

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

HOW JOKES CAN HELP YOU THINK

JOHN CAPPS AND DONALD CAPPS

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

“Better than getting hit on the head with a bushel of apples.”

Isaac Newton

“Tremendous book but I bet no one will buy it.”

Arthur Schopenhauer

“I’ll take that bet!” ***Blaise Pascal***

“A wake-up call!” ***Immanuel Kant***

“A *complete* triumph!” ***Kurt Godel***

“It will make you smarter than you think.” ***Ludwig Wittgenstein***

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

HOW JOKES CAN HELP YOU THINK

JOHN CAPPS AND DONALD CAPPS

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009
© 2009 John Capps and Donald Capps

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of John Capps and Donald Capps to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Capps, John M., 1970–

You've got to be kidding! : how jokes can help you think / John Capps and Donald Capps.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-9665-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4051-9664-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Critical thinking. 2. Wit and humor. I. Capps, Donald. II. Title.

BC177.C3455 2009

160–dc22

2009007418

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5/13pt Minion by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

Printed in Singapore

01 2009

On the first day of school, the kindergarten teacher said, "If anyone has to go to the bathroom, hold up two fingers." A little voice from the back of the room asked, "How will that help?"

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
1 Why Thinking Critically Is Important	1
2 Fallacies of Relevance	13
3 Fallacies of Evidence	45
4 Fallacies of Assumption	80
5 Critical Thinking and Objective Truth	97
References	116
Index	119

Preface

This book came about through a happy confluence of seemingly unrelated events. One of us, a psychologist, was writing a book on humor, and stumbled onto Ted Cohen's *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (1999). He told the other, a philosopher, about the book, and this led both to begin thinking about collaborating on a book on humor. Our initial idea was to write a book in psychology, one that would combine humor, cognitive therapy, and philosophy. Then, however, the fact that the philosopher was teaching undergraduate courses in logic and critical thinking led us to think that a philosophy book would be more useful.

This idea was exciting to the psychologist because he thought it would be nice to contribute to a philosophy book. It was also daunting because, although he had been an undergraduate philosophy major, this was many years ago, and he had forgotten much of what he had learned in logic courses. Then, however, he discovered Jamie Whyte's *Crimes against Logic* (2005). The back cover identified Whyte as a past lecturer of philosophy at Cambridge University and winner of a philosophy journal's prize for the best article by a philosopher under thirty. The words "past" and "under thirty" suggested that the author and the psychologist-reader had certain life experiences in common. More importantly, the subtitle – *Exposing the Bogus Arguments of Politicians, Priests, Journalists, and Other Serial Offenders* – suggested that the book would enable him to pick up where he had left off years ago. After reading it, he sent off a proposed set of chapter headings to the philosopher who responded with a carefully formulated table of contents. The project was now underway.

As we were writing the book, another book appeared on the philosophy shelves of local bookstores: *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy through Jokes* (Cathcart and Klein, 2007). The book cover indicated that the authors, Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, had

majored in philosophy at Harvard and had then gone on to pursue other, quite unrelated careers. The book's appearance caused the psychologist, who should have known better, several sleepless nights: "Cathcart and Klein got there first," he moaned to the philosopher. The philosopher, however, remained calm and unperturbed and cited the following joke:

The train conductor was going through the cars collecting tickets. He came to the seat where a woman was sitting with her son. "Ma'am," he asked, "how old is your little boy?" "He's four." "He looks at least twelve to me." "He worries a lot."

He also pointed out that the Cathcart and Klein book has ten chapters, only one of which is devoted to logic, and this chapter considers only two of the twenty-three fallacies we were covering in our book. He concluded that, if anything, we should be elated that others have paved the way for our book on jokes and critical thinking. Thus mollified, the psychologist took his subsequent discovery of *Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes* by Jim Holt (2008) with remarkable serenity. What's especially noteworthy here is that the philosopher countered the emotional reaction of the psychologist with an appeal to reason supported by compelling evidence.

As John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987) shows, philosophers have been interested in humor throughout the history of philosophy. Our book, however, has a special affinity with the investigative spirit of Henri Bergson's *Laughter* (1912). Bergson sought answers to these questions: What does laughter mean? And what is the "basal element" in the laughable? He knew that gaining answers to these questions would be an uphill battle. After all, "The greatest thinkers, from Aristotle downward, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation" (p. 1). However, his excuse for attacking the problem anew was that he would not try to imprison the comic spirit within a definition, but instead treat it with the respect due any product of human imagination. By establishing "a practical, intimate acquaintance" with it, he would honor the fact that "the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities," that it "has a method in its madness" (p. 2).

On the basis of this intimate acquaintance for nearly two hundred pages, Bergson concluded that the comic spirit has all the appearances of being logical, but it actually abandons logic (p. 196). Similarly, Ted Cohen writes

about a type of joke that it displays “a crazy logic,” “an insane rationality,” “a logical rigor gone over the edge,” and involves “twisted reasoning” (p. 46). So, we think it makes a lot of sense for a philosopher and a psychologist to collaborate on a book about jokes and critical thinking. We agree that jokes often reflect the abandonment of logic and reason. We also believe, however, that some jokes make a lot of sense. The fact that some do and some don’t is precisely what makes them a valuable resource for critical thinking.

