

PHILOSOPHY: IS IT A JOKE?

By Tony Lynch

On this occasion last year I delivered a short talk entitled “10 Reasons Not To Do Philosophy”.

It wasn't an entirely negative piece.

It began with 5 reasons for doing philosophy – that it is the science or craft of thinking; that it is useful for most things and essential if we are to do some things well; that good thinking lasts; that philosophy involves thinking deeply about things that matter; and finally, that good thinkers are always in short supply, so good philosophers are always in demand.

But it was balanced – as it seems all media presentations are required nowadays – by the countervailing case against philosophy.

In essentials the case is as follows – philosophy can get you killed, as it did Socrates; it sensitises you to bullshit, and that is painful given how much of the stuff is around; that the sedentary lifestyle has adverse health impacts; that it a striking fact that philosophers tend to great personal ugliness; that philosophy destroys intellectual modesty; that it may well drive you to drink; that in philosophy nothing is ever finally resolved; that it encourages unsavoury social habits like talking to, even arguing with, yourself; that, as a consequence, it tends to wreck personal relationships; and that you always have to say, after having brilliantly and conclusively said all that needs to be said, “any questions”.

I am not going to repeat myself this time, instead I'm going to ask a different, but extremely common, and deeply relevant, question. I am going to ask if philosophy *is a joke*, and I'm going to ask it in the way philosophers tend to ask questions.

So – first things first – what is a joke? Well, in the most general of terms it is the humourous element in a situation. So what is

humour? Here we must go beyond the merely definitional. Of course humour involves the quality of being amusing or funny, but this is just circular. We need something a little more informative, and so we need something a little more controversial.

Here, I think, we should turn to that greatest of 20th Century philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wrote:

Humour is not a mood, but a way of looking at the world. So, if it's right to say that humour was eradicated in Nazi Germany, that does not mean that people were not in good spirits or anything of the sort, but something much deeper and more important.

This is a striking passage, and it is surely correct. Humour does not appear to have been a feature of life in Nazi Germany, as it had been – if usually in an ironic and satirical form – in the preceding Weimar Republic; but many, perhaps most people, were it seems, and most of the time, in remarkably good spirits.

So what kind of way of looking at the world does humour involve? What was it that was missing in Nazi Germany?

Wittgenstein says merely that it is something deep and important; and while this is obviously true, it would be nice to be able to say more.

And I think we can say more.

Consider the following two jokes from the history of philosophy. The first concerns Diogenes and Alexander the Great; the second Socrates and Athenian Democracy.

Alexander, already Master of Greece, set out on his journey on to conquer the world. On the way he stopped in at his vassal city-state Athens to see Diogenes. Now Alexander knew his philosophy – he had been tutored by Aristotle - and now he wanted to make the acquaintance of the renowned Cynic. He was directed to the tub in which the naked philosopher lived,

and, the sun behind him, asked Diogenes if there was anything he might do for him. Diogenes eyed him for a moment, then said, “Yes there is. You can get out of my light”. Alexander laughed. And claimed that if he could not be himself he would surely want to be Diogenes.

That’s the first story – and the first joke.

Now for the second story – and the second joke.

Socrates has been charged by the poet Meletus, the politician Anytus, and the orator Lycon, with “inventing new gods” and “corrupting the youth of Athens”. Both charges reflect his philosophical questioning of anyone he could get to talk with him.

After the prosecution and defence cases are heard, the Jury find Socrates guilty, 280 votes to 221.

The accusers ask that the sentence be death. Before the jury vote on the sentence, Socrates, as the Law provides, is asked to nominate his own sentence for consideration. He suggests the State provided him with free meals for the rest of his life, and put him up in the plushiest part of the City. There is uproar. He is supposed to be suggesting a penalty for himself, not a benefit. Oh, *all right*. He’ll pay a fine. And how much will he pay? Well, how about 1 mina of silver. More uproar.

The jury vote for his punishment – death – is much higher than the vote for his guilt.

Now what do these joking philosophers show us? What is their way of looking at the world?

In the first place they don’t look at the world as an arena for personal gain. Diogenes could have made a killing from Alexander; and Socrates joking about his sentence ensures it’s going to be death.

In the second place, they have no natural deference to authority. Mere position or power does not impress them at all. These are men of a singular integrity and unconquerable autonomy.

In the third place, they are without fear; or at least, they are courageous. For it is no light thing to joke at the expense of the Supreme Leader or to bait the slaving mob of Athenian Democracy.

And finally, as I hope you will have noticed, it is not just that their jokes are those of a “funny guy”; they are the jokes of a philosopher; and they are jokes that express or embody their philosophy.

Diogenes is a Cynic – and that means he wishes to live as natural, as uncorrupted, as simple and as virtuous life as it is possible for him to lead. For him, this is what Reason demands. Thus – although I doubt Alexander realized this – his generous offer to Diogenes was an offer the philosopher could not accept. It was, in fact, almost an insult; for to make it meant not to appreciate the depth and sincerity of Diogenes’ philosophy. And so by asking for something at all – even if only to move out of the light – Diogenes is being extremely tactful. He does not tell Alexander to push off, he allows him to give him something, without compromising his own commitment to live as reason demands, that is the simplest and most natural life possible.¹

Socrates is – well – Socrates, and that means he is dedicated to pursuing knowledge of what is Just, and so of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. In doing this he is not corrupting the youth, nor is he inventing new gods. Because there is nothing more important than these things he just can’t stop asking people what they know about them; and he can’t stop himself from pointing out how little they do in fact know. His joking

¹ We should also note Alexander’s beautiful response. Far from taking offence, he makes the joke his own, and in a way that reaffirms his authority. He says that if he were not himself, he would be Diogenes – that is, *he* would be the man who managed to make such a joke.

about his punishment by treating things as if he deserved a reward is his way of reminding the Athenians of the importance and the necessity of what he does not merely for himself, but the importance of what he does for them all.

So is philosophy a joke? Well, I should hope so! Our two philosophers joke out of honesty, out of fidelity to an ideal, and a respect for reason. They joke with tact and compassion. And they do not do this out of any concern for personal gain, nor out of an unthinking or fearful obedience to power, but with courage, integrity and freedom.

And so I think we can see what Wittgenstein meant by speaking of the deep importance to be found in the lack of humour that characterized the good-spiritedness of Nazi Germany.

Nazi Germany's "good spirits" in no way stood courageously before the demands of power, nor did it quieten the demands of a fearful self-interest; nor did it reflect courage and integrity and freedom, let alone heed the voice of reason. It had no time for tact and compassion. No time for jokes or jokers.

And so my conclusion.

To the extent that we want to live better lives than those to be found whenever power and selfishness, tyranny and unreason, cowardice and collusion dominate the scene, then we need to be able to joke as did our two philosophers. And their jokes – and what made them able to joke under such extraordinary circumstances – arose from their commitment to philosophy. It was their philosophy that enabled them to look at the world in the way they did.

So, if you want to make sure that you can always look at the world in a way that those in Nazi Germany typically could not, then one thing to do is to do philosophy. It won't necessarily work – and it didn't work for the philosopher Martin Heidegger in Nazi Germany – but as our two heroes show us, it *can* work, it *has* worked, and it is remarkable and memorable thing when it *does* work. Philosophy can help you see the world aright.