**PHI 238: Philosophy of Comedy**

Time: Tu/Th 9:25-10:40 AM

Location: NB 1.125

Instructor: Michael Brownstein, msbrownstein@gmail.com

Office Hours: Tu/Th 10:45-12:00 or by appointment in NB 8.63.19 ([video explainer](https://www.reddit.com/r/Professors/comments/99e8k9/a_video_explainer_about_office_hours_for_students/?st=JL5YL6F3&sh=c1f6434b))

**Course Description**

This course uses a diversity of tools—historical, psychological, philosophical, and more—to consider the nature of comedy as a form of creative expression. Understanding comedy requires considering questions such as: what makes something funny? When is it okay (and not okay) to laugh at a joke? Why do we laugh at all? Can comedy be used as a tool for pursuing social justice?

**Required Texts**

None. All readings (and other material) will be posted to Blackboard.

**Grading**

This course uses the John Jay College grading scale (available [here](http://inside.jjay.cuny.edu/compendium/assets/PDFs/Reg.008%20-%20Grading.pdf)).

**Requirements**

*Abstracts* (40%)

For each week of the course, you will need to write a short abstract for one of the assigned readings. You will write a total of 12 abstracts. Your final “abstract grade” is the average grade of these 12 abstracts.

An abstract is a one paragraph summary of: (a) the main point of the reading; and (b) the argument(s) the author offers in support of his or her point. Abstracts are to be typed and must be submitted to Blackboard (*without your name or any identifying information on them*) before the start of class.

The grading scale is this:

* 3 points if you have obviously done the reading, made a good-faith effort to understand it, and have the central argument basically right
* 2 points if you have obviously done the reading but there are some problems with your understanding
* 1 point if you have done the reading but there are serious problems with your understanding, indicating that you did not read carefully
* 0 points if you have clearly not done the reading or do not turn in an abstract

*Critical Commentary* (30%)

Students will write 3 critical commentaries on selected readings. Critical commentaries should be 2-3 pages long. Students should append a commentary to their abstract (as part of the same document) three times over the course of the semester.

The goal of your commentary is to further illuminate the issues raised by an assigned reading. This can be done by showing where an author goes wrong, by identifying what has been left unsaid, or by arguing for an alternative position. *You do not need to re-describe the reading in your commentary. Commentaries should be 2-3 pages of evaluative, critical writing.*

*Be warned:* you will be expected to work hard on your commentary. You should plan to revise your commentary several times *before*turning it in.

\*\*\***A NOTE ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**\*\*\*

If you plagiarize a paper, you will fail the course. See the JJC page on Academic Integrity for what counts as plagiarism: <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/academic-integrity-0>

*Class Presentations* (15%)

Students will give two brief presentations to the class. Details will be discussed in class.

*Participation, Attendance, and Quality of Failure* (15%)

Active and informed participation in class discussions counts for a relatively large portion of your final grade in this course. If you are afraid of speaking in public, push yourself to try. If you are terribly afraid of speaking in public, please talk with me about it privately before the course begins. Note that asking questionsin class—no matter how simple or well-informed the question is—counts as “active and informed participation.” So, ask the questions that are in your head, even if you think everyone else knows the answer. (Hint: they don’t.)

Regular class attendance is expected and counts toward this portion of your grade.

Quality of failure refers to your willingness to take intellectual risks. Have you proposed a different way to look at things? Have you taken a stand for an unpopular view? Have you argued for a view that might seem strange? Most importantly, have you been willing to speak or write about something even if you’re not sure it’s right? If so, then you will get a good Quality of Failure grade. Whenever you take a risk and fail, just tell yourself, “this is how I learn.”

**Expectations**

Doing philosophy is more like learning to ride a bike than memorizing the periodic table; more like learning to play an instrument than identifying a plant species. You will not be responsible for memorizing facts in this course. But you WILL be responsible for learning to understand, analyze, and create ARGUMENTS. In philosophy, arguments are not shouting matches. They are claims or views about one thing or another.

*Expectations for Class Participation*

Students should be able to:

* Summarize an argument
* Highlight conclusions or theses of arguments
* Outline key chains of reasoning and major premises
* Practice perspective-taking (understanding others’ viewpoints)
* Speak clearly and succinctly
* Speak creatively and with a willingness to fail well

*Expectations for Abstracts:*

Students should be able to:

* Concisely summarize and paraphrase an argument
* Represent an author's view accurately, including the “key moves” he or she makes
* Write in clear, grammatical prose

*Expectations for Critical Commentaries:*

Students should be able to:

* Write in clear, grammatical prose
* Present a transparent, narrow, and specific thesis statement
* Organize and structure your writing around a thesis statement
* Analyze arguments for validity and soundness
* Exercise the principle of charity
* Clearly define terms and concepts
* Precisely discuss examples and evidence and connect to claims
* Exhibit understanding of readings
* Present a view of one’s own

**Communication**

Email me often! Staying in touch is one of the best ways to excel in this class. You can expect a response with 24 hours on the weekdays and within 48 hours on the weekend. If you do not hear back from me within this time-frame, feel free to write again.

**Note**

Qualified students with disabilities will be provided reasonable academic accommodations if determined eligible by the Office of Accessibility Services (OAS). Prior to granting disability accommodations in this course, the instructor must receive written verification of a student’s eligibility from the OAS, which is located at L66 in the new building (212.237.8031). It is the student’s responsibility to initiate contact with the office and to follow the established procedures for having the accommodation notice sent to the instructor.”

**Schedule**

*Course Introduction*

8.28 – Introductions (no assignments)

8.30 – Discussion: what’s funny?

*Theories of Humor*

9.4 – Shaw, “Philosophy of humor” (focus on pgs. 112-118), **abstract #1 due**

9.6 – McGraw and Warner, “What, Exactly, Makes Something Funny? A Bold New Attempt at a Unified Theory of Comedy” and McGraw and Warner, “When is a Joke Too Soon? A Scientific Inquiry,” **abstract #2 due (on both readings)**

*Psychology of Humor*

9.13 – McGraw and Warner, “Why do humans laugh? (Hint: It’s rarely because something’s funny.),” **abstract #3 due**

9.20 – Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside jokes: Using humor to reverse-engineer the mind*, chapters 3&5, **abstract #4 due (on both chapters)**

9.25 – Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside jokes: Using humor to reverse-engineer the mind*, chapter 9, **abstract #5 due**

*Comedy and Identity*

9.27 – film (*Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*)

10.2 – film (*Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*)

10.4 – no class (at home assignment TBD)

10.9 – Boskin and Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” **abstract #6 due**

10.11 – TBD

10.16 – Student presentations

10.18 – Student presentations

*Ethics and Aesthetics*

10.23 – Henry, “The only line comedy shouldn’t cross is the no-laughter line,” **abstract #7 due**

10.25 – Ware, “The psychological danger of laughing at offensive jokes,” **abstract #8 due**

10.30 – student presentations

11.1 – no class (at home assignment)

11.6 – student presentations

11.8 – Anderson, “Racist Humor,” **abstract #9 due**

*Comedy’s Virtues and Vices*

11.13 – Ziv, “Humor as a Social Corrective” and O’Hara, “In the 21st Century, comedy is our greatest tool for progressive change,” **abstract #10 due (on both readings)**

11.15 – McClennen & Maisel, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?: Mockery and American Politics* (chapter TBD), **abstract #11 due**

11.20 – student presentations

11.27 – Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*

11.29 – Kahn, A., “Stand-up Tragedy,” **abstract #12 due**

12.4 – Guest speaker: Jennifer Ware

12.6 – Alfano, “The Virtue of Dark Humor”

12.11 – student presentations