

The Benefits of Comedy: Teaching Ethics through Shared Laughter

Christine A. James, PhD

Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Valdosta State University

Valdosta, Georgia

E-mail: chjames@valdosta.edu

Over the last three years I have been fortunate to teach an unusual class, one that provides an academic background in ethical and social and political theory using the medium of comedy. I have taught the class at two schools, a private liberal arts college in western Pennsylvania and a public regional state university in southern Georgia. While the schools vary widely in a number of ways, there are characteristics that the students share: the school in Pennsylvania had a large population of students raised in a middle class industrial context, and the school in Georgia had a majority of students from middle-to-lower class agricultural backgrounds. Because of recent collapses in the economy of the tool and dye industry in the Great Lakes region, and the ongoing concerns for development in rural and urban areas of the southeastern United States, both groups of students were in similarly dire economic and working conditions. All faced the distinct possibility that they would not do as well in life as their parents. Most of the students grew up with television and film and had a love of comedy when they arrived at college.

Entertainment and mass media contributed to the students' mindset and the lens through which they viewed and interpreted their lived experience. Comedic mass media in the form of television sitcoms and films were common choices for inexpensive entertainment, in their childhood, in their past, in their homes, and now in their college dorms and apartments. In asking students to connect their own history with cultural trends depicted in comedy in film and television, even through the history of television, gave the students a familiar venue to critically consider their own intellectual growth and development and that of American society as a whole.

Many of them were familiar with the internet, and enjoyed the internet as a source of information about celebrities as well as the history and episodes of their favorite television shows and films. Students are rediscovering and discovering television programs that their professors may have watched as children, with the availability of a wide range of comedy television programs available on cable, especially TVLand, Comedy Central and Nick-at-Night.

In this article I will elaborate on the value of comedy as a teaching tool for philosophers and professors. I will provide a number of examples, showing how

comedy can provide fertile examples of ethical theory at work, and I will show how comedy can be used to clarify cultural norms and values. Finally, I will discuss the political activism and student empowerment involved in teaching *Philosophy, Comedy and Film* in southern Georgia.

As a philosophy professor I always look for new ways to make the curriculum exciting, and comedy seemed a natural fit with ethics and social and political theory. I have always felt that comedy is inherent in Immanuel Kant's discussion of the two shopkeepers, in the situations of "lifeboat ethics," and in the circumstances relevant to Aristotle's "Golden Mean." I often introduce the moral virtue of courage in a way that invokes stand-up: "Say you're a member of the military engaged in hand-to-hand combat; that would require a significant amount of courageous action on your part. In contrast, say you just happen to be shopping in a convenience store when it is suddenly held up, by a team of individuals with machine guns, and you're behind the potato chips in the back aisle where no one can see you. Would anyone really blame you or call you cowardly if you just stayed behind the potato chips and didn't fight?"

Personal Ethics and Comedy

Comedy films, television sitcoms, and their historical development can be used as a pedagogical tool for explaining a variety of classical ethical theories. One such ethical theory comes from Aristotle. Aristotle's ethics focuses on moral education and the attempt to live a flourishing life, one marked by the happiness that comes from actively using reason well. Aristotle describes a character-based moral theory: one should try to become habituated into the right moral character by doing those activities which would be most likely to be performed by one who has a properly developed moral character. Actions have moral worth if they are done in accord with a good moral character. Courage, as well as the other virtues, is central to the well-developed moral character: one must have courage to pursue rational activity and not be over-courageous or too bold or under-courageous and too affected by fear. Putting this notion of a well-developed moral character together with the idea of using reason well, it is clear that proper self-knowledge and knowledge of how to achieve one's goals was very important for Aristotle. Virtues of courage and moderation are classic themes in comedy, often the character offered as the "butt of the joke" is so marked because they lack the self-knowledge and the courage to confidently use their skills and achieve their goals. Such characters mistakenly attempt to use their cognitive abilities to concentrate on the details of the task at hand, rather than relying on their properly conditioned moral character and experience of acting in accord with the moral virtues; they do not use reason actively and well. As such, they provide an example of Aristotle's ethical theory.

A second type of ethical theory comes from Kant. Kantian moral theory emphasizes the primacy of the rational self. The moral agent is first and foremost a rational agent; an agent who purportedly has a certain level of self-knowledge and a capacity to derive the moral law for itself. Further, Kantian moral theory has a distinct focus on acting from duty. Acting from duty arguably gives a certain self-assurance and freedom from self-consciousness, especially if we consider Kant's famous example of developing one's talents. As Kant notes in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, as a rational being one necessarily wills that all one's faculties should be developed, inasmuch as they are given to one for all sorts of possible purposes. It is reasonable to infer that Kant would never want us to be so self-conscious that we could not proceed in the development of our talents, such as playing music before an audience. In addition, a variety of related duties (categorical imperatives) can be derived, including duties to engage in charitable giving, duties to engage in altruistic behavior, duties to oneself, and duties to others.

A third variety of moral thought, Utilitarianism, claims that we must always do whatever will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, and that one must judge the moral worth of an action based on its consequences rather than the intentions behind the action. The consequences of one's actions can have a positive or negative connotation for the sake of comedy, and a variety of comedic situations result when characters are concerned with situations in which the means appear to justify the ends. Likewise, altruism can be interpreted as a utilitarian action, provided that the altruistic benefits of one's actions serves the greatest good for the greatest number concerned. One such example can be found in a sitcom from the 1970's.

An episode of *The Jeffersons* provides differing views of altruism. The characters involved in the episode express views that can be connected with the perspectives of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. The episode, entitled "George the Philanthropist" (season 3, episode #60, March 28, 1977) opens with George Jefferson (Sherman Helmsley) in the running for a prestigious philanthropic award. It becomes clear throughout the course of the episode that George assumes that the more money he gives, the better his chances to win the award. He pledges a significant sum of money to open a youth center in Harlem. As the story unfolds, George loses the award to the person who has been collecting checks from those hoping to win the award, Lester Phillips (Henry G. Sanders). When George finds out he has lost, he plans to withdraw his pledge, much to the dismay of his wife Louise (Isabel Sanford). Louise emphasizes to George that he must keep his promise to establish the youth center, a message reinforced when one of the youths, Jason King (played by Ernest Harden, Jr.), who would benefit from the center visits George and Louise.

At first, when George is planning to make a large donation, Louise is concerned about both the amount, and George's real motivation. Louise displays an Aristotlean concern

for altruism in the right amount, at the right time, in the right circumstance; and a Kantian concern that George not act out of mixed motivations. In response, George acknowledges that his motivations are mixed (like the friendly shopkeeper, his motivations for doing the right thing also involve benefiting himself). But George also feels justified on utilitarian grounds; of importance to George is that the youths in Harlem are getting their center, and George will get his award, so everyone wins. When he finds out that he has lost the award, his temporary change of heart reflects a particularly sharp self-interested egoism. But when he meets Jason, one of the youths who will benefit from the center, he decides to go ahead with the plan to build the center after once again recognizing the utilitarian good of his actions.

Students who might not feel an affinity for the primary text by itself can benefit from seeing the behavior, recommended by an ethical theory, acted out on television or film. Many plays or dramas could also be useful, but comedy is comfortable for students. They enjoy laughing together in class, and feel like they can identify with the characters involved. Over the course of a semester, I show a series of television and film clips. At the end of the semester, I reinforce the positive messages of the ethical theories by giving the students the chance to create their own presentations. I ensure that the students ground their presentations in specific readings and research; and they present their own theoretical research and their clips of film and television that exemplify, or challenge, the theoretical perspective they are discussing.

To illustrate the usefulness of comedy as a pedagogical tool for teaching ethical theory, I have provided some quotes from my student evaluations for the course:

The course has allowed me to see sociological issues through comedy.

It gave me a new way of looking at things that I've seen all my life.

This class was a valuable educational experience. It taught me to look at comedy with a more insightful eye.

I consider the course valuable. It allowed me to evaluate comedy critically, instead of just laughing.

The discussions were relevant to what we viewed in everyday situations, from race, gender, and sex the theories were applied and made the students realize that watching is a skill.

I have learned to view television with certain opinions more. So I am no longer content to sit in front of the boob tube and let it control me. I am able to take clips and time apart and analyze the bigger picture and also come up with a clear message.

The combination of familiar material with new theories gives students a sense of confidence; and the fact that they have grown up talking about comedy on television and in film means that they are ready for the next move, applying ethical theory to comedy. As one student noted in the evaluations, "At the beginning, I knew nothing about philosophy. Now I am highly interested and wish to study further."

American Cultural History: Challenging Assumptions

Comedy provides useful pedagogical tools in another area besides personal ethics. In the case of social and political issues, a number of comedic moments provide "teachable moments." One example is the issue of personal liberty and drug use. Many students come to college with the assumption that drug use was rampant, and widely accepted in the 1960's and 1970's, but that since the Reagan presidency drug use is dramatically declining and television and film do not find portrayals of drug use to be acceptable. The general trends in this case can be difficult to define: should we look at portrayals of people smoking cigarettes on film in the 1950's--1970's and compare them with images of people smoking in films from the 1980's - 1990's? A number of theorists, including Nicole Matthews (2000), argue that the Reagan "new right" era did cause a number of shifts in portrayals of behavior on screen. I like to ask students to challenge their socio-cultural assumptions. In the case of drug use, I have them compare a 1978 episode of the sitcom *Taxi* with an episode of *That 70's Show* from 1998. I ask the students if the attitudes toward drug use portrayed in the shows match their assumptions about drug use attitudes in the time period.

In the *Taxi* episode titled "Men Are Such Beasts" (season 1, episode 12, November 21, 1978) Tony Banta (Tony Danza) wants to break up with his attractive girlfriend, a cabbie named Denise (Gail Edwards), for two reasons: because his friends find her too clingy, and because she is using drugs. Her response to this is to get a job where Tony works, at the Sunshine Cab Company. This infuriates Tony, but Louie (Danny DeVito) is thrilled to have her aboard, because she brings in more money than any of the other cabbies. However, her large earnings are mostly due to her amphetamine use, which results in fast driving and long hours under the influence and behind the wheel. Denise slips Alex Rieger (Judd Hirsch) some amphetamines before he has a meeting with the company owners. The cabbies, already upset with Denise's apparent drug problem (and the fact that she is driving while on drugs), are so angry she has given drugs to Alex that they finally take action. Denise leaves the company after being told that Tony is already involved with Elaine Nardo (Marilu Henner), and Louie.

The *Taxi* episode's overwhelming disapproval of drug use stands in direct contrast to the lighthearted way that the more recent *That 70's Show* depicts drug use. This was apparent from the first episode, "That 70's Pilot" (season 1, episode 1, August 23,

1998). In this episode, Eric Forman (Topher Grace) is shown in his basement smoking pot with his three friends, Michael Kelso (Ashton Kutcher), Steven Hyde (Danny Masterson), and Fez (Wilmer Valderrama). Eric is anticipating an important moment for a 16-year-old, getting his first car. Eric's parents (Kitty Forman played by Debra Jo Rupp; and Red Forman played by Kurtwood Smith) give Eric use of their Vista Cruiser Station wagon and, against his dad's orders, Eric takes his five friends out of town to a Todd Rundgren concert. On the way, the battery dies, and they are forced to give up two tickets to get a replacement battery. The fact that Eric is using drugs and driving is not presented as a problem, it is used for comedic value and a series of sight gags, with the wallpaper behind Eric's parents floating as Eric's parents pop in and out of Eric's visual field. (A reprise of the sight gag is in a second season episode, titled "Garage Sale," from September 28, 1999, showing Eric's parents in a pot-influenced situation themselves.) At the end of the show, Eric pays no penalties for using drugs. Unlike Denise at the end of *Taxi*, Eric actually gets his car, gets to keep driving and getting high, and finds a love interest in his next-door neighbor Donna Pinciotti (Laura Prepon).

These two programs provide an interesting sample of social and political attitudes across the last three decades. The overwhelming spirit of *That 70's Show* is a theme of nostalgia, the idea that the 70's were somehow free and fun in a way that the 1990's and the 21st century are not. But the *Taxi* episode that actually dates from the 1970's shows that attitudes about drugs were by no means monolithic, and there actually was serious discussion about whether or not drugs presented a serious social problem that had to be addressed. For my current students, many of whom were born in 1983-1987, this provides an important context within which they can understand how comedic taste is shaped. Students came to the class with certain assumptions regarding societal issues, and by looking at comedy critically and historically, they arrived at a new and more accurate understanding of those issues.

Comedic tastes and social attitudes change over time, as addressed in the work of David Marc (1997). The history of social and political identity, as reflected in comedy, is itself a pedagogical tool, a "teachable moment." In his book *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, Marc notes that early television had almost no emphasis on parenting problems (*Father Knows Best*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Dick van Dyke Show*). (Marc 1997, 89) However, especially since the 1980's, parenting and the psychology of the family have progressively become fair game for comedy. Sitcoms like *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*, *Roseanne*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *King of Queens* acknowledge that family dynamics are not always perfect. Especially significant is the shift in assumptions about the American father -- the assumption that father knows best has definitely been replaced with an assumption that fathers are buddies at best and bumbling at worst. Examples

from comedy provide excellent groundwork for students to think about issues of gender and family dynamics.

Comedy also provides teachable moments on religion and culture. David Marc also gives a detailed history of the Jewish American immigrant experience and its contribution to American stand-up, variety shows, and sitcoms. For example, Marc catalogs the de-emphasis of Jewishness in *The Dick van Dyke Show*, a program that was originally based on the life of Carl Reiner as a comedy writer for *The Sid Caesar Show* (Marc 1997, pp. 76, 79-81). The executives behind the show made a conscious decision to make the Rob Petrie character and his family less overtly Jewish, in an attempt to remove specific cultural identity and remain in the assumed comfort zone of the middle-American audience. It is interesting to compare and contrast the point Marc makes about television history to the history of American film. Examples of films that show Jewish American experience include Mel Brooks' *High Anxiety* airport checkpoint scene (which borrows from Jewish American immigrant stereotypes), Billy Crystal's emotionally textured performance as a comedian who moves from stand-up to television in the 1950's and 1960's in *Mr. Saturday Night*, and the performances of Peter Riegert and Amy Irving in *Crossing Delancey*.

Marc makes the case that cultural identities seen as "Other" tended to be lost or relegated to the sidelines in comedy throughout the 1950's, 1960's, 1970's and into the 1980's. Gay and lesbian identities were similarly glossed over, or underacknowledged, as in the character of Jodie Dallas on the 1977 soap-opera parody *Soap*. Even in 1994, the theme of cultural "whitewashing" came to the forefront in the Margaret Cho television show *All-American Girl*. Only more recently have cultural identities begun to take a central role within the assumed comfort zone of the audience, as in *Seinfeld*, *The George Lopez Show*, and *Will and Grace*. Again, the point is that students may be completely unaware of the negative history that their own culture has regarding social and political identities. Rather than merely saying that racism, sexism, homophobia, and cultural misunderstandings exist, we can explain it and illustrate it as reflected in entertainment. Comedy works best for this project, because the students already feel comfortable with it. Were I to use drama, many students might feel bored, or they might find the approach to the issues too aggressive. Some students might feel they were "beaten over the head" with a particular message. But by asking students to view comedy critically, they have more of a chance to read the theory and then have new specific insights of their own, and they can begin to pick their own examples from their favorite comedies.

The Personal and Political Activism of Teaching *Philosophy, Comedy and Film* in South Georgia

Students gain a sense of their own power when they gain an overarching view of cultural norms and stereotypes through comedy. This power allows them to understand the origin of cultural norms, and to critique them from within. This is especially true in the context of comedy that comments on cultural assumptions and takes them to task. In the last semester of my *Philosophy, Comedy, and Film* class, black and white students gave presentations on the work of Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock. To help them do the work of theorizing about comedy and race, I encouraged them to look at the work of Blistein (1964), Bakhtin (1968), Matthews (2000). One student presentation centered on a *Dave Chappelle Show* sketch entitled "Black KKK" featuring a racist member of the Ku Klux Klan, a member who is black and does not realize he is black because he had been blind since birth. The humor of the sketch came from the reactions of white racists as they discovered their fellow racist was black--including a group of Klan members who had asked him to speak to their group after reading his book, and a group of racists who he encounters at a gas station. The show has received both criticism and acclaim for its directness in discussing issues of race, and for its refusal to adopt stereotypes about white and black American culture:

Dave Chappelle, an African-American comedian, has been criticized for his racially insensitive skits that poke fun at everything from white supremacists to MTV's "Real World." In one skit, Chappelle plays a blind white supremacist leader who doesn't know he is black. Chappelle's character abhors black people and when some white teens blast rap music he yells at them, calling them the n-word. The teens are actually flattered. The skit continues with Chappelle leading a KKK rally, raising his fist in the air shouting, "White power!" and inciting the white crowd. When Chappelle is uncloaked, his KKK followers are shocked by his deep dark secret: He's black. Even Chappelle's character is disgusted that he's black. But he can't escape reality, so he divorces his white wife for liking black people, and continues to live as a racist. "Chappelle's Show" touches on many issues, from suburban white kids embracing the ghetto lifestyle to illegitimate siblings with different fathers. If the show has any redeeming qualities, it is the fact that Chappelle doesn't shy away from controversial topics. In fact, it has opened up discussions about race among many of my friends, some of whom have asked me questions like, "Would you be offended if I said the n-word?" (Andom, 2004, p. 1)

Examples like Chappelle's may be extreme, but they provoke discussion among students and they spark student's conceptualization of racism. An example like the Black KKK sketch also gives students food for thought on Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 11), in which the societal roles and power structure are turned on their heads. The black KKK member is at first interpreted as an authority figure by his fellow racists, and their struggle to understand where he fits in their power structure once his race is revealed is a source of catharsis and inspiration

for the students. The discussion that followed the presentation of this sketch included a number of black and white students describing their own experiences with racism, and in some cases, acknowledging their own family's involvement with racist activities. The salient point is that a small amount of laughter in a classroom can go a long way towards relaxing the students, and letting them know that it is alright to be honest. After seeing a sketch like this, students can see their own power in following or challenging stereotypes. Those who have engaged in racist behavior are also made to realize the fools they have made of themselves, and when that realization is handled in a sensitive way in a "safe space" classroom, those students begin to change their own behavior.

In *Comic Politics*, Matthews also develops a theory inspired by Bakhtin, a theory that comedy can emerge from juxtaposing low and high culture, "the sacred and the profane" (Matthews 2000, p. 27). This theoretical rubric has been especially engaging for my students on the issue of the confederate flag flying over the state houses of Georgia and South Carolina. During the run of HBO's Chris Rock Show, in 1998, Chris Rock did a series of on-the-street interviews in Columbia, South Carolina. These interviews were brought together in a sketch entitled "Confederate Flag Survey." During the interviews, Chris Rock would ask white and black Columbia residents to explain where they stood on the confederate flag issue and look at examples of "new" confederate flags designed to replace the confederate flag and bring about healing. These new flags featured a variety of pop, or low, culture icons, including O. J. Simpson, sitcom stars, and a saltine cracker. The example flag that won the on-the-street survey was a flag that featured the confederate cross, but with the stars replaced by the stars of the WB network. At the end of the sketch, Chris Rock ceremoniously brings the flag to the state governor and then to the top of the state house, and begins to raise the new flag to great fanfare. For many white southerners, the confederate flag represents a type of high culture "heritage"; the wry positioning of "high" culture with the arguably low culture pop references provided the students an example of the Bakhtinian carnival, comedic relief, and a chance to speak out on the issues of race. Soon after Chris Rock's visit to Columbia, South Carolina, the state legislature voted to remove the flag from the state house dome, and it was relocated to an eye-level monument in the front of the state house.

The example Chris Rock provides takes the Chappelle insight a step further, because Rock models a methodology for how to speak to people on issues that are controversial. The courage that Rock showed in bringing sample confederate flags that were potentially targets, and talking to people on the street about them, and winning over those individuals, should be appreciated and incorporated into a student's own social tools. The part of the sketch in which Rock speaks to the Governor at the state house is also a model for how to discuss controversial issues

with political leaders; after seeing the sketch a number of students actually said they felt inspired to call or write their congress members on issues that affected them. "If Chris Rock can do that, why can't I?"

Another theory that I have found useful, and empowering for students, in the literature on philosophy and comedy is "officialdom." Both Matthews and Blistein acknowledge that characters who take their official capacity too seriously are a source of comedy and readily used as the "butt of the joke" (Matthews 2000, p. 27). The key insight about characters who embody the over-zealous officialdom is that they are seeking respect. Blistein describes one of his favorite examples from Shakespeare, Constable Dogberry from *Much Ado About Nothing* (Blistein 1964, p. 15). Clearly, as the Constable interacts with Seigneur Leonato and the Sexton, Dogberry wants to be respected, to the point of chiding Headborough Verges in front of them. His officious manner contrasts markedly with his gift for malapropisms. To that extent, Dogberry presents a model for students of how not to behave in situations where Chris Rock triumphs. These comedic examples are actually a subtle way to help students develop moral virtues in the Aristotelian sense: how to show good manners, but not to be too extreme, how to respond to a situation and win over those who may not agree with you.

In its fullest bloom, what I hope this can do for my students in southern Georgia is bring them to a place where they can actually reverse assumptions about respectability and authority. Blistein makes this point about comedy in *Comedy in Action*: some comedic characters successfully challenge our assumptions about who is respectable and who is an authority figure. Blistein uses the example of Alfred P. Doolittle in "Pygmalion/My Fair Lady." Doolittle explains to Henry Higgins that he does not want to be limited by the assumptions of middle class morality, and its requisite loss of freedom. A bemused Higgins tells Colonel Pickering that they should not listen to him anymore, or they won't have any scruples left. In that moment, the audience is also filled with a certain amount of doubt about their own middle class scruples. (Blistein 1964, p. 7-8, 11) By the end of the play, Eliza Doolittle is presented as a person of good character who has been taken advantage of by the scholarly assumptions of a brutish Henry Higgins. Her sense of personal ethics and character remains, even in the face of his assumptions. For students, especially students in challenging economic circumstances, the message that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated" is a call to action, a call to self-fulfillment in the face of overwhelmingly negative societal pressures and judgments.

Similar examples can be found in more recent comedy films. The assumptions about what it means to be a "Real Man" are challenged in the discussions between Robbie Hart and Glenn Gulia in *The Wedding Singer*. When Robbie discovers that Glenn has been unfaithful to their mutual love interest Julia Sullivan, he is visibly upset. Later in

the film he challenges Glenn and tells him to stop cheating on her. Glenn responds by challenging Robbie's masculinity, and Robbie responds calmly but firmly. A rather one-sided fight ensues, but the point is made -- Robbie is the better man, and the more likeable character, because a good man would not be unfaithful. This example presented by the well-liked comedian Adam Sandler provokes an interesting discussion among students who may have been raised to think that promiscuity is a proof of their masculinity, and a necessary right of passage into manhood.

Economic status is also explored in comedy, and can be used to great pedagogical effect. *Raising Arizona*, *Joe Dirt*, and *Pretty in Pink* all emphasize that wealth and a healthy moral character do not necessarily coincide. In these films, Andie Walsh (Molly Ringwald), Joe Dirt (David Spade), and H. I. McDunnough (Nicolas Cage) are all held as examples of members of the lowest possible economic classes who persevere in the face of dire circumstances. Andie Walsh rejects the advances of richie-boy Steff, remains loyal to her friend Duckie, and finishes the film with nice-but-rich Blane. Joe Dirt struggles to find his real family, which abandoned him, and in spite of a series of challenges and a perilous journey, he never betrays his moral principles. H. I. McDunnough has a criminal record, but tries to live a good life until he is overtaken by his misplaced efforts at providing a child for his wife, Ed. By the end of the film, he does the right thing and returns the child to its parents. What can two farces and teenage romance teach students in a Philosophy, Comedy, and Film class? Films like these, that challenge societal assumptions about their own economic class, encourage students to feel their own authority and power in the context of stereotyping. Films like these provide a message that one need not be a bad person simply because society assumes that is the class or race into which they were born.

There may also be a deeper point, one that reflects the ongoing value of philosophy and the search for truth. In *Truth and the Comedic Art*, Michael Gelven describes how comedy allows us to express truth clearly, concisely, vivaciously, and perhaps with less offense and more grace than direct statements. In the context of Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon and Socrates discuss whether comedic poets are actually to be made available to the citizens of the ideal city-state.

In Book II of the *Republic* we read of Socrates providing a speculative account of the state based upon mutual advantage. The emerging polis, however, seems rather Spartan to the youthful and eager Glaucon, who protests such a state is bereft of luxuries. When Socrates, with putative reluctance, agrees to add some, he asks Glaucon what he has in mind, and is quickly provided with several instances, including spices for food. This introduction of spices alters entirely and forever what civility offers; for now, we do not eat merely for health and life, but we dine solely because of its pleasure. Spices do not add one whit to the nutritive value of food, but they do introduce a dangerous, unhealthy, but wonderful new level of thought: I can

eat, not merely to live, but simply to appreciate that I can taste at all. The whole world is changed by this introduction. In like manner, when laughter, which may be a natural instinct not unlike our desire for simple food, is refined, then we understand what it means to laugh, and not merely what causes it. Among the other luxuries added are the artists, which include the comedic poets. For the Greeks this meant introducing the perilous magnificence of Dionysian spirituality, and it is from this spirit itself that philosophy emerges. (Gelven 2000, pp. 8-9).

In this sense, comedy helps us to "understand what it means to laugh." The study of comedy from a philosophical and ethical approach also is a means to help students understand *how to live, and live well*.

References

- Andom, Mary. 2004.
"No Laughing Matter." The Seattle Times NEXT, July 14, 2004.http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/next/2001981497_nextraceshow18.html
- Blistein, Elmer M. 1964.
Comedy In Action. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Downey, Patrick. 2000.
Serious Comedy. New York: Lexington Books.
- Gelven, Michael. 2000.
Truth and the Comedic Art. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Marc, David. 1997.
Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture. New York: Blackwell.
- Matthews, Nicole. 2000.
Comic Politics: gender in Hollywood comedy after the new right. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Citation for this article: James, Christine A. (2005). The Benefits of Comedy: Teaching Ethics with Shared Laughter. *AE-Extra*. April. Available Online. [URL: < <http://www.unco.edu/AE-Extra/2005/4/Art-3.html> >]. Created: 23 March 2005.