

## **Editorial: Some Reflections on Humor and Aristotle's Conception of the *Golden Mean*<sup>1</sup>**

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It is possible, for example, to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain generally, too much or too little; and both of these are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue.

-Aristotle (2004, p. 41)

As for pleasantness in social entertainment, the intermediate man is witty, and the disposition wit; the excess is buffoonery and the indulger is the buffoon; the man who is deficient is a kind of boor and his disposition boorishness.

-Aristotle (2004, p. 45)

In studying or philosophizing human behavior, one inevitably contemplates the nature of problem behavior, its antecedents, and its consequences. As many social scientists point out, a behavior such as joke telling, can often be a problem if it occurs too frequently (or too little), if it is too intense or abrasive, if it occurs for a questionable period of time, and if it occurs over a broad range of situations without due consideration of its appropriateness in non-appropriate situations. With limited effort one can easily conjure up an image of such an individual, whether celebrity or not, with a

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<sup>1</sup> We are pleased to announce that the ISJHR is registered with the Directory of Open Access Journals: <http://www.doaj.org/> as well as the Open Academic Journals Index (OAJI) at <http://oaji.net/journal-detail.html?number=371>

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consistent tendency to parade their joke telling repertoire, risqué or otherwise, and over a broad range of situations without care as to its appropriateness.

In focusing on the frequency of behavior, analysts or therapists typically assess the excesses and deficits of behavior. Aggressive behavior would typically be construed of as an excess, though the nature of excess may be contextually and culturally bounded. That is, there may be situations in which aggression may be appropriate such as those requiring the use of one's self-defense skills. Conversely, limited social skills or levels of wit may be viewed in deficit terms, though this may be contextually bounded as well. At the heart of excess and deficit is what makes a given behavior optimal. Numerous explanations and possibilities abound. For example, according to *Flow Theory*, if skill (e.g., humor) is mismatched with the degree or level of challenge, we may experience various states such as boredom or apathy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Differently, a match between skill and challenge would influence the state of flow. A second, related response to our optimal level query concerns the ethical or philosophical role of virtue. It is suggested here that a middle ground in our behavior or for our purposes, humor and wit, provides us with the most benefit. For the present discussion, we contend that living according to a *mean* of sorts (relative to each of us) would be the optimal route of behavior though context and culture also play a role. Apart from differences in what is considered funny and acceptable, the articles presented within this volume are loosely aligned with this principle though virtue is not the only guarantor of happiness as we implicitly contend.<sup>5</sup>

Rhetorically speaking and to reiterate more clearly, the question we pose is whether or not there is an appropriate level of behavior for a given situation or more broadly, a level of consistent behavior. Suggestive in this second situation is the level of virtue or character that is most likely to influence levels of happiness, a view held by many ancient Greek philosophy schools such as the Aristotelians.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a plethora of

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<sup>5</sup> We should also take note of the various biopsychosocial influences that impinge on behavior such as genetic heritage and degree of social support.

<sup>6</sup> The role of virtue in happiness is but one view associated with the *good life*. Other ancient philosophy schools, which have some continuing relevance today, such as the Cynics (Dobbin, 2012), the Stoics (Robertson, 2010), and the Epicureans (Annas, 1987; Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, 2008), held different views of how happiness is best derived. Common to each, apart from their Socratic foundation, is virtue. However, each espouses different views as to how best to achieve happiness through virtue (e.g., the Cynics and their short-cut to virtue and happiness) and living (e.g., the Stoics - controllability versus the Epicureans - simple pleasures and the avoidance of pain). In any case, according to the ancients and many contemporary social scientists, philosophers, and other scholars, happiness can be achieved through the self-presentation of virtue or character, through personal meaning in life, through reasoning, or through

research from within the social sciences (and humanities) suggests that living a virtuous life is associated with well-being and health (see e.g., Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beerman, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012). For example, the virtue of humor has been associated with increased levels of life satisfaction and subjective well-being across various samples or populations.<sup>7</sup>

Philosophically, the ancients held that there are four cardinal virtues, *Justice*, *Courage*, *Temperance*, and *Wisdom*. Psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) recently added *Humanity* (e.g., love, kindness), as well as *Transcendence* (e.g., appreciation of beauty and excellence, and humor - playfulness) to the mix. In Peterson and Seligman's model, 24 character strengths comprise six virtues. Underlying these virtues is the concept of *moderation* in thought and behavior. Historically, Aristotle (as well as Socrates and the Pythagoreans), in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, held to a rule termed the *Golden Mean*, a desired middle point between two extreme end points, characterized on one end by a state of deficiency and on the other, a state of excess.<sup>8</sup> In Aristotle's view, the middle point reflects the virtuous behavior with too little or too much associated with nonvirtuous behavior. For example, according to Aristotle, courage is a virtue, a desirable state between its deficit of cowardice and its excess of recklessness. Relatedly, as our opening implied, humor is a desirable state whereas oversolemnity and buffoonery are the associated deficits and excesses, or the two states to avoid. Thus, one can relate each of the virtues and strengths to the midpoint while avoiding the extreme end points. The extremities would in turn be associated with a host of biopsychosocial challenges such as pain, illness, and loneliness, the latter of which are dependent on the virtue or strength.<sup>9</sup>

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the simple pleasures in life, to name but a few mechanisms. For others, happiness is maximized through the combination of such means, leading some scholars such as Huta and Ryan (2010; see also Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) to equate maximal happiness with the *full life* (eudaimonia, hedonia). For these different schools, humor plays some role.

<sup>7</sup> However, most studies deal with the linear aspects or relationships between humor and outcome. As will be suggested, if we are considering the optimal use of humor, then perhaps one should assess such quantitative or statistical relationships nonlinearly where the most benefit is gleaned not at the extremes, but at the middle point.

<sup>8</sup> To qualify our discussion, keep in mind our opening quote concerning Aristotle's conditions for virtuous behavior in relation to the Golden Mean: that virtuous behavior presents itself during the right times, on the right grounds, with the right people for the right motive, and in the right way.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, how we self-present to others should be considered. As many social psychologists contend, the way we self-present may not necessarily be in accord with how we intend to present. Others interpretation of our behavior may differ from our intended behavior. For example, if our intent is to make others laugh and be perceived as humorous, the audience may nonetheless view our behavior as rude or insensitive instead of the former. Thus, the question of control is also at issue here. Culture and the

Lest anyone assume Aristotle was alone in his thinking, other philosophers, as well as other cultures, and religions, held similar beliefs. For example, in Chinese philosophy, Confucius held to the *Doctrine of the Mean*. From Gautama Buddha we have the *Middle Way* between religious asceticism and self-indulgence, and in many religions, whether Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, observance of the codes generally reflects avoidance of the extremes.<sup>10,11</sup> A similar and fascinating case relating moderation to the precepts of secular humanism can also be made.<sup>12</sup>

Given the mean, Aristotle's conditions (e.g., the right motive), and to some extent culture and context, how might it help us in understanding humor and laughter? Certainly, the possibilities are endless. For example, as we have seen time and time again, whether in life or in literature, both have been linked to improved health and well-being, as well as decreased stress, although as Martin (2002) has pointed out, there are limitations in the extent to which humor may benefit us, especially in relation to one's physical health. In the present volume we see traces of the give and take between the virtue of humor and culture in its various guises, and its benefits. For example, in *Playing with Paradigms – A Role for Humor*, Paul Jewell insightfully relates Erving Goffman's and Thomas Kuhn's works to the view of humor as a *paradigm buster*; that is, the view of *humor as a challenger to assumptions, frames, and paradigms*. Construed one way, the virtue of humor and its content may derive some social benefit (given for example, the right motive) though it is not clear if such a use extends beyond the Golden Mean rule or is contained within it. Clearly, Jewell opens up the possibility for such a consideration. In helping us to understand humor in mass cultural teaching contexts, and somewhat akin to Jewell's discussion, Anna Fterniati, Argiris Archakis, Villy Tsakona, and Vasia Tsami's *Scrutinizing Humorous Mass Culture Texts in Class: A Critical*

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acceptability of humor content is another. Rudolph Herzog's (2011) historically insightful discussion of the acceptability of extreme, nationalistic forms of humor during the tragic and terror based reign of the Nazis is a case in point.

<sup>10</sup> We acknowledge that many have critiqued the use of the Golden Mean and its variants as a guide to happiness and life. Our purpose in using the Golden Mean and other similar principles is merely to illustrate the potential problems in advocating for the extremes while suggesting the benefits of the midpoint, especially in relation to humor. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_mean\\_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_mean_(philosophy)) as well as <https://phenomenologyftw.wordpress.com/2010/11/30/philosophical-discussion-aristotles-golden-mean/> for further discussions of the Golden Mean.

<sup>11</sup> The issue of the Golden Mean raises an interesting point in its relationship to humor. That is, the concept poses the question of whether it is the degree of humorous behavior as opposed to its content or subject matter. We suspect they are separate though correlated issues. However, we also connect these points to Aristotle's conditions for virtuous behavior.

<sup>12</sup> See A.C. Grayling's (2011) *The Good Book*, published by Walker & Company.

*Language Teaching Proposal*, examines humorous teaching texts through a critical discourse analysis of the various linguistic qualities of said texts. Of particular interest is the level at which humor is examined, through mass culture, and its effects – that is, helping students to understand stylistic variations and stereotypes (e.g., the right grounds, the right motive). Thus, even when stretched beyond, in this case, an imaginary mean, if indeed such an extrapolation is possible, humor, in particular its content, extends its virtuous benefits at a mass or cultural level. In our third paper, *Humor as a Correlate of Psychological Strengths among Elderly*, Madhurima Pradhan, Shiksha Anand, Preeti Bala Mishra, and Bhanu Pratap Yadav examine the conceptual and statistical relationships among humor, self-efficacy, hope, and optimism in a sample of elderly females and males. Interestingly, while the authors link humor to virtue, humor was found to be related to general self-efficacy suggesting that it may derive its benefits through the belief that one can engage in a range of confidence based behaviors. Further research should explore the nonlinear relationship of humor to these and other similar variables (e.g., the right time, the right motive). This suggestion may be more consonant with a middle ground or *mean* understanding or approach that we have articulated herein. In a fascinating article concerned with stand-up comedy, *Stand-up Comedy as an Activity Type*, Ibukun Filani helps us to understand how stand up comedians manipulate aspects of the activity in order to achieve their intended goal, which may inadvertently create an allowable or expected repertoire between the comedian and the audience (e.g., the right time, the right motive). Interestingly, one implication is that the mean of humor and the topical content of the comedian's *shtick* is in part contextual, as was alluded to earlier. Lastly, Arthur Asa Berger reviews Audun Mortensen's *Slavoj Zizek, Zizek's Jokes (Did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?)*, an edited text based on the jokes of Slavoj Zizek, the regarded cultural theorist/critic and philosopher. Asa Berger nicely sums up this contribution:

What is important to recognize about Zizek's Jokes is that it contains some wonderful jokes and that Zizek often ties his jokes to philosophical thought and the theories of some of our influential thinkers. Thus, jokes (and humor in general) often have profound philosophical implications of which we generally are unaware – unless we have someone like Zizek to call our attention to them (e.g., the right motive – editorial note).

As always, we thank the authors as well as the Board/reviewers for their support of the ISJHR; our appreciation is also once again extended to those who have provided access to the Mortensen text. Once again, we encourage our readership as well as future contributors to submit their research to the ISJHR. As one can glean from the range of articles published by the Journal over the last few volumes, the ISJHR considers all theoretical, quantitative, qualitative, and applied topics across the social sciences and humanities, as well as the natural sciences and beyond, as related to humor. We look forward to the next volume in further celebrating this fascinating and valued human trait.

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