

WELTEN DER PHILOSOPHIE 

About this book:

This anthology looks at laughter through intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives. It focuses on humoristic aspects of East-Asian philosophies such as Daoism and Zen Buddhism as well as on the use of irony and wit by Western authors ranging from ancient Greece to contemporary Newfoundland.

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Hans-Georg Moeller, Günter Wohlfart (eds.)
Laughter in Eastern and Western Philosophies

WELTEN DER PHILOSOPHIE 3

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Laughter in Eastern and Western Philosophies

Proceedings of the
Académie du Midi

Verlag Karl Alber Freiburg/München

Originalausgabe

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in der Verlag Herder GmbH, Freiburg im Breisgau 2010
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www.verlag-alber.de

Satz: SatzWeise, Föhren
Druck und Bindung: AZ Druck und Datentechnik, Kempten

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier (säurefrei)
Printed on acid-free paper
Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-495-48385-5 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-495-86038-0 (E-Book)

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Introduction

Unfortunately, to philosophize about laughter is usually quite unfunny. On the other hand, thinking back to previous topics discussed at the meetings of the *Académie du Midi*, it should also be considered that philosophizing about death is not lethal, and philosophizing about war is often rather peaceful. That one cannot expect too much congruency between the exercise of philosophy and its various subjects may therefore also have its blessings.

In any case, laughter is not a typical theme in philosophy. Therefore it can be no surprise that many of the articles included in this volume deal with issues and sources that do not belong to the core canons (whatever these may be) of either Western or Eastern philosophical traditions. Some papers refer to works of literature—such as the *Journey to the West* and the *Iliad*, medieval Japanese and English poetry, or the writings of Hanshan and Kafka—and others even to contemporary comedians from Newfoundland. However, I think that in general the methodologies that are applied throughout the volume are to a certain extent, »traditionally« philosophical. The leading questions are: How to think (and write) with, through, or about humor?

Some sort of preliminary typology of laughter and humor in philosophy (and literature) emerges when reading the various essays. First, as arguably the most radical type of a philosophy of laughter, it can be considered a philosophical practice or method itself. In Zen Buddhism the outburst of laughter as such is physically, emotionally, and socially applied philosophy. It is not an exaggeration to say that in Zen Buddhism laughter can be deemed a more appropriate philosophical practice than, for instance, writing or lecturing—or even thinking. Interestingly enough, one may also ascribe such an attitude to Friedrich Nietzsche.

Second, there are philosophies that use humor, and, by extension, the laughter of the reader, as a mode of expression. The works of *Zhuangzi*, for instance, are renowned for their outstanding literary

wit. But one will probably be able to find examples for exquisite hilarity or subtle irony in most philosophical traditions around the globe. Philosophy and literature are, as Richard Rorty insisted, intrinsically similar, and they thus can share humor as a major stylistic feature. Some philosophical works actually can make people smile and thereby promote a humorous outlook on whatever they deal with.

Third, there is a philosophy about humor. Kant, although on occasion even a somewhat funny writer, provided us with a fundamentally unfunny definition of laughter in the *Critique of Judgment*. Although he otherwise dealt with laughter mainly in his philosophical anthropology, and thus one of the minor and least important branches of his self-styled scientific philosophy, laughter still seemed to be a remarkable enough phenomenon to deserve at least some of his intellectual efforts.

Fourth, there can be a philosophy against humor, a teaching that warns us about the perilous effects of having too much fun. »Laughter ethics,« so to speak, tend to describe the limits of decency with respect to enjoyment and wit, and to prescribe when and, in particular, when not to laugh. For some Confucians, for instance, laughter was morally much more suspicious than crying. But without doubt, the perception of laughter as a potential threat to morality is not a uniquely Confucian feature.

Fifth, there is the rhetorical usage of humor and laughter in a derisive way. The ancient Chinese Mohists liked to portray their philosophical opponents as ridiculous fools. But again, this is by no means a specifically Mohist quality. I would dare to speculate that most philosophical and religious traditions contain a certain dosage of mockery of those who do not share their beliefs. But, after all, if one is not a proponent of a strict »laughter ethics,« one may find such uses of humor more delightful, and even more truthful, than a presumably emotionless and unbiased critique of what one considers wrong.

I chose once more and East-West order for structuring this volume. As it turned out, the structure then also became more or less chronological, at least within the three major sections on »East,« »West,« and »East-West.« No ideological commitment to cultural differentiations underlies such a division; it simply seemed to me that the three sections each include essays that are thematically, historically, and/or methodologically linked to one another.

Anna Ghiglione provides us with an insight into one of the more neglected philosophical schools within the ancient Chinese tradition,

namely the Mohists. In line with their advocacy of frugality and utility, the Mohists promoted an austere and thus not very funny way of life. They did not appreciate humor very much and hardly used wit as a literary device in their texts. Nevertheless, they did on occasion »maliciously« mock their main rivals, the Confucians. Thus, they did in fact produce some at least vaguely humorous polemics.

Robin Wang takes a look at the different attitudes towards laughter in ancient Confucianism and Daoism. Figuratively speaking she says that »Zhuangzi is laughing while Confucians are crying.« In particular, she focuses on the more somatic aspects of laughter and points out that while the Confucians embraced singing and dancing as forms of emotional expression, they nevertheless did not encourage laughter. It may be, Wang suggests, that the Confucians abhorred the absurd aspects of humor that present a challenge to a worldview based on an ideal of harmonious social order. Laughter may thus pose a danger for civilization by giving way to some unobstructed natural or »uncultivated« impulses.

Paul D'Ambrosio dissects the allegory of the »happy fish« and several related stories in the *Zhuangzi* in order to define the kind of philosophical humor employed in this work. He argues that the *Zhuangzi's* laughter is foolish. Foolish laughter is laughter at others, but it is not derogatory. It is not supposed to express that the one who is laughing considers himself superior to or wiser than the one whom he laughs at. To the contrary, the foolish laughter of the Daoist sage expresses not only amusement about others, but, at the same time, amusement about oneself. He laughs about the foolishness of the other only to confirm his own foolishness. When a philosophical dialogue ends in laughter in *Zhuangzi*, the Daoist sage thereby expresses something like: »Look how ridiculously foolish all of us philosophers indeed are!«

Richard John Lynn presents a most elaborate philological analysis of the history of the modern Chinese word for humor: *huaji*, or, in pre-modern pronunciation, *guji*. He looks specifically at the occurrence of this word in the *Zhuangzi* and in Guo Xiang's commentary and Chen Xuanying's sub-commentary to this text, and then compares these with passages from other sources such as the *Shujing* (*Book of History*) and the *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*). In conclusion, he suggests that the term originally referred to what he translates as »slippery operators,« i. e. political or military advisors who used cunning and witty rhetorics to »undermine conventional assumptions about life and the

world, to reform harmful behavior, and reverse wrong strategies.« Even Zhuangzi himself, Lynn argues, may have conceived of himself as a »slippery operator« in philosophy.

Robert Carter answers the question »Why do birds shit on Buddha's head?« This is a reference to a Zen (or Chan) Buddhist Koan, and Carter's answer explains the usage of humor in this tradition. He mentions the »deconstructionist« function of humor in Zen that challenges ordinary thinking, values, and hierarchies. Existentially speaking, life is paradoxical, and so is laughter. More concretely, to point out that birds shit on the head of (a) Buddha (sculpture) indicates a rejection of any pretence of holiness, the overcoming of dualistic value distinctions between what is beautiful and what is disgusting, and an emphasis on the fact that there is no ontological »waste,« that all things are of equal reality.

Karl-Heinz Pohl approaches laughter in Buddhism by focusing on its iconography. One of the founding figures of Chinese Buddhism, Huayan (334–416), is typically portrayed pictorially as having a laugh with his visitors Tao Yuanming (365–417) and Lu Xiuqing (406–477). This presentation is not meant to depict an actual historical scene, but rather the harmonious unity of the three teachings Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Similarly, there are a number of paintings that show the famous poet Hanshan, who is often linked in one way or another with Buddhism, with a laughing face. Even more present in pictorial art is the »Laughing Buddha,« the Bodhisattva Maitreya who can be seen in many Buddhist temples. The medieval Chinese Buddhist iconography of laughter is, as Pohl shows, continued even in contemporary postmodern American literature. The novel *The Laughing Sutra* by Mark Salzman plays with exactly this heritage.

Franklin Perkins writes about the philosophy of laughter in the Chinese predecessor of *The Laughing Sutra*, namely the famous Ming Dynasty novel *Journey to the West*. The plot of this quite fantastic novel revolves around the monk Xuanzang who travels to India in order to bring sacred Buddhist texts to China. According to Perkins, the novel as such »presents a profoundly pessimistic view on human life« which is quite in line with »orthodox« Buddhist beliefs. However, Perkins shows that the text is nevertheless full of irony and humour. While Xuanzang himself is a rather serious and unfunny character, his travel companion Monkey is a comic figure who constantly provokes the pious monk. Perkins interprets the comic tension between Xuanzang and Monkey

as an illustration of a certain ambiguity in Buddhism. On the one hand it advocates »serious« compassion for all beings that suffer while, on the other hand, it promotes a much more light-hearted pursuit of non-attachment.

Robert Borgen explores the historical roots of Japanese Haiku poetry. The term Haiku became widely used only in the nineteenth century. The genre essentially goes back to the older genre of *haikai*. *Haikai* was the title of a section in the Japanese poetic anthology *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Japanese Poems, Ancient and Modern*) which was compiled around the year 905. While the term *haikai* can be literally translated as »fun, a joke,« it is often very difficult to understand what about the poems in this section in the *Kokinshū* is actually supposed to be funny. As Borgen demonstrates on the basis of a detailed analysis of some of the poems, they do contain quite intriguing word plays. These could have been perceived as funny by an audience that was familiar with concrete allusions and cultural references which may totally escape contemporary readers.

William R. LaFleur introduces a genre of Japanese poetry that evolved out of the *haikai* and Haiku tradition, a short and humorous mode of verse named *senryū* that became popular in the Edo period (1600–1867). LaFleur is particularly interested in the relation between humor and the human body. One of the main reasons for humans to laugh about themselves is, according to LaFleur, the fact that we both *have* and *are bodies*. This issue is dealt with in a number of *senryū* where human physicality becomes a laughing matter. In particular, the »intellectual« professions of priests and physicians are made fun of with respect to their bodily existence that they cannot deny; they also, for instance, sneeze or experience sexual arousal. The *senryū* mock these and other manifestations of our physical life, but they do so, as LaFleur points out, in a healthy way that does not intend to do harm to those it ridicules, but to make us share a refreshing and relaxing laugh.

Haijo Jan Westra's topic is humor and, in particular, irony in ancient Greek and Latin literature. He begins by pointing out, not unlike Robert Borgen in his analysis of Japanese poetry, that it is often difficult to detect a pun in a text when the reader is not familiar with its immediate social context. This is particularly so in the case of irony which by itself is one of the more hidden forms of humor. In order to better indicate passages that are meant in a funny way, various textual signs (*nota*) where sometimes employed in writing, but this has not been a

common practice. Westra then uncovers a number of ironical scenes and statements in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Finally, he comments on the religious use of irony by the early Christian poet Prudentius.

Manfred Malzahn quotes from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the title of his article: »Great laughter was in Heaven.« This line introduces a survey of occurrences of humor and laughter in European English language literature ranging from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. He begins with a look at grim humor in *Beowulf* and then turns to sardonic and sombre humor in the works of Shakespeare, Andrew Marvell, and John Donne. Further evidence for laughter in this literary tradition is given by reference to Milton and Alexander Pope. A well-known representative of satirical literature in the eighteenth century is Jonathan Swift, while Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is an example for absurd dimensions of humor in more recent times.

Lorraine Markotic deals with laughter in the works of Nietzsche. Her attention is devoted not so much to the witty or funny aspects of Nietzsche's writing, but more to the pronouncements and aphorisms that actually talk about laughter and its »philosophical« role. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, laughter can be linked to a break with traditional thought and values. Nevertheless, according to Markotic, in other works by Nietzsche, laughter appears not at all as a sign of liberation, but rather as one of restraint and limitation. It indicates a merely »temporary upsetting that functions to fortify existing structures.« An example she cites for laughter as an act of constraint is the ridicule that is met by »The Madmen« who announces the death of God in the *Gay Science*. But there is also another function of laughter for Nietzsche: In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for instance, laughter opens up the possibility of the transformation of the human into *das Übermenschliche*.

Brendan Moran discusses Walter Benjamin's detection of occasions for laughter in the works of Franz Kafka. Just as D'Ambrosio with respect to *Zhuangzi*, Moran classifies this laughter as foolish, but as a kind of foolishness that is connected with wisdom. Interestingly enough, Benjamin conceives of this connection explicitly as Daoist. Not so different from what D'Ambrosio says about laughter in the *Zhuangzi*, Moran says that for Benjamin, »Kafka enables us to laugh at the fools only insofar as this becomes laughter at us, laughter that passes into thinking about the mythic production of ourselves.« Moran how-

ever also states that humor in Kafka is »often inextricable from horror.« This is, I would say, hardly the case in the *Zhuangzi*.

Stephen Crocker reports on the humoristic productions by a group of comedians from Newfoundland called Codco and their former member Andy Jones. Crocker highlights the postcolonial aspects of their satirical works which often focus on the problematic identity of Newfoundlanders as inhabitants of a once autonomous entity that then decided to join the Canadian state. The solo performances by Andy Jones, according to Crocker, transcend the socio-political dimensions of humor, and connect with religious and philosophical practices. Jones looks at comedy as a »truth procedure« that culminates in an act of »desubjectification« of the comedian—which leads Jones to claim in somewhat Buddhist fashion: »To know me is to remove me.«

Alfredo P. Co compares different types of laughter and humor in three of the main figures of the »axial age«: Siddhartha, Socrates, and Zhuangzi. Socrates' kind of laughter, as depicted in the *Symposium*, is characterized as »laughter in erotic innuendos.« Zhuangzi's laughter, according to Co, can be classified as a »practico-cynical« laughter that »brings us face to face with the absurdity of existence and the way we look at reality.« Siddhartha provides us with a third type of laughter, the »spiritual-intuitive humor« of Buddhist enlightenment. Co concludes with a plea for cross-cultural understanding through humor and joy. One can »intuit the essence of truth« in laughter, and thus it may serve as a foundation for a harmonious new universal culture.

Günter Wohlfart leads us »beyond enlightenment.« Commenting on Kant's definition of laughter as »an emotion resulting from the sudden transformation of eager expectation into nothing,« Wohlfart suggests a slight amendment: The »nothing« should be spelled with capital »N«—and the laughter with capital »L.« If so, one could actually arrive at an understanding of laughter that can be found in Zen Buddhism: Enlightenment is an act of bursting into laughter while paradoxically experiencing that the search for enlightenment ends with the realization of its »emptiness.« Here, we are facing the most »radical« type of a philosophy of laughter that I listed above, a philosophy in which laughter is a most philosophical activity.