

Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art, philosophy and psycho-analysis –
<https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/>

Title: Elucidating humour in Kierkegaard's philosophy

Author: Gorica Orsholits

Section: Academic articles

Abstract: Søren Kierkegaard recognised that humour belongs to the highest stages of life among the ethical and religious spheres of existence but not the aesthetic one. In Kierkegaard's philosophy, humour aids in maintaining a true self, which requires constantly striving to remain in communion, to attain synthesis, to balance a multitude of different humours, and to oppose aspirations that exist within the personal self. Through the analysis of the contrasting and conflicting views of Kierkegaard's humour as the highest stage of life, Hegel's objective humour, Freud's relief theory linking humour to the unconscious, and Shakespeare's tragicomedy *Hamlet*, the aim is to understand how humour contributes to the existence of being and whether the initial ontological meaning of the word *humour* managed to transport itself from the sphere of life in the 19th century into our contemporary world view, into our state of mind, and into our life philosophy.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; humour; Hegel; Freud; Shakespeare

Copyright © 2023 Orsholits.

Correspondence: Gorica Orsholits, e: gorica.orsholits@egs.edu.

Received: 15 September, 2022.

Accepted: 25 October, 2022.

Published: 15 January, 2023.

How to cite: Orsholits, Gorica. "Elucidating humour in Kierkegaard's philosophy." *Inscriptions* 6, no. 1 (January 2023): 41-47.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Elucidating humour in Kierkegaard's philosophy

Gorica Orsholits¹

Abstract

Søren Kierkegaard recognised that humour belongs to the highest stages of life among the ethical and religious spheres of existence but not the aesthetic one. In Kierkegaard's philosophy, humour aids in maintaining a true self, which requires constantly striving to remain in communion, to attain synthesis, to balance a multitude of different humours, and to oppose aspirations that exist within the personal self. Through the analysis of the contrasting and conflicting views of Kierkegaard's humour as the highest stage of life, Hegel's objective humour, Freud's relief theory linking humour to the unconscious, and Shakespeare's tragicomedy *Hamlet*, the aim is to understand how humour contributes to the existence of being and whether the initial ontological meaning of the word *humour* managed to transport itself from the sphere of life in the 19th century into our contemporary world view, into our state of mind, and into our life philosophy.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; humour; Hegel; Freud; Shakespeare

The origin of humour

Since antiquity, work in the philosophical and aesthetic fields of study has constantly explored the idea of humour and prompted a new understanding of, and new approaches to, humour in relation to our existence. The word humour originates from Latin and originally signified liquid, whim, fantasy, strength. It was used as a symbol for four bodily fluids (blood, bile, phlegm or mucus, melancholy or black bile), which would cause illness if they were out of balance. Humour determined physiological, psychological and pathological characteristics of a person. In Christianity it was considered that no one possessed the perfect balance of the four humours, apart from Jesus Christ.

It was only in Renaissance times that humour began being associated with the comic effects

of artistic creation. The categorization of human character based on the balance of humours in one's organism had a strong influence on the creation of characters in Renaissance comedy, Shakespearean theatre, opera, music theatre, Elizabethan drama. They all recognized that humour warns us of the boundaries of the linguistic, the philosophical and the emotional, in a peculiar and subtle way in the form of sobering, emotional rupture, dissonance, perhaps even rebellion.

It is not only Kierkegaard who tries to equalize humour and poetry in his existential philosophy; he even characterized himself as a poet with a leaning toward the religious. He claims that his book *Either/Or* is the work of a poet, so it is impossible for me not to mention Plato's opposition to and suspicion of laughter and humour, similar to his stance towards poetry. He

¹ European Graduate School.

believes that comedy in an ideal state needs to be controlled. “No composer of comedy, iambic or lyric verse should be permitted to hold any citizen up to laughter, by word, or gesture, with passion or otherwise.”²

Plato was the first to recognise that humour creates emotion which erases self-control, and that it even leads to violent behaviour. And just as in poetic creation, when rationalism fails, humour begins to work – emotionally shaking our thoughts, knowledge – and it can express the ugliest and the hardest, most unimaginable conditions of our being, to speak without known language. Speech and words become the means of transmission of emotions, together with bodily gestures, eye movements – the entirety of one’s body and psyche participates in the act of humour. And it is exactly in what Plato views negatively in the concepts of humour and poetry that Kierkegaard finds what he considers to be the most important factors in the creation of self.

The role of humour in Kierkegaard’s existential awareness

Kierkegaard opposed Plato’s statement that we have to control humour’s emotional imbalance while also recognizing humour’s erasure of self-control when he proclaimed himself a two-faced Janus – “with once face I laugh with the other I weep.”³ In declaring this, Kierkegaard exactly explains the mode of existence of our living where we spend our entire lives trying to find a balance between these two faces, which is very close to the original understanding of the four humours as balanced liquid/water de-

termining the character of a person. This is a subjective process and humour is evidence of this balancing act — the existential act and the philosophical act of how to become your own self.

That subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth is my thesis; that the pseudonymous authors relate to it is easy enough to see, if from nothing else than their eye for the comic. The comic is always the mark of maturity; and the only thing is that in this maturity the new shoot should appear, and the *vis comica* not stifle pathos but simply indicate the beginning of a new pathos. The power of comedy is something I regard as an indispensable legitimation for anyone who is to be regarded today as authorized in the world of the spirit.⁴

Subjectivity is the truth, proclaims Kierkegaard and if one lacks a sense of humour, one does not have the authority to make general statements about human life. In his discussion of his three spheres of existence – the aesthetic, ethical, and religious faith – humour in Kierkegaard’s view stands at the boundary between the ethical and the religious. Humour, however, is the result of moving into the religious sphere since “Humour is the last stage of existential awareness before faith.”⁵

In Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage, in which the aesthetic retains an existential note, he nevertheless sets boundaries for poetry, art and all kinds of imagination claiming that they provide only imperfect comfort in life, because when we direct our eyes to the artistic, we do not look at reality. Kierkegaard’s is about aesthetic existence in terms of the spiritual and

² Plato, *The collected dialogues of Plato*, trans. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1978), 7: 816e; 11: 935e.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987), 482.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding unscientific postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1974), 250.

⁵ Kierkegaard, 259.

vital state of the individual, whose state of being is realized in relation to aesthetic being and whose existence has only as much reality as the aesthetic being itself.

In the ethical stage, an ethical person does not claim complete autonomy over one's entire existence. One can and wants to choose to develop certain capacities and leave others, but that person is then fully aware that those talents one rejects have their value. Such a subject does not rush into innumerable possibilities but takes the given element and perpetuates it in the imagination. If we stick to the choice with the whole inner side and the sincerity of the personality, the being is purified and brings itself into a state of higher magnification. This does not imply the choice between good and evil, but the process by which good and evil are chosen, or by which good and evil are rejected.

When the first choice is made, that is, the transition from aesthetics to ethics, one cannot go backwards, once one makes the leap and gains faith, one can no longer descend to the ethical stage, so one can always go only forward. Humanity is so eternally in crisis, because coming to one's own self is a leap, an ecstatic effort to reach the inner self. That is why there is fear, because every decision that is made is definite. The Existent chooses one's own self which is the eternal self in one's relationship with God. The self is then a synthesis of possibilities and necessities manifested in a belief that stands in opposition to every opinion and is the opposite of despair. One also believes only by means of the absurd, Kierkegaard reasons, because absurdity is not within the bounds of reason.

This is about knowing how we want to live and under what determinations we view our whole life. It is ethics, the reality of choice itself, that through which one becomes what one becomes. Aesthetics would then be that through which one is directly what one is, i.e., what one is by birth.

Kierkegaard's substantive claim is that to be

human requires acting without proof of results. Therefore, to understand oneself requires understanding that vulnerability. The objective thinker ignores this vulnerability, her existential situation, and thereby makes a comical mistake. Kierkegaard's essential diagnosis is that the objective thinker is pursuing this as a self-defeating strategy to avoid risk and vulnerability.

Humour is a genuine effort to come to terms with paradox and risk. Since objective thought approaches human life in a way that avoids the unavoidable nature of existential risk, it thinks that existential thought misses what is important in humour. For Kierkegaard, however, humour ironically gets its revenge. Although objective thought is unable to illuminate the depths of humour, humour is able to find objective thought funny; and that is exactly how Kierkegaard critiques the concept of Hegel's objective humour.

Critique of Hegel's objective humour

The title of Kierkegaard's capital work *Either/Or*, or *Enten-Eller* in Danish, originated as a kind of parody or slogan of the key features of Hegel's dialectical philosophy related to the reinterpretation of Aristotle's logic and his objective humour. Hegel explains the concept of humour in his lectures on aesthetics where he made a distinction between comedy, which he considers as a sub-genre of poetry and the last form of classical art, and humour which is part of his thesis on romantic art.

Hegel considers humour within aesthetic form, as an elevated form of poetic creation, and he does not consider crude jokes and roaring laughter as humour. Even if both Hegel and Kierkegaard recognize the poetic side of humour, Hegel remains only in the domain of poetic imagination while Kierkegaard elevates humours to a position between the ethical and religious spheres of existential awareness. Ob-

jective humour, according to Hegel, is within each person and through consciousness, each person experiences it through objects and in given appearances. Hegel demands the engagement of the absolute spirit which is the only one that can grasp the difference between appearance and transcendence. Thus, it is able to subjugate simple forms of laughter which theoretically don't even interest the spirit.

[W]hat matters to humour is the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex, then we acquire thereby a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of objective humour. [...] The form meant here displays itself only when to talk of the object is not just to name it, not an inscription or epigraph which merely says in general terms what the object is, but only when there are added a deep feeling, a felicitous witticism, an ingenious reflection, and an intelligent movement of imagination which vivify and expand the smallest detail through the way that poetry treats it.⁶

The Hegelian objective humour is contained within the aesthetic sphere and not the ethical and religious. Thus Hegel does not recognize that by limiting humour exclusively to the aesthetic domain, he prevents it from participating in the creation of being and its importance for going toward the truth. Consequently, for humour to play its role in self-being, it must possess irony, dark thoughts, and sarcasm in addition to beauty, virtue, and poetry.

While Kierkegaard extended great energy in attempting to overthrow Hegelianism he

still respected Hegel's work saying: "If he [Hegel] had written his whole logic and declared in the *Preface* that it was only a thought-experiment (in which, however, at many points he had shirked some things), he would have been the greatest thinker that ever lived."⁷ It is worth mentioning that Badiou also refers to Hegel in his interesting advice on how to portray the character of philosopher in theatre: "In theatre the philosopher is quite regularly represented as a comical figure." The character of the philosopher use ridiculous rhetoric, speaks Latin, and "[i]f you get a comedian who is a little bit snarky to recite a passage of Hegel then you'll make everyone laugh, in fact even I could do it."⁸

Freud's humour of the unconscious

Freud's thoughts on philosophers was that he was "[I am] aware that anyone who is under the spell of a good academic philosophical education, or who takes his opinions at long range from some so-called system of philosophy, will be opposed to the assumption of an 'unconscious psychical'."⁹ But for Freud, humour precisely originates in the unconscious. He shows us how humour and jokes are related to unconscious mechanisms of the human mind. He separated humour from jokes stating that, on the whole, humour is closer to the comic than to jokes. It shares with the former its psychical localization in the preconscious whereas jokes, as we have had to suppose, are formed as a compromise between the unconscious and the preconscious.

⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's aesthetics: lectures on fine art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 1 (Clarendon Press, 1975), 609.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding unscientific postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1974), 558.

⁸ Quentin Margne, "An interview with Alain Badiou: theatre and philosophy, an antagonistic and complementary old couple," *Verso* (blog), trans. David Broder, 9 September, 2014 [2012], <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1697-an-interview-with-alain-badiou-theatre-and-philosophy-an-antagonistic-and-complementary-old-couple>.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1960), 161.

On the other hand humour does not participate in a peculiar characteristic common to jokes and the comic, on which we have perhaps not yet laid sufficient stress. It is a necessary condition for generating the comic that we should be obliged, simultaneously or in rapid succession, to apply to one and the same act of ideation two different ideational methods, between which the “comparison” is then made, and the comic difference emerges. Differences in expenditure of this kind arise between that which belongs to someone else and to oneself, between what is as usual and what has been changed, between what is expected and what happens. In the case of jokes, the difference between two simultaneous methods of viewing things, which operate with a different expenditure, applies to the process in the person who hears the joke.

One of these two views, following the hints contained in the joke, passes along the path of thought through the unconscious; the other stays on the surface and views the joke like any other wording that has emerged from the preconscious and become conscious. We should perhaps be justified in representing the pleasure from a joke that is heard as being derived from the difference between these two methods of viewing it. Here we are saying of jokes what we described as their possessing a Janus head, while the relation between jokes and the comic had still to be cleared up.¹⁰

Freud says, “we take note of the fact that ‘saving in effort spent on inhibition or suppression’ seemed to be the secret of the pleasurable ef-

fect of tendentious jokes.”¹¹ They are “ways of restoring old freedoms and of disburdening us from the compulsion of our intellectual education.”¹² In modern day language, it’s about letting go of political correctness, and being authentic with our actual feelings. We all have repressed negative opinions of others or systems that disadvantage us. Freud says, that “we scarcely ever know what we are laughing at in a joke, though we can discover it by an analytic investigation. The laughter is in fact the product of an automatic process which is only made possible by our conscious attention’s being kept away from it.”¹³

Humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation: “The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.”¹⁴

“Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.”¹⁵ Thus, Freud posits that humour is a form of catharsis for repressed hostilities. He also claims that we read society through the types of jokes they use. Freud expresses a strong belief that the same processes that create dreams in the unconscious mind are also at play when making jokes.

¹⁰ Freud, 234–35.

¹¹ Freud, 119.

¹² Freud, 127.

¹³ Freud, 154.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The future of an illusion: Civilization and its discontents and other works*, trans. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1961), 162.

¹⁵ Freud, 163.

Humour in Shakespeare's tragicomedy *Hamlet*

In Shakespeare's tragicomedy *Hamlet*, the essence of humour is psychological and poetical, and represents the distinction between that which is expected, and that which occurs in reality. In his master dissertation, *The concept of irony*, Kierkegaard introduced Shakespeare as the great master of irony: "by no means does Shakespeare allow the substantive worth to evaporate into an ever more fugitive sublimate, and as for the occasional culmination of his lyrics in madness, there is an extraordinary degree of objectivity in this madness."¹⁶ Kierkegaard sees irony as a psychological process where the writer assumes that the listener or reader understands him, while not seeking to be "universally understood." Kierkegaard reads the story of Hamlet as a mirror of his own experience. In *Fear and trembling*, Kierkegaard's conception of Shakespeare is implied thus: "Thanks, once again thanks, to a man who, to a person overwhelmed by life's sorrows and left behind naked, reaches out the words, the leafage of language by which he can conceal his misery. Thanks to you, great Shakespeare, you who can say everything, everything, everything just as it is – and yet, why did you never articulate this torment? Did you perhaps reserve it for yourself, like the beloved's name that one cannot bear to have the world utter, for with his little secret that he cannot divulge the poet buys this power of the word to tell everybody else's dark secrets. A poet is not an apostle; he drives out devils only by the power of the devil."¹⁷

Shakespeare exposes all of Hamlet's existen-

tial and psychological problems with "double language" which enhances the humour in the tragic story of a specific time of political, societal, and individual instability. We can thus add that the play within the play allows Shakespeare to reveal to us his own reflections on acting in plays. Everything Hamlet says about the art of acting could be said by Shakespeare himself. He speaks through Hamlet's mouth when commenting on the art of acting. The advice that Hamlet gives to the actors is indeed very reasonable. He advises them not to delve too deeply into extravagant passions while speaking on stage, but neither to be too mild. He compels the actors to adapt the work to the word, and the word to the work, and not to exaggerate in anything. He also advises clowns, asking them not to overdo their banter.

Hamlet's most striking feature is probably his philosophical nature and intellectual depth. This is visible in all his monologues, which reveal a deep thoughtful and meditative nature. In his first monologue, we find Hamlet obsessed with thoughts of the shameful haste with which his mother remarried. He feels that even the beast would "mourn longer." He regrets the fact that his mother married his uncle, who is in every aspect inferior to his dead father. This disgusting behaviour of his mother leads Hamlet to contemplate: "Weaknesses, your name is woman . . ."¹⁸ In his next monologue, Hamlet reflects on the secret revealed to him by the Ghost. He now addresses his mother as "the most destructive woman", and calls his uncle "a smiling bastard..."¹⁹ His uncle's deceptive appearance leads him to say: "He can laugh..." In the second monologue, Hamlet looks back on his delay in carrying

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The concept of irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1989), 324.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983), 61.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, accessed 25 October, 2022. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html>.

¹⁹ Shakespeare.

out the task imposed on him by the Ghost and rebukes himself with harsh words, calling himself a “donkey” and a “dishwasher.” In the same monologue, he devises a plan to “capture the king’s conscience.”

The pursuit of the real truth – perhaps this is the most accurate motivation of Hamlet’s character. But can we even get to that truth? The openness and breadth of the problem made this drama eternally interesting and provocative and provided an opportunity for numerous and very different performances. This Hamlet’s pursuit of the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence, typical of the Renaissance, is best embodied in the famous monologue that begins with the well-known “to be or not to be.” To exist or not to exist, to endure all the injustices that life in a corrupt society brings, or to end it all by the act of suicide. Hamlet’s reflection on human nature reveals that we mostly do not opt for the latter, not only because of religious prohibitions, but also because of our innate fear of the unknown, of disappearance, of death that we have simply because we are human.

By its dramatic structure, Hamlet is unconventional and innovative. Unlike the recommendations from Aristotle’s Poetics, which are followed by all the tragedians who preceded Shakespeare, this drama is not focused on the action but on the character. For this reason its important element are the monologues. Also, the text is full of comic, humorous, and ironic elements, especially in Hamlet’s replicas and witticisms which always bring forth an unpleasant truth.

Conclusion

Can we ask today, in a humoristic manner whether I should cry or laugh about how hard it is to be – or not to be – myself in this world? The crises of our humanities, asks the Niet-

zschean question: are we too human or we are not human enough? The values which underpinned our existence have lost their importance and consequently we have lost our sense of humour. If anyone laughs, they don’t laugh at themselves but at someone else out of malice, behind their backs, to look down on them, to disqualify them. The world has become serious – too serious; consumerism, success, material wealth, social standing erase that intrinsic function to search for oneself. Education, upbringing, social conventions and demands, have made it seem as though searching for oneself is futile. Instead, consumerism gives us the possibility to find ourselves through a large choice of material goods, clothes, cars, telephones, spaces (real and/or virtual), celebrities which leads us to believe that there is large choice of “selves” which can be copied and adopted as one’s own to match one’s material situation. All that is left, as Kierkegaard rightly states: “The more one suffers, the more, I believe, has one a sense for the comic. It is only by the deepest suffering that one acquires true authority in the use of the comic, an authority which by one word transforms as by magic the reasonable creature one calls man into a caricature.”²⁰ It is good for humour that we are all becoming clowns, but that might not be good for us.

References

- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Translated by James Strachey. The Hogarth Press, 1960.
- . *The future of an illusion: Civilization and its discontents and other works*. Translated by James Strachey. The Hogarth Press, 1961.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding unscientific postscript*. Translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton University Press, 1974.

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on life’s way*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1988), 245.

- . *Either/Or*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1987.
- . *Fear and trembling*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1983.
- . *Stages on life's way*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1988.
- . *The concept of irony*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Margne, Quentin. "An interview with Alain Badiou: theatre and philosophy, an

antagonistic and complementary old couple". *Verso* (blog). Translated by David Broder. 9 September, 2014 [2012]. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1697-an-interview-with-alain-badiou-theatre-and-philosophy-an-antagonistic-and-complementary-old-couple>.

- Plato. *The collected dialogues of Plato*. Translated by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns. Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Shakespeare. *The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Accessed on 25 October, 2022. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html>.

Copyright © 2023 Orsholits.

Correspondence: Gorica Orsholits, e: gorica.orsholits@egs.edu.

Received: 15 September, 2022.

Accepted: 25 October, 2022.

Financial statement: The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author's own expense.

Competing interests: The author has declared no competing interests.

How to cite: Orsholits, Gorica. "Elucidating humour in Kierkegaard's philosophy." *Inscriptions* 6, no. 1 (January 2023): 41-47.

2023 Ereignis Summer School

June 4 – June 11
in Gdynia, Poland

Join us for a week of seminars, workshops, and talks at the **2023 Ereignis Summer School**. Designed to ease the transition from graduate study to professional engagement this summer school will help you write better essays, give more professional presentations, and increase your academic acumen. The summer school consists of academic seminars, workshops, and evening events. The summer school culminates in the 3rd Ereignis Conference, with an opportunity to present your paper. Our students are also invited to submit an essay to our peer-reviewed scholarly journal *Inscriptions*, giving you the chance to join the academic publishing circuit.

- Seminar with **Andrew Jorn**: Time famine – temporal castration and capitalist subjectivity
- Seminar with **Christopher Norris**: Deconstruction and the politics of truth
- Workshops on academic writing and presentation skills
- Free attendance at the 3rd Ereignis Conference

... and more

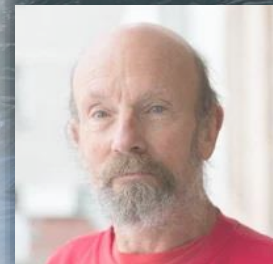
Visit our web-page for more information and to apply.

€ 500

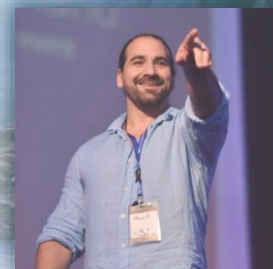
ereignis.no/



Andrew Jorn



Chris Norris



Sharif Abdunnur

