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A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.

--Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*?

(And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (PI §111)

-Ludwig Wittgenstein

Dialogue. Summer 2011

Michael Peters: The idea for this dialogue comes from a conversation that Morwenna Griffiths and I had at the Philosophy of Education of Great Britain annual meeting at the University of Oxford, 2011. It was a discussion that at one point focused on an assessment of a piece of work where one of the external examiners used the phrase 'I knew Jean-Paul Sartre'.

Morwenna Griffiths: Our discussion started in laughter. We were recounting episodes in committee meetings, focusing, I see now, on bad arguments. One episode concerned me, early in my career in Higher Education. I was attending, for the first time, a Board of Examiners at a low-status institution, overseen by the local university. The Board was chaired by a rather pompous, rather self-satisfied professor of French from the University which validated our degrees. There was a question over a very high mark I had awarded for an essay in an undergraduate philosophy of education course. In my estimation, the student had made an honest and creative attempt to discuss Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Not surprisingly, the attempt was not elegant. However, I thought it was interesting, original and very much his own thoughts about this difficult book. The Chair took a different view, stating that the essay lacked clarity and contained contradictions and ambiguities. I was too new to the conventions of academic life to realise my relatively low status and his relatively exalted one. (Perhaps I was still too close to the apparent academic democracy of being a doctoral student?) I replied that Sartre himself loved ambiguity and paradox. Take, I said, the second chapter in *Being and*

Nothingness where Sartre is discussing sincerity.... At this point, I was cut off in mid-argument by the authoritative voice of the Chair, 'I knew Jean-Paul Sartre'. However, in spite of this apparently knock-down argument, my mark was allowed to stand...

Was this laughter of ours appropriate to the high purposes of a conference on philosophy of education? Does laughter and comedy have a place in philosophy or philosophy of education at all? This dialogue explores this question, partly by remembering the power of laughter and comedy, partly in a scholarly way, and always linking it to education. We intend this exchange to be serious but without the self-defeating solemnity, pedantry and pomposity that can overtake academic discussions of humor. Nor is it adversarial.

Michael: You could have responded to the pomposity by saying 'Jean-Paul Sartre was my grandfather' (spoken in a thick Parisian accent, blowing the smoke of your Gauloise cigarette in his face). What I particularly like about this story is the assertion of authority through association (as though knowing someone rubs off their genius): there are endless variations 'my mother knew Wittgenstein' or pushing the association further, 'my mother's step-cousin met Marx's grand-daughter.' Comedy and laughter are great antidotes to pomposity and bombastic assertions of disciplinary authority and prowess. 'I knew Jean-Paul Sartre' was designed to establish or prop up the authority of the examiner. It was laughable and also comedic. I can easily imagine Monty-Python constructing a skit on this theme. And it seems to me that part of the success of Monty-Python was the development of a kind of surrealist philosophy based on semantic and visual play and juxtaposition. Similarly, humor can be the constant self-critique of a discipline that takes itself too seriously and rarely sees its own excessive self-esteem or exaggerated dignity and pretentiousness. In politics and philosophy, and indeed throughout academia, comedy, humor, satire, irony and pastiche are important forms of critique, especially where reason runs out and doctrinaire ideology takes over. I see the relevance of humor when it comes to what I call 'the finger-wagging' discourses generally employed by those who possess the Truth and whose only mission is to demonstrate their moral superiority. This means anyone with ideological goods to trade: for example, some old-style Marxist sociologists of education

who can dismiss everything they haven't read as 'nonsense,' especially if it isn't British or American.

Yet comedy, by contrast to tragedy, is often seen as a low form of art that originates after tragedy, and which does not resonate easily with the loftier themes to be explored about the human condition. Consequently, it has been of less interest to philosophers. Simon Critchley (1999, 2002) has argued that if aesthetics has provided a bridge that spans the pure and the practical, then tragedy is the privileged aesthetic form that reconciles the freedom of the subject and the necessity of nature, a view central to Schelling's *The Philosophy of Art*. He also investigates the tragic-heroic and the comic anti-heroic paradigms of philosophy in the French context, showing that the comic anti-heroic paradigms can be traced back through Heidegger and Nietzsche to elements within German idealism and romanticism.

In Athenian democracy, public opinion was strongly molded by political satire, and the politics of emotions played a strong role in political life. Comedy was considered one of the four original genres of literature by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, (alongside tragedy and epic and lyric poetry): it is the genre most removed from *mimesis* as imitation of life. The philosophical study of the comedic can be distinguished from the philosophical study of humor (and laughter) which according to the standard analysis, of D. H. Monro (1951), has three main categories: incongruity (Kant, Kierkegaard), superiority (Hobbes, Plato, Aristotle) and relief (Freud, Spencer) (some scholars add 'play' as a fourth category). These constitute (philosophical) theories of humor (Smuts, 2006).

Bernard Freydberg's (2010) review of six recent books on the philosophical significance of comedy shows that laughter and comedy have a deep structure, so to speak. They indicate something quite profound about the human condition. The books (Critchley, 2002; Heller, 2005; Hokenson, 2006; Willett, 2008; Zupančič, 2008) flow out of the Continental tradition that sports Friedrich Nietzsche's scattered comments, Henri Bergson's *Laughter* and Georges Bataille's philosophy of laughter as *non-savoir* among its standards. Like Freydberg himself, they also use

classical sources. They arise out of long enduring traditions that reflect embedded social relations and are therefore also open to change and, more importantly, culture-bound, gender-biased, and class-based (Trahair, 2001). One woman, Willett (2008), approaches comedy from a political perspective as 'feminist, queer, and multiracial' (119); another, Zupančič (2008) fashions her own account from the Freudian-Lacanian tradition.

Education often serves as the focus and background for comedies like the university novels of David Lodge (*Nice Work, Changing Places, Small World*). In the tradition of Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* (1511), a satirical examination of the pious abuses of Catholic doctrine and the learned humanists, modern education has always stood in a line of critique that sharpens the wit through the use of satire and irony as a source of moral criticism and cultural resistance, according the Shakespearean fool, the trickster and the jester central pedagogical roles.

Morwenna: Michael, thank you for these references. I had not yet come across them. You point at comedy, and at comedy as a form of education. You also point out that 'The philosophical study of the comedic can be distinguished from the philosophical study of humor (and laughter)'. And yes, of course you are right, in one way, because comedy has been discussed – with great seriousness – by many philosophers down the centuries. Nevertheless, I think that doesn't do justice to the way we started this dialogue. Isn't part of the point of the comedic that it is anarchic: hard to pin down in a discussion that distinguishes it analytically from humor and laughter, or, for that matter, from irony, satire, tomfoolery, slapstick, farce, the grotesque, the monstrous, the buffoon, the bawdy and the scatological.

It is not just that there are a number of ways in which laughter is used as argument. Perhaps most obviously, it can be used to undermine lazy argument and taken-for-granted ways of behaving. And, relevant to this dialogue, it can be used as educational argument, in that an argument is educational if it opens up an area or raises serious issues in an accessible way, by provoking a smile, a giggle or a belly laugh. Douglas Adams (1995) is an author who has done this. In his portrayal of the cow which is happy to be eaten he tickles the minds of his readers to

think harder about reasons for being vegetarian. Elsewhere, he describes a supercomputer which can deduce the existence of spaghetti just a few minutes after somebody has input the *cogito*. These philosophical arguments could be made more solemnly, but not more seriously.

Michèle Le Doeuff's pioneering book in feminist philosophy uses a similar strategy to argue against sexism in philosophy. In the 'Author's Note' to the English translation (1990: xi) she recalls a 'small woman...perched on a chair like a nervous bird....defending a thesis on Kant.'

She is facing (*ibid.*):

five gentlemen all in a row; these are the panel of examiners....one of them is speaking at this moment...Has she even noticed the slightly odd tone of his voice, which is saying, 'Madame, in your bibliography you have omitted to cite Nabert! How, Madame, could you have forgotten Nabert? Nabert whose fine Kantian beard everyone remembers'¹. And when I speak of Nabert's Kantian beard (pause), I do not mean "a fine beard like Kant's" (pause) for like everyone else I know that Kant was clean-shaven. I simply mean that all the great commentators on Kant have always fine patriarchal beards like Nabert's'.

The wry smile on the faces of some of her readers is probably only be found on those who understand something of the technologies of sexism. For those readers it will add to their understanding and perhaps give them further tools to combat it. It is, surely, more powerful than simply arguing straightforwardly that it is important to be explicitly aware of the significance of role models, etc. She also gives an example of the power of laughter to silence feminist critique. In Le Doeuff (2003) she describes being part of a group at the Sorbonne, which was preparing a section on English philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for a philosophical encyclopedia. They were checking through the list of those to be included, when she noticed that Wollstonecraft was not there. Many of the assembly had not heard of her. Le Doeuff explained that Wollstonecraft was of the Enlightenment and contested the subjugation of women (p. 109).

Roars of laughter ('maybe you'd like an entry on women's lib while you're at it?'), jokes and giggles...The laughter died down, the group leader wiped her eyes, [and] said 'All right, Michèle, but the shorter the better'.

Not surprisingly, in Le Doeuff's book she has the last laugh. She recounts that the following year she was approached by one of the general editorial team to suggest some women, since they seemed not to have enough of them.

Michael: Argument makes an appeal to reason through demonstration based on the logic of inference between premises. Humor and comedy operate in different ways—in many cases they contradict logic and play to irrationality by surprising us with unusual associations like a dream or a surrealist painting. Humor is a tool that dislodges the ideologue when reason and reasoning has run out, when the limits of rational discourse have been reached. Sometimes comedy and humor can also provide insight and wisdom through paradox and riddle. Indeed, the riddle contains a form of wisdom that states the truth through paradox or contradiction in both Western and Eastern traditions.

Morwenna: The more I mused over the ideas in this dialogue, the more ways I found that these elements might enter into philosophy as educational at the same time as they puncture philosophy's tendency to identify itself with 'the man of reason' as being the discipline that always works from logic and inference.

Christine Battersby (2010) draws attention to some of the possibilities for a less reasonable, less straitlaced and less straight-faced philosophy. She compares the later Nietzsche's apparent self-identification as a *Hanswurst*, (or *Hans Wurst*, i.e. Hans the sausage) the greedy and lewd stock character in German popular theatre. She focuses particularly on Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1969), pointing out the passage in 'Why I am a destiny' as saying he has a terrible fear that one day he would be called a holy man. He says he would rather be a *Hanswurst* than a holy man. He goes on (p.326), 'Perhaps I am a buffoon [German: *Hanswurst*²].' As Battersby comments, Nietzsche's words in this book are not to be taken at face value. But equally, the

tricks and the clownish antics, of the *Hanswurst* perform the same disruption to otherwise straight and tragic dramas as *Ecce Homo* does to the orthodox philosophizing of Nietzsche's time. Battersby further points out that he is attentive to the responses of Hamlet to his impossible situation. In 'Why I am so clever' he says (p.246):

I know of no more heart-rending reading than Shakespeare: what must a man have suffered to have such a need of being a buffoon³!

Is Hamlet *understood*? Not doubt, *certainty*, is what makes one insane.

He is, it seems, demonstrating that philosophy needs the paradox and riddles that you mention, Michael.

There are many others who provide educational examples of thinking without linear reasoning and logic. Most obviously, there is irony. Socrates is known as using it in argument, judging by dialogues widely believed to be early. Then there are well known philosophical jokes about epistemology, such as the poem about Bishop Butler's idealism:

There was a young man who said, 'God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the Quad.'

REPLY

Dear Sir:

Your astonishment's odd:

I am always about in the Quad.

And that's why the tree

Will continue to be,

Since observed by

Yours faithfully,

GOD.

Another example is the epistemological joke: ‘Solipsism is such a stupid idea, it must have come from somebody else.’ These are serious jokes. From the point of view of education: Are these ways to learn? To think? Or are they perhaps ways of entering a ‘community of practice’? And either way, isn’t there a pedagogical point here?

Michael: I think you are right. There are pedagogies connected to humor and to laughter—that of the jester, the trickster and the fool. The pedagogy that teaches us to laugh at ourselves has a role to play in sensitizing us to our customs and desensitizing us to our culture. (What is the role of the ‘class clown?’)

Morwenna: Classically, Aristophanes undermines Socrates by lampooning him. Is this itself an argument? Or a reason for philosophy and philosophers to distrust comedy? Perhaps it is an assertion that philosophy and argument take a range of forms. Foucault asserts the significance of laughter: of laughing at the pretensions of straight philosophy. He explains that it is precisely the trouble he takes in writing that leads him into the labyrinths in which he can be accused of shifting position. The metaphor of a labyrinth is useful for Foucault: rather than proceeding in a linear argument, he explores all the branching possibilities that his philosophy presents. He puts this, ‘I’m not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you.’ (Foucault, 1972: 17)

Comedy, laughter, irony, buffoonery: all these are significant beyond the confines of academic philosophy. Indeed, jokes and laughter precede the self-conscious writings of the Academy. In particular, they are significant for marginalized groups, as the example I gave of Le Doeuff’s writing shows. These forms of communication matter, at least in the early stages of educational political/philosophical thinking about social justice: a matter of central concern, I think, of education, and so of philosophy of education. We could consider how subverting the taken-for-granted is subverted by Irigaray’s use of mimesis (Irigaray, 1985, Whitford, 1991). Or we could consider playfulness as discussed by Maria Lugones (1989). Autobiographically I think of the kinds of laughter that we used to have in the early days of the UK Society for Women in

Philosophy about masculine ways of doing philosophy (self-importance, ignorance of children); metaphors, (argument as a chase; argument as a tournament), counter examples ('You think like a woman,' used as a compliment to a man). Or to take another kind of marginality, and again autobiographically, Stefan Körner, a Czech immigrant to the UK, and a professor of philosophy, lampooned taken-for-granted British philosophical norms. Ever since he explained how British he found the idea that oddness is a problem, I, too, British as I am, have been less susceptible to the common move in philosophy, 'That seems rather odd,' meant as a way of belittling an argument.

With these thoughts in mind, I find I am drawn to the idea that philosophy needs 'fools', in the sense that fools are found in theatre and dance. The fool provokes laughter, perhaps just because she or he can point up the distance between wishful thinking and hard truths; they can make the absurd – or tragic – bearable, to allow us the possibility, as Battersby argues for the later Nietzsche (Battersby, 2010):

of rationally willing the recurrence of one's life – however terrible and tragic that life might be. He insists that the greatest human being (the 'overman') is able to say 'yes' to life, and will that the world should repeat itself in all details an infinite number of times again – however awful that thought (and the suffering) might be.

In a less pessimistic mode, fools may help point out the solemnity of the taken-for-granted, opening up a space for new ways of thinking and seeing. They help restart the play when it is stuck. They suggest new moves for the dancers, instead of keeping them within bounds of steps and partners. And isn't philosophy crucially about re-thinking, and re-drawing boundaries, just when orthodox modes of understanding have lost their power to provoke understanding and imaginative responses to the world.

So, Michael, I am thinking of comedy, humor and laughter as all part of fooling, of responding to the world become difficult or stale. To do, in effect, what is called for in Sondheim's famous song: *Send in the clowns*

Isn't it bliss?

Don't you approve?
One who keeps tearing around
One who can't move...
Where are the clowns?
Send in the clowns.

And perhaps finding, as Sondheim intended in the song, that all along, all of us are the clowns.

My fault I fear.
I thought that you'd want what I want.
Sorry, my dear.
But where are the clowns?
Quick, send in the clowns.
Don't bother, they're here.

It is significant here that Sondheim's clowns are 'fools', not jolly child-friendly clowns. He explains in an interview (Gussow, 2003):

As I think of it now, the song could have been called 'Send in the Fools.' I knew I was writing a song in which Desirée is saying, 'aren't we foolish' or 'aren't we fools'? Well, a synonym for fools is clowns, but 'Send in the Fools' doesn't have the same ring to it.⁴

All of this, of course, brings us back to the jester, the trickster and the fool that you just mentioned.

Michael: Nothing too much hangs on the distinction between humor and comedy I mentioned at the start, except to say that it is traditional. I agree with most of what you say. It really extends the discussion in all sorts of ways. And your examples are excellent. I do not think I want to reduce everything to the formula: comedy as a substitute for argument; although indeed there are times when it might take this structure. In some instances comedy is required when the limits of reason are reached or when reason runs out or can make no impact, especially in conversational stand-offs with fundamentalists – not just religious fundamentalists – who will cling to articles of faith despite cogent argument or against all evidence.

I think you took the right route to emphasize the discursive *genres* of comedy and its *historical forms*: burlesque, farce, satire, comedy of manners as practiced by Molière and Congreve; Restoration and Shakespearean comedy; theatre of the absurd; surrealist performance in cabaret; not to mention stand-up comedy, slapstick, the joke and so on. This gives us an indication of its breadth, and also its connection with everyday life.

I have always favored the notion of the fool, especially the Shakespearean fool, as a figure that plays a central pedagogical role. This is a very large topic. The fool gives wise counsel in the form of banter that mocks and educates at the same time. The fool is, in part, based on the court jester who was a joker, a prankster, clown or buffoon—the word comes to us from the Latin *follis*, which means ‘bag of wind’—and in the tradition licensed fools provided entertainment, especially through the telling of riddles, but also with music and juggling. There have been a number of studies that demonstrate the jester was not restricted to the Elizabethan stage or to the European court—there were rich traditions in China, India, Japan, Russia, America and Africa (Otto, 2001). I like the formulation that refers to folly as the philosophy of the fool. This plays a vital role as *The History of the Fool* indicates:

The fool displays a folly which is just as important as rationalized wisdom, a construct of magical quality and ambiguity which accurately counter-balances the rationalism of both medieval and renaissance systems. The fool commonly conducts an interaction between himself and a person who society defines as wise by acting stupid and cunning at the same time, an interaction which would always end in the fool winning in this uneven matching of wits. The fool constantly questions our perceptions of wisdom and truth and their relationship to everyday experience. S/he readily applies metaphysical abstractions to attack the routine taken-for-granted aspects of the daily rituals of the audience, becoming an important conduit for determining meaning and clarifying abstractions which rule our lives. The fool lifts the veil of authority, devoid of decorum constantly making silly remarks, acting irreverently, unmasking the unpleasant aspects of power. S/he gives us the opportunity to humorously look at our own values and judgments as the powerful socio-cultural structures of power pull, push, and shape our

identity. The social significance of the fool cannot be underestimated (*sic*), it is perhaps the surest sign that a society has attained cultural maturity because the construct allows the society to reflect on and laugh at its own complex power relations (<http://www.foolsforhire.com/info/history.html>).

The fool in Shakespeare is too large a theme to enter into here but let me refer to Mark Edmundson (2000) who discusses Feste in *Twelfth Night* as one of Shakespeare's most memorable fools, focusing on the exchange Feste has with Olivia:

Feste: Good Madonna, why mourn'st thou?

Olivia: Good fool, for my brother's death.

Feste: I think his soul is in hell, Madonna.

Olivia: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

Feste: The more fool, Madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen.

Edmundson refers to Feste's 'comic pedagogy' and goes on to say (*ibid.*):

Shakespeare's fools are subtle teachers, reality instructors one might say, who often come close to playing the part that Socrates, himself an inspired clown, played on the streets of Athens. They tickle, coax and cajole their supposed betters into truth, or something akin to it. They take the spirit of April Fools' Day to an inspired zenith.

What is worth commenting on, in my view, is the philosophical significance of the riddle. How many philosophical problems are constructed as riddles? The riddle has a special place in philosophy, akin to the place occupied by contradiction and tautology, at the limits of sense that attempts to say what cannot (technically) be said (with apologies to Wittgenstein).

Morwenna: I agree that riddles are akin to some of the lines of thought we have been following. Especially so, in that they, like the playfulness, foolery, satire, buffoonery and double-meanings we have been discussing, can tickle, coax and cajole us into thinking. This is what philosophy including philosophy of education sets out to do. Isn't it? Examples can readily be

found in social justice issues, such as sexism and racism. Take the famous riddle of the Sphinx, as re-told by the poet Muriel Rukeyser, and quoted by the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2000: 9):

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, 'I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?' 'You gave the wrong answer,' said the Sphinx. 'But that was what made everything possible,' said Oedipus. 'No,' she said. 'When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about woman.' 'When you say Man,' said Oedipus, 'you include women too. Everyone knows that.' She said, 'That's what you think.'

I am also reminded of Mary Daly's riddling book, *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, which manages to tickle, coax, cajole and provoke thinking – partly because of her radical feminist perspective. Its collection of puns, of satirical takes on word forms that are taken for granted, and of double-meanings are designed to provoke indignation and laughter, in order to encourage re-thinking. Here are a couple of examples (Daly, 1988, p.147):

Nag *n* : a Scold with Horse Sense; a Biting Critic of cockocracy; one who has acquired the Virtue of Nagging ..

Nag *v* : ['to affect with recurrent awareness, uncertainty, need for consideration or concern: make recurrently conscious of something (as a problem, solution, situation)'

Webster's] : This definition has been awarded Websters' Intergalactic Seal of Approval.

The same tickling and provocation can be found in works of art, as Paul Gilroy comments on the a painting, 'She ain't holding them up, she's holding on (some English Rose)', by the British Afro-Caribbean artist Sonia Boyce. As Gilroy says (1993:76), the painting is 'an ironic re-figuration of herself in the guise of an English Rose.' The painting made me smile at the same time as it provoked me, as a white British woman, to re-think the relationship of Englishness and blackness. No doubt it does the same, only differently, for other British people self-identified in a range of ways. As indeed does the ironic title of the chapter in which Paul Gilroy discusses her work: 'Art of Darkness'.

Michael, I feel that together we have followed Foucault in that we have constructed a labyrinth into which we can venture, moving our discourse (1972, p.17):

...opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary.

We have done this for the reasons he describes (1972, p.17):

...not as a way of saying that everyone else is wrong. It is an attempt to define a particular site by the exteriority of its vicinity; rather than trying to reduce others to silence, by claiming that what they say is worthless, I have tried to define this blank space from which I speak, and which is slowly taking shape in a discourse that I still feel to be precarious and unsure.'

The themes introduced at the start have circled and come back again, while some of the themes introduced near the end have resonances with what came before. As a result, our labyrinthine journey has provided us with new possibilities within educational thinking and theorizing, precisely because it has begun to map how humor can make us philosophers of education laugh, smile, guffaw, and gasp with surprise, with the result that we are provoked, tickled, cajoled and coaxed into thinking and into being creative in response.

Concluding Letters, November 2011

Morwenna to Michael

Dear Michael, It has been some months now since we wrote this dialogue together. I have been looking at it again, thinking about what I have learnt from it, specifically regarding what implications there might be for education and the philosophy of education. We began by wondering what place that laughter of ours had in philosophy of education, and indeed in education more generally. It is interesting to return to this theme – set of themes – while reading our joint exploration of the labyrinth the topic turned out to be.

So, to be serious, but, I hope, not too solemn. To me, the most striking feature of the dialogue is that it is, precisely, a dialogue. Humour, in its many forms, points to the significance of dialogues for philosophy, for philosophy of education, and for education. The examples we

gave, including the example of our own dialogue at the Philosophy of Education conference, point to the significance of foolery, buffoonery, comedy, satire, irony, riddles and the rest, not as part of a practiced argument but as interventions within a dialogue. In our dialogue and elsewhere, these genres seem to function as aids and spurs to thinking. To put this another way, a moment of thinking is induced by laughter.

So I am now thinking that monographs are not a substitute for dialogue. Each has a different function. The thinking that is generated in dialogue can, with hard work, be developed to produce new concepts, arguments and insights which can be written down in the measured wording of a monograph. Even Nietzsche who, he says, aspires to be the *hanswurst*, the buffoon, is only partially successful in his buffoonery when writing his monographs. Of course, the monograph is also a spur to thinking – at least it may be if the reader comes across it in the right frame of mind, and with the appropriate set of understandings and assumptions (that is, ‘prejudices’ to use a term of Gadamer’s). However, as is well known, what provokes laughter in one reader provokes only boredom, annoyance or incomprehension in another. In a real dialogue each of the participants can judge when to interject with humor. It is immediately clear if they have read the situation wrongly. I find myself wondering how others might read our dialogue, given we are now putting it out in written form for others to read. It will have become a fixed ‘text’ dependent on unknown readers for interpretation.

So here we are, using a fixed, text-based version of a dialogue pointing to the significance of forms of thinking which can mostly be found only in fluid, dialogue-in-progress. Philosophy and philosophy of education are essentially about thinking and about thinking anew. I am reminded again that philosophy (the subject) is an act. It is not a spectator sport⁵. It requires the action of philosophizing if it is to continue. This fits well with one of my favourite quotations from Iris Murdoch where she puts forward the view that progress in philosophy is not linear and should not be (1970:1):

It is sometimes said, either irritably or with a certain satisfaction, that philosophy makes no progress. It is certainly true, and I think this is an abiding and not a regrettable

characteristic of the discipline, that philosophy has in a sense to keep trying to return to the beginning: a thing which it is not at all easy to do.

So I am saying that some philosophizing is best done in argument and counter-argument, of the sort that can be formally written down. However some of it works best in spoken dialogue between two or more human beings who are interacting, often face to face (or mouth to ear in the case of telephones), but sometimes in quick exchanges by email as we did. I think we have given examples showing that humor is like this. I am reminded that it is in the dialogues of Plato rather than in the monographs of Aristotle that we find the use of irony, sometimes humorous, used to spur further thinking.

And here I get on my soapbox. As you know I love a rant! It seems that there are forms of thinking not available through straightforward assertion and argument. These days, writing monographs and papers has become part of the way that we academics have let ourselves be co-opted into a managerial, economized way of life. Therefore it seems particularly important to preserve more risky, less manageable ways of doing philosophy. We have both been making a serious argument for humor and laughter in academic life. This is partly an argument of the significance of processes of thinking as well as of their outputs, measurable or not. It is also an argument for valuing the ridiculous, the comic, the absurd; all of them are unexpected, unpredictable and risky. They are not subject to measurement through pre-determined indices, or able to be monitored using tick boxes.

The different kinds of humor and comedy we discussed in the dialogue point to a range of ways in which the stasis engendered by managerialist, 'best practice', modes of academic life can be challenged. Buffoonery, as Nietzsche shows so clearly, is one way of pricking the pretensions and pomposities of orthodox thought. Dealing with pomposity, as you said Michael, is also possible through that laughter we shared about the exam board. Here there is the laughter of shared understanding that something was laughable, in this case pompous statements of status masquerading as argument. Both of us were prompted to think what laughter did for our own thinking about arguments and philosophy of education.

Something similar occurs in Michèle Le Doeuff's account of the Kantian beard and of the come-uppance of the editorial group for the philosophical encyclopedia. She assumes the shared understanding of a feminist readership which will join in the laughter. However, because it is a monograph, there is a risk, indeed likelihood, that those who do not share her standpoint may read the account in quite a different way. I am thinking of how wary of writing Socrates seemed to be, and also how (wonderfully!) difficult it is to interpret the irony within Plato's dialogues (Vlastos, 1991, Nehemas, 1999, Smith, 2011). For me as a feminist reader, my merely implicit understanding was articulated, even conceptualized by Le Doeuff, so that I could more easily recognize similar situations within University teaching and research.

I have also been struck by a further way that humor enters dialogue rather than monologue: bringing in the fools. Thinking can get stuck as I very well know. An impasse can be reached, but no progress made to resolve it. A dilemma seems irresolvable. The dialogue suggests that what may be needed is a lateral leap of insight of the kind that foolery brings. There are many ways of being a fool, as you, Michael, point out: none of them mere jolly clowning, as Sondheim made clear. Buffoonery is one way of being a fool, as are using satire and irony. All of them potentially make space for seeing the situation in a new light, perhaps creating a new concept, perhaps showing a way back in order to find a new path. I need to play the fool more often, I see.

I have been thinking about philosophy, including philosophy of education. But I am also very interested in how all this affects pedagogy and education, including, of course, *through* doing philosophy of education. Like doing philosophy, pedagogy is an interaction between people. To return to an old obsession of mine, teaching is an example of Ryle's 'know how to', not just the rules of 'know how' let alone simply 'know that', as the English government seems to think. (Thank goodness I live in Scotland which has a very different education policy!) I am not saying that it is impossible to teach and to learn through the production and consumption of monographs, lectures, films or websites. I've done it myself, after all. But most people seem to

thrive in a mode of education which is more personal and immediate, whether physically face-to-face or virtual. Such interactions are of the moment, just as philosophical discussion is. And both allow of the introduction of humor. Equally, like academic philosophy, including philosophy of education, teaching is subject to managerialism. Standards are specified and stipulated. Outcomes and objectives are identified from the start. Judgments of quality are made using tick boxes and the like.

Criticisms of a narrow, managerial understanding of education are widely shared among us philosophers and educators. Hence, I guess, some of the significance of humor for both of us. It seems to me that woven through the dialogue is a suggestion of how to move beyond critique into subversion, with a view to constructing ways of teaching and learning that do more than can be measured using pre-specified competencies. Like philosophy in general, education theory and practice means returning to the starting point again and again, and re-thinking practices within contemporary contexts. We need to 'to think what we are doing' (Arendt, 1958, p. 5). I like how Maxine Greene articulates a thought out commitment to education being about more than the acquiring of useful information and skills. Education, she says, is about the transformation of individuals and the world, a world of others into which we are thrown and are part (Greene, 1988:3):

Those of us committed to education are committed not only to effecting continuities but to preparing the ground for what is to come. ...My focal interest is in human freedom, in the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise. ... We are free [John Dewey] said, 'not because of what we statically are, but in so far as we are becoming different from what we have been'. To become different, of course, is not simply to will oneself to change. There is the question of being *able* to accomplish what one chooses to do. ... It is clear enough that choice and action both occur within and by means of ongoing transactions with objective conditions and with other human beings. They occur as well within the matrix of a culture, its prejudgments, and its symbol systems. Whatever is chosen and acted upon must be grounded, at least to a degree, in an awareness of a world lived in common with others, a world that can

be to some extent transformed.

She was emphasizing that in order to change the world not only must we be able to see it as others do, but also to use all forms of thinking (dialogue, creativity, a social imagination) to help us see possibilities for transformation.

This exercise is very similar, if not identical, to some aspects of philosophizing. It is in effecting this kind of thinking that humor comes into its own in education as in philosophy. Woven through our dialogue are suggestions about this. *First*, we both mention the role of humor, satire, irony, comedy and buffoonery as a source of moral criticism and cultural resistance. Surely if education is to transform the world, the first task is to see it from a critical distance, to dig beneath the surface, to unmask the structures of power which are so often taken for granted. Humour and comedy, as we have remarked, provide the first stage in conceptualization and then in creatively imagining alternatives. The class clown, mentioned by you, Michael, becomes significant as more than a disrupter of class management. He or she may be helping everyone, the teacher included, take a lateral look at what is going on in the educative moment. *Second*, the use of irony, satire and their relatives (though not sarcasm) take on significant roles. They can be used to demonstrate and construct shared assumptions. This may even be a way of helping students to enter communities of practice, as I suggested in relation to philosophical jokes. *Third*, irony and satire can be used as a *reductio ad absurdum*, a way of laughing at untenable positions without being insulting to dearly held beliefs. This has to be done carefully, or it can be taken as sarcasm, as the example of Socrates so clearly shows. Perhaps one of the most significant pedagogical uses of irony, satire and the like is in articulating what is not, rather than straightforwardly articulating what is. This makes space for new thinking having cleared away some of the old thinking. This would be education as a shared space for natality (Arendt, 1958): for understanding the world as presented but starting to change it. Irony and satire makes an unexpected and unpredictable response, while demonstrating an understanding of exactly what the expected and predictable response would be. In Arendtian terms then, perhaps the teacher presents the world but leaves space for the newness of response to it that students can bring, developing judgements which will affect

their later actions in the world. *Fourth*, it seems to me that laughter and a shared appreciation of wit helps students in engaging their minds and imaginations with ideas that their teacher puts forward. The serious business of education need not, we suggest, be identified with solemnity, pompous authority and predictable assured outcomes. Rather, the wit of the teacher and her students allow them all to see the world afresh from a new perspective, and to create new ways of understanding it.

Cheers, Morwenna

Michael to Morwenna

Dear Morwenna, You have covered everything I wanted to say and reduced me to silence! It has been an interesting dialogue. I guess when I think of genres in relation to philosophy of education I think immediately of the *bildungsroman* – the novel of educational formation and development (if I can put it that way) – but also the film genre that emulates a structure of liberation, collective or individual– *To Sir With Love*, *Welcome Back Kotter*, *Educating Rita*, *Bad Teacher*. These forms seem susceptible of corruption, not just the 'sit com' but a revival of the comedy of manners, *la comedy humaine*, perhaps even the bitter joke which is hard to swallow. Monty Python was the comedic heir to French existentialism via absurdist theatre, 'kitchen sink' and the broader influence of surrealist humor. The pedant and the 'swot' have often been figures of fun, just as the teacher-student relationship has also been constantly eroticized and sublimated. Now the neoliberal manager requires the hard edge of dark satirical humor, as you suggest. Let's poke fun at all the managers, the deans, the administrators, the students, teachers and especially faculty who display all kinds of interesting pathologies that make them wonderful targets for comedic critique, but especially let us remember to poke fun at ourselves - and other philosophers of education'.

Yours until the sheep grow bald, Michael

Morwenna to Michael

Dear Michael, Reduced you to silence?! Surely not. I would not believe that of either of us.

Still chuckling, Morwenna

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Endnotes

¹ Nabert



² The standard translation by Kaufman translates *Hanswurst* as 'buffoon'. This line in the original is: '*Ich will kein Heiliger sein, lieber noch ein Hanswurst*'

³ See footnote 2

⁴ The 'clowns' in the title do not refer to circus clowns. Instead, they symbolize fools, as Sondheim explained in a 1990 video interview, it's a theater reference meaning 'if the show isn't going well, let's send in the clowns'; in other words, 'let's do the jokes.' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWC5qfVnsVs&feature=related>

⁵ I take this sentence from Gordon Reddiford, my first teacher in philosophy of education.