggerian and not attempting to adapt Heidegger’s concept of “world,” still makes a point that can be clearly beneficial in explicating what I mean by context when he states:

In order for comic amusement to take hold, it requires a background of shared presuppositions…about norms (of intelligence, ethics, and even personal hygiene). When
we laugh together, we are in effect acknowledging our membership in a community … In this context, our converging laughter serves as a signal to each and all of us that we are bound together by shared assumptions … Although we say that *we* get the joke, it might be more accurate to say that the joke gets *us.*

The context of an artwork solicits us. The context tries to contextualize *us*, it tries to incorporate us as part of the context. We are a part, not in an individuated sense, but in the sense of being part of a whole context like a piece of equipment, in the Heideggerian sense. There is no such thing as “an equipment.” There are only pieces of equipment and parts of a context, because equipment like a context or world by its nature entails that there are other parts or pieces that are implied by what it is. It must be part of a whole.

This context seems to start off as analogue with no strict distinctions between pieces, or rather no pieces at all. The digital is exact small pieces of things. It is rather like the difference between vinyl records and mp3s in music. Records have a smoother quality (when not scratched) than mp3s recordings or other digital music that just has a coarser feel to it. Analogue clocks move smoothly; digital clocks jump. What Heidegger would call a ready-to-hand world that is one unified phenomenon is an analogue world. It is only later and secondarily the digital piece meal one might call present-at-hand. once we try to parse out how the comedy “works” for us as individuals. It is here again that comedy highlights this subject/object divide. One smoothly understands comedy in one’s context or world until we are asked to examine it or why we do not recognize something is supposed to be comedic. It is when we seem unaware of the comedic element that we suffer a breakdown and the comedic work becomes present-at-hand to us.

Then and only then does it breakdown into its component digital parts. Oddly, this is when the

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118 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 88 [61].
comedic is least humorous. When you have to explain why something is humorous it generally no longer is; it ceases to work.

When we are unaware of the context of an artwork it still solicits us, but it solicits us in silence. It still tries to speak; we just do not hear it. The more disinterested, the more devoid of content, the more “free” and “pure” a judgment, the more strictly speaking is the artwork severed from the context that gives it meaning. By doing this one is splitting the context in twain between the subjective and the objective leaving only this tether of a relation between the two for said aesthetic judgment to exist. The subjectivity of the aesthetic judgment further entrenches dubious dualisms such as the subject/object divide and dualism writ large.

For Kant, the aesthetic judgment of beauty is supposed to be one of subjective universality. Kant claims that:

a judgment of taste is to have subjective universal communicability without presupposing a determinate concept; hence this subjective universal communicability can be nothing but [that of] the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play (insofar as they harmonize with each other as required for cognition in general).

These judgments must be a mental state, i.e., that everyone ought to universally experience due to their understanding and imagination being engaged in a sort of “free play.” I find it very difficult to believe that we all share the same faculty for understanding, but let us put that aside and allow everyone’s understanding to be a transcendental faculty. I find it hard if not impossible to believe that we could all share imagination in a universal way. Our imagination is likely only an odd composite of all of the things we have been exposed to and seems to be relative to the context or world that we are a part of. On the other hand for Kant, the imagination does a lot of

\[119\] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 54 [211–212], 57–58 [214].

\[120\] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 62 [217–218].
heavy lifting in his critiques, but he is never quite explicit about what it actually is. Kant basically claims that the imagination is just one of the great mysteries of the soul.\textsuperscript{121}

What is more is that it is also an odd metric for judgment when it comes to the beautiful. It seems according to Kant that the longer the imagination and understanding “tarry” in free play the more beautiful the object of judgment is. This free play, while necessarily rooted in the body and sensation due to the necessity of our own observation, is in a “sense” left out of our proper aesthetic judgments when it comes to the beautiful and in fine art. It appears that sensation is immediate and does not allow for this metric to take place in a significant way. Kant claims “Fine art … is a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even though without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to {facilitate} social communication … aesthetic art that is also fine art is one whose standard is the reflective power of judgment, rather than sensation proper.”\textsuperscript{122} So sensation proper is not what fine art is about and this once again takes us further away from the groundedness in the body that must come with all aesthetics judgments. He continues to entrench this dualism when he claims that fine art is about “form that is purposive … rather than the matter of sensation (i.e., charm or emotion). For the pleasure we take in purposive form is also culture, and it attunes the spirit to ideas.”\textsuperscript{123} How exactly this aesthetic judgment “attunes the spirit/mind” over and against sensation, charm, and emotion is again hard to explain.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{121} Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, ed. James W. Ellington, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), see A141–2/B180–1. The imagination is a “hidden art in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty” but he does not really make good on this promise.

\textsuperscript{122} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 173 [306].

\textsuperscript{123} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 195 [325–326].

\textsuperscript{124} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 72 [225–226]. Charm for Kant has to do with agreeable elements in the thing judged. Agreeable things are color and tone, or ornaments like drapery on a statue, colonnades on a building the frame of a painting and finally finery like a gold frame.
It appears that only nature and the “fine arts” are properly worthy of the kind of transcendental reflective judgment that Kant is seeking in the *Third Critique*. As was stated earlier these fine arts are not focused on the agreeable in sensation, but rather on the a priori formal qualities that accompany presentation. It is important to note here that the very idea of fine (schön) arts does not really exist prior to this era. The term “fine” or “schön” in German is etymologically very close to the word for “beauty” or “Schöne.” This alone is genealogically interesting as it demarcates the region of the fine arts to exclude anything we may not consider beautiful, thus eliminating comedy and specifically theatrical comedy, as a proper object of judgment. Kant does include theatrical tragedy as a proper fine art in it being the pictorial/visual plus oral/speech in art, but makes no mention of theatrical comedy that shares the same qualities.\(^{125}\)

Kant does not coin the term “fine arts,” but through his philosophy he greatly bolsters the idea that this category exists and is of great importance. The ancient Greeks did not even have a work for “art” the way we do and in the way we use it, as was mentioned in the previous chapter. Kant claims that art that is not “fine” or at least connected in some way with morality will “serve in that case only for our diversion, which we need all the more in proportion as we use it to dispel the mind’s dissatisfaction with itself, with the result that we increase still further our uselessness and dissatisfaction with ourselves.”\(^{126}\) So it seems that art that is not “fine” serves only as a diversion or distraction that is not meaningful, or useful (except perhaps for our bodily health).

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\(^{125}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 195 [325].

\(^{126}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 196 [326].
When Kant orders the “fine arts” he places music as the lowest among the fine arts “since it merely plays with sensations.”\textsuperscript{127} By contrast, poetry holds the highest rank as “[i]t owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least open to guidance by precept or examples.”\textsuperscript{128} For our current enquiry we must leave aside the topic of genius, but this elevation of poetry to the highest rank among the fine arts is also due to its lack of a posteriori “guidance” and in its pleasure being found in its a priori presentations. This seems troubling, due to poetry’s reliance on a posteriori concepts. Certainly, some of its concepts are indeed a priori, but generally speaking many more are historically and culturally contingent and indebted to an a posteriori context.

Drama, and particularly Tragedy, do seem to hold a high rank ordering in Kant’s judgment of the fine arts, but it seems to lack an appreciation for comedy as a form. This may be because Kant like many Western critics considers Tragedy to be universal in its form, whereas comedy is not. This however, does not hold up under closer scrutiny. A classic Anthropology article entitled “Shakespeare in the Bush” depicts an anthropologist who had been observing a West African indigenous tribe.\textsuperscript{129} The English anthropologist had assumed that the great tragedies of the West, in this case particularly \textit{Hamlet}, would be universally understood and appreciated. As it turned out the story had to be changed and edited by the tribe’s elders such that the tribal audience could understand it, which in turn changed it into an almost unrecognizable story for a Western European audience. As it turned out Hamlet was the villain and his uncle the “tragic” hero. While, the privileged theme of death in the Tragedy may be considered universal, so may humor and laughter in comedy, both require an a posteriori context to work.

\textsuperscript{127} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 200 [329].
\textsuperscript{128} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 196 [326].
This distinction of Kant’s is not unlike that between perfect and imperfect duties in his moral theory. Kant claims our moral duty “not to steal” is tied to our a priori concept of “property,” which is necessary for a civil society, but our imperfect duty to “philanthropy” does not necessarily have to hold for all civilized societies; it just harmonizes better if we do. Both Hegel and Marx point out here that we could actually do away with the a priori concept of property and thus eliminate our duty to not steal since this would be a logical impossibility. In some indigenous tribes in North America the concept of property is very “loose” or different if at all the same concept. Chairman Mao was famed for his statement “property is theft,” i.e., that if everyone owns everything as a community keeping something for oneself is stealing from the whole and thus a very different, understanding than Kant’s. This shows that Kant’s “perfect” duties actually turn out to be at most “imperfect” if we divorce them from his ethnocentric eighteenth-century German culture.

A posteriori concepts often bleed into Kant’s “pure” aesthetic judgments even in the ways he defines them. These judgments about, and categorizations of art serve to denigrate the place of the body in aesthetic judgment. If the Heideggerian understanding of “world” is accurate proximally and for the most part there is no mind/body or subject/object divide most of the time and that these distinctions draw us further away from a meaningful understanding of our context or “world.” The coup de grâce of sorts on all of this is that the “agreeable” or “sensate” amounts to nothing; that nothing is learned or gained, and nothing from these “other arts” leads us to ruminate, meditate, or take a stand on anything. They are in a “sense” lacking the efficacy to take responsibility for our past, present, or future. Kant states:

Agreeable arts are those whose purpose is merely enjoyment. They include [the art of providing] all those charms that can gratify a party at table, such as telling stories entertainingly, animating the group to open and lively conversation, or using jest and laughter to induce a certain cheerful tone among them—a tone such that, as is said, there
may be a lot of loose talk over the feast, and no one wants to be held responsible for what he says, because the whole point is the entertainment of the moment, not any material for future meditation or quotation.130

While this may often be the case, it need not always be the case. Jest and “loose talk” may in fact bring many repercussions. Often things said in jest are our actual beliefs or are made to make one think about our actual beliefs and perhaps modify them. Putting this aside we might also point out that when Kant does mention laughter and humor, he does not bring up comedy as a dramatic form, but rather the form of joking or storytelling, which are not the same. Morreall states that Kant, Schopenhauer and Freud all explain comedy, humor and laughter by primarily using fictional jokes for examples.131 Further, we may indeed be held responsible for our “loose talk” especially if we are in the public eye. Sometimes we should be held accountable or responsible for such talk, and sometimes not, but there is no facile way of determining this aside from a deep understanding of the context from which it came.

There is an understanding in Kant’s Critique of Judgment that gaming, music, and comedic acts may be agreeable and health-promoting but are nonetheless merely bodily gratification set over and against some sort of superior judgment that comes solely from one’s mind or soul and thus categorically differentiates it as transcendentally worthy of our intense philosophical scrutiny. Kant claims:

music and something to laugh about are two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas, or for that matter with presentations of the understanding, by which in the end nothing is thought; it is merely change they involve that still enables them to gratify us in a lively way … that they amount to an inner motion that seems to further all the vital processes in the body, as is proved by how sprightly the mind becomes as a result, even though nothing has been won or learned.132

130 Kant, Critique of Judgment, 172–173 [305].
131 Morreall, Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor, 83.
132 Kant, Critique of Judgment, 202 [331–332].
This quote suggests how little Kant cares for these topics. While music may be salvaged and supplant the other arts in Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art as the supreme art form, comedy does not receive such a restoration. Many philosophers will tout the greatness of music, but few will spare more than a few scant pages for inquiry into comedy as an art form. Kant is considered one of the progenitors of the most prominent philosophical theory on comedy in our contemporary context. He is famed for bringing to light the incongruity theory of comedy, in which he states, “[w]hatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.”¹³³ Thus, an incongruity that we perceive to be absurd builds up and is then released into nothing. This is in a sense the format of most jokes, i.e., set-up … punchline.

John Morreall is perhaps the best contemporary defender of an aesthetic understanding of comedy. For the most part, Morreall maintains that this judgment is one of what he calls “comic amusement” and as such his interpretation is a variation of the incongruity theory of comedy.¹³⁴

2.4. Let’s Get Morreall about Comedy

Comic amusement seems to be the focus of most contemporary philosophers in their attempt to understand the comedic.¹³⁵ Definitions of comedy, humor, and laughter have always been difficult to wrangle, but the current predominant theory bears resemblance to Kant’s incongruity theory.

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¹³³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 202 [332].
¹³⁴ Morreall, “A New Theory of Laughter,” 135 n. 5. Technically so does he. He states here that “humor always involves the enjoyment of a perceived or imagined incongruity.”
¹³⁵ Noël Carroll is among these and might be considered the preeminent scholar on comedy in the English-speaking world.
This theory roughly holds that some sort of perceived incongruity can give rise to comic amusement, which often, though not necessarily, leads to laughter (or sometimes just a snicker, smile, mirth, or levity). There are numerous variations to this definition. One of the first is the above definition given by Kant claiming that a tense expectation is transformed into a harmless nothing. We perceive a building up of tension followed by a punchline in incongruity, which is harmless or not offensive in any “serious” way. For instance, one of the easiest jokes to illustrate this, though not a very funny one, is this: two men walk into a bar, the third one ducks. The idea is that we are waiting for more narrative when we start the joke “two men walk into a bar” since many jokes start this way, but this joke conflates two meanings of the term “bar” to show an incongruity in language that is harmless and perhaps comically amusing so long as we know both meanings of the term “bar” (i.e., a place to get a drink and a pole that one may run into).

In fairness to both Kant and Morreall, it is important to note that Kant while being an important contributor to the incongruity theory of comedy, never intended for it to be an aesthetic judgment of comic amusement, and Morreall, while producing the most contemporary version of aesthetic interpretation of comic amusement, claims that his theory is different from the incongruity theory. Essentially, his “new theory of laughter,” which includes comedy and humor as well as noncomedic/humorous occurrences of laughter involves a sudden pleasant psychological/cognitive shift. With that said, I suggest that his “sudden pleasant psychological shift” is analogous to Kant’s “tense expectation transformed into nothing” and a more nuanced version of the incongruity theory.

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137Tickling, peekaboo, and thrill rides, like roller coasters, all exhibit this according to Morreall.
Morreall asserts that “amusement is idle … [and] in this respect, amusement is like the aesthetic enjoyment of music or fine art, which is a paradigm of disinterested pleasure.”

The problem here is that the comedic need not be “mere amusement.” While the terminology “mere amusement” “feels right” when describing risible happenings, it is too colloquial and myopic for covering the comedic writ large the whole category of “disinterested” or “disengaged” liking/delight is itself dubious as Nietzsche points out in the third essay of On the Genealogy of Morals in section 6. There he points out that all “aesthetic appreciation” is not disinterested in happiness, as a sort of Epicurean or Romantic calmness, tranquility, or ataraxia that we may liken to the momentary stilling of the flaming wheel of Ixion.

To quote Morreall at some length on his aesthetic interpretation of comedy or humorous and laughable:

A central idea in aesthetics is aesthetic experience. While philosophers have characterized it in different ways, there is general agreement that it is a kind of appreciation in which we perceive or contemplate something for the satisfaction of the experience itself, not in order to achieve something else. Starting in the early eighteenth century, with Anthony Ashely Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury; Francis Hutheson; and Joseph Addison, the lack of self-concern and personal advantage in aesthetic experience was called ‘disinterestedness.’ Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790) is the best known account of it. Having an aesthetic interest in something is contrasted with having a practical interest or cognitive interest in it … someone enjoying the sculpture aesthetically attends to the way it looks and feels, rather than to any practical or cognitive gain it promises. This idea of attending to something for the pleasure of the experience, rather than to gain knowledge or reach a goal, applies to humorous amusement, too. We are not amused in order to achieve anything. Without cognitive and practical concerns, we simply enjoy the looking, listening and thinking. Theorists of both humor and art have spoken of ‘distance’ in the way I have spoken of disengagement.

While most of this material has already been addressed, it is important to lay out exactly what the aesthetic understanding of the comedic is, which will succinctly sum up what Morreall states on

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140 Morreall, Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor, 70.
the subject. Once again, it first divests the comedic from having any self-concern or interest either practical or cognitive and is solely for the experience of pleasure and amusement. We have already attended to why amusement might be problematic and why it essentially presupposes the exclusion of the attainment of knowledge, a goal, or achievement of anything substantive. I remain unconvinced of the possibility of “pure distance/disengagement.”

Art becomes petty pleasure when judged solely as a “purely” aesthetic experience. When viewed as petty pleasure it becomes easily ignored and rightfully so if this is all the philosophy of art amounts to. Nietzsche addresses this when he refers to the category of art that he calls Romantic in the *Gay Science* in his 1886 second preface, section 4, and 1886 addendum in Book V, aphorism 370. The roots of this can still be found in the original 1882 edition of the *Gay Science* in aphorism 86, *Of the Theatre*.141 This is also in a sense the death of art that both Hegel and Heidegger point out. Heidegger especially brings to the fore the problems inherent in any aesthetic interpretation of artworks. Unfortunately, he too neglects the role of comedy as possible “great artworks” or what in the West we have referred to as the “fine arts” for roughly the last three hundred or so years. Nonetheless, we will now venture to adumbrate what a Heideggerian interpretation of comedy might look like.

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141 This will be addressed further in chapter 4 of this dissertation.
Chapter 3: Heidegger’s Neglect of Comedy, but a Heideggerian Interpretation of Comedy Nonetheless

3.1. The Forgetting of Comedy

Drama, as an art form, has occupied a central role in the philosophy of art since the time of Aristotle. With the exception of painting, no other art form is used as often as an example for explication of theory in philosophy. Heidegger briefly treats tragedy in his canonical essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (OWA) when he speaks of Antigone, but he fails to even mention comedy. Yet, the comedy of fifth- and sixth-century Athens deserves attention in the philosophy of art. In any case, as a contemporary art form, comedy has taken root as the preeminent genre in the US and, as such, also deserves to be discussed. Heidegger attempts to transcend the aesthetic explanation for art in his OWA. He claims (among other things) that “great art” needs to be truth-disclosing and world-creating.

This kind of world-creating/orienting art, which Nietzsche hinted at, provides a much better account of how truly great art functions and how it is related to our very being. When art is

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144 Though Heidegger is notorious in this essay for his “cherry picking” of art forms, it seems that Heidegger’s neglect of comedy is rooted more in a philosophical bias that views comedy as frivolous, or, as I claim later, that it highlights the features of falling (since comedy often evades the topic of death and highlights idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity) and feeds into it.

145 While this latter claim is more contentious than the former this chapter will use a “promethean” account of art.
treated as merely aesthetic, it loses its vital force and becomes something of a passing pleasure or amusement of mere sensuous subjective experience (which incidentally is where most philosophers have placed all comedy all along). This chapter aims to show that comedy can be the “great art” that Heidegger describes with the ability to produce a happening of truth. To this end, I would like to call that kind of comedy true comedy. True comedy, no less than tragedy, can transform speech by making us take a stand on meaningful decisions in our historical community. When comedy falls short of being true comedy, it can still provide “one” with an excellent phenomenological example of the existential mode of being that Heidegger calls “falling” in Being and Time. To this end, I would like to call this kind of comedy fallen comedy. Throughout this chapter a phenomenological interpretation of comedy will be used to concretely explicate some features of Heidegger’s philosophy.

Authors such as Nietzsche and Gadamer use ancient Greek drama as the focal point of their analyses of art but do little justice to comedy in them.\(^{146}\) Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, as the title might suggest, has precious few passages about comedy in it.\(^{147}\) Gadamer, in his Truth and Method, uses play (spiel) and eventually theatrical plays as a structured form of this play to help explicate his theory of art, which deals with the play in the play’s representation or presentation. However, again very little is said about comedy.\(^{148}\) For Nietzsche and Gadamer, comedy mostly shows up in their works as tragedy’s tag-along mentioned only in the same breath as tragedy. For example, Gadamer repeatedly speaks of the “tragedy and comedy of

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\(^{146}\) Aristotle may be excused from this since it seems that he did write a treatise on comedy, according to indications we gather from both the Poetics and the Rhetoric, but if it did exist it is lost to us. I have argued that while tragedy is about fear and pity, comedy is about indignation and confidence (see chapter 1).

\(^{147}\) In the later writings of Nietzsche the theme of laughter comes up much more frequently and comedy even pops up a few times. However, I am mostly focused on comedy as an art form rather than the philosophy of humor and laughter. Also, see the preceding chapter.

\(^{148}\) Gadamer, Truth and Method, 125. “Comedy”/“comic” does not even make the subject index of this work, while he does specifically engage in tragedy, and Aristotle’s understanding of it from the Poetics.
life”¹⁴⁹ but does not go on to explicate anything else about comedy. Nietzsche speaks about the historic roots of tragedy in the comic satyr-plays and also claims that the comic, along with the sublime, helps to discharge the “nausea of absurdity”¹⁵⁰ of life. This nausea comes when we discover the vacuum and horror of existence.

In the Birth of Tragedy (BoT), this nihilistic wisdom is revealed by the satyr Silenus to King Midas. According to Silenus, what was best in life was “utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon.”¹⁵¹ While Nietzsche does not go into details about the need for the comic here, we might see why one would need some comedy after that news. It is here in the BoT that we can see what might have lead Heidegger (among others) to ignore the role of comedy in art.¹⁵² Nietzsche famously claims that Euripides and New Attic Comedy killed, or at least degenerated, the “good” tragedy of Ancient Athens. He claims that with their advent the Greeks had given up:

not only his [the ancient Greek’s] belief in an ideal past, but also his belief in an ideal future … The passing moment, wit, levity, and caprice are its highest deities; the fifth estate, that of the slaves, now comes to power, at least in sentiment … [the focus of drama becomes] the slave who has nothing of consequence to be responsible for, nothing great to strive for, and who does not value anything in the past or future higher than the present.¹⁵³

It is all too often forgotten that Nietzsche places the blame for the ruination of tragedy with Menander and New Attic Comedy, not just Euripides. Heidegger was greatly influenced by Nietzsche and wrote more about him than any other figure and this, coupled with the

¹⁴⁹ Gadamer, Truth and Method, 112.
¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 43 [§3].
¹⁵² Though this essay will touch on this point, Heidegger, and others, also likely ignored comedy due to its groundedness in the body; for more on the role of the body in comedy, see Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Héléne Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
¹⁵³ Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, §11. This shift in comedy was due to the censorship of Phillip II, after 338 BCE when the Macedonians became the effective rulers of Greece.
aforementioned quote, should help us start to understand why Heidegger neglects comedy, unjustifiably in my view.

It is true, of course, that Heidegger lived during the part of the twentieth century in which the senseless slaughter of World War I was a raw and a recent memory, and a war that was followed by yet another world war. The twentieth century was punctuated throughout with countless genocides, and from the midcentury point onward featured the imminent threat of worldwide nuclear apocalypse. Adorno once famously said, we cannot have poetry after Auschwitz. We can only assume that goes double for comedy. It seems comedy especially should not exist after Auschwitz and that there can be no laughter either.\textsuperscript{154} Though this was said in 1951, which postdates some of the writings of Heidegger that I am examining here, none the less, the sentiment is still that something too grave and too serious had happened to appreciate art after those horrors. Yet in the last half of the twentieth century comedy becomes as important—indeed, arguably more important—than tragedy. In, any case, I am not attributing a philosophy of comedy to Heidegger here. Rather, I am using philosophical insights gleaned from Being and Time and OWA, among other writings, to formulate a sketch of a philosophy of comedy.

It is often difficult to disambiguate Heidegger’s own views on art from what he claims are Nietzsche’s views in his Nietzsche volumes, but it would seem wholly ridiculous to claim that Nietzsche did not have a profound influence on Heidegger’s philosophy of art.\textsuperscript{155} Therefore we should take seriously the claims Nietzsche makes about comedy when considering

\textsuperscript{154} There some rare instances of this such as the film Life is Beautiful, and the Producers but they are few and far between.

\textsuperscript{155} For more on this relation see chapters 1 and 2 of Iain Thomson Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Also, while Heidegger claims in his Nietzsche volumes that we should only really pay attention to Nietzsche’s Opus Magnum (i.e., the unfinished Will to Power), we should neglect the profound influence Nietzsche’s earlier works had on Heidegger as well, regardless of whether this should count as Nietzsche’s ultimate philosophy or not. See Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, ed. David Farrell Krell, 4 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
Heidegger’s philosophy of art. For Heidegger, there is a twofold reason why this is important. First, according to Heidegger’s position in *Being and Time*, we exist as a happening that is a “thrown-projection.” According to Charles Guignon, “Heidegger suggests that instead of thinking of a human being as a substance or as an entity that is just present at hand among other items, we should think of a human as a *happening* or an *event*, that is, as the unfolding of a life story ‘stretched out between birth and death.’”156 As such, we are “thrown” into a world comprised of our past and a greater historical context of meanings that serves as “the source of the norms and conventions regulating the choices we can make and the directions we can pursue in making something of our lives.”157 We are also, according to Heidegger, always already ahead of ourselves because of our involvement in definite “projects” toward some future.

This projected future dragging along its past only comes to be meaningful and authentic when it resolutely grasps its possibilities while heading toward its inevitable end in death. Guignon claims that “because our very being is defined by our ways of being projected into the future, we are a constant *being-toward* the defining culmination or realization of our lives as a whole.”158 To properly understand one of the defining existential features of our being, we must understand ourselves as beings with futural projects that shape and form us. When we inevitably forget or ignore this we become “absorbed in the ‘they.’”159 Heidegger claims this is how we are “proximally and for the most part” in our average everydayness. While Heidegger claims that this is not a moralizing critique or a negative mode of being, this way of being is considered

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157 Guignon, 34.
158 Guignon, 34.
159 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 210. The “they” is the English translation of *Das Man*; it is also sometimes translated as the “one,” but that sounds funny to English-speaking ears. *Das Man* has the sense of saying something like “that is not how *one* acts” or “If *one* were to speak about such a thing it might sound funny.” Heidegger claims that mostly we act as “one” would act or we do things the way they do things. Being original seems either impossible or else unintelligible.
inauthentic and is called “falling” or “Verfallen.”\textsuperscript{160} And while this may be a type of inauthentic Being, it is still an important part of our Being, since falling is an existential mode of Being-in-the-world.\textsuperscript{161} Further, Heidegger claims that “authentic existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon.”\textsuperscript{162} Even though Heidegger says this, it is often overlooked that this “falling” and being part of the “they” are ontological features that need only be modified in order to achieve authenticity, no matter how fleeting said authenticity may be.

If we take this interpretation of Heidegger to be correct, in its account of the human way of being (which he refers to as \textit{Dasein} in \textit{Being and Time}\textsuperscript{163}), we can see why the aforementioned type of comedy might not at first appear to be particularly useful in coming to an understanding of the authentic meaning of our being. In this sort of comedy, we fail to take responsibility for our past and our future in order to focus solely on the pleasure of the momentary present. These comedies portray an inauthentic way of being, which can reveal something about the nature of “falling” for Heidegger. These fallen comedies can also be a constant source of satiation for Dasein’s fallenness. Comedy that takes no responsibility often shows up exemplifying what Heidegger calls “falling” or “fallenness.” This kind of comedy exemplifies the three characteristic features of “falling”: idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{160} Verfallen usually indicates decay or deterioration, i.e., like a “fallen empire,” and is also commonly used to denote a state of addiction in the German language.

\textsuperscript{161} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 221.

\textsuperscript{162} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 224.

\textsuperscript{163} Dasein in the German literally means “being-there,” which is what we might call “the human way of being.” Heidegger’s \textit{Being and Time} takes an almost exclusive look into ontology with this as its vantage point. It is important to note that Dasein does not mean the individual or the self, neither is it collective humanity as such.

\textsuperscript{164} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 210–224 [§35–38].
3.2. Fallen Comedy

One example of idle talk, or Gerede, that Heidegger gives in Being and Time is gossip or passing the word, but idle talk includes more than that. Heidegger claims “idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one’s own.”165 By understanding everything, Heidegger means to point out that neither nothing important or actual about our authentic being is being understood nor anything substantial about the world, and certainly no new truth is disclosed. It is the sort of thing that “one” would say and is understood the way “one” does.166 Fallen comedy is not the sort of discourse that seriously brings Dasein’s past and future together for it to claim as its own in an authentic fashion. Idle talk is a modified type of discourse that instead of disclosing things to Dasein serves “rather to close it off, and cover up the entities within-the-world … The fact that something has been said groundlessly, and then gets passed along in further retelling, amounts to perverting the act of disclosing [Erschliessen] into an act of closing off [Verschliessen] … Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing-off.”167

So much comedy comes off in this way. We almost know the punch line before it is said. We already know the joke that is to be told, save for some slight nuance. This is the sort of comedy that says things like “you all know men are like this” and “women are like that” or “white people are like this” and “black people are like that.” Any version of the “idiot” joke also comes across this way. This is the sort of joke that mocks a particular group for its idiocy, whether actual or imagined. It does not really matter which group of people are trying to screw in the proverbial “light bulb.” These are the sorts of jokes and comic instances that you need to be within a certain world or shared framework of intelligibility to understand, but after that there is nothing more to be understood and often nothing more is disclosed. The comedy is not based on

165 Heidegger, Being and Time, 213.
166 For instance, Das Man.
167 Heidegger, Being and Time, 213.
anything actual (the comedian or comic actor serves as the everyman or Das Man\textsuperscript{168}) and does not reveal anything so much as close off other interpretations that do not take the comedy as “one” would/should take it. Idle talk appears to reach a clear understanding even though it does not, and this discourages Dasein from new inquiry. We hear these same jokes over and over again, changing only slightly in their “retelling” and “getting passed along.” They disclose nothing new to our understanding.

If we look at what Heidegger says about curiosity, we see that “it concerns itself with seeing not in order to understand what is seen (that is, to come into a Being toward it) but just in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty … this kind of seeing … does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth.”\textsuperscript{169} This kind of comedy hides our Being-toward and is akin to always wanting to hear/see new jokes or comic performances without ever wanting or demanding of them to have substance or the ability to reveal truth. Fallen comedy ends up being a “constant possibility of distraction.”\textsuperscript{170} Much of what philosophers have said about comedy ends up pegging comedy as a type of distraction, recreation, or pleasurable and gratifying amusement.

Fallen comedy is the kind of comedy that just gives us the next laugh or groan, only for the sake of the laugh or groan.\textsuperscript{171} One does not generally dwell on the fart joke, or a sex joke,

\textsuperscript{168} See Henri Bergson, \textit{Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic}, trans. Clodesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: MacMillan and Co., 1911), 134–35. Bergson comments here, in chapter 3, that the comic character is of “ready-made” kind and that “[e]very comic character is a type. Inversely, every resemblance to a type has something comic in it … to depict characters, that is to say, general types, is the object of high-class comedy … there could be no better definition of comedy. Not only are we entitled to say that comedy gives us general types, but we might add that it is only one of all the arts that aims at the general; so that once the objective has been attributed to it, we have said all that it is and all that the rest cannot be … the essence of comedy.”

\textsuperscript{169} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 216; my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{170} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 216.

\textsuperscript{171} What is a fallen comedy or a true comedy has almost nothing to do with the artist but has much more to do with how the comedy is received by its audience or its preservers. The features which I articulate here can only be a guide as to how these comedies are usually received, however, the openness of the comedy allows it to be received as either fallen or truth-disclosing, though the structure of the comedy itself can lend itself better to being received in one of these two ways.
and, in a certain sense, there is nothing new disclosed through the perceiving of them. One might, however, attempt to authentically dwell on the fart joke or the sex joke if one considers in earnest wonder\textsuperscript{172} the place of the body and its unruly functions in our social context where “one” does not do or say things in this way. It brings to light a certain awkwardness of our assumed dualism in which our “mind/spirit/soul” should function smoothly and gracefully but often does not due to some bodily (mal)function. The woman is supposed to walk across the room, not slip on the banana peel. If we were disembodied minds, we would simply function smoothly and gracefully, but since we are in fact always embodied, this ungracefulness comes across as awkward, unsociable, and comic. It makes us shift our perspective to understand an oddly placed dualism in our world that deals with the expectations that “one” has for themselves and others, even though it is impossible to attain/maintain: i.e., everybody farts, and it is not always up to you as a disembodied mind to stop it when in an inappropriate situation. It is in this way that Bergson claims that all comedy is a type of social corrective.\textsuperscript{173}

If we consider this from a Heideggerian vantage point, the “they” can use laughter as a method of leveling down,\textsuperscript{174} as a closing off of certain possibilities of Dasein that do not cohere with the social order of one’s world. Diogenes the Cynic was perhaps the first philosopher to really bring to light the oddity of the public/private distinction for the way “one” ought to act. He would masturbate in the marketplace to the disgust and laughter of the ancient Athenians. This is


\textsuperscript{173}Bergson, \textit{Laughter}, chapter 2, part 1. The other way that the comic happens, according to Bergson, is when we repeat actions or do and/or represent “typical,” stock, or ready-made things. This is comic he claims because in reality everyone and every event is unique and happens only once; therefore repetition and things showing up as a type is an incongruous oddity that is laughable. This once again makes laughter a social corrective.

\textsuperscript{174}Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 165. Leveling down is also addressed by Kierkegaard in his 1846 pamphlet on society and media; see Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{The Present Age: On the Death of Rebellion} (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2010).
not what “one” does in public, in that shared social context, or in ours for that matter. Whenever I even relay this story to my students, they always laugh. Farting, masturbating, eliminating, and other bodily functions are humorous, particularly because they are not the way “one” ought to act, at least not in public. No one particularly needs to point this out to us, (or if they do it becomes an even more explicit case of leveling down). Instead, when it occurs, everyone sharing the same framework of intelligibility or social context is prone to laugh, often without the ability to prevent oneself from doing so, because we already understand the comic element in a way that is not entirely our own but is often disclosed as this sort of idle talk or discourse.

This brings to mind that we are embodied; this perspective shift is not merely mental in a dualistic way. When we laugh unintentionally, the mind/body distinction seems to dissolve into a certain embodied comic joy. Heidegger claims that Dasein’s “Being-with-one-another in the ‘they’ is … an intent, ambiguous watching of one another, a secret and reciprocal listening-in. Under the mask of ‘for-one-another,’ an ‘against-one-another’ is in play.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 219.

One can see this subtle “against-one-another” in play if we consider comedy a type of *social corrective* toward some cultural norm as Bergson does. Comedies often try and teach a lesson about being too rigid in one’s social context. The target of laughter is either too morally upright and stogy or too bawdy, ungraceful, or otherwise ill behaved. Unless we truly attempt to understand what it is that we are laughing at when we laugh, which seems to always be somewhat ambiguous, we have not truly attempted to dwell in an authentically wondering way.

Heidegger claims that ambiguity or *Zweideutigkeit* is the third characteristic feature of falling. He states that ambiguity is:

> the sort of thing which is accessible to everyone, and about which anyone can say anything, it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in genuine understanding, and what is not … Everyone is acquainted with what is up for discussion

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and what occurs, and everyone discusses it; but everyone also knows already how to talk
about what has to happen first—about what is not yet up for discussion but ‘really’ must
be done. Already everyone has surmised and scented out in advance what Others have
also surmised and scented out. This Being-on-the-scent is of course based upon
hearsay.\textsuperscript{176}

Ambiguity, along with idle talk and curiosity, maintains the mode of falling as according to
Heidegger, “so long as there is a possibility of a non-committal just-surmising-with-someone-
else. Being “in on it” with someone” but without any allegiance.\textsuperscript{177} This sort of being “in on it”
with someone really smacks of the kind of being we seem to exhibit when viewing something
comic. All comedy aims at an audience that is “in on” the joke, even if that audience is small,\textsuperscript{178}
while laughing alone often amounts to what many take to be madness.

We take the ambiguous position of laughing along with others at the comedy; we are “in
on” the understanding of what is going on and what will be going on. We may take a position
from the standpoint of hearsay, but not a committed one. People will often take part in laughing
at sexist or racist jokes, but when confronted with a charge of sexism or racism they will be
ambiguous about their position. Since they did in fact laugh, they cannot entirely disavow what
happened, but they would not want to commit themselves to the bigoted position.\textsuperscript{179} They are
generally unable to genuinely speak as to why they are laughing or what they are particularly
laughing at. Alternatively, social or political jokes with an implied ground of commitment will
often suffer the same fate, “one” might laugh at them but then have no allegiance or commitment
to the position or agenda that the comedy is espousing. A certain level of commitment or taking a
stand is necessary for an authentic mode of being. This is the sort of thing that people are not

\textsuperscript{176} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 217–218.
\textsuperscript{177} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 218.
\textsuperscript{178} Bergson, and Carroll both make this point about comedy.
\textsuperscript{179} At least we hope! This is also referred to as the \textit{attitude endorsement theory} and is a bit overly simplistic as we
may laugh at awful things we do not agree with, but there is something to it. See Noël Carroll, \textit{Humour: A Very
often prone to take in relation to a comedy, since they prefer to be absorbed in the “they” in their fallenness.

What is a fallen comedy or a true comedy has almost nothing to do with the artist or the artwork nor does it need to be explicitly structured in the ways I have described. It has much more to do with how the comedy is received by its audience or its preservers. The features I articulate here can only be a guide as to how these comedies are usually received; however, the openness of the comedy allows it to be received as either fallen or truth-disclosing, though the structure of the comedy itself can lend itself better to being received in one of these two ways. Comedy’s ambiguity, which I will touch on later, is different than the ambiguity of Dasein’s falling, though it does find itself rather at home in the “They.”

In fallenness, in our absorption into the “They,” we can see a highlighted type of comic response. When Dasein laughs at comedy in the mode of fallenness, Dasein is laughing without an authentic understanding, and even if truth is revealed, it is not taken ahold of due to absorption and evasion. Often people who laugh at comic events without properly knowing what they are laughing at. Yet, people often notice if someone joins in on a laugh when they have just walked up, had not heard the entirety of the joke, or should not understand what they are laughing at due to the joke being “inside.” One seems to naturally “fall” into communal laughter. It is usually in these kinds of situations that this lack of understanding, or their fallenness, becomes conspicuous, since the laughing usually signals “understanding,” i.e., “getting it” or being “in on” the joke or comic event. It is only when something like this happens that Dasein’s inauthentic falling might become something noticeable and present-at-hand. For the most part falling is not something present-at-hand.\(^\text{180}\)

\(^{180}\) Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 220.
Falling is usually a ready-to-hand smooth comportment through the world. We see it in the unthinking way we might ask about the weather, or ask and respond to the question of “how we’re doing?” or causally tell or laugh at a joke or funny image we encounter. In these situations, we are neither taking a hold of our past and our future in a resolute manner nor do we confront our inevitable death. Instead of striving for a wholeness in our lives, we lock ourselves into a holding pattern of evasion toward our own death. We would be in a “mode of evasion in the face of it [death]—giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically, and concealing it.”  

The fallen comedy often presents a typical and ready-made character that will also likely exhibit this mode of fallenness and evasion.

Most comedies do not involve the death of the protagonist(s), and they therefore lack the completeness of tragedies. The only true end to a life-story is, of course, death. The wholeness of an authentic life requires struggle and must be earned by taking a resolute responsibility for one’s past and one’s future possibilities in the face of one’s own death. Notably this is not something that Dasein can do as an individual isolated from the community; it must be done as a modified way of being Das Man. One’s own authentic possibilities are not a type of inward haecceity but rather something that must come from the real possibilities of one’s community and social context. Fallen comedy, or comedy that is not received as true comedy, is not going to help us authentically grasp Dasein’s being, and in that sense, these comedies are not going to be “great works of art.” Falling with its characteristic features “ensure[s] that what is genuinely and newly created is out of date as soon as it emerges before the public.”

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183 For more on the necessity of a social context for being authentic, see Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (New York: Routledge, 2004), especially chapter 8.
A comedy that can constantly bring into question the meaning of being anew is a comedy that will be a wellspring of great and lasting significance due to its ability to continuously draw our attention to this unresolved issue. Comedy can help highlight the ontological structure of our being; it can readily lend itself to sustain Dasein’s falling in a constant self-entangling, feeding, and maintaining of this mode of being in perhaps the most efficient way possible. A true comedy can help us to grasp our being in an authentic way as well as disclosing a type of primordial truth. It is not that comedy has not always had this capability nor that it has not worked this way continuously. The problem is that comedy has not been recognized as doing this or perhaps that this has been forgotten—and forgotten for a long time, perhaps since the time of the Greeks, but more likely since the advent of modernity.

Still, most artworks, even tragedies, will mostly be taken in authentically by Dasein. It appears that comedy is just much more prone to be taken in this inauthentic mode of falling than most other forms of art. This is perhaps why comedy is the preeminent genre of contemporary society in the US. It lends itself so well to the “They” and to “falling.” It feeds and sustains Dasein’s falling, ever evading the thought of death. It is almost the laughing away of death. This may present us with one of the most dangerous arts when it comes to grasping being authentically, but perhaps Heidegger and others should also consider comedy’s promise.

3.3. Great Art, Comedy, and the Subject/Object Divide

This brings us to the second reason for Heidegger’s neglect of comedy. Heidegger explicitly states in OWA that he is only concerned with “great art,”\textsuperscript{185} or, as Guignon puts it, “monumental

\textsuperscript{185} OWA, 20.
works of art, works that make a lasting impression on a culture.” Julian Young holds a similar position claiming that “art is only great if, like the Greek temple or medieval cathedral, it possesses world-historical significance.” These great works of monumental and world-historical significance are considered from the vantage point of their current working within a still existent community that receives the artwork as meaningful or mattering. Most comedies of the ancient Greek era, by virtue of the lack of their preservation, no longer matter to any living community. These works cease to be at work and, as such, cannot presently be great or monumental works in the way that Greek tragedies are. Comedies on the whole tend toward having a deep level of hypercontextualization with their “moment in time” such that they rarely “make a lasting impression on a culture.” If they are comedies featuring falling, or are a fallen comedy, then due to the very nature of falling they are out of date as soon as they appear. Comedy tends to be about whatever is topical in a community and tends to lose its meaning over time due to a loss of context—unless such a context continues to be meaningful. We shall return to this shortly, but before we proceed any further, a better understanding of the work of art and its relation to the happening of truth must be adumbrated.

According to Heidegger in OWA, the work of art is neither about the artist who Heidegger says is “almost like a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work.” It is also not about some sort of subjective feeling or experience that we get from the work as object. According to Ian Thomson, “aesthetics looks for art in the wrong place (at a derivative rather than primordial level of human interaction with the

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187 Young, Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art, 7.
188 This is not surprising, though I could not imagine future preservers maintaining a large canon of our contemporary romantic comedies as “great works.” Also, obviously some of the works are lost due to historical contingency.
189 OWA, 19.
world).”

If we consider a work of art like the Mona Lisa, which one generally considers a great work of art, one might consider what makes it a great work.

As Guignon claims, great works of art “play the role of opening what he [Heidegger] calls a ‘clearing’ or an ‘open region’ in which anything can come to show up as meaningful in some way or other. And insofar as such a clearing is regarded as truth in the original sense of that word [aletheia, as unconcealment or disclosedness] … Heidegger can characterize a work of art as a ‘happening of truth.’” This happening of truth “opens up, in its own way, the being of beings. This opening up, i.e., unconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work … Art is the setting-itself-to-work of truth.” In a related way, Thomson claims that, rather than an aesthetic experience, artworks form and inform “our basic historical sense of what is and what matters.” Julian Young claims that this earlier understanding of the philosophy of art:

took for granted that the point of art was to be ‘truth’-disclosing, to disclose to its audience, at least the outline, the shape of the proper way to live. That ‘aesthetics’ has displaced ‘philosophy of art’ reveals, Heidegger believes, that we have abandoned the ethical conception of art, Art, he holds, no longer provides, nor is expected to provide, guidance as to how to live. Rather, it is designed to provide ‘aesthetic experience.’

The ethical import of comedy as a social corrective never quite seems to lose this though, which may be why it is so hard to take comedy aesthetically.

What the work of art opens up, according to Heidegger, is a world; the work sets up a world in the sense of the “world of Ancient Greece,” in the case of the temple at Paestum, the “world of the farmer,” in the case of van Gogh’s shoes, or the “world of US politics and

191 Guignon, “Meaning in the Work of Art,” 33; see also OWA, 16.
192 OWA, 19.
193 Thomson, Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity, 56; this forms what he calls “Ontotheology.”
194 Young, Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art, 8–9.
bureaucracy,” if we consider a television show such as Parks and Recreation. Heidegger claims that “standing there, the temple work opens up a world.”

According to Guignon:

such a temple is not merely an ornament or adornment that a group of people tacks on to its already established world. On the contrary, Heidegger holds that it is only through the temple that the world of this people comes to be realized and defined for the first time… the appearance of the temple opens a space of significance in which things can now show up as counting or mattering in determinate ways.

Instead of the work of art being merely a thing for our aesthetic pleasure, the work becomes the bedrock, framework, or “background of intelligibility for a community.” In this sense, the Mona Lisa transcends the subject/object divide.

The Mona Lisa forms a world historical framework for all of Western painting. Its importance has to do with its history in the context of painting techniques and portraiture: the history surrounding it, including it being stolen, its place in the Louvre, and the continual swarm of spectators that flock to view it, its relation to Da Vinci, and its reception among its preservers. The Mona Lisa also elicits the question from its audience, “Why is this painting so great?,” which can bring one to dwell upon it. It could also easily be taken in an inauthentic mode of falling, i.e., the rushing to the front of the crowd at the Louvre only to take a picture of it before quickly and contently receding from it, or to quickly sit in aesthetic judgment before moving on to the next piece, perhaps the Venus de Milo or the next page of an art history book.

When its entire social and historical context is taken from it and the painting is judged from a

195 OWA, 21.
197 Guignon, “Meaning in the Work of Art,” 36. See also Young, Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art, 7. Young states, “What Heidegger is doing here is agreeing with Hegel that nothing less than the reception of the artwork by a culture (‘people’) as a whole is sufficient to establish its ‘greatness’. Art is only great if, like the Greek temple or medieval cathedral, it possesses world-historical significance.” Herbert Dreyfus goes so far as to claim that “Heidegger holds that a working artwork is so important to a community that people must try to make the work clear and coherent and to make everyone follow it in all aspects of their lives.” See Herbert Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 289–316, here 300. This is a far stronger claim than the one I am trying to make here.
198 There is a lot of academic contention regarding exactly what a “preserver” is and what role or function they play in OWA.
purely aesthetic point of view, the judgment may be different. The work of art, when not taken aesthetically and taken in this Heideggerian way, brings into being a complex context of relations that reveals the happening of truth in a world. Heidegger claims that “Truth happens only by establishing itself in the strife and space it itself opens up.” 199 This happening of truth occurs in the open space that is established in the strife between earth and world. By earth, Heidegger neither means this planet nor does he mean something like dirt. Earth is that which is concealed, sheltered, unresolved, undisclosed, and unexplained. 200 Young claims that “it is this region of ineffability, the, as it were, epistemological ‘depth’ to Being, which Heidegger calls ‘earth’ [is found].” 201 The world, by contrast, is “defined as the disclosure of meaningful possibilities for action available to a people.” 202 World is the open available options or “essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people.” 203 The two of these are inseparable because “every decision … is grounded in something that cannot be mastered, something concealed, something disconcerting. Otherwise it would never be a decision.” 204 Heidegger claims that “world is grounded on earth, and earth rises up through world.” 205 Dreyfus claims that “Heidegger calls the way the artwork solicits the culture to make the artwork explicit, coherent, and encompassing the world aspect of the work. He calls the way the artwork and its associated practices resist such totalization the earth.” 206 Thomson characterizes the relationship between earth and world when he says:

Earth … both informs and sustains this meaningful world and also resists being interpretively exhausted by it. The earth provides that ‘combination of recalcitrance and support’ that allows a great artwork to quietly pulsate with an ‘inexhaustible abundance’

199 OWA, 36.
201 Young, Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art, 40.
203 OWA, 26.
204 OWA, 31.
205 OWA, 26.
of possibilities while also maintaining the sanctity of the uninterpretable within the very world of meaning it conveys.  

It is in this inexhaustible abundance that comedy can be great. All comedy is polysemic in some way or another, and when it is “great” it has this inexhaustible character. For example, mocking, even especially vicious and one-sided mocking, can also be taken as “the highest form of flattery”; it is at very least reactively bringing to the fore the person or thing to be mocked, since it is deserving of our attention. Often times we are made to wonder whether certain jokes are morally permissible due to their ambivalence or if they are “just wrong.” So long as the comedy brings to light a meaningful decision that is not yet worked out, “resists totalization” in the context of our world, and remains “inexhaustibly abundant” with meaning, it can continue to work. Comedy is especially good at highlighting this tension between earth and world and often brings us to a new happening of truth due to a fresh comic interpretation.

According to Thomson’s interpretation of “great art,” a work will need to be able to transcend our common aesthetic way of viewing art such that we can take it in a mode of ontological pluralism or plural realism. The great artwork must be polysemic. Ontological pluralism or plural realism, according to Thomson, is about a multiply suggestive outline rather than a final design. Thomson claims that plural realism for Heidegger is:

- to no longer preconceive everything we experience as modern objects to be controlled or as late-modern resources to be optimized, but instead to learn to discern and creatively develop the independent meanings, solicitations, and affordances of things, staying open to the multiple suggestions that things offer us and dedicating ourselves to bringing forth such hints creatively and responsibly into the world.

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207 Thomson, Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity, 90.
208 While it is the case that everything may be polysemic or multiply interpreted, it seems that comedy is conspicuously and especially found to be this way.
209 It is in this way that Thomson claims that Heidegger is a post-modern, i.e., in the sense that we are transcending our modern/late modern aesthetic framework for the philosophy of art.
211 Thomson, Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity, 25.
Comedy, which is always somewhat ambivalent, seems to be a perfect example of plural realism. This plural realism is a postmodern interpretation of art that attempts to escape aesthetics from within. Also, jokes/comic events in general seem to take our understanding beyond looking at the world as “resources to be optimized” or “objects to be controlled.” It makes our experience the sort of thing that is tarrying without this normal, i.e., modern/late-modern way of looking at the world.

In “The Age of the World Picture,” Heidegger speaks of enframing (Gestell) and in “Question Concerning Technology” he writes about treating everything as a standing reserve to be optimized (Bestand). These two concepts taken together reveal our modern/late-modern framework: a framework that seems near impossible to overcome or transcend. The issue is that if Heidegger is right about our modern framework, enframing everything for optimum utilization, it seems as though we cannot escape aesthetics. It is our primary understanding of the world of art. However, Thomson provides an illuminating interpretation that leaves room for an escape from this framework. He states:

Heidegger seems to mean us to take his words seriously: Aesthetic representation now possesses ‘a conceptual machinery which nothing can stand against’ … We reach a dead-end, that is, until we hear these words differently, as instead suggesting that (the) nothing can indeed stand against the otherwise irresistible conceptual machinery of aesthetics … for Heidegger, the nothing is not nothing at all but, rather, does something; ‘the nothing itself noths or nihilates [das Nichts selbst nichtet]’ [P90/ GA9 114], as he notoriously put it in 1929. This active ‘noth-ing’ of the nothing was the first name Heidegger came up with to describe the phenomenological manifestation of that which both elicits and eludes complete conceptualization, an initially inchoate phenomenon we encounter when we go beyond our guiding conception of what-is.212

It is not that we cannot escape the framework; it is that only through the Nothing that we can hope to transcend it. Thomson claims that this Nothing from “What is Metaphysics?” is an idea that Heidegger struggled with throughout his career giving it different names at different times.

212 Thomson, Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity, 84–85.
Specifically he claims that this early “nothing that nihilates” becomes the “earth” in OWA and later “Being as such.”

The Nothing or the earth or Being as such eludes proper description by its very nature. Anytime we could say something concrete about it we have attached being to it. How does one describe the ineffable, the inchoate, and the so-called “blooming buzzing confusion” that escapes conceptualization? It can only be talked around. Yet it is always there, and while it is easiest to conceive of visually as the “edges,” so to speak, of our active intentions of the world (i.e., that which is outside of what we are fully grasping, the fuzzy background of sorts), it is also there in our understanding, discourse, and moods. The trick seems to be to allow this inchoate nothing or earth to help allow us to let “being be” or unfold for us in a more open manner.

Our expectations change when we are viewing a comedy, and we are more open to being. We allow fantastical and irrational situations to unfold without being sure about what to expect next, as comedy tends to elicit a sudden shift in our understanding of the situation.\(^{213}\) This shift is always already expected so long as we are in a comic mood, and thus, when viewing a comedy in a comic mood the modern/late-modern way of looking at the world must be transcended lest we miss what is comic in the comedy. We, as interpreters of a comic event, must creatively come to understand what, if anything, is humorous about it. This is evident when we fail to “get” the joke/comedy, or fail to “be in on it.” Our average everyday way of enframing the world mostly fails to make sense of comedy, as we must make sense of the comic outside of this framework. As Thomson might claim, this is an active and creative process that requires us to “see things differently.” We must take the lie, the exaggeration, or something that might seem entirely sad or terrible in another mood and try to grapple with a perspective shift such that the work now seems

comic. Otherwise we end up taking the sarcasm, irony, or hyperbole as just a lie and the artist of such comedy as a liar. Further works are now suspect since they might not lead to the proper optimization or control of the world we live in; in fact, the comic seems to have very little to do with any of that.

The idea of optimizing the comic in some sort of modern technological way strikes us as funny. The Comedy Central show *South Park* has an episode addressing this.\(^{214}\) The aforementioned episode depicts a comedy awards show where the Germans are awarded the prize of “least funny people in the world.”\(^{215}\) The Germans, who are seriously offended by this, have their scientists create “the ultimate-comedian”: a robot, the XJ-212 Funnybot, which is made to logically produce the funniest jokes and to prove that the Germans are not the least humorous people on the planet. It is often said that jokes are all about timing, and they claim that the Funnybot has perfect timing within 0.0001 milliseconds. This is an obvious attempt to show optimal maximization of comic timing. The robot is so successful that it puts all other comedians out of work. The robot eventually determines that comedy is optimized when the maximum amount of awkwardness is produced, and therefore the most awkward situation would be to destroy all life on earth, since “nothing would be more awkward than destroying that which created Funnybot.”\(^{216}\) Aside from the jab taken at Germans for not being very funny and for creating a machine that plans to kill all humans, this episode reveals something true about comedy, i.e., that it is not the sort of thing that can be logically optimized and controlled the way we take most other objects in our world.

\(^{214}\) *South Park*, season 15, episode 2, “Funnybot,” written and directed by Trey Parker, aired May 4, 2011, on Comedy Central.

\(^{215}\) The other nominees are the Japanese and the Yupik Eskimos.

\(^{216}\) *South Park*, “Funnybot.”
Comedy cannot just be a matter of qualities inherent in the object, i.e., the artwork, something that a machine could logically optimize and mass produce. Otherwise we could just have one comic robot tell all the jokes, or analogously, we do not really need new art or art at all. For that matter, nature could suffice in an aesthetic framework so long as we already have optimized pieces of beautiful and sublime work. Perhaps all we need is a sunset and a picture of the churned-up sea. It also cannot be merely a subjective projection; we need others to laugh or else we will appear unintelligible, immoral, or mad (or perhaps just nervous and out of place as Freud would claim). Something of a shared mood and world that transcends the subject/object divide is necessary for the comedy to work. Something akin to Thomson’s plural realism seems to be at work in true comedies. It is necessary to note that while almost all works of art could transcend this modern framework, and to show this is the goal of many Heideggerians doing the philosophy of art, comedy is special in that it is the least likely to lend itself to an aesthetic interpretation.

Another way in which comedy works can be highlighted through the structure of “the joke” or, in comedy generally, is our openness to being when we are attuned in a comic way. Perhaps a joke can make this clearer. A racehorse has been getting old and hasn’t won a race in a while, and he knows that if he doesn’t win a race soon, or at least come in third, that his owners would surely kill him. So when he spies the best racehorse at the track he trots up to him and says, “Hey do you think you could throw the next race for me? I’m kind of getting old, and I haven’t won a race in a while, and if I don’t at least show in the next race I’m sure my owners are gonna send me to the glue factory. Do you think you could do me this favor to save my life?” The prizewinning horse replies, “I don’t know. I don’t know you, and I’m not sure if it’s right to throw the race. That seems like it might be cheating and immoral. Also, how do I know you’re
not trying to scam me? And further, even if I am saving your life, Kant would always say it is wrong to cheat, as that is not universalizable.” The first horse then says, “Come on, they’re gonna kill me if you don’t throw this race. Do you really want that on your conscience?” The prizewinning horse begins to look uncomfortable and says, “I’m just not sure I can do this for you.” At this point a dog, who had been nearby and heard the whole exchange, walks over to the two horses and says to the prizewinning horse, “How could you not throw the race! What could possibly be more moral than saving this guy’s life?” Then the one horse looks at the other and says, “Holy shit, a talking dog!”217 The point of this joke is to highlight how much is taken for granted in our framework of intelligibility when we are comically attuned or in a comic mood. We allow fanciful and fantastic states of being to go unquestioned. That there are talking horses seems natural for the joke, and then we allow for them to be creatures engaged in a moral quandary, which seems fine too. We even allow for the horse to exhibit the human expression of discomfort. Even more surprising, we allow the horse a basic understanding of Kantian morality.

We go along unsure of where the joke is leading us. This is the inchoate and undisclosed earth element in comedy. We attempt to grasp what the point of this is without a clear understanding of its being as of yet. The joke reveals a certain tension between earth and world that is to come to better light with its punchline, though not ever fully. We have the unclear and unquantified earthy tension of “where this is all heading” within the fantastic world of the talking racehorses at the track. This joke then jars us back into the context of “reality” with its punch line and makes us think about jokes and joking in general, or rather, it illuminates the structure of the joke and the comic mood. Comedy allows us to change our usual way of being in the world

217 I owe this joke to Harvey Cormier who used it toward a different end in explicating the Kubrick film 2001: A Space Odyssey. See Harvey Cormier, “2001: Modern Art and Modern Philosophy,” in Philosophy and Film, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland, Thomas E. Wartenberg (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183–200. I also realize this is not the funniest joke, but it does serve to highlight the structure of comedy and joking, i.e., setup then punchline.
by entering into a comic mood, which allows the world to be disclosed in different ways. Things become more polysemic. Comedy can offer a fresh perspective on a meaningful decision that needs to be worked out, and it has the advantage of a mood that allows for a much greater openness to being. A serious mood would not allow such fantasies as talking horses and would immediately assume that the speaker was lying or mad.

I believe that this understanding that a comic mood can better allow for new and different perspectives is at the root of what Nietzsche is getting at when he calls for “gay science” or “joyful wisdom” in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche is practically quoting Kant when he states that “‘where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking does not amount to anything’ … let us prove that this is a prejudice.” 218 Kant and others want to claim that a comic work “produces no thought that carries any interest with it … [and] by which in the end nothing is thought.” 219 If comedy can in fact get at a happening of truth and help open up a world or allow us to come to a meaningful stand on a decision, then it may be shown that this is indeed just a prejudice.

### 3.4. True Comedy

The happening of truth that occurs in a great work of art is the working out of meaningful decisions in the context of a historical people’s significant possibilities. This “working out” requires there to be something to be “worked out,” so it is necessary for there to be unexplained and inchoate elements or else they would not be what we properly call “meaningful decisions.” If someone were to ask me if I made the decision to wear shoes today, I might be inclined to say no, since I did not really deliberate over it or really even think about it. There was nothing

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218 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §327. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §54. Kant also claims in this section that when we are whimsical, i.e., in a comic mood we “put ourselves into a certain mental disposition, in which everything is judged in a way quite different from the usual one.”

219 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 331–332 [§54]. For more on this see chapter 2.
confusing, unexplained or concealed in this context, and therefore the “decision” (if we want to call it that) was at the very least not meaningful. If, on the other hand I want to go to an all-day music festival, “the world of the concert,” where I am likely to have my feet stepped on, I might have to make (a somewhat) meaningful decision about whether I want to wear boots to protect my toes or sneakers to protect against blisters. In this situation my future possibilities are not settled (they are concealed by earth), and I must come to a decision about the welfare of my feet.²²⁰

According to Guignon, “the artwork sets up a challenge to a people, and the people realize and define what is at stake in that challenge by taking a stand on what is questionable and unresolved in their world.”²²¹ Heidegger uses the example of Antigone, a tragedy by Sophocles, to highlight how a great drama “transforms that speech [the work] so that now every essential word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and what unholy, what is great and what small, what is brave and what cowardly, what is noble and what fugitive, what is master and what slave.”²²² It may at first seem inappropriate to include comedy as a work of art that can “transform speech” and “put up for decision what is holy and what unholy,” but only if we concern ourselves with what I have called fallen comedy. Comedy can often bring to light hypocrisy and what we deem “unholy” through wit, irony and mocking. It can delimit what is “holy,” not just reveal the “holy” itself.

Julian Young, interpreting Heidegger in a way that would seem true to Heidegger himself, claims that the earth in OWA is also the “holy” and the “mysterious” and that “the fundamental character of “earth” as it occurs in “The Origin” is, I believe, that it is the principle

²²⁰ This example is an adaptation of one used by Charles Guignon, “Heidegger’s Concept of Freedom: 1927–1930” (unpublished manuscript), Microsoft Word file.
²²² OWA, 22; emphasis mine. Notably, this quote by Heidegger is a reference to Heraclitus’ frag. 53. Oddly, readers of Heraclitus often notice his wit and humor, though Heidegger never does.
of holiness.” Young points out the “truth happens awesomely because the world presences as holy.” This interpretation is based on the examples that Heidegger gives in OWA, i.e., the Greek temple, the cathedral, and the tragic play that is part of a holy festival. It is also based on the later writings on Hölderlin’s poetry, which look to the festival in the Greeks, the betrothal of men to gods, the wedding, holy mourning, and round dance. All of these “holy” festivals brought us beyond a mere holiday in the sense of cessation of work or Arbeitspause and into authentic wonder and a festive mood that can lead to authentic care. Young goes on to claim that Heidegger wants us to think of art in a festive mood, which is similar to Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian split. He claims that the Dionysian is like the earth, a type of uncontrolled and boundless chaos that is tempered by the Apollonian intelligibility and individuation that is the world. He points out that the Greek “tragic” festivals were not like modern theatre, since these were true festivals in a religious or holy sense, i.e., something that ethically orients us in our world. Heidegger believes that we have lost this and that we can only regain this by transcending the aesthetic interpretation of art and by fulfilling “the essential character of any festival—the gathering together of community with that “wonder” that happens in the work (the “communal” condition).” While none of this seems particularly comic, save for the “communal” condition, I believe this is where we can see how and perhaps why Heidegger and Young neglect comedy.

The funny thing about Heidegger and his understanding of the festive is that it lacks at least half of what is truly festive. The Dionysian included tragedy and comedy, ending with the

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223 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art*, 38.
224 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art*, 42.
225 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art*, 73–75. Examples of this in the later works of Heidegger can be found in such essays as “Remembrance,” “Building Dwelling Thinking,” and “Poetically Man Dwells” among others.
226 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art*, 86.
227 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art*, 88.
228 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy Of Art*, 89.
latter, which gave them the last resonating note. I do agree with Young that the earth/world
distinction roughly mirrors the Dionysian/Apollonian distinction from BoT, but it is far from
being the more rigidly structured event that Heidegger describes. Laughter and the carnivalesque
seem to be part and parcel with the festive. Writers such as Bakhtin and Charles Taylor put a lot
of importance on this point. What would a festival be without laughter? In the Middle Ages,
festivals could last for about three months of the year.\textsuperscript{229} They were communal egalitarian events
that were chaotic and dissolved many of the normal boundaries that existed for them. Further,
they delimited the holy, the sacred, and the well-ordered hierarchical existence that they were
used to. Heidegger and Young by default only tend to look at the well organized and ordered
festival events and elements. What Heidegger neglects in the comic is the important element of
disorder and chaos that marks the truly egalitarian communal festival. This disorder and chaos
are not used pejoratively; they can ambivalently swing both ways between producing what
Young wants to call authentic care and an oblivious and violent cruelty.\textsuperscript{230}

Though Taylor does not take this quite as far as Bakhtin would like, he still holds the
position that carnival (i.e., the festival life of the medievals) was necessary as a certain sort of
release valve for their exceedingly well ordered and rigidly hierarchical society. He wants to
claim that “[t]he weight of virtue and good order was so heavy and so much steam built up under
this suppression of instinct, that there had to be periodic blow-outs if the whole system were not
to fly apart.”\textsuperscript{231} These blow-outs happen because of a primitive tension between the opposites of
order and chaos or structure and anti-structure.\textsuperscript{232} These medieval festivals have an egalitarian

\textsuperscript{230} As Nietzsche points out in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, §2, it can be that intoxicating “witches brew” of sensuality and
cruelty.
\textsuperscript{232} I do not hold that these are actual or literal opposites but instead an alterity. See chapter 2.
view that produces a topsy-turvy world: feasts of misrule, boy bishops, making the fool king for a day, and the use of masks to hide and equalize one’s identity. In ancient Athens they would even release prisoners from jail for the Dionysia.

The delimiting of the holy was a crucial part of the festival but perhaps even more important was the appeal to community: Taylor, following Victor Turner, makes the insightful claim that “[t]he order we are mocking is important but not ultimate; what is ultimate is the community it serves; and this community is fundamentally egalitarian; it includes everyone.”

It is not the betrothal, the wedding, or the round dance that make the festive mood; it is the drunken reception thereafter. It is in the equal mingling of the families, rather than their structured division at the ceremony, or the shoving of the cake into each other’s faces, rather than the solemn vows that are taken, that make the festival festive.

According to Taylor, festivals reflect a certain sort of necessity of opposition. Kosmos and Chaos need each other, and as Taylor claims, “all structure needs anti-structure.” For Taylor, these ancient religious orders always allowed for an outside and a limit to their order; they were delimited by the festival and, in a certain sense, by the comic.

The problem with rational modern secular orders is that they are self-enclosed and fail to have an outside, or delimiting. They consider themselves without a limit and or an outside to their perfected rational order. There can be no change save for revolution, since these orders lack the anti-structural element. Taylor concludes that “we need to tack back and forth between codes and their limitation, seeking the better society, without ever falling into the illusion that we might leap out of this tension of opposites into pure anti-structure, which could reign alone, a purified

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233 Taylor, A Secular Age, 47.
234 Taylor, A Secular Age, 47.
non-code, forever.” This anti-structural element found in festival was used to loosen boundaries. The festivals more than being just release valves allowed the borderers, boundaries, and limits of the order to be tested and adjusted even after order was restored. This is why it is not simply a strict binary of opposites; it alters what was once the order. It is in this way that comedy can have its highest level of efficaciousness. It can create an alterity that in not a merely a transitory antipode to the reigning order.

Perhaps in a way similar to how anxiety “is what first makes fear possible,” the festive mood may be what first makes the comic mood possible. It may be the opposite end to anxiety that we find our primordial grounding in care (Sorge). Perhaps it is in an egalitarian oneness with Being-in-the-world as such that we may also find care, coming from no one and nowhere in particular. The festive again mirrors anxiety in the sense that we are festive about our “authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world.” The possibility of freedom and change are inherent in the festive, and the festive and festival, as all of the aforementioned authors have noted, seems to be a basic, fundamental, primordial, and ineradicable component to the human way of being as such.

3.5. A Heideggerian Interpretation of Aristophanes

Perhaps this festive mood is hidden from us, and perhaps it has been forgotten, but if it exists our authors would have to all agree that it should appear in ancient Greek comic and tragic festivals. So now we turn to a phenomenological examination of ancient Greek comedy.

Aristophanes, a contemporary of Sophocles, crafted great works of comedy for his world. Our preservers and historians have maintained eleven out of approximately forty plays by this

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235 Taylor, A Secular Age, 54.
236 Heidegger, Being and Time, 230 [I.6.40].
237 Heidegger, Being and Time, 232.
comic playwright and a number of these plays are still performed regularly. The works of Aristophanes are generally considered Old Comedy. The key features that distinguish Old Comedy are that it usually directly mocked, slandered, or insulted powerful, contemporary, social, religious, or political figures and often addressed topical social, cultural, and political issues. Much of what was funny in these plays required a shared understanding of that particular people’s past and some investment in their future. This ridicule was also directed toward a projected futuristic thinking about an existing figure or issue in that world. The prominent political figure Kleon brought charges of slander against Aristophanes after a particularly scathing assault on his character. Plays such as *Lysistrata*, *Birds*, and *Clouds* all bring forth controversial discourse on meaningful issues of that time: war, for instance, in the first two cases, the role of women in society in *Lysistrata*, and what to make of Socrates in the latter case. From what we have of Old Comedy, we can see that it is very much concerned with taking a stand on meaningful decisions that must be made. These comedies playfully take up both the past and the future in an attempt to produce a happening of truth from the strife between the world of the comedy and the concealed and as yet unresolved issues brought forth by the earth. This can be seen in the following interpretation of *Lysistrata*—a Heideggerian interpretation, if you will.

The plot of *Lysistrata* is simple; the women of Athens and Sparta are tired of the Peloponnesian War that has been devastating all of Greece and plan to end it by staging a sex

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238 K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1. Only Euripides has more extant plays preserved from this classical era of ancient Greek theater. Euripides has eighteen or nineteen extant plays, while Sophocles and Aeschylus each only have around seven extant plays.

239 Some scholars have suggested that the late extant plays of Aristophanes be considered “middle comedy,” but this is debated.

240 One of the key differences between Old, Middle, and New Comedy is that starting in 388 under the new Macedonian rule strict censorship of the comic theater was enforced. Playwrights were no longer able to directly mock contemporary figures or write about hot political topics. Middle and New Comedy, in a sense, lost its bite, and with that its potential to be “great art.”

241 Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 99–100. Kleon lost the case and Aristophanes then continued mocking him in future plays such as *Acharnians* and *Knights* (lines 424 and 581). He also mentions these earlier mockings in *Clouds* (lines 549–550).

242 Most recently, Spike Lee produced and cowrote a modern take on *Lysistrata* in his 2015 film *Chi-Raq.*
strike until their husbands declare peace between Athens and Sparta. While the play is silly, and rife with belligerent sexual props, innuendo, and bawdy scenes, the work of art “puts up for decision” something of the utmost importance, war. The Peloponnesian War was still going on when this play was first performed and all of Athens was in great peril. This topic of peace and war shows up often in Aristophanes’ preserved works. *Birds* may be interpreted to be a pro-war or an ironic anti-war play. It brings to presence more inchoate earth than many of his other plays. This play, which is still often performed for contemporary audiences, has many ironic themes coursing through it. These ironic themes make it difficult to provide an authoritative interpretation, as is often the case with comedy. It is left up to the historical community of the time to interpret its meaning or to leave it open in its polysemy.

Each occasion of presenting a play is a new happening of truth. Heidegger claims that “the establishment of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being of a kind which never was before and never will be again.” Gadamer similarly makes the Heideggerian claim that “the viewer of today not only sees things in a different way, he sees different things.” A production of *Lysistrata* today is a very different happening of truth than it was to its original fifth-century world. At that time all of the actors were men dressed in women’s clothing wearing ridiculous looking masks. Part of the comedy and truth of the world of the fifth-century occasion of the play is found in the fact that women behaving in this fashion would have been considered ludicrous, and not in the way you might first think.

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243 See Jeffrey Henderson, “Mass versus Elite and the Comic Heroism of Peisetairos,” in *The City as Comedy: Society and Representation in Athenian Drama*, ed. G. W. Dobrov (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 135–48. This pro-war interpretation tends to be overlooked, since most commentators tend to portray Aristophanes as a consistently anti-war writer. This play may have influenced the Athenian’s to go forward with what ended up being the disastrous Sicilian Expedition of 415 BCE.

244 OWA, 37.

Women were not to be involved with politics directly and had no legitimate control over their husband’s fornication during this era. Aristotle, when speaking of tragedy, claims that it is difficult to make a woman appear “good” or “useful” (χειρον), and she should never be portrayed as clever (δεινήν) because it is not fitting (οὐχ ἄρμόττον). When *Lysistrata* is presented in a contemporary performance, it is usually acted by both sexes, and while the women’s bawdy behavior may be funny, we are not struck by the ludicrousness of women engaging in politics and engaging in it well. The relationship of mutually exclusive sexual fidelity, which is the norm of our historical community, was not present in the “world of ancient Athens.”

Foucault points out in his *History of Sexuality*, volume 2: *The Use of Pleasure* that the husband and wife relation of this era was one-sidedly set up for exclusivity on the part of the wife only. There were no official taboos for the husband. His sexual congress with someone other than his wife was culturally permissible, however, being exclusive was a mode of self-mastery that was praised. This is also an era where the rape of one’s wife was not illegal. The women address the issue of “being forced” early in the play. Lysistrata tells them to resist until beaten but then to “submit, but disagreeably: [because] men get no pleasure in sex when they have to force you.” This seems to be a disconcerting solution to say the least. Many of these ancient *ludicrous* elements of the play are no longer part of our interpretation of the play (thankfully).

Heidegger could claim of this play that “the world of the work that stands there has disintegrated.” There is a sense in which these plays are what *has been* and that this world can

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248 OWA, 20. This claim is made in reference to Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which is why it is at least equally appropriate for Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. 
never be regained. The world of the happening of that *Lysistrata* has decayed and lost some of its former self-sufficiency. Despite this, *Lysistrata* is still a working work of art in the sense that certain of its elements still have a very meaningful context that provides a “background of intelligibility for a community.” The role of women in society is still an issue that we must take a stand on. We still sadly inhabit a mostly male-dominated world despite our best efforts to overcome sexism. Also, the question of war in a democracy is always put to a decision in each historical community that presents this play. It is because this play has had a “lasting impression on culture” that I claim it is a great or monumental work.

As was stated earlier, comedy’s topical nature causes it to be hypercontextualized to a very specific time within a very specific world. If the context or topic that is addressed in a comedy is no longer present in the community of a historical people, the world decay begins. For comedy this can happen rapidly. The happening of truth becomes stale, and the workings out of the decisions put into question are no longer relevant.\(^{249}\) Unlike tragedies, comedies become much more noticeably decayed because jokes and humor trade on a shared context of intelligibility where incongruities and ridicule are meaningful. When jokes fail they come forth as inchoate earth that we can no longer understand nor interpret; they are no longer meaningful in the context of our world.

Almost all becomes the inchoate earth when you can no longer provide a meaningful interpretation for the work of art. Jokes about people that we have no historical record of illuminate a concealing of an original truth of the work that has suffered an obtrusive and conspicuous world-decay. A comedy can be a “great” or monumental work when it has an

\(^{249}\) For instance, Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, a once “great” work, no longer works for modernity, because it portrays Socrates as a pedantic miscreant and buffoon. The world of Athens made the meaningful decision to put this man to death. Modern audiences and preservers have decided differently about Socrates due mostly to the dialogues of Plato. As such, this play is rarely staged and mostly read by classicists, philosophers and those involved in the dramatic arts.
impact beyond the time of its reception and when it takes up a world’s past and future, its throwness and projection, as an essential feature of its work. The working out of the truth of a very particular historical world is instantiated best through the works of comedy, but by the same token, it generally leads to the closing off of its reinterpretation by future preservers. This is the main reason for our lack of preservation of comedies. While they are incredible historical, philological, and philosophical records, most of them fail to be compelling works of art. Their meaning is so contextualized that the work often soon closes off the meaning at stake. Guignon claims “as long as the work is working, its meaning is open-ended, constantly in contention, defined by decisions a people makes in taking up its challenge and carrying it forward in time.”

I contend that comedy deserves an equal role to tragedy when its works are taken as great, i.e., when they are received as true comedy and when they are not; we can still learn about a very specific happening of truth for historical people at a particular time or what works of art feed into falling for people. In this danger of fallen comedy there seems to lie the promise of true comedy, authenticity, and the festive as such.

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4.1. Introduction

We learned in the last chapter why Nietzsche in his early work disparaged a certain type of comedy and why Heidegger neglected comedy. We were able to see an interpretation of what I have called fallen comedy that would fail to be great art for both Heidegger and Nietzsche. We were also able to see an interpretation of what I have called true comedy, which is truth-disclosing in the Heideggerian sense. Truth here is meant as more of a way of interpreting the work of art such that it is impactful and efficacious; it may even create a world in some cases. This kind of comedy is a great work of art in the Heideggerian sense. It is the type of artwork Nietzsche praises for being a “stimulant” to life that leads to activity rather than a “narcotic” that leads to passivity.²⁵¹ We saw how comedy does not fit into the usual aesthetic interpretation of art, and how art—and specifically comedy—can help us transcend the modern aesthetic paradigm. This, in turn, allows us to approach a postmodern interpretation of the world. This approach seems to best come from a festive or comic mood. For Heidegger, this festive mood should seem to be almost an imperative not just for understanding great works of art but also for philosophy and for thinking.

It is because of this paramount importance of the festive mood that we now return to Nietzsche, for once we have Heidegger’s criticism of the aesthetic and his insistence that an

artwork discloses a world, we are in the position to appreciate the impetus and insights that Nietzsche provides for a philosophy of comedy. I can hardly help but begin with Nietzsche’s call for “gay science” or “joyful wisdom.” There are many places in Nietzsche’s corpus where he calls for a cheerfulness, gaiety, joyfulness, etc. in our thinking well, in our philosophizing, or in our art. These calls for gaiety are almost ubiquitous. This does not mean that we are talking about happiness or being without suffering. Rather, what is being called for is a certain perspectival taking of the world, something that might be akin to a Heideggerian mood. This festive or comic mood is something that Nietzsche addresses well when he is waxing about one’s way to escape the weightiness of one’s tradition, morality, or self.

4.2. The Spirit of Gravity

And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound, and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall. Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come let us kill the spirit of gravity!

From Nietzsche’s first published work in The Birth of Tragedy until the works of his last sane moments, he constantly concerned himself with comedy. While comedy certainly takes a back seat to tragedy in the earlier works, it comes to the fore in the middle and late works. It is a funny thing that in Nietzscheinian scholarship, comedy and Nietzsche’s general comic style and tone are so often neglected. Michael Ure rightly points out that Nietzsche’s comic tone is often missed by his critics, and even Nehamas misses this in his excellent book, Nietzsche: Life as Literature.

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252 The comic mood might well be the ontic derivative of an authentic festive mood.
However, Ure observes that Keith Ansell-Pearson does not miss Nietzsche’s “mocking tones of self-parody.”255 It is of critical importance to understand the role comedy plays in Nietzsche to properly understand him. Comedy also leads us to a postmodern ethical interpretation that gets us beyond “games of truth” and the ascetic ideal as exhibited through the will to truth. This is a truly novel approach to ethics that could prove to be quite efficacious. If this Nietzschean interpretation of the value of comedy is in fact efficacious, it will show us how comedy may be the greatest of the arts and not just a matter of mere amusement or intoxication.

Nietzsche’s concern with comedy becomes obvious in *The Gay Science.*256 *The Gay Science*’s title practically demands comic interpretations, or at least interpretations that need not be weighty, severe, serious, or graven. The German word *Schwere* is often used by Nietzsche to describe the “spirit of gravity” and a general lack of cheerfulness that usually accompanies “good thinking.”257 Comedy and foolishness get juxtaposed with Truth and seriousness throughout *The Gay Science.* Nietzsche is also rather concerned with comedy in his *On the Genealogy of Morals,* particularly in the third essay, but also in the preface. In that book it appears that the only thing that can combat the ascetic ideal and the will to truth is a “comedian of the ideal.”258 Nietzsche begins one of his last works, *Twilight of the Idols,* by speaking of the “cheerfulness” and “prankishness” needed for the revaluation of all values. Finally, while many find *Ecce Homo* to be a pretentious book because of its style and chapter titles, we should really consider the whole of that book to be comic. Titles from that book like “Why I Write Such Good Books” and “Why I am So Clever” are meant to be comic, not serious. This is not to say he does not think his books

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256 Before this point Nietzsche either has little new to say about comedy such as in *Human, All Too Human* (§169 and §213) where Nietzsche basically espouses the Kantian incongruity theory of comedy found in §54 of the *Critique of Judgment* where a sudden tension dissolves into nothing. Nietzsche also says some negative things about comedy and the ruination of Greek Tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy,* but I will address this later in this chapter.


good or himself clever but that he recognizes the perspectival and comparative character of judgments about his books and his cleverness. These are comic titles because they have the polysemic ambivalence that marks comedy. We should also consider just how much comedy is involved in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The work itself is a parody or a satire of the Bible, and while book 4 is a slightly contentious book owing to its limited original publication, it smacks of comedy throughout; one of the final sections is entitled “The Ass Festival,” which has the same insulting and funny ring to it in German. George McFadden rightfully points out that Thus Spoke Zarathustra is much more of a parody and a comedy than it is a tragedy; he claims “the book is anything but tragic.”

The spirit of gravity (der Geist der Schwere) and laughter are both central themes in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The spirit of gravity shows up in all four books of Zarathustra but nowhere else by this particular name in the rest of Nietzsche’s corpus. However, the spirit of gravity represents a central position in the evolution of Nietzsche’s thought that is especially tied to aesthetic self-creation, metamorphosis, self-overcoming, and experimentalism (the Versucher of Beyond Good and Evil 42 and 210). Laughter too has a special and particular role in the evolution of Nietzsche’s thought, which must be dealt with if we are to properly understand the spirit of gravity and how to kill it with laughter.

First, it is important to recognize that the term Schwere in German does not simply mean gravity. The term is also defined as (and more often used to connote) seriousness, heaviness, difficulty, severity, weight, or as Kaufmann often translates it, something grave. This term and its variations show up quite often in Nietzsche’s corpus. The heavy, grave, and severe spirit that

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259 McFadden, “Nietzschean Values in Comic Writing,” 343. Some such as Paul Loeb, in his The Death of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), claim that Zarathustra is a tragedy where he dies at the end of book 3 and book 4 is the Satyr play. Also, Babette Babich makes a similar claim about this.

Nietzsche claims as his devil is personified in a variety of ways in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He claims first that it is his “thundercloud,” and devil, and later that it is a monster that is half dwarf and half mole. The spirit of gravity’s first appearance in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is in “On Reading and Writing,” so we shall begin there.

Nietzsche claims in “On Reading and Writing” that “aphorisms should be peaks—and those who are addressed, tall and lofty.” Aphorisms are Nietzsche’s favored style of writing; thus this is an important point that high elevation is necessary for those who want to understand him. The fastest way between mountains, he claims through the voice of Zarathustra, is from peak to peak, but flying rather than hiking is the fastest way from peak to peak. The spirit of gravity, which is later characterized as half dwarf and half mole, is neither tall nor lofty. In fact, it is quite the opposite: short, burrowing, and blind (even subterranean). Flying and floating appear quite frequently for Nietzsche as metaphors for the distance between oneself and one’s tradition and morality, a distance one needs in order to make oneself into an artistic phenomenon that one is not ashamed of. If we look to aphorism 107 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche claims that our lives are made bearable if we transform them into art. It is here that he first really attacks the spirit of gravity. To quote Nietzsche at length:

> At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking down upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing over ourselves or weeping over ourselves … Precisely because we are at bottom grave [schwere] and serious human beings—really, more weights than human beings—nothing does us as much good as the fool’s cap: we need it in relation to ourselves—we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us … We should be able also to stand above morality—and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but

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261 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part 1, “On Reading and Writing.”
263 This is a shift from *The Birth of Tragedy* where he claims twice that life can be justified this way. Daniel Came explains how this justification can happen, but it does not take into account Nietzsche’s shift from this position in his later works. See Daniel Came, “The Aesthetic Justification of Existence,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 41–57.
also to float above it and play. How then could we possibly dispense with art—and with the fool?—And as long as you are in any way ashamed before yourselves, you do not yet belong with us.\textsuperscript{264}

This flying and floating gives us the artistic distance necessary to really craft ourselves as different from our tradition. It is also the metaphorical distance that is necessary for one to be able to laugh at oneself. According to Bergson, emotion (and specifically pity) kills laughter, but intellectual distance or a certain absence of emotion allows for things to be laughable.\textsuperscript{265}

Nietzsche assumes that people are generally very serious (i.e., schwere) about themselves, their tradition, and their morality. He implies that being able to laugh at oneself and to accept one’s own foolishness and folly on the other hand is far more rare, but also preferable. The point about not being ashamed before oneself is critically important to Thus Spoke Zarathustra and the spirit of gravity, but it will likewise be important in later works, such as On the Genealogy of Morals, where Nietzsche urges us to overcome the shame of our “bad conscience.” This gravity that keeps us from having an artistic distance from ourselves and our tradition causes us to be more weights than human beings, and honesty about our existence without the help of art leads us to great “nausea and suicide.”\textsuperscript{266} This honesty leads to a suicidal nihilism that really comes from the discoveries made when serving the will to truth. The “freedom above things” that is mentioned above is a freedom from the spirit of gravity. This freedom, however, is not the freedom of “free will” but the freedom of the “free spirit,” which happens to be the subtitle of the first of what is

\textsuperscript{264} Nietzsche, The Gay Science, §107.
\textsuperscript{266} Nietzsche, The Gay Science, §107. Nietzsche is also getting at this point throughout The Genealogy of Morals but especially in §3, and is a major theme for The Birth of Tragedy and The Will to Power.
dubbed Nietzsche’s middle works (and his first truly aphoristic work), *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits.*

Even from this early middle period (1878) in his writing, we might think that he was trying to fight something like the spirit of gravity with its contrasting class, the “free spirit.” In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche explicitly rails against any understanding or belief in something like free will. This leaves one to wonder what is meant by the “free” part of the “free spirit.” In aphorism 225, Nietzsche claims that:

> he is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what, on the basis of his origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of the age, would have been expected of him. He is the exception, the fettered spirits are the rule… what characterizes the free spirit is not that his opinions are the more correct but that he has liberated himself from tradition, whether the outcome has been successful or a failure.  

Even in this middle work, Nietzsche points out that it is not about the “free spirit” being correct, i.e., having a hold of the truth, but about something else instead. The “fettered spirits,” or as Nietzsche later calls them in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the “chained type of spirits,”²⁶⁸ make up the herd and are opposed to all new values, philosophies, and ways of life. The freedom here, or floating and flying, if you will, is more of a distance from the norm, from society’s mores, or even from the self that you have cultivated thus far. This chained spirit happens to be at the end of the chapter entitled “The Free Spirit” in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here Nietzsche also spends time attacking the concept of “free will” while explicating what he means by “the free spirit.”

In the chapter entitled “The Free Spirit” in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche describes a type of future philosopher. *Versucher* is the German word for attempter, tempter, searcher,

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²⁶⁷ The emphasis on “fettered” is my own. Also see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §76.
researcher, or experimenter. These free spirits make their lives into experiments,\textsuperscript{269} seeking to find their own truths, knowledge, judgments, and good.\textsuperscript{270} The “free spirit” judges and evaluates from an artistic distance.\textsuperscript{271} Metaphorically, this distance is the distance of an elevation at odds with that which we are grounded by, namely the spirit of gravity, or our embeddedness in our time, tradition, morality, or even our self. The own-ness of the aforementioned truths, knowledge, judgments, and good is of particular importance with regard to the spirit of gravity.

According to Zarathustra, “he, however, has discovered himself who says, ‘This is my good and evil’; with that he has reduced to silence the mole and dwarf who say, ‘Good for all, evil for all.’”\textsuperscript{272} The “mole and dwarf” represent the spirit of gravity in this quote, and it is the spirit of gravity that claims universal, atemporal good and evil. This is the form of Nietzsche’s true archenemy and devil. \textit{Human, All Too Human, Daybreak, Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morals, and Twilight of the Idols} all have as a central theme getting beyond the unjustified atemporal and universal binary of good and evil. This was a major theme throughout what is called Nietzsche’s middle and late periods.

\subsection{4.3. On Genealogy}

Historically, culturally, and even for the individual, good and evil are relative terms for Nietzsche, and, according to things he says in all of the works mentioned above, good and evil

\textsuperscript{269}See also Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, §324, “life could be an experiment of the seeker for knowledge.” Also see Nietzsche, \textit{Human, All Too Human}, trans. Helen Zimmern and Paul V. Cohn (New York: Prometheus, 2008), §3. For further reading, see Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, “Brief Habits” [§295], and “Preparatory Human Beings” [§283].

\textsuperscript{270}Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, §42–44.

\textsuperscript{271}Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, §60.

are generally terms used to tame and codify civilization. Good for all, evil for all breeds stability and shame. The shame that we are speaking of here comes from “bad conscience,” which is another important Nietzschean theme developed in many places over his corpus, but most pointedly in his later work, On the Genealogy of Morals, where he claims (mostly in essay 2) that “bad conscience” is an internalization of the guilt we feel for our animal instincts, urges, and drives that do not harmonize with civil society. This guilt that we feel over our animal instincts is both necessary as “a rule” for the masses of society and as an alien imposition for every individual.

In On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche claims that this bad conscience, and consciousness itself, was the last thing to form in humans and thus always puts us into a strange relationship with our more animal inclinations. After all, what good does our fight-or-flight adrenaline boost do us in civil situations of fear and anxiety? In our prehistory, this would have served us well in helping us run and escape or confront an enemy or physical threat, but it does us no good to start sweating, to turn red, and to elevate our pulse rate in a boardroom, at a job interview, while giving a lecture, or in an argument in civil society. In fact, our animal responses in these sorts of situations are often just an embarrassing, shameful hindrance. Perspiration stains, shaky hands, and a red face do not exactly inspire confidence in one’s prospective audience.

Any sort of “abnormality,” according to tame and civil society, with its historically contingent yet codified set of “good and evil,” is something to feel ashamed of and is a grave

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273 There is a much more nuanced way of speaking about this that derives from On the Genealogy of Morals involving the differences between the ancient Greek noble good and bad and the slave morality of good and evil born out of ressentiment, but that digression is unnecessary for the current essay.
274 Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, especially part 2, §15–16.
275 See also Nietzsche, The Gay Science, §76.
276 Though this does sound like the start of a comic moment as long as you have enough distance from it.
(schwere) burden to the individual. If we return to *Zarathustra* for the moment, we may see what Nietzsche means:

> Earth and life seem grave [schwere] to him; and thus the spirit of gravity [der Geist der Schwere] wants it. But whoever would become light and a bird must love himself: thus I teach... We are presented with grave [schwere] words and values almost from the cradle: ‘good’ and ‘evil’ this gift is called. For its sake we are forgiven for living. And therefore one suffers little children to come unto one—in order to forbid them [at] bedtimes to love themselves: thus the spirit of gravity orders it... we are told: ‘Yes, life is a grave [schwere] burden.’ But only man is a grave [schwere] burden for himself! That is because he carries on his shoulders too much that is alien to him ... he loads too many alien grave [schwere] words and values on himself, and then life seems a desert to him. And verily, much that is our own is also a grave [schwere] burden!  

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the spirit of gravity gives us good and evil and teaches us to feel guilt and shame for living. This is most often found in Judeo-Christian slave morality, in what amounts to “original sin” and shame for loving our life in this world. Nietzsche claims that instead of embracing life-affirming values, we have life-denying, ascetic values loaded upon us so that we may reach the next, more perfect “world beyond.”

According to Zarathustra, we must necessarily be embedded in this tradition and become loaded down by it before we can float and fly from it. Zarathustra claims that “he who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance: one cannot fly into flying.” Much like the “Three Metamorphoses of Spirit” that begins *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, this is a learning process. Defeating the spirit of gravity is going to require a learning process. We must also take time to try and understand our context and ourselves in

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278 Or at least make the suffering in this life seem to be valuable for something. See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, part 3, §27.
279 It is part of the “Three Metamorphoses of Spirit” for one to become the camel who is loaded down with all of the values of his tradition before he can change into the lion and destroy them, or the child after that who creates new values.
281 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part 3, “On the Spirit of Gravity.” “Man is hard [schwere] to discover—hardest [schwertsen] of all for himself ... thus the spirit of gravity orders it. Also see Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, especially the preface to part 1. “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge.”
this learning process, and each one of us is different and has a different “way,” so to speak.

Zarathustra continues, stating that:

by many ways, in many ways, I reached my truth: it was not one ladder that I climbed to the height where my eye roams over my distance… That, however, is my taste—not good, not bad, but my taste of which I am no longer ashamed and which I have no wish to hide. ‘This is my way; where is yours?’—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way—that does not exist.282

Again, in the greater context of the Nietzsche corpus, this applies to the “free spirits” of both Human, All Too Human and Beyond Good and Evil. It also applies to the variegated aesthetic phenomena that we are supposed to be from The Gay Science, and to those in the process of sounding out the idols while reevaluating all values from Twilight of the Idols. Nietzsche also mentions these “free spirits” again in On the Genealogy of Morals, pointing out that if they still believe in Truth, then they are not truly these free spirits; this belief in Truth is a belief in “the way,” which makes them not really the “free spirits.”283 In all of these cases, there is an individual learning process, metamorphosis, experimenting, or self-overcoming that is opposed to what is metaphorically the spirit of gravity.284 In all of these instances, a “cheerful,” “gay,” or comic mood for the free spirit seems to be a type of precondition; otherwise, how could they laugh at the spirit of gravity?

The freedom and distance necessary to laugh at the spirit of gravity is not easily won, and Nietzsche’s relation to laughter and comedy is quite particular, much like his relationship to the use and value of art. Some scholars claim that “with certain qualifications Nietzsche’s thought may be said to comprise not a tragic but a ‘comic’ philosophy.”285 Others, like Mark Weeks,

284 Nietzsche scholars such as Alan White also appropriately link the spirit of gravity with the eternal return (ER) which is discussed at some length in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, “Vision and Riddle.” The mole-dwarf drips leaden thoughts of the ER into Zarathustra’s ear which he then must come to terms with. See Alan White, Within Nietzsche’s Labyrinth (New York: Routledge, 1990), 85–104.
think Nietzsche is mostly a tragic thinker who “imaginatively conceived a futuristic laughter … Nietzsche projected a transcendental laughter that would become the object of desire, a driving force of the will.”

I think both of these claims are right to a certain extent.

4.4. Nietzsche on Comedy and Laughter

Nietzsche’s philosophical writings start with a focus on tragedy and then shift to a specifically more comic perspective beginning with *The Gay Science* that continues throughout the rest of his works, although he never abandons the tragic sense. The chronology of his works aside, Nietzsche works a certain form of comedy and laughter into his work while denigrating another kind. Even as far back as *The Birth of Tragedy*, we can overcome the horror and absurdity of existence either with sublime art or “the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity.”

Weeks claims that

Nietzsche argued that such nausea should not be relieved but should be tragically overcome. He thus bemoaned the role of popular comedy in the cultural ascendancy of ready satisfaction, ‘cheerfulness in a state of unendangered comfort,’ a ‘womanish flight from seriousness and terror, this craven satisfaction with easy enjoyment (BT, 11).’

However, Nietzsche here attacks New Attic Comedy. Nietzsche’s problem with New Attic Comedy is that it focuses on “the cheerfulness of the slave who has nothing of consequence to be responsible for, nothing great to strive for, and who does not value anything in the past or future

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287 *Twilight of the Idols* may try to claim cheerfulness in its opening lines, but the candor of that book from 1888 (along with *The Antichrist*), his last working year, was rather dour. Also in his 1886 addition to the *Gay Science*, in §380, “What Is Romanticism,” he proclaims a Dionysian pessimism and lauds a tragic insight and tragic view of life.


higher than the present.”290 In Old Comedy, such as in *Lysistrata, Birds, Peace*, and *Wasps*, central themes involve topical political and juridical themes of the day that were not about “easy enjoyment” and did place a high value on the future; most of Aristophanes plays are an attempt to inspire action in the *polis*, which gives them an ethical and efficacious dimension.

Nietzsche does, however, have a negative view of mob or slave comedy and laughter.291 Weeks points out that even Zarathustra is driven from the town by icy laughter in the prologue. But he then points out what he calls a daring maneuver for Nietzsche, when “rather than attack laughter, he challenges his readers, through Zarathustra, to will a new kind of laughter, one that will not collapse the temporality of becoming and the will to redeem time through the narrative of special advancement.”292 In “On Vision and Riddle,” Zarathustra exclaims after seeing a shepherd bite the head off of the “heaviest” (*schwerste*) snake (which may represent the spirit of gravity) that has crawled down his throat:

> Far away he spewed the head of the snake—and he jumped up. No longer shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, laughing! Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die now!293

The end of this aphorism points toward metamorphosis, change, and self-overcoming.

Zarathustra only comes to this point after having dealt with the most grave (schwere) thought of the eternal return of the same. It was a process and not just an ex nihilo sublimation that caused this transformation of the shepherd.

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290 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §11. Also see *Untimely Meditations: The Use and Abuse of History for Life* on the happiness of the cow, due to his forgetting, i.e., a lack of a future or past. See also Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, part 2, §1–2.

291 Especially New Attic and Roman comedy, i.e., Menander, Terrance, Plautus. In *Human, All Too Human*, §213, he claims that “It is the pleasure of the slave at the Saturnalia.”


This aphorism also points toward future humans or philosophers, as Nietzsche is often prone to do. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ends in a hopeful longing for these future men, possibly Übertmenschen. Nietzsche holds out hope for men to come who will be able to laugh this laughter. Even still, regular human laughter is able to dispel the spirit of gravity. When Zarathustra speaks of the higher men who have come to visit him, he claims “if they learned to laugh from me, it still is not *my* laughter that they have learned. But what does it matter?... This day represents a triumph: he is even now retreating, he is fleeing, the spirit of gravity, my old archenemy.” The issue here is that this laughter may dispel the spirit of gravity, but it will not kill it. Just as the mole-dwarf whispered into his ear: “You threw yourself up high, but every stone that is thrown must fall.” It does not seem that the spirit of gravity has been defeated by this kind of laughter, because it is still human laughter. Nietzsche ends *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with an image of the laughing lion because his “higher men” have all disappointed him. Nietzsche leaves open a future pregnant with possibility, but that future is not actualized.

In the end, mob laughter seems petty and without future. The laughter of higher men toward the spirit of gravity shall dispel it for a time, giving them elevation or artistic distance. But in the end, these higher men of the present age shall still succumb to the spirit of gravity according to the age-old proverb that what goes up must come down. They are still ashamed in front of themselves, as most civilized men are, and even in their attempts to become free spirits, the fetters of gravity bring them back to their own embeddedness in tradition. Laughter may kill the spirit of gravity, but Weeks seems right in deeming that laughter as “Super-laughter.”

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296 I think this eventual falling back to earth precipitated by the spirit of gravity, is a part of the ongoing process of the “Three Metamorphoses of Spirit,” where we become camel, lion, and child in a cyclical fashion. Further evidence for this cyclical process seems to be linked with the spirit of gravity whispering “leaden” thoughts of the eternal return into the ear of Zarathustra. It seems as though the child stage is not a constant state, and that becoming burdened, or loaded down with the values of society and the “spirit of gravity” is necessary.
But dispelling the spirit of gravity for a time with regular human laughter still seems to be a worthwhile venture. Being able to distance oneself from one’s tradition and the prevailing “Truth” of that tradition seems to be the best route available to us, especially if we are trying to be “free spirits” or attempting a revaluation of all values. To get beyond this “Truth,” art and particularly comedy can be interpreted in Nietzsche’s corpus not as “the way” but instead as a particularly productive way to produce new interpretations not dependent on atemporal and universal “Truth.”

Comedy is quite often a hiding place, a refuge, a guise, or a mask. It aims not at Truth; or perhaps it would be better to say that it seeks truth by being antagonistic or agonistic. There is some safety in the ambivalence of comedy. It seems that a bit of merrymaking creates a mood that can mollify even the more hard-hearted or serious (i.e., schwere) observer, even if it is not something they care to hear or see. Unless the comedy is directed at them as the proverbial “butt of the joke,” comedy seems to safeguard itself from real censorship or prohibition. Even the kings had their jesters. Comedy may often feel as though it is speaking the “Truth,” but its deceptive nature or framework always brings it back from the brink of being the ascetic will to truth. Even the most one-sided satire has a bit of ambivalence in it. If we think of a roast, we might better understand this ambivalence.

Both Foucault and Nietzsche point out that direct negative satire mocks and derides but at the same time reinvigorates the forms of power that it targets.\(^\text{297}\) They claim that what is being mocked is worthy of such mockery and of sociopolitical concern. Nietzsche states in *Twilight of the Idols*, “Whether we immoralists are harming virtue? Just as little as anarchists harm princes. Only since the latter are shot at do they again sit securely on their thrones. Moral: *morality must

be shot at.” It reestablishes the importance of the target. We should also note that this statement has a bit of joking tone to it, especially at the end. Nietzsche is pointing out that we ought to attack morality even if we are not going to get beyond it, although this can validate the existence of power.

Comedy’s flexibility and ambivalence highlight Foucauldian power in its own ambivalence and ambiguity. Comedy often forms a point of resistance or transgression that is also involved in reestablishing that which it is resisting or transgressing. In the ancient Greek world, Aristophanes mocked and derided, but he also brought to the fore and reestablished the importance of people like Kleon and Socrates, and even of the gods, such as Dionysus. As Xavier Riu points out, this seems to be a type of “sacred insult” along the fashion of a roast. Bakhtin also points out that in the early Roman tradition, while there was a eulogy for the dead and praise given in the ceremony of the triumphal procession, derisive mockery was also part of both of these practices (much like in a roast, where the speakers lambast and then compliment). The power of comedy and the comedian as well as fiction in Nietzsche’s philosophy is in combating the ascetic ideal. This comes out of overabundant health and cheerfulness. Even the superiority theory of comedy claims to make some people cheerful. Nietzsche’s claims in The Gay Science that “laughter means: being schadenfroh [feeling pleasure from someone else’s suffering] but with a good conscience,” and he claims not to have

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299 Nietzsche does generally mock anarchists and socialists throughout his corpus.

300 Aristophanes mocks Kleon in various plays but apparently in his lost play *Babyloniens*, Socrates in *Clouds*, and Dionysus in *Frogs*.

301 Xavier Riu, *Dionysism and Comedy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999). Though this has a much greater impact than a mere roast due to its religious nature.


resentment for people who laugh at his “faults and blunders.” Such resentment would be akin to slave morality’s reactive *ressentiment.* While the superiority theory of comedy certainly has its faults and shortcomings, there are aspects of it with which Nietzsche seems to agree.

Nietzsche might agree with Bergson in that comedy needs to distance itself from all emotion/feeling, sympathy, and pity in order to be laughable. Nietzsche might here add atemporal and universal Truth to the list of things we are distancing ourselves from. Comedy perhaps more than any other art requires us at once to be intimately familiar with the context in which we operate, but it also requires a certain “pathos of distance,” as Nietzsche calls it in *On the Genealogy of Morals.* Comedy much more than other art forms seems to represent as good the “will to deception”; it is an art in which the lie is sanctified.

The ascetic ideal is the central theme of *On the Genealogy of Morals.* Nietzsche really starts to develop this concept once again at the beginning of his middle period, in *Human, All Too Human* and in *Daybreak,* but it does not come into its own full philosophical robustness until the *Genealogy.* The ascetic ideal strangely both protects one against suicidal nihilism but also necessarily draws one closer to it. According to Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal espouses life-denying values in order to provide meaning for our suffering.

Lawrence Hatab has a particularly insightful article on the ascetic ideal, in which he claims that “the fundamental question at the heart of GM: [is] the value and meaning of natural life” over and against the life-denying values of the ascetic ideal, whether those espoused by

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308 All of the third part of Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (but esp. §136–140) and Nietzsche, *Daybreak,* §109, §113.
309 Most of this is in the second half of Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals,* §3, but especially §28.
310 Lawrence J. Hatab, “How Does the Ascetic Ideal Function in Nietzsche’s Genealogy?,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 35/36 (Spring–Autumn 2008): 106–123, here 107. I agree with Hatab in almost everything he says in this essay save for his conclusion where he turns to tragedy rather than comedy as the counter ideal.
priests, artists, scholars, philosophers, or even scientists. As Hatab writes, “life-alienating forces in human culture; this is the core meaning of the ascetic ideal, whatever form it takes.”311 One of the strangest pills to swallow for “we moderns” when we closely read essay 3 of On the Genealogy of Morals is the fact that Nietzsche lumps together the priest, artist, scholar, philosopher, and even the scientist as handmaidens to the ascetic ideal. Most people view science and religion as being opposites or as at least espousing very different values. Nietzsche, however, points out that this is not really the case. The aforementioned types of people all fall under the spell of the ascetic ideal for one particular reason: “the overestimation of Truth.” The ascetic ideal has a goal, and even claims to have the goal:

[i]t permits no other interpretation, no other goal; it rejects, denies, affirms, and sanctions solely from the point of view of its interpretation…it submits to no power, it believes in its own predominance over every other power, in its absolute superiority of rank over every other power—it believes that no power exists on earth that does not first have to receive a meaning, a right to exist, a value, as a tool of the ascetic ideal, as a way and means to its goal, to one goal.312

Nietzsche points out in Thus Spoke Zarathustra: “the way—that does not exist.”313 And in Beyond Good and Evil, he points out that the truth is not the truth for everyone,314 thus denying its universality and metaphysical existence as part of Being. What Nietzsche is getting at here I will call an exclusive monoperspective. Both religion and science have these vantage points; they both have an interpretation that excludes all others and so can only interpret the world through their own understanding of revealed truth or the best-fitting physicalist theory available. Often modern people look at philosophers and scholars as “nonbelievers,” feeling they are the “pale atheists,” “immoralists,” and the “last idealists of knowledge.” They may think that they are Nietzsche’s “free spirits,” but they “are far from being free spirits: for they still have faith in

311 Hatab, “How Does the Ascetic Ideal Function,” 114.
314 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, §43.
truth ... it is precisely in their faith in truth that they are more rigid and unconditional than anyone.”

Science is not the opposite or contraposing force to the ascetic ideal, because science lacks a:

value-creating power ... this pair, science and the ascetic ideal, both rest on the same foundation ... on the overestimation of truth (more exactly: on the same belief that truth is inestimable and cannot be criticized). Therefore they are necessarily allies, so that if they are to be fought they can only be fought and called into question together.316

Both religion and science vie for the exclusive monoperspective, and the reason they seem so often juxtaposed or in contention is not because they are opposites but rather because they are so very similar, like siblings in a bloody dispute over ascendency to the throne of Truth.

The problem with all of the former types of people is that they are still all dependent on the will to truth expressed through the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche puts proselytizing atheists—and there are many of those who like to tell all theists about their idiocy due to their lack of understanding the truth of science—on the same level as proselytizing theists. Neither of these groups has the resources to combat the ascetic ideal, because they both rely on the Truth.

Nietzsche claims that “[the] will to truth requires a critique... the value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question.”317 The value of truth being called into question “experimentally” harkens back to Beyond Good and Evil.318 This is where his “experimenters/attempters,” or in the German, Versucher, are the new philosophers, who will still love truth, but a nonuniversal truth, i.e., a truth associated uniquely with the individual or

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318 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, §42–43.
“free spirit” but also more with Becoming and not with Being (in the traditional ways that these terms are parsed out).\textsuperscript{319}

It is in this way that Heidegger explains why Nietzsche values art more than truth. Heidegger claims the problem is “Truth, i.e., true being, i.e., what is constant and fixed, because it is the petrifying of any single given perspective, is always only an apparentness that has to prevail, which is to say, it is always error … \textit{Art, as transfiguration, is more enhancing to life than truth, as fixation of an apparition.}”\textsuperscript{320} The question becomes what kind of transfiguration is art? Heidegger does not himself notice what is going on at the end of \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals} or in the rest of Nietzsche’s corpus because of his overemphasis on the unpublished notes that became \textit{The Will to Power}. This, however, is exactly what I want to address now.

4.5. Overcoming the Ascetic Ideal

Since we are trying to affirm life and escape from the ascetic ideal that arises from the will to truth, we are left to wonder: if not truth, then what shall be our guide to the future? Nietzsche answered this question over and over again, starting with \textit{The Birth of Tragedy},\textsuperscript{321} but also in \textit{Human, All Too Human},\textsuperscript{322} \textit{The Gay Science},\textsuperscript{323} and finally in \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals}.\textsuperscript{324} The answer to what can oppose the ascetic ideal is “Art—to say it in advance, for I shall someday return to this subject at greater length—art, in which precisely the \textit{lie} is sanctified and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{319} Heidegger’s truth is much more similar with this kind of truth. Truth which he claims is relative on Dasein in \textit{Being and Time}, §44, is neither universal and atemporal, nor does it appear that way in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” or the \textit{Essence of Truth}.
  \item \textsuperscript{321} Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, §5, §7, §11, §24.
  \item \textsuperscript{322} Nietzsche, \textit{Human, All Too Human}, §151; though Nietzsche is far more derisive about art in this book than any other.
  \item \textsuperscript{323} Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, §107.
  \item \textsuperscript{324} He also writes about the saving power of art in \textit{The Will to Power} but that book is contentious for a variety of reasons.
\end{itemize}
the will to deception has a good conscience, is much more fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal than is science.\textsuperscript{325} Nietzsche never got the chance to return to this subject at “greater length,” but some of his ideas can be found in the notebook for The Will to Power. There he claims that when man can no longer create fictions (or even Truth as a type of fiction) then he will create nihilists. If there is one thought that hovers over Nietzsche’s works from beginning to end, it is the threat of passive or suicidal nihilism.\textsuperscript{326} In order to fight against this nihilism that is produced by the ascetic ideal, art can save us as the lie sanctified. As Nietzsche points out in The Gay Science, the poet and the liar are like brothers, but we hate the liar who is not a poet because we expect from him the truth. We do not expect such things from poets, i.e., artists. This “will to deception” that has a “good conscience” is the will that opposes the will to truth. If we start by accepting art as untrue, which we usually do, but maintain faith in it because of its value as either life-affirming or life-denying, then we can start to combat the ascetic ideal.

Most interpreters of Nietzsche follow this interpretation, but what they fail to notice is that instead of a tragic solution, here Nietzsche points instead to a comic one:

All I have been concerned to indicate here is this: in the most spiritual sphere, too, the ascetic ideal has at present only one kind of real enemy capable of harming it: the comedians of this ideal—for they arouse mistrust of it. Everywhere else that spirit is strong, mighty, and at work without counterfeit today, it does without ideals of any kind—the popular expression for this abstinence is ‘atheism’—except for its will to truth. But this will, this remnant of an ideal, is, if you will believe me, this ideal itself in its strictest, most spiritual formulation, esoteric through and through, with all external additions abolished, and thus not so much its remnant as its kernel. Unconditional honest atheism (and its is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is therefore not the antithesis of that ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences—it is the awe-inspiring catastrophe of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the lie involved in belief in God.\textsuperscript{327}

\textsuperscript{325} Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, part 3, §25.
\textsuperscript{327} Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, part 3, §27.
So it is not atheism and science with their will to truth that can oppose this ideal but instead the artist as comedian of the ascetic ideal, since she arouses mistrust—i.e., she can undermine the ideal itself. A good comedian must understand their context and their audience for their art to work. So a comedian of this ideal would need to be part of this tradition, in the way of the camel from *Thus Spoke Zarathurstra*’s “Three Metamorphoses of Spirit.” It would need to be someone akin to what Nietzsche has been calling his “free spirits,” since they would also need the artistic distance from the tradition itself to be able to mock properly.

These comedians would need this distance also to feel free from the paralyzing pity and emotion that makes one “grave,” i.e., schwere. If one is “too serious,” one cannot mock the ascetic ideal. It is the cheerfulness, gaiety, or festiveness that seems to be necessary to overcome this ideal through art, and particularly through comedy. This is not a complete divorce from one’s tradition, as it seems that that is really impossible, but instead a comic distancing or elevation from mocking. This comedian can produce comedy that takes one’s past and one’s future and one’s tradition thoughtfully, though not seriously.

But comedy made out of weakness/slave morality lacks responsibility and does not consider the past or the future as ideal. Comedy has the ability, because of its generally accepted deceptive nature or framework, to get beyond all truth games while still being incredibly efficacious and often ethical or moralizing. Bergson claims that comedy is essentially a social corrective. Comedy distinguishes itself in kind from other fictions, such as fantasy, myth, or fairy tale, in that its morals are not one-sidedly accepted as true. Comedy does not present an exclusive monoperspective; i.e., there is no ambivalence or ambiguity in “The Tortoise and the Hare” nor in “Hansel and Gretel,” nor in “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” They all produce monoperspectives that leave little room for interpretation or polysemy.

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328 *Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy*, §11.
Bakhtin points out, can lose (and in late modernity often has lost) almost all of its ambivalence if it is purely one-sided satire and is therefore an overly or overtly moralizing kind of comedy.

This, however, is a kind of sliding scale. On the one hand, we have comedy that is conscientiously trying to be a pointed, negative critique (most often seeming like the superiority theory), and, on the other hand, we often run into comedies with no avowed standpoint, political view, or moral critique (e.g., the New Attic Comedy that Nietzsche describes, or the fallen comedy I described in my last chapter). Comedy at its best can often present a type of alterity in ambiguity, next to or other than the binary moral of fantasy, fairy tale, or fallen comedy. Comedy has greater flexibility (while maintaining its efficacy) than other forms of art. Knowledge of context is necessary before something may be comic, but what we take away is up to us.\textsuperscript{329} Do we return to our former values unchanged? Or does the great comedian/comedy change the way we value our values, particularly those values that we hold sacred? It seems to hold as a general rule that the funniest comedies/comedians deal with the things most sensitive, sacred, or taboo, so long as we are not too sympathetic or empathetic to the cause, as Bergson points out (or as Plato points out in his \textit{Philebus}).

Art as the good will to deception has the power to save us from nihilism.\textsuperscript{330} Comedy can be this great art, in the sense of being a cheerful, less serious taking of the world. It can be a childlike taking of the world—a childlike laughter at the world, as prescribed in \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}. Zarathustra asks not “What are we free from?” but rather “What are we free for?”\textsuperscript{331} Comedy and genealogy are a way of taking the world less seriously, i.e., with less gravity or Schwere, such that we can more easily change our traditions and beliefs when they no longer

\textsuperscript{329} This process of taking up one’s context/tradition, and then negating it, followed by a playful rebuilding closely mirrors the “Three Metamorphoses of Spirit” from \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}.


\textsuperscript{331} Nietzsche, \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}, part 1, “On the Way of the Creator.”
serve us well (what have I to do with refutations?). Any dogmatic ethics has a rigid quality about it, and every ethics based on honor or purity has a level of pride that will not allow it to be changed easily. When you hold some set of beliefs as apodictically “True,” or in this case as right or good, you appear foolish when they fall short in some area.

Inevitably and almost necessarily because of the passage of time, every morality will fall short somewhere, at some time. People generally hate appearing foolish, but an ethics that embraces or at the very least accepts foolishness would not have to respond in vengeful hatred. When we hold our beliefs to the standard of a supreme fiction, so to speak, we have a back door allowing escape from shame. Appearing foolish when in a comic stance is not shameful; rather, it is expected.

Just because something is comic does not mean that it is less valuable or that it has less meaning. As I have already claimed, the comic is necessarily polysemic and often leans toward the ambivalent. The comic can be of great importance to our lives and the way that we comport ourselves. The comic can have just as great an impact on us as anything considered under the guise of seriousness. Part of the meaning of “gay science” is that even the physicists know that their so-called laws are only convenient fictions that certainly “work” but are still not apodictically true. Physicists can believe in their supreme fictions in the sciences even though “proof,” “data,” and “facts” still cannot provide apodictic certainty. Why then is it so hard to take this approach toward ethics?

We do not consider past scientists foolish or shameful for being wrong, but we do feel that way when our ethics come up short. We have a long history of trying the same experiments with the same results in the field of ethics. As Nietzsche points out, perhaps we should consider

another perspective for this field—perhaps a less serious and more comic approach.

Contemporary philosophers such as Stanley Cavell\textsuperscript{334} and Cynthia Willett\textsuperscript{335} attempt to work through ethics with comic libidinal relationships, but it is by no means a popular choice when it comes to ethics. It is not coincidental that both Willett and Cavell use Nietzschean themes when explicating a libidinal ethics.\textsuperscript{336}

The comic is always a perspectival approach. It is always fueled by a nonstandard way of looking at the world. The comic takes the all-too-serious, the sacred, and the taboo and looks at them from the viewpoint of the body, i.e., he, she, or they; it looks at them from the standpoint of a cheerful mood of laughter, and laughter always brings things back to the body. It makes us wonder sometimes whether we should be laughing, or whether another’s perspective is so alien to ours that they can laugh at something we find unfunny or even perhaps reprehensible, thus bringing an ethical dimension in almost without our consent. This is part of the power not just of comedy but of poetry in general.

Poetry, music, drama, and comedy have always been efficacious in moving people to action, especially when prose fails.\textsuperscript{337} This is why poets have always been powerful and why the ancients thought that the poets spoke truth (though Plato claimed that they “lie too much”). Nietzsche also says the poets lie too much, echoing Plato,\textsuperscript{338} but for Nietzsche the lie and the deception that is art are more important than the truth.\textsuperscript{339} Heidegger tries to explicate why “art is worth more than truth” for Nietzsche, but he misses the core of what Nietzsche is up to in that

\textsuperscript{334} Particularly in Stanley Cavell, Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005).
\textsuperscript{335} See Cynthia Willett, “Engage the Enemy,” in Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy & Freedom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), which posits irony against hubris/arrogance such that it can help us to avert tragedy in both friendships and in properly functioning democracies.
\textsuperscript{336} Nietzsche claims in Human, All Too Human, §98, that sexual relations “on the whole makes men better.”
\textsuperscript{337} Nietzsche, The Gay Science, §84.
\textsuperscript{338} Nietzsche mentions this Platonic utterance twice in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, part 2, “Upon the Blessed Isles” and again, more thoroughly, in “On Poets,” and also consider The Gay Science §87, §107, and §222.
\textsuperscript{339} As noted earlier the will to truth is a will to nothingness.
statement from *The Will to Power*. Though a very complicated issue in Nietzsche scholarship, “Truth” for Nietzsche seems to be a historically agreed-upon concatenation of lies.340

Truth for Nietzsche is not just about subjective experience or perception. It is perhaps closer to intersubjective agreement, although this agreement is probably false. It is akin to error theory, which is to say there is no truth, only errors, though some of these errors are useful. The veils are social constructs, but they never bottom out; there are just veils or masks all the way down. This is why art is more important and profound than truth for Nietzsche; art has an honesty that truth lacks, since truth lays claim to a universal exclusive monoperspective (i.e., there cannot be multiple truths about a single statement), but art starts off claiming to be a certain kind of invented falseness.

Comedy’s poetic ability to entertain and its current popularity allow it to reach a wider audience than a directly “truthful” communication. We might cite Horace here when he says “joking often cuts through great obstacles better and more forcefully than being serious would.” The philosophy of art is degraded by the title *aesthetics* because it makes art into a narcotic, as Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science*.341 When art is only about a supposed universal-subjective judgment that one ought to feel, we miss the entire sociopolitical and ethical efficacy that art can have.

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References


