

**Proposal Title: Philosophy & Comedy: A Long Shot**

**Proposal Author: Dr. Russell Ford, Assistant Professor of Philosophy**

**Summary:** The project is an edited collection of essays on the historical and critical relation between philosophy and comedy that will be published by the State University of New York Press. The contract for this book is already in place, as are the bulk of the contributors, with the completed manuscript being due to the Press in the Fall of 2009.

**Abstract:** The project for which I am requesting the Faculty Research Grant entails the composition of an essay that will provide a general historical introduction to the relation between philosophy and comedy. This essay will serve as the Introduction to the book, highlighting the role of comedy in the work of particular philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, and Derrida. Of particular importance to this historical account will be the often unstated relevance of comedy and tragedy to the ethical theory of various philosophers.

## Narrative

### 1. Current Situation

Already with Plato, at the very inception of the Western philosophical tradition, the question of drama and its relation to philosophical truth occupied a peculiarly central position. Plato famously excludes most poets (including playwrights) from his ideal city in the *Republic*, being concerned that their fictional stories will corrupt the youth. Yet he gives a different impression of poetry in his *Symposium* where the comic playwright Aristophanes is given a central role – indeed being the only person other than Socrates still awake at the end of the dialogue, the two discussing whether a single poet could be both a good tragedian and a good comic writer. With Aristotle, the philosophical concern with drama focused more narrowly on tragedy and its relation to other forms of political communication. Famously declaring in his *Poetics* that poetry was more truthful than history because the former spoke of universals while the latter was confined to particulars, Aristotle concerned himself not simply with the truth-content of tragic poetry and performance, but with the particular way that this mode of communication worked within the society of Athens to achieve ethical and political ends. With the promised extension of the *Poetics* that would deal with comedy lost (or perhaps never written), Western philosophy in the wake of Aristotle has prioritized the relation of tragedy and philosophy, simultaneously relegating to the sidelines the discussion of other types of poetic discourse.

In the writings of the Church Fathers, notably Augustine and Tertullian, the question of the moral consequences of attending the various Roman “spectacles” is discussed at length. With these authors, the question shifts from Aristotle’s worldly moral concern to the possible

corruption of one's soul through an immoderate interest in the often grotesque, but also often seemingly trivial, entertainments. With the collapse of the western Roman empire, the tradition of interpreting the Greek philosophers passed into the Arabic world where, due in part to an interest in Aristotle's account of imagination in his book *On the Soul* (an interest that was not shared by the early Church Fathers), what would appear to Western scholars as "aesthetic" questions were integrally connected with political questions, a connection that reflects the intertwining of these two issues in the Greek authors themselves.

With the rediscovery of the Greek philosophers by Western Europe through the gradual reconnection of the scholarly communities rent asunder by the destruction of the Roman empire, the question of poetry confronted the scholars of the Catholic Church. For these Scholastics, the principle problem was that of beauty and, because according to Aristotle tragedy is the type of drama that deals with people who are at least as good and generally better than the average person watching the performance, tragedy again was given almost unquestioned privilege over comedy. However, alongside this Scholastic work, at the level of society, comedic drama flourished as traveling minstrels and bands of entertainers traveled from city to city. It was this inter-city and -state communication, itself made possible only through the strengthening of the Church which made traveling itself safe and, therefore, possible, that led to the rebirth of the dramatic arts in the Renaissance and on into the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

With the growing prevalence of the poetic arts in the lives of everyday people, the more esoteric question of beauty that had dominated the earlier Scholastic discussions gave way to what again was a closer adherence to the Greeks' interest in how and to what extent poetic performances interacted with civic life and public morality. The first philosophical works devoted to what would now be considered "aesthetics," Baumgarten's Leibnizian-inflected

*Aesthetica* and Hume's essays "Of the Standard of Taste" and "Of Tragedy," exhibit a peculiar conflation of Scholastic concern for definition and the situating of aesthetic concerns within a larger worldview, with an interest in the faculty or faculties that create and appreciate poetic works.

It was the great philosopher Immanuel Kant who would give this curious mixture its decisive formulation that, to a large extent, remains in place in current philosophical debates. For Kant, the question of beauty (and of the relation of art to human nature generally) was a matter of the human determination and pursuit of values. What was beautiful was what beckoned us to pursue what was good, even as we lacked empirical, scientific evidence for the concrete existence of such a good. In other words, for Kant, aesthetic beauty was the oblique justification for a sort of moral faith. This formulation fired the imaginations (and the philosophical projects) of the German Idealists, as well as the Romantics. The metaphysical systems of Fichte, Schelling, and, above all, Hegel, give a preeminent place to aesthetic matters and, significantly, the aesthetic discussions are always cast in tragic terms. To discover truth, runs a rough generalization of these systems, the mind or soul must suffer through an ever more difficult series of obstacles. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, first published in 1807 as Napoleon's armies strode across Europe, the pursuit and attainment of truth is explicitly linked to tragic experience.

So pervasive was the linkage of tragedy, aesthetics, and truth at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that even the critics of the German Idealists, including such disparate thinkers as Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche, each were compelled to engage the Idealists on the ground of tragedy. Perhaps the most important product of this century-long engagement was Nietzsche's early work *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). Recasting

value itself – and only consequently tragedy – as a matter of poetic creation, Nietzsche created a space from which to escape the overwhelming dominance of tragedy in discussions of aesthetics (indeed, so great was this dominance that it had, prior to Nietzsche, become so unquestioned as to be invisible). This space provided Nietzsche with the intellectual resources to strike out from the tragic model of thought that had dominated the Western tradition and to develop a philosophy shaped by humor, laughter, and comedy (cf. the discussion of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus in Nietzsche's *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1873), as well as his more mature work, *The Gay [fröhliche] Science* (1882; 1887)). Although largely unappreciated during his brief career (except, notably, by artists such as Strindberg and Wagner), Nietzsche's work, and especially his reworking of the problem of aesthetics inherited from Kant, was decisive for 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy.

Nietzsche's reception in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was largely alongside and/or in contradistinction to the German Idealists. Thus, in the dominant philosophical systems emerging in France and Germany (the two countries in which philosophy was most engaged with its historically bequeathed problems) tragedy was still the chief matter of concern for aesthetic theories, but it was, simultaneously and thanks to the intervention of Nietzsche, explicitly recognized as a tragic formulation (and thus as a particular species of the aesthetic which would, presumably, encompass a larger domain). The story of this engagement was given concrete form in Walter Kaufmann's enormously influential book, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, which appeared in 1968. This book, which came after a series of books devoted primarily to the Existentialists and the relation of philosophy and religion, simultaneously sought to preserve Nietzsche's scholarly importance from the distortion of the ideologues of the Third Reich and to contextualize that work in terms of particular subsequent thinkers whose work clearly showed an engagement with

the difficulty of rational and moral decision-making in the world (Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Unamuno, etc.).

At the same time that Kaufmann was working out his intellectual inheritance of Nietzsche, another group of philosophers was finding a significantly different sort of philosophy in Nietzsche's works. These thinkers (a group that included Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Hélène Cixous, and Jean-François Lyotard), predominantly in France and led (at least chronologically) by the noted Nietzsche scholar and translator Pierre Klossowski, saw in Nietzsche's work not merely a radical critique of Kant and the Idealists, but the possibility of a new sort of philosophical metaphysics, founded in an aesthetics that was no longer organized according to the model of tragedy. While this strand of philosophical scholarship still enjoys a great deal of influence, recently a number of contemporary philosophers have returned to an emphasis on tragedy as essential to the philosophical development of thinking and truth. Examples of this line of thinking include Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2001), *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (1991) by John Sallis, *Philosophy and Tragedy* (2000) edited by Miguel de Beistegui, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (2001) by Dennis Schmidt, David Krell's *The Tragic Absolute* (2005), and *Epochal Discordance: Hölderlin's Philosophy of Tragedy* (2006) by Veronique Foti.

At the same time as a number of philosophers have returned to tragedy as a privileged location to study not only aesthetics but, more often, ethical life, a smaller but growing number of scholars have begun to openly question this prioritization, both in its contemporary and in its historical guises. Examples of this latter line of thought include Sarah Kofman's *Why Do We Laugh: Freud and Jokes* [*Pourquoi rit-on: Freud et le mot d'esprit*] (1986), Peter Berger's

*Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (1997), Simon Critchley's *On Humour* (2002), and Agnes Heller's *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life* (2005). The present project gathers together a number of prominent philosophers and presents, in a single volume, a wide range of proposals regarding comedy's importance for philosophical thought.

## 2. Project Plan

This particular project is part of a larger research trajectory that has its origin in a problem posed by Albert Camus at the outset of his book *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Speaking of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Camus remarks: "One might think that a period which, in a space of fifty years, uproots, enslaves, or kills seventy million human beings should be condemned out of hand. But its culpability must still be understood." The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century only serves to sharpen Camus' point. An understanding of what Camus calls the "culpability" of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has involved, in my own work, questioning whether it is legitimate to link philosophical and ethical progress with suffering. In tragedy, knowledge and, consequently, the good of a society is attained only through the suffering and/or death of one or, more likely, more than one of its members. The atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in both their scope and their barbarity, call into serious question this sort of 'mortal theodicy' of progress through pain. The ethical impossibility of justifying the concentration camps, the gulags, the genocides, and the lengthy litany of disastrous attempts at "social reform" – on both great and small scales – begs the question of whether the very arguments used to justify each new "great leap forward" are flawed not (merely) at the level of content, but at the rhetorical level, in their very form. This project serves as a partial answer to the question of whether the form of ethical thinking in the

Western tradition is mired in an unquestioned structure that necessarily brings about atrocities at the very moments when people and societies self-consciously intend to bring about a rational and beneficial transformation.

*Philosophy and Comedy: A Long Shot* will both highlight this philosophical question of the form of political, philosophical, and ethical justification in the Western tradition, but will also serve as a resource for scholars who will have a single volume in which to follow the explorations of a number of contemporary thinkers engaged in challenging the unquestioned dominance of tragedy in ethical debates. This Faculty Research Grant will help achieve these goals by allowing me to conduct the necessary research in order to produce an introduction to the volume that will trace the fate of comedy in the Western philosophical tradition. This is a much needed project as the story of tragedy and philosophy has been told so many times as to become virtually the only story of the relation between dramatic rhetoric and philosophy. I expect this introduction to be substantially completed by the end of the summer of 2008. This research will involve a review of the relevant historical texts (summarized above), as well as research in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (for materials relating to comedic drama in the Renaissance). Once complete, this introduction will serve as an important document from which other scholars can draw resources in order to challenged the current hegemony of tragic thinking in the Western philosophical tradition.

### 3. Faculty Expertise

As exemplified by the narrative above, as well as my publication history below, I have a demonstrated history of being able to conduct detailed philosophical research that results in publication in leading peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes. In addition, I have a

background in dramatic theory that includes the obtaining of a doctoral minor in aesthetics (incorporating a full year's worth of dramatic theory as well as numerous classes on rhetorical theory), as well as the production of Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* at a philosophical conference in Italy in 2002. Finally, I have taught on numerous occasions classes either devoted to the problem of philosophy and drama, or have incorporated theatrical elements into other classes, such as Business Ethics.

#### 4. Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination

The most immediate evaluation of the success of the project will come with the completion and publication of the book. In addition, as has been the case with my previous large-scale research project on Pierre Klossowski, I expect that my research will generate a number of subsidiary articles that would appear in peer-reviewed journals. Along these same lines, I expect to make conference presentations related to the findings of my research. Finally, as the project nears completion, I hope to offer an upper-level seminar on the ethical relevance of comedy.

## **Time Line**

### **Summer 2008**

#### Scholarly Research:

- The History of Philosophy and Comedy: in Ancient Greece; the Romans and Church Fathers; the Islamic reception of Greek and Roman philosophy; comedy and the problem of beauty in Scholasticism; comic drama in the Renaissance; comedy and the rebirth of aesthetics in Modernity; the dominance of tragedy after Kant and the Idealists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries; contemporary attempts to reinvigorate comedy and the comic along ethical lines.
- Travel to Oxford for research at the Bodleian Library on comic drama in the Renaissance

#### Summer Teaching:

As part of my regular load of 6 classes per year, I will be teaching a class on modern moral thinking in the Summer of 2008. The theme of this class will be the historical development of the concept of autonomy and will provide the backdrop for the central section of the essay by helping me to articulate the historical transformation of an ethics based on social goods to a modern one that emphasizes individual goods and the reflection of this change in dramatic forms.

#### Composition of Essay:

I expect to be able to write the historical introduction during the final third of the summer.

**Budget:**

- One of the necessary components for the introductory essay will be a review of the relevant literature outlined above as well as research in the Bodleian Library at Oxford where I can obtain otherwise inaccessible materials related to comedic drama during the Renaissance. I am currently part of a group of faculty traveling to Oxford over the summer and the Grant would help subsidize the cost of that trip.
- Because I spent this past January term securing the contract for the book, and anticipate needing the January term of 2009 in order to work on my contribution to the collection of essays, the Grant would help to subsidize the corresponding salary loss (I taught in the January term in both 2006 and 2007).
- I anticipate that there will be fairly substantial costs for books, essays, copies, and other materials related to the completion of the essay.
- I have not solicited any other funds, nor do I anticipate receiving any (including from SUNY Press).

**Amount Requested:**

- For the reasons outlined above, I am requesting \$3500.

## Current and Previous Grants

Fall 2000 - Edwin Erle Sparks Dissertation Fellowship competitively granted by the College of Liberal Arts at Penn State University

Summer 1995 - Penn State Research and Graduate Studies Travel Grant for travel to *Einstein Meets Magritte* Conference in Brussels, Belgium

## Publications from the last 3 years

### Books & Edited Volumes

*Such a Deathly Desire*, a translation of *Un si funeste désir*, by Pierre Klossowski, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

*Whispers of the Flesh: Essays In Memory of Pierre Klossowski* (a special issue of *diacritics*), coedited with Ian James, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2005.

### Essays

“Of Dice and Men: Rethinking Business as a Game.” Forthcoming in *Cutting-Edge Issues in Business Ethics: Continental Challenges to Theory and Practice*, eds. Patricia Werhane and Mollie Painter-Morland (Springer, 2008).

“Andre Gide: *The Catacombs of the Vatican*.” *Compendium of 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Novelists and Novels*, ed. Michael Sollars (New York: Facts on File, 2007).

“Afterword: Klossowski’s *salto mortale*” in *Such a Deathly Desire*, by Pierre Klossowski, trans. Russell Ford (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), pp. 123-133.

### Articles

“The Threshold of the Invisible: Said, Conrad, and Imperialism.” *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 50, No. 5, Winter 2006, pp. 463-476.

“Whispers of the Flesh: An Introduction to the Thought of Pierre Klossowski.” Co-authored with Ian James. *diacritics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 3-7.

“Tragedy, Comedy, Parody: From Hegel to Klossowski.” *diacritics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 22-46.

“Positive Politics: A Post-Marxist Fable.” *Dialogue and Universalism*, Vol. 3-4, pp. 1-12, Fall 2005.

“Deleuze’s Dick.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Winter 2005, pp. 41-71.

### **Book Reviews**

*Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question*, Leonard Lawlor. *Metaphilosophy*, 38:1, Spring 2007, pp. 122-127.

*Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63:4, Fall 2005, pp. 392-394.

*Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, Slavoj Žižek. *Bulletin for the Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 113-116.