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Robert R. Clewis, *Kant's Humorous Writings. An Illustrated Guide* London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021 Pp. xxiv + 256 ISBN 9781350112780 (hbk), $68.00

A closer acquaintance with Kant's writings and biography reveals that he had an acute sense of humour. His texts display mastery of irony, parody and sarcasm, and his contemporaries considered him a witty interlocutor. The 'humorous writings' featured in the title of Robert Clewis' book are entertaining short texts that Kant employs in writings and lectures to convey his views on aesthetics, anthropology and morals. The subtitle reads 'an illustrated guide', which is to be taken in the literal sense as Kant's jokes are paired with pictorial illustrations by Nicholas Ilic. More figuratively, however, Clewis elucidates what Kant finds comically amusing by reconstructing Kant's theory of humour. Clewis' treatment is divided into three parts. In part one, he develops a reconstruction of Kant's theory of humour and considers the application of Kant's ethics to humour. In parts two and three, he exemplifies Kant's understanding of humour by discussing thirty entertaining texts employed by Kant in his writings and lectures.

Part one, 'Kant's Theory of Humor', consists of three chapters. In chapter 1, Clewis examines Kant's theory in light of the most prominent approaches to humour: the theories of superiority, release and incongruity. Kant's theory of humour encompasses the three aspects singled out by these major theories. So, on the superiority theory, 'we feel comic amusement because we feel we are better than the object of our laughter' (p. 7). This aspect figures in Kant's theory as it strikes a balance between 'setting ethical bounds on ridicule' and 'allowing a great deal of room for satirical jest' (p. 21). According to the release theory, 'we laugh … in order to release pent-up psychological energy' (p. 12). The presence of this aspect in Kant's theory of humour is shown by numerous passages in which Kant describes laughter as the mental and bodily relaxation following a mental and bodily tension (pp. 16–19). On the incongruity theory, 'we are amused … because we enjoy a mismatch between what we perceive and our ordinary expectations' (p. 9). The author locates this aspect in Kant's recurring characterization of '*laughter* [*as*] *an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing*' (*CPJ*, 5: 332–3; Kant's emphasis). On Clewis' interpretation, Kant holds that many jokes are structured so as to generate an expectation just in order to disappoint it. When the expectation reveals itself as an illusion, it disappears – it turns into nothing. Provided that no intellectual, moral or

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emotional interest is attached to the illusory expectations, their turning into nothing elicits comical amusement.

In addition to incorporating aspects of these traditional theories, Clewis contends that Kant's theory of humour contains a distinctive component of play. The author's argument is that Kant's account refers to distinct moments in a process of mental play with thoughts and with aesthetic ideas. The play with thoughts is explained as a condition in which the understanding is stuck and merely develops the suggestions of the imagination (p. 23). Relating to the latter, quoting Kant's description of 'material for laughter' as a kind of 'play with aesthetic ideas' (*CPJ*, 5: 332), Clewis holds that the aesthetic ideas in question must have to do with the idea of infinity. The continuous movement of the mind and the richness of meanings produced by incongruity jokes, the author suggests, could serve as a kind of infinity that the understanding cannot grasp but the imagination can entertain (pp. 24–5).

In chapter 2, Clewis classifies laughter as an aesthetic experience (p. 45) and asks whether it is also an aesthetic judgement. On a '"strict" interpretation' (p. 48), the answer must be negative: laughter is not an aesthetic judgement because its *prima facie* lack of a reflective and propositional character renders it incapable of normativity (p. 46). However, a '"reconstructive" reading' (p. 48) allows for a positive answer. Clewis here locates the normative character of laughter in the element of reflection emerging from Kant's discussion of humour as a play with thoughts and aesthetic ideas. Distinguishing between judging as activity (*Beurteilung*) and judgement as its product (*Urteil*), he reads humour-induced responses as mirroring the dynamics of pure aesthetic judgements. Accordingly,

> the act of judging in response to a beautiful object 1a) creates a harmonious free play between the imagination and understanding, and 1b) this harmonious free play produces, or is experienced as, pleasure. 2) Finally, a judgment is made on the basis of, and is about, this pleasure. Such a judgment asserts that the object is beautiful. (p. 49)

Clewis locates the reflective moment at (2) and maintains that this structure also applies when responding to humour. Drawing on several passages from Kant's lectures on anthropology, he argues that 'Kant holds that we can use reason to reflect on our feelings of gratification' and suggests that such reflection is 'similar to making a judgment on the basis of a judging activity and its accompanying pleasure. They are both second-order reflections about some pleasure' (p. 50). Thus, laughter acquires some measure of normativity and, with it, its character of pure aesthetic judgement from the normative character of the two faculties of reason and understanding involved. However, Clewis holds that laughter is neither a judgement of the beautiful nor of the sublime; rather, it bears similarities to both. Like the latter, it starts with a discordant relation between two faculties, produces an oscillation of both the mind and body, and ends with a resolution of the initial discord (pp. 56–7). Like the former, it invites us to linger, involves a play with thoughts and aesthetic ideas, and requires disinterestedness (pp. 57–60).

In chapter 3, Clewis applies Kant's moral philosophy to humour. This chapter is not 'an interpretation of Kant's claims in the strict sense' but 'a presentation of broader Kant*ian* arguments' (p. 67). Clewis dubs the Kantian position 'soft ethicism' (p. 66) and

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clarifies that it revolves around the question as to when it is appropriate to make or laugh at a joke. Clewis provides four reasons for choosing the term 'ethicism': (1) humour is subject to moral constraints, the paramount being respect for oneself and others, (2) it can be overridden by moral concerns and is, therefore, dispensable; (3) the moral content or effect of a joke increases its moral worth; (4) humour promotes sociability which supports morality. The qualification as 'soft' indicates that 'Kant thinks we should listen to the joke as a joke' (p. 83). Clewis points out that Kant repeatedly praises the physical, mental and social benefits of joking and laughing. In order to engage in these activities in a morally appropriate way and take a joke as a joke, two conditions must obtain. First, the content and context of the joke must allow the joke teller and audience to adopt an emotionally and morally disinterested attitude; second, the joke may not harm anybody (p. 84).

After extensively fleshing out the importance of the context (pp. 83–93) when assessing the moral permissibility of a joke, Clewis lays out 'three Kantian guidelines'. Accordingly, it is morally acceptable 'to joke about … one's own group' ('Group Membership') and people in a position of privilege ('Punching Up'). Conversely, it is morally unacceptable to tell jokes that 'target people who are at a lower level in the hierarchy' or habituate one 'to think in a prejudiced way' ('Duty to Self'). However, Clewis' discussion of the permissibility of jokes seems partly at odds with these guidelines. Assessing the permissibility of a joke about groups of people, he argues that 'a Kantian would hold that a morally inappropriate attitude need not be endorsed in order to find an off-color joke funny; the attitude need only be entertained' (p. 91). What seems to be required is not a moral assessment but imagination and a technical appraisal. In other words, this argument suggests that one can pass a judgement on the moral permissibility of a joke without foregrounding moral criteria. This would be in contradiction with the 'Duty to Self' guideline, the dispensability of joking in cases of overriding moral concerns, and the notion of the nauseating character of jokes devoid of morality (pp. 31–2).

In part two ('Jokes'), Clewis discusses twenty jokes from Kant's writings and lectures. The jokes are divided into three classes. The first consists of eleven 'Incongruity Jokes' exemplifying aspects of Kant's theory of humour, like the requirement of disinterestedness, the occurrence of a second-level reflection, the notion of an expectation turning into nothing and the difference between amusing and nauseating puns. The third class, 'Jokes with a Point', consists of five jokes that Kant employs to flavour the presentation of some tenets of the critical philosophy. The second class contains four 'Ethnic and Sexist Jokes and Quips', and Clewis dwells on two jokes commonly suspected of being racist and misogynistic. The first comes from the third *Critique* and concerns an Indian man amazed by the sight of the foam erupting from a bottle of beer (p. 135). Clewis assesses and rejects several arguments supporting the interpretation that Kant makes a non-European and non-white man the butt of a racist joke by portraying him as a simpleton (pp. 86–9). The second joke comes from the *Observations* and concerns women who engage in scholarly pursuits (p. 139), who according to Kant might as well wear a beard. Clewis qualifies this joke as sexist and explains that it turns on Kant's distinction between profundity (as a species of sublimity) and moral feelings (as beautiful). The sexist quality resides in the fact that Kant holds sublimity superior to beauty and assigns the former to men and the latter to women (p. 140).

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The last part ('Sayings with a Message') encompasses ten entertaining texts displaying the close connection between Kant's aesthetics and moral philosophy. Especially noteworthy is Clewis' treatment of the function that Kant assigns to jokes and entertaining imagery as tools of moral education. Due to such discussions in the last two parts and the reconstruction of Kant's theory of humour in the first, the book is of twofold interest for aesthetics and moral philosophy scholars. Clewis offers both a comprehensive account of an underexamined aspect of Kant's aesthetics and a contribution to the literature devoted to reconstructing how Kant intends to provide the moral law with access, efficacy and durability.

Clewis' *Kant's Humorous Writings* is a thorough elucidation of the content, structure and dynamics of what Kant found funny. In addition to reconstructing Kant's theory of humour, the author hints at the possibility of exploring new areas like Kant's theory of tragedy and comedy (p. 38) or the presence, place and function of the aesthetic idea of the infinite in a joke (p. 198). Furthermore, Clewis' discussion does not require any proficiency in Kant's philosophy since the author skilfully navigates between oversimplifying Kant's thought for the sake of readability and providing accessibility at the expense of accuracy. Finally, Clewis' clarity, light prose and occasional witticisms make the book pleasant reading.

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Frederick the Great's Philosophical Writings, ed. Avi Lifschitz, trans. Angela Scholar Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021 Pp. xlvii + 249 ISBN 9780691176420 (hbk) $35.00

The role that Frederick the Great (1712–86) played in the Enlightenment goes far beyond that of the typical sovereign of one of the major political and military powers of Europe as it then was. The leading monarchs of the time were usually engaged in much more concrete matters than philosophical reflection, and in the best cases they only communicated their ideas in private, amateurish correspondence with a few scientists and philosophers of note. Rather distinctively, Frederick II, the *roi philosophe*, the 'inimitable modern Solomon' – as his friend and mentor Voltaire used to call him – cultivated throughout his life a passion for philosophy that was anything but dilettantish, and which always accompanied his political commitment and military action.

This collection of Frederick's writings edited by Avi Lifschitz and published in an accurate and refined translation by Angela Scholar (directly from the standard edition, Preuß 1846–56) offers the reader a large selection of works of different nature – essays, epistles, prefaces, notes and even a dialogue of the dead – composed by Frederick starting from the late 1730s. Altogether, these writings testify to the sovereign's persistent interest in the themes and topics that were, at the time, included in the wide spectrum of what was called 'philosophy', namely, political

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