Comedy as Philosophy

JULIAN BAGGINI

Abstract
Comedy often plays with philosophical ideas, but can it actually do philosophy? Focusing on the examples of *The Simpsons*, the Monty Python movies, and the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, this contribution argues that not only can it do so, but some of its tropes, methods, and techniques are apt to do some philosophical things better than straight argumentation. It can use humour as a vehicle to explore and question fundamental aspects of human existence. It properly reasons, not by constructing arguments but by showing and making us attend to the world so as to see its shape and nature better. It can offer unique insights, challenge conventional wisdom, and provoke introspection by blending entertainment with philosophical inquiry. Comedy can serve as a powerful medium for engaging with deep philosophical ideas in a relatable and engaging way. Comedic philosophy tends to be deflationary, encouraging a philosophically helpful mentality of not being overconfident and being sceptical about our own capacities to understand the truth.

1. Introduction

When I told my better half that I was going to give a talk at a conference on philosophy and comedy, she thought I was having a laugh. What could I possibly talk about? I told her I would be advocating for comedy *as* philosophy: the idea that comedy could actually *do* philosophy. To which she replied, 'That sounds like you're trying a bit too hard.'

I don't think I am. I am entirely serious and sincere about this. I'm not saying that all comedy is philosophy, but not even all 'philosophy' is philosophy. A lot of it is mere scholastic verbiage.

Seeing comedy as philosophy is difficult if you assume that the only way to do philosophy is as mainstream academe does it. But we should not mistake an archetype for the only type, the most common variety for the only variety. Even if it is true that philosophy is mostly – perhaps almost always – best advanced by the writing of peer-reviewed, footnoted journal papers, it would be rash to assume that this is the only way good philosophy could be done. There are more ways of doing philosophy than are dreamt of in academic philosophy.

doi:10.1017/S1358246124000225 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2025

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One of my starting points for this isn't comedy, but Stephen Mulhall's work on film as philosophy. In his seminal book *On Film* he wrote, quite provocatively, that 'films can think seriously and systematically in just the ways that philosophers do' (Mulhall, 2002, p. 2). That 'just the ways' is quite a claim and I'm not sure Mulhall was wise to put his claim quite so strongly. But if we read this more weakly as 'in structurally similar ways' or 'using the same basic principles', I think the claim can be supported – not only for film, but for literature, drama, and also comedy.

There is value in pursuing this possibility even if you do not ultimately agree that comedy can be philosophy. To investigate the possibility that it can is to reflect upon what philosophy is, how we do it, and whether it can be done in ways other than the now standard ones. To do this we have to ask some basic metaphilosophical questions: what is philosophy? What is its goal? What are its methods? And what are its styles?

2. What is Philosophy?

Start with the biggest question of them all: what is philosophy? When it comes to 'What is X?' questions, I have become sceptical of the once ubiquitous approach of providing an answer in terms of strictly defined necessary and sufficient conditions. I take more of a family resemblance approach, which should not be so closely associated with a more generally Wittgenstinian one as it often is. I could just as easily make my reference point Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory of meaning (Taylor, 2015, pp. 286–89). The key point is simply that it is a fool's errand to think that one can draw a sharp, precise line around philosophy, since philosophy is contiguous with pretty much every other area of enquiry. To have a clear idea of what philosophy is, it is good enough to describe what it is in its most prototypical, uncontroversial manifestations. We can describe this better by breaking down to philosophy's subject matter, goals, methods, and styles.

What is philosophy's subject matter? My now standard answer to that is that it concerns the questions which matter to us in some way that we find important – not necessarily for a practical reason – but ones that are just not answerable by empirical methods alone. These questions have to be fairly general to come under philosophy's purview. 'Why is Lenny Bruce so funny?' may not be a strictly empirical question but it is too specific to be a philosophical one. 'What is humour?' on the other hand, could be the subject of a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophical treatise. More typically, philosophy asks: what is real? What does it mean to do right and wrong? What is justice? What is a cause? *Et cetera*, *et cetera*.

This subject matter, however, can be addressed in many ways by many disciplines. They can be approached through the arts or theologically, for example. But we can narrow down this wide scope by thinking about the goal of philosophy which, as Wilfrid Sellars memorably put it, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term' (Sellars, 1962, p. 35). Another way of putting that is to say it's to examine phenomena that might be complex or difficult to understand and bring them under the simplest, most coherent and truthful account possible. That is not the way the arts typically approach the big questions.

That still leaves theology undistinguished from philosophy. To differentiate philosophy from theology, we need to think about philosophy's methods. In academic philosophy, the key method is generally seen to be a combination of argument and evidence, with the relative weighting varying according to whether the philosopher veers more towards empiricism or rationalism. This is sufficient to distinguish philosophy from other disciplines. Theology takes as premises certain articles of faith or doctrine, whereas philosophy is supposed to make no assumptions other than those minimally required to reason at all, such as that we are not mad or systematically deceived. (And we even prefer to have arguments to justify why we are allowed to make those assumptions.) It also distinguishes philosophy from science because the evidence philosophy rests on is not of any special kind. It is not gleaned from experiments, archaeological digs, or historical manuscripts. It is simply the kind of evidence any reasonable person should accept as relevant.

However, I think the term 'argument' is misleading. Very little philosophy is actually any kind of formal argument, whether deductive, inductive, or abductive. A more general word to describe what philosophers do is to *reason*. And formal arguments do not exhaust what we mean by reasoning, or even capture the majority of what it is.

The grip of philosophy's self-image as a discipline built on argument is so strong that I was about to use the stock phrase 'I have argued elsewhere…' when I realised that this is, of course, misleading. What we should say is 'I have *made a case* elsewhere…'. The case in question was for the idea that to reason is essentially to give reasons for belief (Baggini, 2016). These may include arguments, but they may also include pointing to aspects of a phenomenon that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

make sense under a certain description but not under others, or to make a conceptual distinction that makes a phenomenon clearer.

Of course, to be rational is not to offer just any reasons for belief, such as 'because I say so' or 'it's common sense, innit?' The kinds of reasons that add to a rational case have certain characteristics. Briefly, they have to be objective, assessable, comprehensible, and compelling. Objectivity here is not meant in any absolute, God's eye sense, but in Nagel's sense of depending as little as possible on our idiosyncratic subjective viewpoints (Nagel, 1986). This involves a capacity for any reasonable agent to be able to understand and assess the reasons for themselves. They also have to be compelling in some way. When we are given strong reasons to believe something, there is something about those reason that make belief hard to deny, even if we want very much to deny it.

Whatever we think are the precise methods of philosophy, there is also another aspect of the way in which it is done which receives less attention: style. For example, some are more negative, others more positive. Some philosophers try to build a positive account of the way things are: a theory of art, a theory of experience, a metaphysical theory. Then there's the negative kind of philosopher who goes around knocking things down. Bernard Williams is considered one of the greatest 20th century British philosophers, but little of what he did was particularly constructive. One of his colleagues once said to him something like, 'You know, you go around knocking all these things down and what do you put in in their place?' And his reply was, 'In that place, nothing should be' (Baggini, 2007, p. 131).

As well as the contrast between positive and negative, there is the slightly different contrast between being systematic and piecemeal. Philosophy can try and assemble a grand theory. Equally, it could just make a little intervention somewhere. It is a perfectly legitimate and valuable philosophical move just to intervene in a debate and make a very specific point and not say anything else about the broader system. Again, Bernard Williams was an exceptional example of that.

There is never going to be universal agreement on the goals, methods, and styles of philosophy. However, I think that those I have described are at least commonly accepted ones and if I can make the case that comedy is capable of achieving these goals through these methods and styles, then I will have made the case for comedy as a form of philosophy. To make this case it is sufficient to give some examples of comedy doing just these things.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Identifying the Nub of an Argument

When you read philosophy, you often get very caught up in the details. Professionals pride themselves on being very up on these, knowing every variant of an argument, the footnotes, the footnotes to the footnotes, and so on. But a lot of the time all these details don't really matter. A lot of the positions people take on a lot of the big issues are on the basis of the big, clear points and arguments, not the tiny details and variations of them.

To give an example, consider the ontological argument for the existence of God. It's a hoary old argument that tries to argue that the very concept of God necessitates God's existence. Virtually every philosopher today thinks no version of it works, even Christian philosophers. So it's not anti-religious to say the ontological argument is rubbish.

Why is it rubbish? Not because no one has yet come up with the formulation which is sufficiently clever to get around all the objections, although God knows (or at least would know, if it existed) many people are trying. Most of us are confident these attempts are futile because there's a fundamental problem with the argument that once identified, seems insurmountable. That problem is that you can't leap from a truth about a concept to a truth about what exists. To explain fully why that's the case you would need a lot of time, but once you've seen it, it's the one big reason that carries the day and shows that the basic premise behind the argument is fatally flawed. Still, the way in which some continue to talk about the ontological argument and its innumerable variants, you'd think the tiny little arguments mattered.

There may of course be times where someone approaches a debate, which everyone thinks is dead, and they come up with such a clever little twist on it that it revives the argument. Not everyone is wasting their time when they keep picking away at the corners. But unless and until someone succeeds, our convictions rest on the big points, the clear and compelling reasons. So when communicating to people who don't have a philosophical training, it's not dumbing down or over-simplifying to cut to the chase and tell them the essence of the argument.

Comedy is very good at stripping things down to essences, cartoons especially. *The Simpsons* is a terrific example of a very philosophical cartoon comedy. One of the things it does is not simplify philosophy, but get to the heart of an argument. It can take what are really quite complex phenomena and boil them down to the essential points.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Take as example a classic episode of from the series' Golden Age: 'Homer the Heretic' (Reardon, 1992). In the episode, Homer stops going to church, because God appeared in a dream and told him he didn't have to. One of the things the episode does brilliantly is to refute Pascal's Wager. This is the argument that you really ought to believe in God because if you believe in God and God doesn't exist, you've had a lot of reassurance in your life, so you haven't really lost out. You could have done a few more naughty, sinful enjoyable things, but they're generally a bit overrated anyway and don't compensate for the anxiety of believing death is the end. If you believe in God and God does exist, fantastic. Off you go to the afterlife, you're saved. If you don't believe in God and God doesn't exist, well, you know, life's meaningless anyway, frankly, so you haven't really gained anything. You've gone through your whole life thinking there's no ultimate purpose and you were right, but now that you're dead meat that brings no vindicatory satisfaction. But if you are wrong about God not existing, you may well find yourself being tortured forever by little demons. So consider each option and the risk/benefit analysis seems clear: you can't know if God exists or not, so better to believe and risk being wrong than not believe and risk being wrong.

It always surprises me when people take this argument seriously. What Homer does in a few words is to give you objections which are better than the ones you'd get in most philosophy textbooks because they don't pull any punches. They bring out the ridiculousness of Pascal's argument brilliantly. So he says: 'What's the big deal about going to some building every Sunday, I mean isn't God everywhere?' More to the point of Pascal's Wager, 'Don't you think the almighty has better things to worry about than where one little guy spends one measly hour of his week?' I've always thought this is absolutely true. I used to be a Christian in my teenage years and before I became an atheist I just thought, I'm being told that it really matters whether I believe in God or not, but would God give a damn, literally? Surely if this superpower cared about anything it would be about whether I'm trying to live a decent life, trying to think seriously about his existence, not whether I reached the right conclusion or not. Homer makes this key point brilliantly.

Another problem with Pascal's Wager is that it presents a very simple risk/benefit analysis, in which if you believe and you are right, you're going be saved. But as Homer says, 'And what if we've picked the wrong religion? Every week we're just making God madder and madder?' Even if we accept it is better to worship God, we can't be sure how to do so.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What Homer is doing is not summarising, simplifying, or alluding to more subtle arguments that the proper philosopher makes. He's saying *everything* that we basically need to say to get the crucial point. Comedy can do that really well.

Obviously, we can be misled by a comic demolition that doesn't actually hit its target at all. In the same episode Homer is shown lying on a sofa watching a stand-up, who says something smart-arsed and Homer laughs saying, 'It's funny because it's true.' Sometimes things are funny because they're true, but sometimes things are funny because we think they're true, but if we thought a bit harder, we'd think, actually, that's not true at all. (A lot of observational comedy works by tapping into caricatures of what is true – for example about 'blokes' and 'women' – which on examination are not.) But in the same way one could be persuaded by a bad but clever argument. In both cases, the key thing is that what the philosopher and the comic scriptwriter present to us as reason to reach a certain conclusion are objective, assessable, and comprehensible, and when good, compelling. We can examine them and ask: are these actually good reasons? Do they correspond to the facts? Are they reasons which are capable of being assessed? Can we say whether they're true or false? Are they properly objective or are they just reasons that we like because they fit our worldview? We can interrogate Homer's arguments and see if they stand up. When we do, we see that they very much do.

I suggest that even philosophers settle on their basic commitments on many philosophical issues at a level of discourse which is closer to the simple truths of *The Simpsons* than the complex mental machinations of philosophy of religion. Where the latter make is a difference is when, while fishing in the deep waters of arcane debate, they hit upon some shining intellectual pearl that they can bring back to the surface for us and hold it up, clear to see. Beware the intellectual who says to see you must come deep-sea diving with them: they're probably trying to drown, not enlighten you.

4. Maestros of the *Reductio*

Another great thing comedy can do is apply that famous method of argumentation in philosophy, the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. This is a standard way of doing philosophy in which you take a position which you find problematic and you demonstrate that it entails something else which is clearly absurd and false, which means that it must be false itself. So if I believed that there was a huge elephant in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the room in which I gave the talk on which this paper is based, the only way to make that consistent with what everyone could see is that this elephant was completely invisible and either wasn't touching anything or was intangible. That's so absurd that we can reject the thesis of the elephant in the room. Comic mockery often takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Comedy is very good at showing that if you believe *x*, then you must believe *y*, and *y* is comically ridiculous, therefore, *x* must be false.

Going back to 'Homer the Heretic', there is a scene in which he's talking to Reverend Lovejoy about why he stopped going to church. His explanation is, 'He appeared before me in a dream and I knew that was special because I usually dream about naked ….' Realising he's talking to the vicar, he quickly changes the ending of his sentence to 'Marge', the name of his wife.

What's the *reductio ad absurdum* here? There are people who argue very seriously that religious experience is a legitimate basis for religious belief. So the fact that someone has had a profound personal experience of what they take to be the divine means that they are justified in concluding the reality of what they believe in.

'Homer the Heretic' presents a *reductio* of this. Homer Simpson has this special dream, so he believes that God was speaking to him. That's obviously ridiculous. But why is it any less absurd than Abraham believing that God told him to sacrifice his only son when it was God who actually arranged for the son to be born in the first place? God prohibits murder, and killing your son is the worst thing you could do. Kierkegaard wrote about this very astutely (Kierkegaard, 2005). Abraham, by any sane account was just mad and deluded. Having this powerful experience, he should have concluded, 'There's something wrong with me. I need a shrink' or 'Satan's trying to tempt me'. Concluding that he had experienced the divine was completely bonkers. ('Completely bonkers' is of course not a standardly accepted criticism of a philosophical argument, but 'absurd' is. There is no significant semantic difference between the two and their relative acceptability is purely a matter of etiquette, which comedy can effectively subvert.)

5. Slapstick Subtlety

The examples I've given so far are quite straightforward ones of comedy doing quite simple but not simplistic philosophy. But the best comedy can delve into things with quite a lot of subtlety and complexity, while also being succinct and homing in on the essence

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the issue. One classic Simpsons episode which does this is 'Homer Badman' (Lynch, 1994).

Homer is taking the babysitter home and in the car a lot of spilled gummy bears, a kind of candy, are lying around. And as the babysitter gets out of the car, he notices one of these gummy bears has stuck to her jeans. And so Homer being Homer, a man driven by gustatory greed, he cannot resist reaching over and taking the gummy bear from her. Obviously, he shouldn't have done that, especially since it was right on her derrière. But this wasn't a sexual advance. He just wanted a gummy bear and was being insensitive and inappropriate. Still, a storm builds up over this, with feminist protests outside Homer's house. He is demonised as a sex pest.

Some of the humour is just great satire about the pomposity of middle-class liberals. Outside his house, for example, they deliver the absurdly pedantic and mealy-mouthed chant:

> 2, 4, 6, 8, Homer's crime is very great. [Pause]
> Great as in large or immense, we mean it in the pejorative sense.

Marge also talks of a meeting she has had with the group's 'Indignation co-ordinator'. But if all the episode were doing was mocking everyone, it would hardly classify as being greatly insightful. But that is not all the episode does. Rather, it offers a critique of just the kind of laissez-faire relativism which lazier satires would hide behind to mock everyone.

When we indulge in universal mockery, often what we are doing is lapsing into an ironic, post-modern relativism in which we deny the possibility of truth and revel instead in the plurality of worldviews and their equal absurdity. *The Simpsons* does maintain an equality of absurdity in one sense but not another. That is to say, we are all absurd and in that sense we are equal, but we are not all equally absurd: some viewpoints are crazier than others. In particular, we throw out the idea of truth at our peril. There may be no such thing as The Truth but there is a difference between truths and falsehoods.

This is where the script is philosophically brilliant. The episode effectively deconstructs standpoint theory, a highly influential idea in class, race, and feminist thinking. Put simply, standpoint theory says, with Marx, that that the socially oppressed can access knowledge unavailable to the socially privileged. The ruling classes are in effect intellectually blinded to truths which the oppressed can see all too well. There is a lot of truth in this. If you have a disability, if you're a person of colour in a white majority country, if you are woman in misogynist culture (i.e., pretty much the whole world),

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it's pretty obviously the case that you do have a certain kind of insight into the way that society works that people who don't share that lack of privilege have. For example, if Homer had been more politically aware he might have seen what is obvious to those who suffer the consequences of misogyny: namely that it is inappropriate to remove a sweet from someone's arse.

But just how privileged is the perspective of the oppressed? What you see in this *Simpsons* episode is what happens if you take standpoint theory and you understand it in the wrong way, as it is often crudely understood in popular culture and maybe sometimes even by some academics. If you do get it wrong, you end up with the obviously false view that the perspective of whoever is identified as the victim has a kind of privileged status irrespective of the strength of their case and before it's even been established whether they are the victim or not. To assume that one standpoint is privileged above all others repeats the very same fault standpoint theory claims to be correcting. The problem of the ruling classes is that they cannot, or do not, see things from the standpoint of others. But if feminists too adopt only one standpoint, that will also provide a limited vision and blind them to the wider truth. If you add to this the truth that in some social milieu, such as academia, feminism is part of the official orthodoxy, you can see the critique coming absolutely full circle: feminism becomes the standpoint of the entrenched ruling classes.

The mistake of the feminists in Homer Badman is evident: by only seeing the incident from the standpoint of the 'victim' they are blinded to the real truth. The genius of the set-up is that they are thus shown to be making exactly the mistake they identified in the patriarchal system they oppose.

But there's more. For, what happens in a culture that absorbs relativism, perspectivism, and standpoint theory? Facts are no longer sacred and you can say anything as though it were the truth. Standpoint theory has opened a Pandora's box, out of which have come a multitude of standpoints that depend upon taking only a partial view of things. Thus fairness and objectivity have become obsolete and all we are left with are competing viewpoints and interpretations.

There's a great line where the newsreader says, 'Homer sleeps nude in an oxygen tent that he believes gives him sexual powers.' Homer's reaction is, 'Hey that's a half-truth!"'That he does not say it's a lie is funny, because it makes us wonder exactly what the half-true part of the story is. But perhaps there is also a deeper point being made: in a world of viewpoints and interpretations, not one of truths and facts, it is dogmatic to say of anything that is just false or a lie. Even the most

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

absurd claim must be granted the respect of a half-truth. Toleration for diversity of opinion has opened the door to a free-for-all in which it is not allowed to say anything is wrong. In abstract terms that may sound open-minded and diverse, but its unacceptability is made clear by asking who would think it desirable to accept that holocaust denial is a half-truth.

The rest of this segment contains more examples of what happens when a respect for the facts is replaced by a primacy on opinion and interpretation. We have the weeping woman who says, 'I don't know Homer Simpson, I've never met Homer Simpson nor had any contact with him … I'm sorry, I can't go on.' 'That's OK,' says the reporter, 'Your tears say more than real evidence ever could.' Feeling has triumphed over fact, interpretation over evidence, and in tracing the spread of this, a direct line can be followed from left-wing academic theory to trial-by-TV populism.

And it gets worse. Standpoint theory started as a tool of the oppressed. But if you allow that truth is defined by standpoint, you're going to end up with a situation where the perception of the majority standpoint becomes the truth. Hence Kent Brockman reports a poll showing that 95% of people believe Homer is guilty, saying, 'Of course, this is just a television poll and it's not legally binding. Unless proposition 304 passes and we all pray it will.'

This is the mess we get into when ideas of truth and fact get dumped, even in the name of progressive, liberatory movements like feminism. So how do we get out of it? The episode resolves the issue by new evidence coming to light. It turns out groundskeeper Willy had filmed the incident, showing the clumsy innocence of Homer's touch. But why was he filming? He explained, 'My hobby is secretly videotaping couples in cars. I didn't come forward because in this country… … it makes you look like a pervert. But every single Scottish person does it!'

Marge's response is, 'You know the courts may not work anymore but as long as everybody is videotaping everybody else justice will be done.' It's a liberal horror: decent criminal justice replaced by the surveillance society. Except that, as a matter of fact, people videotaping everybody else is precisely what has led to many instances of justice being done. In the US, perhaps the most famous example of this is amateur footage of the beating of Rodney King by the LAPD. The joy of this joke is that at first we want to laugh at Marge's naivety, but on reflection, maybe she's just right.

Whether or not she is, in this case justice is ultimately done because multiple perspectives are opened up and instead of just granting each its own truth, we see how they come together to assemble the greater

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

truth. Standpoint theory was right to insist there is no objective view from nowhere. But we don't need a view from nowhere to get at the truth: all we need is enough views of the same scene.

And this, brilliantly, is what you could say the whole project of *The Simpsons* is about. In *The Simpsons*, no one viewpoint is sacred. Indeed, everyone's perspective is mocked. But that doesn't leave us with a postmodern relativism: rather, we get a greater sense of the wider truth by seeing the limitations of every single partial truth. This is summed up brilliantly in a late exchange when the babysitter says, 'Homer, I thought you were an animal but your daughter said you were a decent man. I guess she was right.' To which Homer replies, 'You're both right.' But it should be obvious that this does not mean there are two competing truths out there and we just have to grant each its reality. Rather the whole truth comprises elements from both partial truths. Homer is not a contradictory animal-decent man amalgam, but part animal, part decent man, and only when we come to see him from several perspectives and take what is true from each one can this whole be discerned. That's neither naïve, old-fashioned view-from-nowhere objectivism nor permissive standpoint theory or relativism; rather it's a mature, sophisticated epistemology, expressed and explained more eloquently and clearly in one episode of *The Simpsons* than any academic treatise. It makes all these points, it's giving you a proper understanding, and it's a philosophical critique of a philosophical view, but it makes them in such a way that you don't have to be even aware of what the theories are behind it are.

6. The Importance of Attention

'Homer Badman' does not present explicit arguments, with premises and conclusions. Rather it *shows* us what is right and wrong with standpoint theory. Showing is a form of reason-giving which is underappreciated in Western philosophy, in part because we are fixated on the idea of argumentation being core. Good philosophy makes us attend to the right things, so that we can see better how to understand them. So when I am describing to you how the episode works – telling, not showing – I'm actually doing the philosophy less effectively.

What a lot of great philosophers do is get us to attend more carefully to whatever it is we're trying to understand, to notice what we may have missed, in a way that is compelling. Take the obvious example of Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am.' This looks like an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argument. It's even got the word 'therefore' in it! But in the *Meditations* he doesn't use that phrase at all (Descartes, 1986, p. 17, §25). In that work he employs a method of doubt that doesn't rely on constructing arguments. He simply explores one by one the kinds of things he can doubt and the kinds of things he can't doubt to find what is certain and indubitable. What he finds is that he cannot doubt his own existence. It's an impossibility. You verify that for yourself, not by seeing if his logic is correct, but by seeing if it's possible to doubt you own existence and finding that you can't because in the moment of doubting *you* are doubting, so 'you' is clearly there. There are problems with how Descartes takes this insight, but the fundamental point is that he's drawing our attention to an important feature of our experience.

When Hume argued against Descartes, his criticism was that Descartes jumped to a conclusion about what this indubitability entailed: that the self was an indivisible ego of some kind. When Hume argues against it, again, it's not actually an argument in the sense of premises and conclusions. He gets us to pay more careful attention to what's going on when we are thinking. To paraphrase, he says that if you were to observe carefully what is going on when you are thinking, you never find a 'you', a 'self'. You only find thoughts, feelings, experiences. You never have this experience of a self behind them. Whether Hume's point is compelling or not depends on whether you reach the same conclusion when you attend to your own experience in the same way. It has nothing to do with the validity of any argument (Hume, 1962, Part 4, §6).

Paying attention is important for all philosophy, but especially in moral philosophy. Going back to Stephen Mulhall, there is a wonderful paragraph.

> There is a strong philosophical tendency to think of moral disagreement on the model of opposing opinions about a particular course of action, with each opinion supported by more general ethical principles. But as the example of Socrates and the polis implies, moral disagreement can also be a matter of differing visions of what matters in human life, different conceptions of human flourishing in the world, and so on; and discussion here may well take the form of encouraging one's interlocutor not so much to change her mind about a particular course of action but to look at everything differently – and so to find moral significance where it did not previously seem to exist, as well as to find that what previously seemed highly morally significant

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> was in fact trivial or even essentially illusory. (Mulhall, 2007, pp. 279–94)

Comedy can do that. One way it can do it is by ridiculing something that people take very morally seriously, which they shouldn't. (Moral philosophy often works by showing that something people do not take morally seriously is more morally significant than they think. But because comedy as philosophy generally works more on the negative than the positive side, we can't expect it to do this as often.)

To give an example of this, take the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (Coen, 1998). I don't want to reduce the film to a thesis or proposition. But I am sure the film invites us to consider the question of when and if we should challenge wrongdoing. It's set at the time of the first Gulf War, and early on George Bush Sr is shown on a screen television saying, 'This aggression will not stand.' That's the backdrop of the film. The main action sees how this attitude plays out on a smaller scale. Basically a load of hoodlums have got the wrong Lebowski. They pissed on his rug. And that rug was really good. It really tied the room together. Lebowski's buddy Walter tries to persuade him that this should not stand. These guys should not get away with it. He should stand up to them.

The consequences of him doing this are – spoiler alert – pretty bad. It becomes pretty obvious by the end of the film that, actually, although there is something quite wrong about people getting away with turning up in someone's house and pissing on their rug, standing up to that kind of stuff isn't always worth it. And how does it make that case? Obviously, it's showing us that through a particular story. So you might say, that's not good enough, because philosophy is meant to be about general principles. But remember the background. We've already seen George Bush evoke the same principle for the Gulf War. So it's pretty clear that you know that we're being asked to make some connections. We are being invited to generalise.

This is exactly how a lot of mainstream moral philosophy works. You are given an example or a thought experiment. You draw a conclusion from it and then you generalise. The film is doing the same kind of thing. You've got two examples, the Gulf War and the hoodlums pissing on the rug. In both cases, the conclusion we draw is that the idea that wrongdoing should never be allowed to stand is false. We are being shown that a plausible sounding principle is wrong.

If the point were only negative, that would be enough. I have already argued that there is a role for purely negative philosophising. But the film offers a positive model too, because of the philosophy of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Dude – Lebowski – is that he abides. Life went wrong when his friend persuaded him this was not enough.

In moral philosophy historically and around the world, one of the ways in which people will try and make a case for a certain way of living is to point to moral exemplars. The idea of the virtuous person as a model to be followed. *The Big Lebowski* is giving us a very moral exemplar, quite explicitly. At the end, the cowboy who is acting as a kind of commentator says, 'It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners.' But he is a weird kind of moral exemplar. He's a kind of dropout. He doesn't do anything. We are being invited to think about how there's actually something good about the man who just abides and lets things be. He's not like the bad people in the film. He's not greedy, he's not avaricious. He just *is*. That may not make him the best person in the world. Most moral exemplars, of course, are heroic. But there's something to be emulated in the Dude. And the way the case is made for this follows the classic way of doing moral philosophy by generalising from well-chosen examples.

7. A Positive Philosophy

I've talked mainly about comedy as doing piecemeal and largely negative philosophy. But sometimes, it can even articulate a broader position, such as a school of philosophy. Take what I would call British existentialism. This is different from the French variety, which was serious, earnest, espoused by Gauloises-smoking figures who talked about how grim everything was: anguish, abandonment, despair (Sartre, 2001).

British existentialism was the work of one *Monty Python*. Their version highlights an overlooked aspect of philosophy, which is that there are beliefs and there are arguments, and then there's how we react to them. Philosophical disagreements are often about how we react to things, not the things themselves.

Take the example of free will. There are people on supposedly opposite sides of the debate who agree that the only kind of freedom we have is the freedom to act for reasons that we ourselves endorse, free from coercion, and that in no way means that we have escaped from the cycle of cause and effect which ultimately determines everything in the universe. Some people say, 'Oh my God, that's the only kind of freedom we have, so we're not *really* free!!!!' Other people say, 'That's the only freedom we have, and that's cool, it's all the freedom we

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

need.' They agree on the facts, but they gave different attitude to them.

French and British existentialism agree that the universe is ridiculous, absurd, and ultimately meaningless. The French find this all a bit grim and the British find it bathetically hilarious. *Monty Python* shows us why that is better response. In *The Life of Brian* and *The Holy Grail* they ridicule the idea that there is some kind of transcendent purpose or grand narrative that dignifies our existence, using the *reductio ad absurdum*. For example, when King Arthur is galloping through the countryside telling the peasants he is their lord and liege they tell him, 'Well, I didn't vote for you.' When he's asked to explain why he's king and he talks about how Excalibur came forth from the water, their reply is, 'Some watery tart handing over a sword is hardly a sound basis for a democratic system' (Gilliam & Jones, 1975). It might seem crude and unphilosophical but like Homer Simpson, it's just getting straight to the nub of it, cutting the crap.

The closing song of *The Life of Brian*, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' sums up the philosophy (Jones, 1979). Because it has become so ubiquitous at funerals, perhaps it's become a bit cheapened by being so popular. But if you think about it and try to remember the impact when you first saw it, it is actually brilliant. And you know, the philosophy is summed up in one verse:

> Life's a piece of shit, when you look at it.
> Life's the laugh and death's a joke is true.
> You see, it's all a show, keep on laughing as you go.
> Just remember that the last laugh is on you.

The song makes a vital point brilliantly: we live in a pointless, meaningless, empty universe. How are we going respond to it? You can get miserable if you want and say, 'Oh my God, God is dead, and so will I be soon.' Or you can just say, 'We are ridiculous, imperfect creatures and we are gonna get on with it.' Python is definitely doing philosophy here.

8. Conclusion

I've tried to say why I think comedy can do philosophy. It can use humour as a vehicle to explore and question fundamental aspects of human existence. It can offer unique insights, challenge conventional wisdom, and provoke introspection by blending entertainment with philosophical inquiry. Comedy can serve as a powerful medium for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

engaging with deep philosophical ideas in a relatable and engaging way.

One of the values of comedy is that it is deflationary. So whereas most philosophy in history is a bit full of itself, the kind of philosophy you get coming out of comedy tends to result in a worldview in which things are cut down to size. That's good. It leaves us in the philosophically helpful mentality of not being overconfident and being sceptical about our own capacities to understand the truth.

Comedy is good at deflating our pretensions, reminding us of our fallible ridiculousness. We think we can plumb the depths of the universe and understand everything, but comedy cuts us down to size. At the end of 'Homer Badman', Homer and Marge are watching a TV trailer for an exposé of the 'pervert' Groundskeeper Willy, provoking this exchange:

> Homer: That man is sick!
> Marge: Groundskeeper Willy saved you Homer.
> Homer: Listen to the music, it's evil!
> Marge: Hasn't this experience taught you that you can't believe everything you hear?
> Homer: Marge, my friend, I haven't learned a thing.

Yes, the episode may well have been a philosophical masterclass, but like Homer, most of us won't have learned a thing from it. We'll carry on dismissing the idea of objective truth and accepting limited perspectives, even as we have laughed at and mocked those characters who have acted ludicrously for just the same reason.

Similarly, at the end of the Coen Brothers' *Burn after Reading,* two CIA officers discuss the 'cluster fuck' which has resulted in more than one apparently pointless death (Coen & Coen, 2008):

> Gardner Chubb: What did we learn, Palmer?
> Palmer: I don't know, sir.
> Chubb: I don't fucking know either. I guess we learned not to do it again.
> Palmer: Yes sir.
> Chubb: Although I'm fucked if I know what we did.

Films dealing with ethical issues invite us to draw general lessons, but it is always risky to do so, since no two situations are entirely alike. After considering many thought experiments, I wonder how often the right conclusion is not to confidently extract a general principle but to say that all we have learned is not to do *that*, accepting that what *that* is, other than the exact scenario described, isn't clear.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, if we accept comedy *as* a valuable form of philosophy (or anything other than direct prose as philosophy) then its effectiveness as a medium for philosophy is going to be tightly linked to its form. So the danger of an essay like this is that as soon as you try and translate it entirely into another form, you are doing a kind of violence to it. The artist Edward Hopper once said, 'If you could say it in words, there would be no reason to paint.' Similarly, if we could do the kind of philosophy comedy does in anything other than the medium of comedy just as well, there would be no need for philosophical comedy.

That puts me in a kind of bind. I'm making the case that comedy can do philosophy in a fairly straightforward, philosophical way. But if I'm right, then there's something about the way comedy does philosophy, which can only be done in that way, and the moment I translate it into something else, I've lost something of it.

If I have failed to convince you that comedy can be philosophy, perhaps you could at least accept that philosophy is capable of being comic, not deliberately, but because it often deals with absurdities. Norman Malcolm, wrote that 'when Wittgenstein invented an example during his lectures in order to illustrate a point, he himself would grin at the absurdity of what he had imagined. But if any member of the class were to chuckle, his expression would change to severity and he would exclaim in reproof, "No, no: I'm serious"' (Malcolm, 2001, p. 17). Philosophy can be both serious and funny, like the very best comedy. If you can't see anything comedic in naked apes of evidently limited cognitive powers, thrown into the world, trying to make sense of it all, coming up with divergent answers and arguing the toss about them as though they could know which was right, you're in the wrong business.

References

Julian Baggini, *The Edge of Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

Julian Baggini, 'Truth and Truthfulness: Bernard Williams', in Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom (eds.), *What More Philosophers Think* (London: Continuum, 2007), 130–46.

Joel & Ethan Coen (dirs.), *Burn after Reading* (2008).

Joel Coen (dir.), *The Big Lebowski* (1998).

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* John Cottingham (trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986 [1641]).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Terry Gilliam & Terry Jones (dirs.), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975).
David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Book One* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1962 [1739]).
Terry Jones (dir.), *Life of Brian* (1979).
Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Alistair Hannay (trans.), (Harlow: Penguin Books, 2005).
Jeffrey Lynch (dir.), 'Homer Badman', *The Simpsons*, Season 6, Episode 9 (1994).
Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).
Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2002).
Stephen Mulhall, 'Film as Philosophy: The Very Idea', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 107 (2007), 279–94.
Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
Jim Reardon (dir.), 'Homer the Heretic', *The Simpsons*, Season 4, Episode (1992).
Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism and Humanism', in Stephen Priest (ed.), *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, (Routledge, 2001 [1945]).
Wilfrid Sellars, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', in Robert Colodny (ed.), *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 35–78.
John R. Taylor, 'Prototype Theory in Linguistics', in James D. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 286–89.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press