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THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT BEING EARNEST: THE ROLE OF IRREVERENCE IN PHILOSOPHY AND MORAL EDUCATION

Stephen Kekoa Miller
Oakwood Friends School, Marist College,
Poughkeepsie, NY 12603, USA
smiller@oakwoodfriends.org
stephen.miller@marist.edu

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Plato claims that "philosophy begins in wonder" (Theaetetus, 155c–d). To genuinely question the unquestioned opens a hole in the floor of certainty. This feeling (awe and wonder may be some of the hardest emotions to invoke) is the prerequisite to true philosophical thinking. However, paradoxically, it is often the absence of irreverence that prevents true awe. In order to provoke moral seriousness in students, it is common to inadvertently "flatten" the moral world by injecting seriousness into everything; however, when everything is serious, nothing is serious.
This paper explores the role of conceptual *and* tonal *irreverence, and situates this topic more generally within the role of humor in pedagogy. Finally, the presentation demonstrates connections to social justice and the ways that educational reform, in flattening the moral world, have omitted the opportunity to generate wonder and reverence.*

Key words: *irreverence, philosophy education, ethics, morality, Socratic method*

> "A noble education has to include dancing in every form, being able to dance with your feet, with concepts, with words; do I still have to say that you need to be able to do it with a pen too – that you need to learn to write?"
>
> (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*)

Remarkably little has been written about the need for irreverence in a philosophical classroom. Philosophy in a college classroom begins

with an imbalance of power. Philosophy in a precollege setting magnifies this situation: the instructor in both settings generally gets to decide what's important and what counts as germane. This is true for almost every subject. In philosophy, there is also the added weight of a tradition of difficulty. In a moral philosophy course, this problem is made even worse; to question socially-bound conclusions is bad enough, but to introduce a tone of playful banter can be seen as morally calloused. The result is stultifying.

Plato claims that "philosophy begins in wonder" (*Theaetetus* 155c–d). To genuinely question the unquestioned causes a hole to open in the floor of certainty. This feeling (awe and wonder may be some of the hardest emotions to invoke) is the prerequisite to real philosophical thinking. Often however, paradoxically, it is the absence of irreverence that prevents real awe. In order to provoke moral seriousness in students, it is common to inadvertently "flatten" the moral world by injecting seriousness into everything; however when everything is serious, then nothing is. From zero-tolerance systems to shrill and overly concerned responses to morally minor issues like profanity or dress code violations, schools miss a real chance to open the vertigo of uncertainty.

Irreverence can provide an antidote here. In this case, irreverence comes in two forms: *conceptual* and *tonal*. *Conceptual irreverence* involves the basic starting point of all real philosophy: nothing is sacred insofar as that means beyond the reach of "play" or exploration and adopting different perspectives. *Tonal irreverence* functions at the level of unseating previously established patterns of power – it works to move the morally trivial from equal status with the truly serious.

Recent research shows how this problem expresses itself in a distinctive pattern: lower functioning schools and highly strict charter schools in the USA strongly tend towards enforced *tonal* and *conceptual reverence* (i.e. an absence of intellectual "play"). What Jonathan Kozol calls the "Ordering Regime" can be described this way:

> "As racial isolation deepens and the inequalities of education finance remain unabated and take on new and more innovative forms, the principals of many inner-city American schools are making choices that few principals in schools that serve suburban children ever need to contemplate (…) nothing even faintly frivolous took place while I was there. No one laughed. No child made a funny face to somebody beside her." (Kozol, 2006, 625)

As odd as it can sound, this suggests a justice issue in the right to irreverence, to intellectual play.

In this essay, I explore the role of *conceptual* and *tonal irreverence*, distinguish these from the more commonly discussed irony and perplexity and situate this topic more generally into the role of humor in pedagogy. Finally, the paper demonstrates the link here to social justice and the ways that educational reform, in flattening the moral world, have elided the chance for wonder and reverence.

Concerns about irreverence

Most of the discourse that does exist about irreverence comes out of a place of deep concern. One writer suggests that irreverence is the spirit of our times, and that it is a marker of unconcern for morality. Alice von Hildebrand describes it this way:

> "I think more and more of us are beginning to realize that as a people we have become too irreverent (…) Irreverence is spreading through modern society like a cancer. It is metastasizing and has infected virtually every facet of our everyday life." (Hildebrandt, 2011, 25)

Of course, this isn't new; one way to read Plato is to suggest that Socrates was executed for irreverence towards the gods (Nails, 2002). A few early references in English are instructive about how this word has come to be used. Chaucer, in 1386, describes it this way in the *Parson's Tale*, 329: "Irreuerence is whan men do nat honour there as hem oghte to doon." And, five hundred years later, John Tyndall's *Fragments of Science* (1879) I. xi. 353 views it as, "Lowering the moral tone, and exciting irreverence and cunning" (Oxford English Dictionary, "Irreverence"). Collectively, these perspectives suggest that to be irreverent involves a lack of respect for things due it. They also share a view that there is a negative moral consequence to this lack of respect.

While understandings of the term 'irreverence' focus on displays of respect, they tend to overlook the other aspect which of "reverence" dear to many, the "Solemnity and sense of awe" (Oxford English Dictionary, "Reverence"). If, as Plato famously suggests in the *Theaetetus*, "Philosophy begins in wonder," (*Theaetetus*, 155c–d) then we really do have to worry about whether irreverence may imperil our ability to achieve this state.

> "Reflective inquiry should lead to irreverence when something is an imposter, when something claims it is worthy of reverence when in fact it is not. On the other hand, in our times, there seems to be a tendency to mock even the highest and best. On such occasions, irreverence is the greatest folly. It destroys individuals and communities by corrupting virtuous action." (Garrison, Rud, 2009, 2639)

An article from *Teachers College Record* promoting the virtues of a reverence in schools suggests that,

> "Reverent classrooms cultivate appropriate awe, wonder, admiration, respect, and shame, often by proper ritual, in pursuit of shared ideals of human flourishing." (Garrison, Rud, 2009, 2640)

Finally, while seemingly remaining open to questioning, these authors submit that "reverence for truth teaches us that there is always a need to question and inquire further" (Garrison, Rud, 2009, 2646), because "recognizing that sometimes there are no clear answers while persevering in the face of ambiguity is often the higher reverence" (Garrison, Rud, 2009, 2642). In order to make sense of this concern, let's go deeper into detail about both reverence and irreverence.

What is irreverence?

Reverence and irreverence are not simply mirrored opposites. Irreverence lacks some of the aspects that both define and add appeal to reverence, in particular the emotional impact of wonder. To clarify, both concepts here involve a relationship to respect. This relationship is both performative and cognitive. The more straightforward of these involves the performance – reverence and irreverence appear through expression, tone, posture and more overt forms of direct oral or written communication. The performance is not necessarily tied to the mental states but often will signal them. If irreverence involves an intentional stance, it's tricky to ascertain what Dennett (2006, 240) calls its "aboutness". Irreverence isn't really "about" anything as much as it's a conscious positioning of uncertainty in regards to concepts and beliefs. In this case, I'd contend, irreverence is less a signal of a lack of respect but rather a suspension of respect which allows the space for philosophical thinking. If true reverence involves not only a performance and an intention of respect, it also, at its most salient, describes a phenomenological experience akin to religious or aesthetic awe. While seeming counter-

intuitive, it is actually irreverence that first must clear out space for this experience. More to come on this.

Next, irreverence comes in two forms: what we'll call *conceptual* and *tonal irreverence*. All philosophy is premised on *conceptual irreverence*. This stance simply says that no idea ought to be respected until it has been shown to deserve it. Socrates is the very embodiment of this approach. He questioned everything. Yet, importantly, he also made it clear that he experienced reverence toward beauty, justice and truth.

The irreverent stance comes from a position of relative power. Irreverence situates oneself above the object of irreverence. Given how dauntingly challenging philosophy's history, concepts and vocabulary tend to be especially when beginning, there can be a tendency to fall into unwarranted agreement with an idea simply out of the pleasure of finally understanding it.

Tonal irreverence can be a great way to disrupt this pattern; playing with language and laughing at unusual expressions allows for this to at least start to be addressed. Here we would be focusing less on the content of claims, but on the way that they're delivered, both in word choice and in voice tone. Socrates is again a brilliant practitioner of this art. As an example, one thinks of the ironic delivery of concepts such as the marriage number in the *Republic* which leave readers wondering whether or not the ornate mathematics informing his eugenics scheme is farce, deliberate hyperbole or a dark vision of sexual control.

Henry Louis Gates' offers an interesting view on the use of what he calls "signifyin(g)" that's helpful here. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates suggests that a strategic employment of a tonal marker can alter the connotative meaning of words, and in so doing, change the power dynamic among speakers; in this study, he shows how this strategy arose over time in the African American community in order to reduce the pain of oppressive power. He describes it this way:

> "For non-Western, so-called non-canonical critics, 'getting the man off your eyeball' (a phrase from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*) means using the most sophisticated critical theories and methods available to reappropriate and redefine our own 'colonial' discourses." (Gates, 2014, 50)

In this case, signifyin', or tonal language play through song or playing the dozens, serves the same purpose as critical theory – disruption of power. Another analysis of tone claims that analytic philosophy itself sounds

> "… too irreverent for some; and its irreverence is too cheerful for others. It conveys no tidings of hope, but also no tidings of despair. But through the youthful accents of the good-humoured iconoclast there rings another accent which jars equally with those who severely disapprove and on those who severely approve of irreverence (…) This is the accent of the thinker to whom even beliefs or unbeliefs are less important and less interesting than cogency and trenchancy of argument." (Akehurst, 2010, 100)

A third perspective defends the role of the "fool" and "buffoon" in philosophy:

> "In a less pessimistic mode, fools may help to point out the solemnity of the taken-for-granted, opening up a space for a new way of thinking or seeing." (Griffiths, Peters, 2012, 138)

Ultimately, then, when properly done, *tonal irreverence* may open space for a disruption of content… the disruption needed to begin to truly do philosophy. It also brings with it the inherent joy found in proper education. This is Dewey's point about of how real education should feel good and not involve "strain." He writes,

> "Not only does effort in its true sense play no part in moral training, but it plays a distinctly immoral part. The externality of the end, as witnessed in its failure to arouse the active impulses and to persist toward its own realization, makes it impossible that any strain to attain this end should have any other than a relatively immoral motive. Only selfish fear, the dread of some external power, or else purely mechanical habit, or else the hope of some external reward, some more or less subtle form of bribery, can be really a motive in any such instance." (McMurray, Dewey, 1895, 25)

Tonal irreverence then aims to reduce this strain, to make the process of analyzing ideas fun… the challenge is how to achieve it.

Ritual as-if versus heroic sincerity

It wasn't only the ancient Athenians who put Socrates to death for irreverence; plenty of other societies would have been happy to do so as well. Beginning with the Protestant Reformation in the Western world, there has been an emphasis on an authenticity that we'll call *heroic sincerity*. This stance places a high priority on being genuine, "true to oneself," sternly honest and faithful to one's beliefs. If this movement began as a statement of courageous declaration of conscience which stood as a rejection of empty and shallow rites, it has continued up

into mainstream, secular philosophical practice. Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposes in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) "the principle that one should do what is imposed upon him by society only insofar as it would seem congruent with one's secret principles and feelings" (Rousseau, 1997, 479). These inner principles he conceives as being constituent of one's core identity. Thus inauthentic behavior would pave the way to self-destruction on this view. This near-fetishization of authenticity continued on through existentialism into the 20th century. It is a core constituent of our current legal philosophies about conscience. This view understands conscience to be tied to "sincerity or intensity of one's commitments" (Howard, 2014, 141). As an example, current American law governing Conscientious Objection centers around sincerity and certainty of belief. Further, it denies C.O. status to those who would engage in subtle reasoning, granting it only to those who object to all war in general. This view of conscience downplays the social role of moral reasoning, and "leads to capacity to resolve moral disputes internally, investing one's efforts in securing lasting moral consensus will be less of a substantial concern than following through on one's own convictions" (Howard, 2014, 162). In a word, this view of conscience, as a form of heroic sincerity, downplays the need to hear from others, the precise opposite of a philosophical approach.

A recent book, *Ritual*, co-authored by four Harvard professors from different disciplines provides an interesting and helpful alternative picture: ritualized suspension of belief. In this text, the authors start with the observation that in the Western tradition, there has long been a presumption of the shallowness of ritual in contrast to strong beliefs informed by conscience. I still remember initial exposure to Confucian thought played through this prism – Confucius was presented as fundamentally conservative and thus not morally serious for advocating a respect for traditional rituals (lǐ) in contrast to inner conscience. However, *Ritual* suggests that this is a misreading of the nature of ritual. On this view, ritual and play (the book links these) "open up the subjunctive worlds 'as if' rather than 'as-is'" (Seligman *et al*., 2008, 105). This idea points to the fact that ritual allows for suspension of business as usual which opens the door to new thinking. In regards to ritualized joking, the authors refer to Radcliffe-Brown in writing

> "… where people in certain relationships are required to tease each other, he saw it as exactly this kind of boundary play. In this case he argued that joking

> relationships occur when people must simultaneously transcend and maintain boundaries." (Seligman *et al*., 2008, 95)

This describes a classroom well; joking irreverence allows suspension of the power dynamics between a philosopher and a student enough for the student to avoid being strangled by the heavy ideas. This perspective can move even so far as to touch the religious, sometimes seen as the home of philosophical awe:

> "By revealing the arbitrary, provisional nature of the very categories of thought, by lifting their pressure for a moment and suggesting other ways of structuring reality, the joke rite in the middle of sacred moments of religion hints at unfathomable mysteries." (Seligman *et al*., 2008, 96)

Finally, they conclude, ritual and the subjunctive "as-if" are the preconditions for any genuine pluralism. From this understanding, classroom irreverence could function as a ritual which participants who both create and practice it. Not all classroom rituals lend themselves to this however and to develop routines which promote healthy irreverence, teachers would need to employ careful boundaries and structures within which the play would occur.

One question that arises concerns how these complex ideas could play out in a classroom setting. Zadie Smith points to what this might look like in her analysis of the political persona of Barack Obama in "Speaking in Voices." In this article, Smith (2009) describes what she terms "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, Doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." She contrasts this to Ideological Heroism, a "fierce (…) embrace of an idea" (Smith, 2009). The contrast at heart here she suggests is one of what she terms Voice. Voice here is the ability to "live variably" or to see multiple perspectives. She describes it this way in relation to Obama (who she thinks strongly displays this trait due to his liminal background):

> "We'll see if Obama's lifelong vocal flexibility will enable him to say proudly with one voice 'I love my country' while saying with another voice 'It is a country, like other countries.' I hope so. He seems just the man to demonstrate that between those two voices there exists no contradiction and no equivocation but rather a proper and decent human harmony." (Smith, 2009)

At the heart of this way of thinking is the suggestion that certainty of belief and the concomitant projection of this same assurance end the mul-

tiple perspectives found in any truly useful conversation. Jason Howard, in *Conscience in Moral Life* suggests the drawback of this view:

> "Moral ambiguity cannot be tolerated: real leaders know what to do and cannot back down from their decisions." (Howard, 2014, 163)

What I've been calling *tonal irreverence* serves just this purpose. It allows us to maintain distance from any conclusion, to suspend respect for an idea but to simultaneously maintain a deep respect for core ideas like truth, beauty and goodness. In this case, literally, voice tone and inflection signals this suspension. It's a marker of intent to engage in *conceptual irreverence*, which through proper classroom ritual would itself suggest a serious intent to discover truth, beauty and goodness rather than accepting conventions.

Case study: Erasmus

What would such a balance between an "as-if" ritualistic approach and a sincere, reverent heroism look like? A case study might help. Erasmus in his 1509 critique *In Praise of Folly* uses both *tonal* and *conceptual irreverence* to take readers towards a reinspired devotion. In the opening pages, he describes the text as "rude" in the "Epistle to Sir Thomas Moore" (Erasmus, 1922, XX) Erasmus responds to his imagined critics, those who would accuse him of irreverence and mean by this an inadequate respect,

> "To reply now to the objection of satiricalness, wits have been always allowed this privilege, that they might be smart upon any transactions of life, if so be their liberty did not extend to railing; which makes me wonder at the tender-eared humor of this age, which will admit no address without the prefatory repetition of all formal titles; nay, you may find some so preposterously devout, that they will sooner wink at the greatest affront against our Saviour, than be content that a prince, or a pope, should be nettled with the least joke or gird, especially in what relates to their ordinary customs. But he who so blames men's irregularities as to lash at no one particular person by name, does he (I say) seem to carp so properly as to teach and instruct? And if so, how am I concerned to make any farther excuse ? Beside, he who in his strictures points indifferently at all, he seems not angry at one man, but at all vices." (Erasmus, 1922, XXI)

The opening lines of *In Praise of Folly* describe the text as "an oration of feigned matter," continuing to describe the effects of his so-called rudeness as

> "… the whole universe receives her ferment of mirth and jollity (…) all their countenances were gilded over with a lively sparkling pleasantness: you soon welcomed me with so encouraging a look, you spurred me on with so cheerful a hum, that truly in all appearance, you seem now flushed with a good dose of reviving nectar." (Erasmus, 1922, 25)

This Folly or rudeness, Erasmus is here clearly describing *tonal irreverence*. His suggestion is that there is inherent joy in it. Gates, describing signifyin(g), puts it this way:

> "… not only represents a metaphorical transfer but also demonstrates H. Rap Brown's statement that Signifin(g) can make a person feel good or bad." (Gates, 2014, 102)

Importantly, however, it goes well beyond this. Using a text which satirizes many of the most important doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church, Erasmus ends the book on a note of serious, sincere and intense reverence. And it is this reverence that reads as real, as earned. Charles Nauert describes the concluding passages of the text this way:

> "Measured against worldly conceptions of the good life, Christian belief itself is folly, since it values holiness and matters of the spirit far above the material goods for which human wisdom strives." (Nauert, 2008)

Contrary to some of what we saw before, then, the rudest tone can elevate and illuminate a most rarefied moral viewpoint.

Irreverence as a virtue

Let's now be clear about something here. Much irreverence is quite horrible. *Tonal irreverence* can be coy, shrill, contrived, cruel, shallow and mocking. *Conceptual irreverence* can often be sacrilegious, blasphemous, calloused or ignorant. Some concepts now appear broadly proven, making their suspension potentially a waste of time. Holocaust denial, climate change denial and young earthism are less playful suspension of belief than they are forms of harsh and harmful heroic sincerity. Irreverence for its own sake is often not desirable, even if it's fun. However, seeing irreverence as a virtue can help us figure this out. Here's Aristotle's famous formula for courage:

> "The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and from the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the rule directs." (Aristotle, 2017, Book 3:7)

As long as we think irreverence has some value, we can then view it as a virtue. From this perspective, it suggests that this practice can be done poorly, in which case, it would be a vice; understanding and performing irreverence properly becomes the challenge. Importantly, what separates virtuous and vicious irreverence could never be formally articulated; it is an excellence learned from practical reason.

As a virtue, it would be the proper amount performed in the right way for the right reasons at the right object in the right setting. Developing this skill would come from practice, mistakes and eventual habituation… in short, from experience teaching. Julia Annas, in *Intelligent Virtue*, describes virtue acquisition like this:

> "… virtue is like practical skill in this respect (as well as some others). Because a virtue is a disposition it requires time, experience, and habituation to develop it, but the result is not routine but the kind of actively and intelligently engaged practical mastery that we find in practical experts such as pianists and athletes…" (Annas, 2011, 14)

Irreverence properly done opens up a classroom and allows ideas to be played with; however, improperly done, irreverence can cause moral callousness and could result in students feeling shame. There's an essential distinction to be drawn here: while a good teacher can allow the students to suspend their beliefs for the sake of philosophical inquiry, they also want to avoid leading students to a view truth as irrelevant or unimportant, to fall into what Frankfurt (2009) suggestively calls "bullshit." This suggests that although it may sound odd, education programs may well want to spend time teaching proper *tonal* and *conceptual irreverence*!

Can irreverence really be a social justice issue?

If as I've suggested, irreverence in a classroom serves two purposes, both to make philosophical ideas more pleasant and to open up concepts for a deeper questioning, it's undeniably a social good. *Conceptual irreverence* is a posture that comes naturally to philosophers; *tonal irreverence* may need to be practiced and taught. However, both are required for a genuinely philosophical education. Given that both forms of irreverence don't require materials or resources, one might imagine it to be one of the few areas where schools are equal. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Jonathan Kozol, one of the foremost writers on social justice in education remarks extensively on just this topic. Kozol calls the modern (public) school approach "the Ordering Regime," employing all of the possible meanings of that term (Kozol, 2005, 268). He describes it as, "if you do what I tell you to do, how I tell you to do it, when I tell you to do it, you'll get it right," says a South Bronx principal observed by a reporter from the *New York Times* in laying out a memorizing rule for math to an assembly of her students.

> "I remember, too, another aspect of my visit that distinguished this class from almost any other I'd visited up to this time. Except for one brief giggle of a child sitting close to me, which was effectively suppressed by Mr. Endicott, nothing even faintly frivolous took place while I was there. No one laughed. No child made a funny face to somebody beside her. Neither Mr. Endicott nor his assistant laughed, as I recall. This is certainly unusual within a class of 8-year olds. In most classrooms, even those in which a high degree of discipline is maintained, there are almost always certain moments when the natural hilarity of children temporarily erupts to clear the air of 'purpose' and relieve the monotone of the instructor. Even the teachers, strict as they may try to be, cannot usually resist a smile or a bit of playful humor in return." (Kozol, 2005, 270)

Kozol describes many such episodes, and in the course of investigating, find this to be a conscious, intentional strategy in these schools designed to introduce "seriousness" to the students. Kozol continues,

> "When I'm taking notes during a visit to a school and children in a class divert themselves with tiny episodes of silliness, or brief epiphanies of tenderness to one another, or a whispered observation about something that they find amusing – like a goofy face made by another child in the class – I put a little round face with a smile on the margin of my notepad so that I won't miss it later on. In all the 15 pages that I wrote during my visit in this classroom in the Bronx, there is not a single small round smiling face." (Kozol, 2005, 275)

In his books written for teachers, Kozol recommends what he terms "intelligent subversion," (Kozol, 2006a, 10) where they have learned how to meet the specifics of the standards by substituting genuinely intellectual and stimulating literacy materials into the curriculum without permission from anybody, but are able to cite curricular standard if someone were to walk in. He continues, "I tell teachers that if they want to be successfully subversive, they need to be good teachers to start with," Kozol says. "They need to maintain discipline. The

most irreverent teachers I know also tend to be the best at charming the kids into behaving." Kozol also admonishes teachers to be "sensibly irreverent (…) Be mature and shrewd in your irreverence" (Kozol, 2006a, 10).

Accepting the importance of both *tonal and conceptual irreverence*, a genuinely concerning social justice issue starts to rear its head. Systematically, the lower socio-economic status of schools, the higher the minority population and the stricter the charter school disciplinary regime, the less likely school is to involve playful language and a philosophical engagement of concepts, the suspension of respect essential to genuine evaluation of ideas. In addition to a dearth of irreverence in these classrooms, suspensions and expulsions often accompany all forms of this. Disciplinary measures for things like untucked shirts but also including laughter (Joseph, 2016). Kozol once again articulates the tragic stakes of this approach,

> "The secret curriculum in almost any class, in my belief, is not the message written in a lesson plan or a specific book but the message of implicit skepticism or conversely, of passivity or acquiescence that is written in the teacher's eyes." (Kozol, 2007, 86)

In many schools now, the secret curriculum then is passive acceptance of the truth of everything the teacher says. Without *tonal irreverence*, learning becomes what Dewey called "strain" (McMurray, Dewey, 1895, 25) and without *conceptual irreverence*, it further degrades to memorization.

What does all this tell us about philosophy and schools?

Many schools have seem to systematically undervalue irreverence. John Morreal describes it like this:

> "Over the next few years I discovered a painful truth about school. The child with musical talent may be sent to the music room, and the one with artistic ability may go to the art room, but the child with a good sense of humor is usually sent to the principal's office." (Morreal, 2002, 125)

Henri Bergson, in his classic essay *Laughter*, points out some of the ways that laughter serves to guard our most human traits. Bergson claims that

> "The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being. The only difference in the two cases is that the former happened of itself, whilst the latter was obtained artificially. In the first instance, the passerby does nothing but look on, but in the second the mischievous wag intervenes." (Bergson, 2015, location 6078)

Famously, this so-called "mechanical encrusted on the living" deserves mockery… it demands it.

If it's the case that, "comedy and laughter are great antidotes to pomposity and bombastic assertions of disciplinary authority" (Griffiths, Peters, 2012,133), it's the very seriousness of the unserious that here matters. Schools, classrooms, student handbooks and honor codes all take themselves far too seriously. It's the role of the irreverent teacher and the class clown ("disrupter of the managerial view of a classroom" (Griffiths, Peters, 2012, 144)) to bring back the subjunctive "as-if" needed for new thinking. The authors of *Ritual* propose that "deadly to the sense of play is when boundaries become impossible to cross, when a single moral community becomes the only acceptable moral community" (Griffiths, Peters, 2012, 98).

What I'd like to call *moral flattening* is the unintended but damaging process which occurs in many schools wherein relatively minor transgressions are treated with wildly overdrawn response. The effect of this policy is to unconsciously suggest to the students that cursing or dress code violation are on the same moral plane as bullying, assault or even genocide. By refusing to mock or tonally challenge unserious issues, schools prevent students from feeling the full power of moral awe in the face of the genuinely serious. It appears here that they've failed to recognize the important distinctions between the serious and the solemn (Griffiths, Peters, 2012, 135) and to accept the idea of "serious jokes" (Griffiths, Peters, 2012, 137).

The best way to allow students to reach the true reverence, the awe accompanying moral growth comes only after the ground has been cleared. Much work has been done showing how purely intellectual moral conclusions don't make people morally better – to get this change, we need to move the emotions. Moral flattening prevents this. *Tonal and conceptual irreverence* re-open the door to the truly serious. Genuine moral questions are far too serious to allow them to avoid the riotousness of irreverence.

Henri Bergson, the great philosopher of humor, tells us that, "It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream" (Bergson, 2015, location 7101). A philosophically irreverent classroom allows us to properly separate out self-righteous hot air from moral depth. According to Bergson, then,

> "Note that vanity here tends to merge into solemnity, in proportion to the degree of quackery there is in the profession under consideration." (Bergson, 2015, location 7466)

It's pretty clear then that Bergson would not only rightfully prompt us to mock much in many schools' codes of conduct; he'd also have us ridicule most of the jargon around education. While many teachers may be forced to use certain buzzwords to maintain their jobs, *tonal irreverence* in the face of this ugly cant serves as a balm for their students. If, as Bergson famously also claimed, "laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness" (Bergson, 2015, location 7629), a teacher employing irreverence virtuously would direct it not against individuals but against ideas, ideologies, systems of power and all mechanical forms of pedagogical practice.

Conclusion

In the end, however, the wonder Plato speaks of concerns "perplexity" (*Meno*, 84c), which is not a sense of awe or curiosity which silences. It's commonplace for me to have students thank me most ardently at the end of a class that left them most uncertain. Whether we call it signifyin(g), ritual subjunctive "as-if", negative capability or just play, students rarely have to be prompted to explore alternative perspectives and ideas. As Erasmus noted, it's just fun.

A disheartening number of schools, in the interest of reaching standards and turning out serious students have unfairly robbed them of a joy of the core of philosophical inquiry: *conceptual irreverence*. Likewise in trying to instill discipline, schools often instead flatten the moral universe, essentially telling them that nothing *really* matters. *Tonal irreverence* is one way to bring these pleasures back, for both the students and their teachers.

Nietzsche himself saw a lack of irreverence as both a failure of content when he wrote that "this piece of irreverence, that the great sages are types of decline, first dawned on me in just the sort of case where scholarly and unscholarly prejudice would be working most strongly to prevent it" (Nietzsche, 2010, 162) and most importantly, as a failure of tone. Nietzsche reminds us, though, finally, that this is a challenge but may be one of the most important ones we face. As he said,

> "It is quite an achievement to stay cheerful in the middle of a depressing business, one that has more than the usual number of responsibilities: but what could be more important than cheerfulness? Nothing gets done without a dose of high spirits." (Nietzsche, 2010, 155)

In the end, the stakes are here too high. Real moral and philosophical questions are far too serious to be taken seriously.

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VAŽNO JE NE BITI ISKREN: ULOGA HUMORA U FILOZOFIJI I MORALNOM OBRAZOVANJU

Stephen Kekoa Miller

Platon tvrdi da "filozofija počinje s čuđenjem" (Teetet, 155c–d). Istinsko preispitivanje neispitanoga izaziva nesigurnost. Taj osjećaj (strahopoštovanje i čuđenje emocije su koje je možda najteže izazvati) preduvjet je istinskom filozofskom mišljenju. Međutim, paradoksalno, često je upravo nedostatak humora ono što sprječava istinsko čuđenje. Kako bi se izazvala moralna ozbiljnost u studenata uobičajeno je da se nehotice moralni svijet predstavi dosadnijim nego što uistinu jest, dajući svemu ozbiljan predznak; no ništa nije ozbiljno kada je sve ozbiljno.

Ovaj rad istražuje ulogu konceptualnog *i* tonalnog *humora te ovu temu općenitije pozicionira u sferu uloge humora u pedagogiji. U konačnici, prezentacija prikazuje veze s društvenom pravdom i načinima na koje je obrazovna reforma, putem prikaza morala kao ozbiljne teme, propustila priliku za stvaranje čuđenja i poštivanja.*

Ključne riječi: *humor, filozofsko obrazovanje, etika, moral, sokratska metoda*