

**Philosophy 180: Philosophy of Comedy**  
Summer II 2018, UNC Chapel Hill

MTWRF 11:30am–1:00pm  
Caldwell 208

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Office Hours: MR 1.00pm-2.00pm

**Course Description**

This is a course on various philosophical issues related to comedy and humor. The course is roughly divided into three sections, though part of the aim of the course is to explore connections between these sections: 1) Historical and contemporary philosophical theories of humor; 2) Connections between more traditional issues in philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of humor; and 3) Moral questions about humor, including the question of what makes some jokes racist/sexist/heterosexist/etc and the question of how humor and morality interact.

**Readings**

You will need to have access to the following texts:

*Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, by John Morreall  
*Inside Jokes* by R. Adams, D. Dennett, and M. Hurley  
*Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* by Roger Scruton

The other readings will be made available on Sakai.

**Course Requirements**

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

Short Papers: 30%  
Midterm Exam: 25%  
Final Paper: 20%  
In-Class Presentation: 10%  
Participation: 15%

## Short Papers

For the short papers, you can choose one of two options:

- (1) You can either write three papers, the first of which is one page, the second two pages, and the third is three pages (worth 5%, 10% and 15% of your grade respectively), OR
- (2) You can write three papers of 2 pages each (each worth 10% of your grade)

For each short paper assignment, select a claim, argument, example, or other noteworthy element of one of the reading assignment for the week and briefly summarize the relevant point. Then try to critically engage with the material in some way. You can do this in several ways: You might think of examples that help illustrate the point, or think of counter-examples that show that the author's claims might be wrong or overstated. You can also compare one author's view to another view that you read about in this course, and so on.

## Midterm

A 90 minute mid-term exam that consists of short answer questions that are designed to test your understanding of the main points discussed in the course so far.

## Final Paper

A slightly longer final paper (4 pages) that is due at the end of the course instead of a final exam. I will hand out a list of possible paper topics later in the course.

## In-Class Presentation

You are required to give one short (10-15 minutes) presentation in class on July 13th. You are to pick one short video (or something similar) and show it in class, and then give a short presentation about how it illustrates (or disproves) one of the theories of humor that we've talked about in class so far.

In order to receive full credit, you have to come to talk to me about the video you chose and what you're planning to say about it **by the end of the second week.**

## Participation

I expect you to attend class regularly and be prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Your in-class participation grade will depend on your attendance and your participation in class. Some days we will have short writing assignments, group activities, etc. in class which will count towards your participation grade as well. I might also ask you to answer a few questions about the reading in preparation for class and your performance on those will count as well. If you feel uncomfortable speaking in class, you can earn participation credit by coming to talk to me during Office Hours.

### **Due Dates and Late Policy**

Short papers are due in class on the day assigned on the syllabus (please email me a copy of your paper or bring a printed copy to class). I'm happy to give anyone who needs it an extension for the short papers until Sunday evening following the original due date. After that, short papers will be docked 1/2 a letter grade for each day that they are late, unless you were experiencing a serious and genuinely unforeseen medical or personal emergency, and only when the emergency can be verified with the Dean of Students Office (<https://deanofstudents.unc.edu/>).

The final paper is due on July 30th at 11.30am. I won't be able to accept late final papers. If you have a genuine medical or personal emergency that can be verified with the Dean of Students Office however, I will try my best to accommodate you.

Any request to take the Midterm or the Presentation at a time other than the scheduled time must likewise go through the Office of the Dean of Students.

**Note: Please write your PID instead of your names on your papers and exams to allow for blind grading.**

### **Accommodations**

If you require reasonable accommodations for a documented disability, you must register with ARS (<https://accessibility.unc.edu/>). Once I receive ARS's recommendations, I will be happy to work with you to implement them as appropriate.

### **Laptops**

Since this is a very small class and in my experience laptops are distracting both to you and the people around you, laptops, phones, and other electronics are not permitted for use in the classroom. (Though if you have a valid reason for which you need to use a laptop come and talk to me and we'll find a way to accommodate you.)

Since I know that many people like taking notes with their laptop, I have decided that in exchange for requiring you not to bring laptops, I will pass out short handouts summarizing the main points of the day's reading at the beginning of each class.

### **Outside Sources**

Please do not refer to any academic sources other than the assigned readings in your papers. The one exception is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/>), which is very useful for general background reading on philosophical terms and topics.

### **Plagiarism**

The UNC Instrument of Student Governance defines plagiarism as "deliberate or reckless representation of another's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise." You are expected to abide by UNC's Honor Code, and refrain from any kind

of academic dishonesty, including cheating and plagiarism. Just as you are bound by the Honor Code not to plagiarize, I am bound by it to report suspected cases of academic dishonesty of any kind to the Honor Court.

In your papers, you may use whichever standard citation convention that you'd like. But any words that you borrow from any external source must appear in quotation marks, and you must provide some sort of internal citation indicating where those words came from. It is also a form of plagiarism to closely paraphrase text from an external source without proper citation, changing a few of the words but imitating the structure of the external source.

In addition, please bear in mind that plagiarism can be committed non-deliberately; if you are reckless in your use of other people's words or ideas, then you have committed plagiarism even if you didn't mean to do so. If you have any questions at all about proper citation of other people's words or ideas in the course, please don't hesitate to come talk to me about them. You are responsible for knowing what exactly counts as plagiarism and to not commit it in your papers.

(Note: This Syllabus is still provisional and some parts of it might change over the course of this semester.)

## Course Schedule

### Week 1 - Historical Theories of Humor

June 25th - Introduction

Optional reading: read Adams, Dennett and Hurley's *Inside Joke*, Chapter 3

June 26th - Superiority Theory

Read Morreall's *Comic Relief*, pp. 4-9

Read Morreall "Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humor," the sections on Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes

June 27th - Incongruity Theory

Read Morreall's *Comic Relief*, pp. 9-15

Read Morreall "Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humor," the sections on Hutcheson, Kant and Schopenhauer

June 28th - Relief Theory

Read Morreall's *Comic Relief*, pp.15-23

Read Morreall "Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humor," the sections on Spence and Freud

June 29th - Discussion

No new reading, **Paper 1 due at 11.30 am.**

## **Week 2 - Contemporary Theories of Humor**

July 2nd - Flickering Theory of Humor

Read LaFollette and Shanks "Belief and the basis of humor"

July 3rd - Carroll's Modified Incongruity Theory

Read Carroll's *Humor, A Very Short Introduction*, Chapter 2

July 4th - **Holiday (No Class)**

July 5th - Play Theory of Humor

Read Morreall's *Comic Relief*, Chapters 2-3

July 6th - Discussion

No new reading, **Paper 2 due at 11.30am.**

## **Week 3 - Contemporary Theories of Humor, Part 2**

July 9th - Computational Theory of Humor (Part 1)

Read Adams, Dennett and Hurley's *Inside Joke*, Chapters 6,7 (optional: 4,5)

July 10th - Computational Theory of Humor (Part 2)

Read Adams, Dennett and Hurley's *Inside Joke*, Chapters 8,9,12

July 11th - Review

No new reading

July 12th - Midterm

**Mid-term Exam**

July 13th - Presentations

No new reading, **Presentations due.**

## **Week 4 - Humor and Aesthetics**

July 16th - Introduction to Aesthetics

Read Scruton's *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapters 1 and 3

July 17th - Introduction to Aesthetics

Read Scruton's *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapters 4-5

July 18th - Humor as an Aesthetic Concept  
Read Hartz and Hunt "Humor: The Beauty and the Beast", Section 4  
Read Morreall's *Comic Relief*, Chapter 4

July 19th - Horror and Humor  
Read Carroll "Horror and Humor" (or TBA)

July 20th - Discussion  
No new reading, **Paper 3 due at 11.30am.**

### **Week 5 - Ethics of Humor**

July 23rd - What makes a joke racist, sexist, etc.?  
Read Philips "Racist Acts and Racist Humor"  
Read Anderson "Racist Humor"

July 24th - Is a racist joke less funny?  
Read Smuts: "Grounding Moralism: Moral Flaws and Aesthetic Properties"  
Read Smuts: "The Salacious and the Satirical"

July 25th - Humor and Feminism  
Read Mizejewski's Introduction to *Pretty/Funny*  
Read TBA

July 26th - Humor and Responsibility: Is it wrong to like a racist joke? Is it wrong to like a racist's joke?  
Read Bergmann "How many feminists does it take to make a joke"  
Read Smuts "The ethics of humor: Can your sense of humor be wrong?"  
Read: TBA

July 27th - **Reading Day**  
**No class**

### **Week 6**

July 30th - Concluding Remarks  
**Final Paper due at 11.30am.**