Review of Dustin Peone. *Making Philosophy Laugh: Humor, Irony, and Folly in Philosophical Thought.* Cascade Books, 2023. $23 (Paperback). 158 pages.

Stuart Dalton[1]

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and I learned a lot from reading it.

In the introduction Dustin Peone argues that philosophy today has lost the correct sense of balance between the tragic and the comic sense of life. Obviously a purely comic sense of life easily devolves into frivolity and cynicism, but an overemphasis on the tragic sense of life is equally pernicious, and unfortunately that's where philosophy finds itself today:

> There is no need today to emphasize the tragic element of life or the tragic sense of philosophy. Philosophical thinking has fully embraced this aspect of existence, to the great detriment of the comic sense of life. To overemphasize the tragic, though, is a perversion of the philosophical tradition…Each is a partial truth, but neither vantage point is complete in itself. Without a dialectic between the two there is only the perpetual laughter or tears of the maniac. What philosophy requires today is a rejuvenation: a return to the sense of the comic, in order to attain a balanced standpoint. (5)

The chapters that follow attempt to balance the tragic sense of life that has become so pervasive today with an appropriate appreciation for the comedy inherent in the human condition. Peone does this with seven chapters that adopt seven different perspectives on the idea and the function of humor.

Chapter 1 is about "The Idea of Humor," and this is where you would expect to find a comprehensive theory of comedy—something that almost every philosopher who decides to take comedy seriously feels compelled to attempt. But to his everlasting credit the author resists that temptation. The greatest strength of the book is that it approaches humor with the appropriate amount of humility. Dustin Peone recognizes the futility of trying to generate a single comprehensive theory of comedy, and instead embraces a fragmentary approach to the many enormously interesting questions concerning humor, irony, and folly. Chapter 1 justifies this

[1] Department of History, Philosophy, and World Perspectives, Western Connecticut State University, USA; daltons@wcsu.edu

fragmentary approach by first providing a survey of several attempts by well-known philosophers to create something like a system of humor, and in each case points out how unsatisfactory the result is. The history of philosophers attempting to systematize or define humor is perhaps the best demonstration that "[h]umor is a matter that continuously defies the constraints of pedantry" (15). Peone derives two lessons from this history of failure:

- "If we are forced to offer a definition of humor, let it be this: Humor is that which we find funny…'I know it when I see it' may be as close as we can come to defining humor" (18). (One delightful piece of evidence Peone cites to support this conclusion comes from a private letter from Umberto Eco, in which he wrote that "Aristotle had the good sense to lose his book on comedy, insofar as he had doubtless 'not succeeded in being as lucid as he usually was'" [20].)
- But the fact that humor can't be systematized or defined does not mean that there's nothing left to say about humor—no other profound insights that could possibly be gained.

The remaining 140 pages of the book prove this second point because they are full of insights into the nature of comedy, undeterred by the fact that trying to define or systematize comedy is itself comical. The remainder of the book is an "essay" on humor in the classical sense: it embraces the value of making an attempt to analyze and evaluate various aspects of humor without pretending that a complete system or definition of comedy is possible. The final lines of Chapter 1 summarize the book's aims and its accomplishments quite accurately:

> We have admittedly failed to define or circumscribe humor, but we have now walked around it and prodded it in order to learn something of its attributes. Having essayed the nature of our subject, we must now set ourselves to studying its functions within the constellation of human affairs and institutions. (29)

After giving us an incomplete but nevertheless very insightful analysis of comedy in that first chapter, the book continues with six more chapters that address more specific applications of comedy: the social use of humor; the educative use of humor; metaphor and irony; laughter and liberation; the fool and the serious person; and finally the tragi-comic sense of life. Each of these chapters contains many excellent insights, and any attempt by me to summarize them in this short

book review is bound to be disappointing. The arguments in these chapters are truly fascinating, so I hope my very inadequate summaries will motivate you to read the book itself.

Chapters 2 and 3 address what Peone argues are the two primary philosophical uses of humor: the social or moral function, and the educational function. Chapter 2 explores the cult-ish nature of all cult-ure, with a particular focus on the place of humor in the cult of Dionysus, and how humor can be used both to reinforce and to disrupt the insularity of all cults. Tragedy and comedy can both be abused in the service of oppression, yet it is striking that such abuses are held against comedy far more often than they are held against tragedy. "The misuse of tragedy does not lead us to take a political stance against the tragic sense of life. Likewise, we should cease to be suspicious of comedy, or to attempt to restrain its subject matter" (48). Perhaps the most valuable social and moral service that comedy performs is to reveal our own values to us. "We learn a great deal about ourselves when we know at what we will laugh. If we are titillated by the comedian who works in the service of inequality, this is a mark against ourselves" (49). In this case comedy is just the messenger that has the ability to educate us concerning our own character, and responding to an unpleasant message by shooting the messenger is always the wrong response (though it is quite funny).

Chapter 3 continues the exploration of the educational power and potential of comedy with many arguments directed against the strange allergic reaction to comedy that is so common in all forms of teaching, but perhaps particularly in the teaching of philosophy. For a discipline whose founding father was basically a stand-up comedian who insisted on using his very last words to tell a joke (Peone gives a compelling argument for this conclusion in the final pages of the book), that is very odd. There is much in this chapter that ought to be required reading for anyone who is about to sally forth to instruct the next generation of humans concerning the uniquely human creation called "philosophy," such as the following:

> One can lecture without interruption for an hour and a half on David Hume and tell first-year university students what the doctrines of his *Treatise* mean and what the student should make of them. This lecture can be given from behind a lectern and in an utterly passionless voice, to avoid the introduction of emotion into the business of instruction. Everyone goes home in good conscience, feeling that education has occurred. The teacher feels pride at

> having given the law to a new crop of human beings, and the student feels refreshed after a good mental nap. (64–65)

That philosophy is so often taught in this way is certainly sad, but also hilarious.

Chapters 4–6 dive into some of the most interesting philosophical questions concerning the nature of metaphor and irony, the uses of comedy in the service of political liberation and the overcoming of oppression, and the analysis of the two obvious extremes of excess on the comedy–tragedy continuum: the complete fool and the utterly serious person. The diagnosis of both of these unfortunate personality disorders naturally segues into the final chapter on the tragi-comic sense of life, which returns to the argument which began the book about the necessity of correcting the current imbalance in the favor of a tragic sense of life with an appropriate appreciation for comedy. The argument comes full circle, but the journey has certainly been enlightening and entertaining. I hardly said a word about the final chapters because I feel incapable of briefly summarizing the many fascinating and nuanced ideas presented therein, so here I too will plead the necessity of a fragmentary approach in this very incomplete book review. *Making Philosophy Laugh: Humor, Irony, and Folly in Philosophical Thought* truly is a thorough and thoughtful book about humor that is filled with good ideas, so I hope the disgust that you feel now as you finish reading this badly-written book review will make you want to read the book itself. I definitely recommend it.