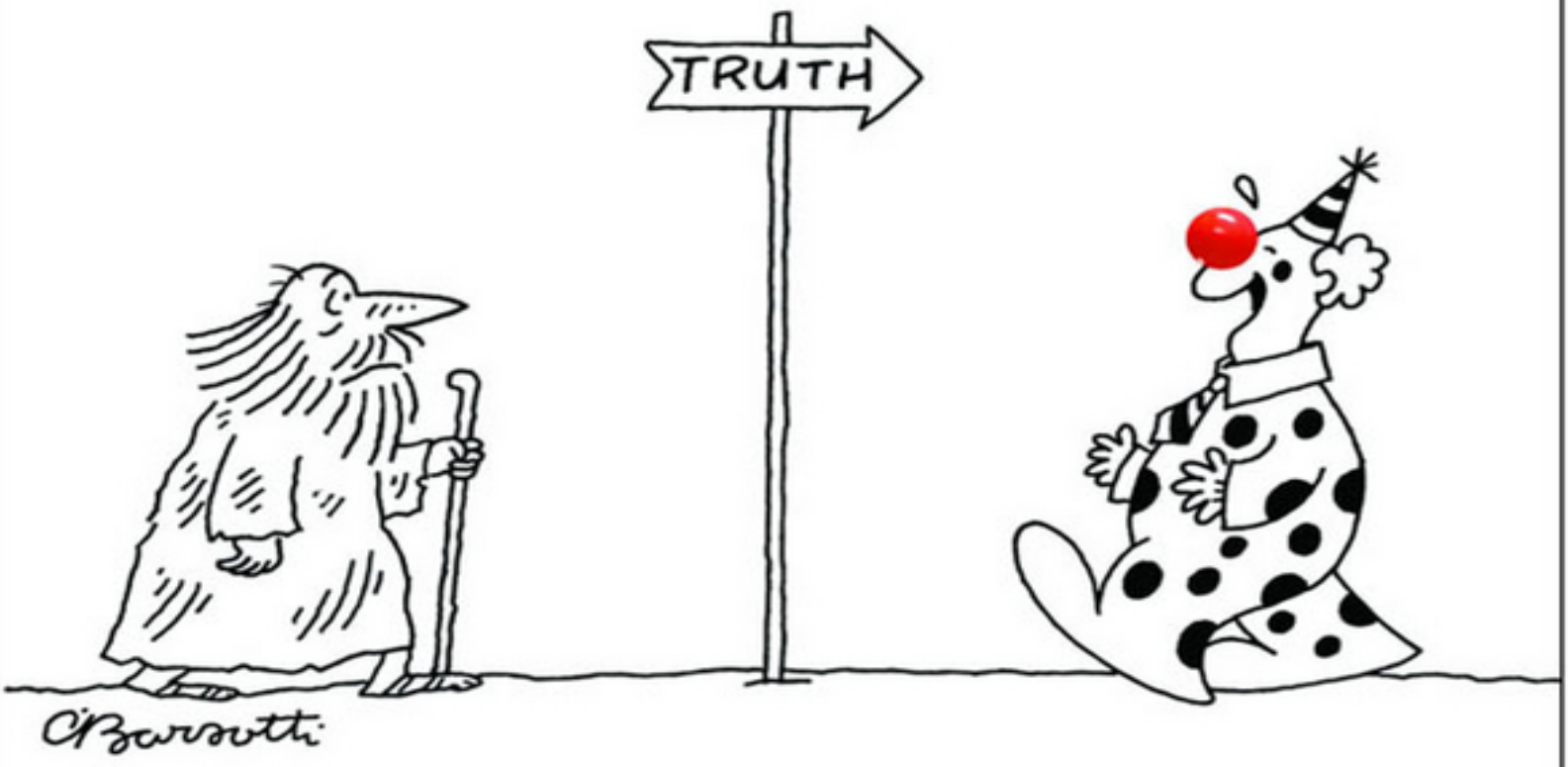
JOHN CAPPS AND DONALD CAPPS

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

HOW JOKES CAN HELP YOU THINK



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WILEY-BLACKWELL
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“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***

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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?”

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:

> **Thetrain 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 compel-ling 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.

Acknowledgements

A couple of professors can put together what they would like to think is a publishable manuscript but it takes many other professionals, working together, to convert a manuscript into a book. The names of many of these persons are unknown to the authors. Of those whose names are known to us, we are especially grateful to Jeff Dean, philosophy editor at Wiley-Blackwell, who expressed interest in our manuscript and shepherded it through the review process. Also, in a moment of sheer inspiration, he came up with the book's title and subtitle. Thoroughly impressed with his title, we have long since forgotten our own. Tiffany Mok attended to the various issues that kept the publication process moving along, and made certain that we were consulted on all aspects of the preparation of the book, including the cover design. Graeme Leonard did a splendid job in the actual editing of the manuscript. Among those whose names are unknown to us, we want to express our particular thanks to the reviewers of our original manuscript. We aren't kidding when we say that we took their criticisms and suggestions very seriously. We and our readers are the beneficiaries of both.

Also, writing a book like this requires telling a lot of jokes and we'd like to thank the people, willing and unwilling, who listened and told us what was funny and what wasn't. We found ourselves depending particularly on the good sense of humor, and also the good sense and good humor, of Evelyn Brister and Karen Capps, as we tested the jokes for this book. We are solely responsible for the bad jokes that remain!

Finally, we have noticed that in the case of some coauthored books one author will dedicate it to one person and the other author will dedicate it to another person. In our case, we both dedicate this book to Eamon Capps, our son and grandson. At three years of age, he has already

shown his impeccable sense of humor by finding most of what we do hilarious. Of course, if this book is right, then he may also be showing his critical thinking skills by laughing at our own shortcomings. So it is with joy, and a little guilt, that we welcome him into this family of joke-lovers.

Good Point!

Humor today goes hand in hand with our rationality, and not just rationality in the sense of cognitive sophistication, but also in the sense of a rational attitude toward the world. Part of this attitude is viewing things critically, and people with a well-developed sense of humor naturally look at things critically, because they are looking for incongruity.

John Morreall

Bad Limerick!!

A candid Professor confesses

That the secret of half his success is

Not his science, as such,

Nor its marvels so much As his bright irresponsible guesses.

Thomas Thorneley

1

Why Thinking Critically Is Important

Critical thinking is about examining the reasons we give for what we believe. It is also about communicating in a clear, understandable, and reasonable way. Technically speaking, critical thinking is rational thinking. The word “rational” implies the ability to reason logically and usually means that one avoids emotionalism, i.e., appealing to one’s feelings or intuitions as the basis for a particular belief. In practical terms, critical thinking involves being “reasonable,” or having defensible reasons for what we believe and say. The word “reasonable” may imply the use of practical reason in making decisions and choices, and in this sense, critical thinking is relevant to solv-ing problems. In this book, we will be using both terms – “rational” and “reasonable”– depending on the context.

We will also use the word “irrational” to refer to beliefs and actions that are illogical. Sometimes the word “irrational” is used as a synonym for saying or doing something in a strongly emotional manner. We will use the word “irrational” here in the more limited sense of engaging in faulty reasoning. This means that just because someone speaks or writes in a highly emotional manner does not necessarily mean that the belief itself is irrational, and, conversely, merely because someone speaks in a calm and measured way does not necessarily mean that the belief expressed is rational. The “emotionalism” that is being called into question here is where one appeals to one’s emotions and,

in effect, ignores or rejects evidence that challenges the validity of the belief in question.

Jokes make good illustrations of the logical fallacies that are a regular feature of critical thinking courses. Figuring out which logical fallacy a joke illustrates can be a valuable exercise in critical thinking. We will present jokes that illustrate these fallacies in chapters 2-5. We realize that by using jokes to illustrate critical thinking we risk undermining the importance of critical thinking, but we hope that this illustrative use of jokes will enable our readers to take the goals of critical thinking even more seriously than they might otherwise and also to get the informal fallacies better fixed in their minds than would otherwise be the case. If critical thinking is about examining the reasons people have for what they believe, then jokes are an especially engaging and memorable way of showing how these reasons can fall short. And if critical thinking is about being able to communicate in ways that are clear, understandable and reasonable, this often means avoiding the logical fallacies that create confusion and undermine honest dialogue, and because jokes commit these fallacies, they can help us learn where our communicating goes wrong.

The Relevance of Context

In this chapter we will discuss several aspects of what is involved in thinking and behaving in a rational manner. One of these concerns the issue of con text. A belief or behavior can make sense in one context but not make sense in another. Here’s an example of a joke in which someone does something that would be perfectly rational in another context but is essentially irrational in the context in which he currently finds himself:

Two guys are walking down the street when a mugger approaches them and demands their

money. They both grudgingly pull out their wallets and begin taking out their cash. Just then one guy turns to the other and hands him a bill. "Here's that $20 I owe you," he says.

It's doubtful that anyone would ever *really* pay back a debt in this way. But the joke illustrates the incongruity between the guy's rational behavior –paying back a loan – and the context in which he pays it back. He suddenly realizes that, since he's being robbed anyway, he might as well pay off a debt at the same time. Here's a joke that plays on the same incongruity:

A New York cabbie is cruising near 5th Avenue when he picks up a man who wants to go to the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago. After a great deal of haggling the cabbie agrees to drive the man to Chicago, which takes them out of Manhattan, into New Jersey, across Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, and finally many hours later onto Lake Shore Drive to the Palmer House. The cabbie drives up to the main entrance, the man gives the cabbie several hundred dollars to cover the ride, and opens the door and gets out. Just then two women slide into the backseat and one says, "We want to go to Shea Stadium." "No way, lady," the cabbie replies, "I don't go to Queens."

What the cabbie tells the lady makes sense to him – "I limit myself to Manhattan"–but it doesn't make much sense in a context where he is dead heading back to New York City from Chicago.

Differentiating the Rational from the Irrational

As these two examples show, jokes can upset our intuitions about what is rational and what is irrational. In the crazy sorts of situations jokes describe, it isn't always clear what is rational or irrational. Thus, jokes can help us recognize that we don't always have a clear grasp on what is rational. They are often a gentle reminder that we aren't always good judges of what is rational or irrational. Take this joke:

> **Two friends decide to take an expensive fishing trip to Montana but after a week of fishing they only manage to catch one fish. So, on the way home one friend says to the other, "The way I figure it, that fish cost us $5,000." "Yeah," his friend replies, "Good thing we didn't catch more."**

Here the irrationality is obvious and apparent. The second guy's reply might sound rational at first but it doesn't take more than a second to realize it isn't. Someone who says, "The guy's right. Two fish would cost $10,000" doesn't get the fact that his thinking isn't rational. Here's another one:

> **A guy was hired to paint the line down the center of the road. The first day he managed to paint two miles, and his boss was very pleased. The next day he painted only 200 yards, but his boss thought he'd probably worked too hard the first day and needed to take it easier the second day. But on the third day he was only able to paint twenty feet. The boss called him into the office and demanded an explanation. The guy replied, "Well, you see it's getting so darned far to walk all the way back to the paint bucket."**

Here, too, the irrationality is obvious. It also has practical consequences. Because he acted irrationally he'll probably lose his job. In real life the irrationality is *usually* more subtle but there are still practical consequences. So we should care about being rational because irrational thinking can have negative practical consequences.

One way of being irrational is to believe something that is obviously false. Say that two guys are hiking in the Rockies and one says to the other, “I’ll bet you 10 bucks that I can jump across that 50-foot ravine,” and the other guy replies, “You’re on.” So the first guy leaps to his death. As he falls, he might shout, “The joke’s on you because I don’t even have ten bucks!” But that’s irrelevant. Because it’s obviously impossible to leap across a 50-foot ravine, it is irrational to believe that one can. On the other hand, believing that he can leap across an 8-foot ravine is certainly conceivable, especially with a running start. It’s even possible that believing he can do it would make a crucial difference to his success. But acting on an obviously false belief is irrational, and we shouldn’t be surprised if it has negative consequences.

Another way of being irrational is to believe or say things that are contradictory. This can also have practical consequences. Here’s an example:

> **The manager of a baseball team went to his doctor to get an ulcer treated. “Remember” the doctor told him, “Don’t get excited, don’t get angry, and forget all about baseball when you’re off the field. Try to remember it’s just a game.” “Thanks, Doc, I’ll follow your advice.” “Good. I’ll see you in a month to find out how you’re doing.” As the patient heads to the door, the doctor says, “Oh, one more thing: why the hell did you let the pitcher bat for himself last night when you had men on first and third?”**

Here the doctor contradicts himself and the patient has every right to accuse him of being irrational. Moreover, the doctor has spoiled whatever good he hoped to do.

Most of us try to be rational, at least, when we want others to think we know what we’re talking about. Nearly everyone who holds contradictory beliefs *thinks* he or she is being