

## Commentary piece

# Make comedy matter: Ernst Cassirer on the politics and morality of humour

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### Abstract

*Many of Ernst Cassirer's later works are concerned with the dangers of political myth. His analysis speaks at length about the role of philosophy during the rise of the Third Reich, and Cassirer argues that philosophers failed to combat the dominant ideology. Today, philosophers struggle to explain their relevance to greater public and governmental powers that see no intrinsic value. Given the current political situation in the US, we find ourselves at a crossroads as philosophers. We can either retreat and remain within the comforts of academia, or we can take up arms against dangerous and divisive political forces. If we take Cassirer's prescriptions seriously, we must choose the latter. Fortunately, philosophy has not disappeared from public consciousness completely. An emerging theme in contemporary cultural studies is the exploration of connections between humour and philosophy. I argue we ought to take advantage of the status of the comedian as public philosopher, and for philosophers to take seriously the political power of comedians. To do this responsibly, I analyse a portion of Cassirer's work that has been widely ignored in scholarship – his understanding of the politics and morality of humour. By analysing these passages in relation to Cassirer's later works, we are given the tools to understand the power of humour in political discourse, as well as the responsibility of that power. I argue that "joking responsibly", for Cassirer, means to reveal the motives and values which underlie sophistry, particularly the sort which lends itself to political manipulation.*

*Keywords: Ernst Cassirer, politics, myth, ethics, epistemology, Donald Trump, public philosophy.*

## 1. Make comedy matter: Ernst Cassirer on the politics and morality of humour

Many of Ernst Cassirer's later works, including "*Judaism and the Modern Political Myths*" (1944), "The Technique of Our Modern Political Myths" (1945), and *The Myth of the State* (1946), are concerned with the dangers of political myth. His analysis speaks at length about the role of philosophy during the rise of the Third Reich: by retreating to the ivory tower, Cassirer argues, philosophers failed to engage, let alone combat, the dominant ideology. Today, philosophers struggle to explain their relevance to greater public and governmental powers that see no direct monetary benefit, and therefore no intrinsic value. As such, academic departments are dwindling from lack of funding and interest.

Given the current political situation in the US, we find ourselves at a crossroads as philosophers. We can either retreat and remain within the comforts of academia, or we can take up arms against dangerous and divisive political forces. If we take Cassirer's prescriptions seriously, we must choose the latter. Of course, this will be an uphill battle, although, fortunately, philosophy has not disappeared from public consciousness completely. An emerging theme in contemporary cultural studies is the exploration of connections between humour and philosophy. Philosophers such as John Morreall (2009), Lydia Amir (2017), Steven Gimbel (2017), and Chris Kramer (2015), among others, argue that the humour develops and encourages epistemological virtues; virtues that are essential for one to be a good philosopher. Beyond academia, public interest in this connection has also seen a resurgence: the podcast *Modern Day Philosophers*, by comedian Danny Lobell, describes itself as "study sessions" with fellow stand-ups as "study partners" aiming to explore philosophical thought. Lobell writes, "I've often heard us referred to as the philosophers of our day which I figured sounded like a good enough excuse" (Lobell 2014). Jesse David Fox's interview with a comedian in 2015 was titled "Pete Holmes on How the Comedian Became the Modern-Day Philosopher" (Fox 2015), and the claim that comedians are and/or should be considered philosophers is echoed in think pieces about and interviews with Louis CK (who Charlie Rose called a "philosopher king") (Haglund 2014; Hendricks 2017), Jon Stewart (Holt 2009), John Oliver (who has been featured twice on the *Leiter Report*) (Garber 2015; Leiter 2017a; Leiter 2017b), and Stephen Colbert (Talma 2013). I believe it to be worthwhile to take advantage of the status of comedian as public philosopher, and for philosophers to take seriously the political power of comedians.

To do this responsibly, I analyse a portion of Cassirer's work that has been widely ignored in scholarship – his understanding of the politics and morality of humour. By analysing these passages in relation to Cassirer's later works, we are given the tools to understand the power of humour in political discourse, as well as the responsibility of that power. I have argued elsewhere that humour functions to wake us from what Husserl would call "the natural attitude" (Marra, forthcoming); and the same idea is in play here: I will argue that "joking responsibly", for Cassirer, means to reveal the motives and values which underlie sophistry, particularly the sort which lend itself to political manipulation. Comedy can be one way of disrupting political myth, but only if it is used properly and with moral integrity.

## 2. The dangers of political myth

Cassirer understands myth as an inescapable element in human life; it is the most basic way in which we understand ourselves and the world (Cassirer 1944b: 115). Mythical thinking is a perspective through which we are "captivated and enthralled" by "immediate experience"; a

basic way of understanding our world through emotional, rather than rational, expression (Cassirer 1946a: 32). It is a “free and spontaneous play of imagination” which cares for neither intellectual unity nor consistency (Cassirer 1944b: 115-116). Rather, mythological thinking is concerned only with calcifying subjective anxiety regarding object-stimulated emotional tension into external representations such as gods, demons, and other mythical expressions (Cassirer 1946a: 33). In Cassirer’s words:

as soon as the tension and emotion of the moment has found its discharge in the word or the mythical image, a sort of turning point has occurred in human mentality: the inner excitement which was a mere subjective state has vanished, and has been resolved into the objective form of myth.

(Cassirer 1946a: 36)

Mythological thinking is a prior stage to rational thinking,<sup>1</sup> but one which is not “left behind” in culture or history when humanity is “emancipated from the common matrix of myth” (Cassirer 1946a: 44). As culture progresses, mythological consciousness evolves into new versions of the impulse to externalise immediacy. In contemporary society, myth is frequently artificially created and manipulated for political ends, satisfying the intuitive need of the human being to objectify subjective emotional anxiety, while simultaneously weaponising myth to produce the desired result, as Cassirer describes in relation to Hitler’s regime:

[myth] was adjusted to political needs and used for concrete political ends... It was brought under control and tied to obedience and order. Myths were brought into being by the word of command of the political leaders.

(Cassirer 1944b: 116)

When politics uses mythology for its own ends, it ceases to be expressive of the imaginative human spirit and becomes “regulated and organised” (ibid.). Sociopolitical leaders can become “dietised”, representing an “image of a momentary god... a deliverance from fear, the fulfillment of a wish and a hope” (Cassirer 1946a: 35-36). The externalisation of the emotional anxiety finds itself represented (or symbolised) within an idol, a political icon, who does not remain mere *symbol* but becomes the concentrated *manifestation* of the god-figure. Cassirer witnessed this dietising with the rise of Adolf Hitler, who the German people believed was the only means to end their suffering.

The sort of mythologies that are used in today’s political discussions involve similar themes, from racism to nationalism to xenophobia. In the US, the rise of Donald Trump to the office of president has resulted in diplomacy’s reduction to the slogan of “America First”, right-wing nationalist extremism has been re-branded as the “alt-right”, the free press is now the enemy of the country, criticisms are “fake news”, and the qualifications for a good leader have been effectively reduced to that leader’s ability to fit a very specific and archaic vision of manhood. These mythologies allow for the emergence and acceptance of “alternative facts”, blatant lies, and the unconstitutional manipulation of the law and citizenry. Admittedly, the dog-whistles and emboldening of “us vs them” rhetoric was *intentional* throughout Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016, as revealed unabashedly and without shame in a Charlie Rose interview with former chief executive officer of the Trump campaign and White House Chief Strategist Steven Bannon (Rose 2017).

More obvious to some than others, this shift is as dangerous as it is irrational – and this is precisely why myth is the perfect vehicle through which to enforce it. Again, myth is not “logical; that is, it does not appeal to or rely on” rationality (Cassirer 1944a: 25). It is expressing through emotion that which is otherwise inexplicable, and it is this feature of myth

which lends itself well to manipulation. Furthermore, it is this very feature that seems to leave rationality at a loss to combat it (we can point to any number of press conferences and interviews to see this harsh reality in action). It can feel as though philosophy is impotent in the face of this new enemy; an enemy that has been carefully and intentionally crafted to be immune to its weapons of logical argumentation. How, then, can we live up to Cassirer's insistence that philosophers should engage the public? I turn to Cassirer's later works to answer this question.

### 3. The proper role of philosophy in sociopolitical life

In these essays, as well as in other writings, Cassirer insists that philosophy is the only way to understand, and therefore overthrow, dangerous political mythologies. He writes:

[Philosophy] can make us understand the adversary... In order to fight an enemy we must know him. And to know him means not only to know his defects but also his strengths. To all of us it has become clear that we have greatly underrated the strength of political myths. We should not repeat this error. We should see the adversary face to face; we should try to understand his try character, and we should study his methods.

(Cassirer 1979b: 266)

Without a proper understanding of the positions of the other side, no matter how contradictory on the surface, we will never be able to understand the motivations of the supporters who give him power. Because the 2016 presidential campaign was so irrational, many politicians and academics did not pay attention to the concerns and arguments of the white working class, instead dismissing them rather than engaging with them. Hillary Clinton and others on the left mocked the rural white communities who supported Trump, reducing them to racists or sexists, characterising them as foolish, uneducated, and unjustified—a “basket of deplorables” with neither morals nor legitimate grievances (Blake 2016). In this way, humour was (mis)used to mythologise, and ultimately reduce, the Trump supporter to a simpleton. Philosophers could have granted legitimacy to the economic and moral concerns which drove many Trump voters to his camp in the first place. Philosophers had the opportunity to work in tandem with political and social figures in a way that could have made a substantial difference in the political conversation. However, even those of us who concern ourselves with real issues effecting the world today often find our work confined to the academy, rarely traversing, let alone translating, into the public sphere. Having missed this opportunity does not negate the urgency philosophers and other intellectuals ought to feel to rectify this mistake now.

In fact, Cassirer believes that the rule of political myth in his time is directly related to the way philosophy was done at the time—instead of combating mythology, some philosophers endorsed and encouraged it. He writes:

In spite of all its learning, philosophy had become stranger to the world and the problems of life which occupied man and the whole thought of the age had no part in its activities. It philosophised about everything except civilization.

(Cassirer 1979a: 232)

Philosophy is the only method through which we can *make sense of* the irrational adherence to unstable political myth. For only when we understand the basic foundations of the myths, in a way which grants irrationality as necessary but not sufficient, can we resist the normalisation which allows for atrocity:

In spite of all its display of military power in spite of its incomparable technique of organisation and warfare, the German colossus remained, after all, a colossus with feet of clay. As soon as it was possible to doubt or to destroy its mythical foundation, its collapse was inevitable.

(Cassirer 1944b: 125)

Philosophy can give us the means to reveal the implications of mythologies that may be attractive to the general public at face value.

How does philosophy reinstate itself into political discourse? I argue that we ought to explore society's newfound interest in comedy as public philosophy. This is not to say that we ought to reduce philosophy to comedy or comedy to philosophy—rather I make the simple claim that we ought to take advantage of the fact that comedians occupy a space between philosophers and the public that can bridge the gap between the two. In order to support this argument, I suggest we revisit Cassirer on the political power of comedy. This will allow us to understand both the strengths and limits of humour for cultural change and guide us toward responsible use of those strengths.

#### 4. Cassirer on the politics of comedy

Gregory B. Moynahan's (2013) study *Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany 1899-1919* makes a strong case that Cassirer's views on comedy were highly influenced by his mentor, Hermann Cohen, particularly his psychology and aesthetics (Moynahan 2013: 18). From lecture notes Cassirer took as a student, as well as the third volume of Cohen's (2012) *System of Philosophy* on aesthetics, we see that Cohen's aesthetics culminated "in an open form of comedy that recognised both the infinite and its relation to human limitation" (Moynahan 2013: 18). Cohen's conception of comedy, as opposed to irony, is that it "reveals a universal form of logic at work in all human activity". Cassirer was taken by Cohen's analysis of comedy, and this interest found its most extensive treatment in Cassirer's (1953) study of Shakespeare and Shaftesbury in *The Platonic Renaissance in England*.

Cassirer's analysis of these writers aims to show that the meaning of "the comic" underwent a significant change during the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> Comedy transformed from retellings of mythology to powerful force of spirit: "It was first in the realm of the comic that this spirit celebrated its highest triumphs and won its decisive victories" (Cassirer 1953: 170), a change from recalling the past to shaping the future:

The Renaissance power of comic representation thus *belongs inseparably and essentially to its power of action*, to its vital and creative energies. Yet, if the comic thus became the strongest aggressive weapon of modern times, its effect was, on the other hand, to take away the violence and bitterness of that struggle out of which the modern era arose. For the comic spirit contains also an element of balance and reconciliation. It does not entertain feelings of hatred towards the world which its free play is destroying, which it cannot but negate; on the contrary, the comic spirit forms rather the last glorification of this decadent world.

(Cassirer 1953: 171, emphasis added)

The symbolic formations through which culture is shaped are transformed through the creations of spirit which move ever closer toward embracing freedom. Shaftesbury serves as an example of the use of comedy for the purposes of progress in the face of irrationality (Cassirer 1953: 168).

We see in this analysis that Cassirer's study of the comic was quite developed: he traces the significant change it underwent and how it transformed. Comedy evolved from *representation* to *activity*; from mimicking experience to creating tangible change; that is, to freeing the mind and spirit. And while Cassirer does not explicitly state that comedy can be

an antidote to political myth, there is clear evidence that he believes that comedy is capable of provoking such an emancipation. He says:

Thus in the power of the comic lives the power of love which will and can understand even that form of the world which *the intellectual must abandon and surmount*.

(Cassirer 1953: 171-172, emphasis added)

The attempt to conquer irrationality with rationality fails, as we have seen. Analysis of political myth from a rational perspective will never lead one to understanding the motivations and complexities of that myth, let alone why and how it is persuasive. Humour, though, can engage irrationality. Humour can meet the irrational interlocutor where s/he is, to use a popular pedagogical term, and in this way can understand the perspective of the other without demanding that that perspective be expressed in rational or even consistent terms. It is in this way that humour can prevail where rationality cannot.

Cassirer continues, “For humour looks before and after; it helps to usher in the vital shapes of the future without renouncing the past” (Cassirer 1953: 178-179). Here Cassirer offers an important point. We have already seen that part of the failure of the Democratic party was its condemnation of Trump supporters. But those supporters are part of the democratic process; moving forward is not possible if we leave them behind. The victory over rationality that humour can achieve is one that invites the irrational interlocutor beyond political myth *with understanding* and *without condemnation*. So what political power does Cassirer believe comedy to have? Precisely the power that can disrupt the sort of epistemic complacency necessary for the success of political mythologies.

Cassirer’s insights, while abstract, are supported by empirical evidence. Comedy is considered by many philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists to involve the recognition of incongruities, falsehoods, and inconsistencies, as well as develop and strengthen openmindedness while decreasing the deployment of defensive mechanisms. The more comedy one is exposed to, and the more complex the nature of that comedy, the better the mind becomes at recognising incongruities outside of the context of comedy (Morreall 2009; Hurley *et al.* 2011). Pedagogical and psychological testing has shown that exposure to comedy before an exam, for example, increases cognitive flexibility, critical and creative thinking, cooperation, and problem solving (Ruch 2008; Davies 2013). These qualities entail what José Medina calls “epistemic virtues”: humility, curiosity/diligence, and openmindedness (Medina 2013: 42). This sort of mental exercise physically changes the neurological connections in the brain, expanding neural networks and decreasing psychological blocks to alternative viewpoints (Ambrose *et al.* 2010). So the very things that Cassirer claimed that comedy could do have been confirmed in the concrete through empirical testing.

## 5. Cassirer on the morality of comedy

But empirical science cannot tell us anything about what comedy *ought* to do. Steven Gimbel (2017), Lydia Amir (2017), and Chris Kramer (2015a; 2015b) take on the morality of humour from an epistemic standpoint, bridging the empirical data with moral education and socio-political resistance, respectively. Resisting political myth, according to Medina (2013), is an epistemic task. In his text *Epistemology of Resistance*, he explains that epistemic vice leads to complacency in oppressive systems. He defines epistemic vices as “flaws that are not incidental or transitory, but *structural and systematic*: they involve attitudes deeply rooted in one’s personality and cognitive functioning” and “harm the chances for epistemic improvement” (Medina 2013: 31, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, epistemic vices

impede one's ability to learn and improve; they "affect one's capacity to learn from others and from the facts; they inhibit the capacity of self-correction and of being open to correction from others" (Medina 2013: 31). In other words, epistemic vices are not conscious choices that one makes only when s/he is confronted with epistemically challenging information or experience; they are insidious ways in which one's thinking itself has been habituated through social conditioning, and supported through a lack of, immunity to, or disregard for, consequences. These vices prevent one from self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and knowledge of the world; indeed, they create barriers to compassion, plurality, empathy, and sympathy. Medina's point is clear: epistemic vices are at the root of intellectual stagnation and moral decay. Insofar as these vices are encouraged, endorsed, or, as is most often the case, ignored, intellectual and moral progress is impossible (Medina 2013: 34-35).

Political myth, then, can be understood as that which creates and sustains epistemic vices and must be disrupted and replaced by epistemic virtues, namely the same virtues, I argue alongside Cassirer, Gimbel, Amir, Kramer, and empirical science that are inherent within the power of humour. Amir understands humour as "an epistemological tool that enables self-transformation through intra-personal dialogue" (Amir 2017: 4). Amir argues that the pedagogical and psychological benefits of humour are perfect for resolving tension between an emotive individual and the brute facts of the world, which "makes room for humour as a necessary ingredient of a harmonious and moral self" (Amir 2017: 73n16). If humour *can* do this work, she argues, it *ought* to. Empathy is a virtue which requires openness and self-acceptance to cultivate, she argues, and "such acceptance is more likely to occur through the compassionate criticism which is inherent in intra-personal and self-directed humour" (Amir 2017: 112). In particular, Amir argues that humour can serve the moral function of reversing what in Cassirer's terms would be called "gender myths". She claims that humour benefits the development of self-acceptance and self-liberation, "gradually freeing oneself" from imprisoning attitudes of oneself and others (Amir 2017: 122).

The language of freedom and liberation through humour is echoed in Kramer's (2015) study of subversive humour. Kramer uses the example of Frederick Douglass caricaturing white preachers, manipulating their own words to reveal the inconsistencies and irrational defense of owning slaves (Kramer 2015a: 7-8). Doing so, Kramer argues, humour interrupts the "spirit of seriousness" which fixes others as static entities incapable of complex inner worlds (Kramer 2015b: 44, 113). As Amir notes, empathy is a precondition for intersubjective understanding which is often defensively blocked by fear of shame (Amir 2017: 126). By disarming the automaticity of defense mechanisms, humour has a greater chance of cultivating empathy than other means of interpersonal dialogue, creating a "safe space" for the vulnerability necessary to understand the other. Indeed, Gimbel (2017) argues that humour and comedy rely on *cleverness*, a term which he defines as including openmindedness as a prerequisite. Aesthetically speaking, he argues, a joke can be judged as good or bad based on the number and kind of virtues inherent in the content, delivery, and intention of the joke. Jokes which intend to harm are not only morally problematic, but aesthetically poor (Gimbel 2017: 101, 134, 136, 138). The implication of this research points to moral responsibility on behalf of humour creators: use humour as you will, but understand and accept the consequences inherent in that use.

Humour at the expense of minority groups, as well as Trump supporters, is a moral failing for these philosophers, and for Cassirer. The power of comedy comes with a normative *charge* toward liberation, not calcification of reductionist mythologies. Comedy ought never be used to defend political myth; as I have argued previously, this would be a perversion of its purpose and function (Marra forthcoming), and would be a morally blameworthy endeavour.

## 6. Conclusion

In the 2016 election, myths were created and politicised by both the right and the left—the myth of the ignorant and immoral Trump supporter and the myth of the inferior minority. In both cases, humour was used for an ethically dubious purpose: to limit the freedom of individuals or groups. Humour should not be wielded for the purposes of manipulation or propaganda; it ought to expose political mythology and encourage questioning, reflection, and doubt. It should aim toward the liberation and freedom of humanity. Comedians and philosophers ought to be critical of myth-making wherever it appears, whether in a campaign rally or an acceptance speech, a news report or a comedy sketch, and use the tools it has to identify and reject those mythologies. Comedy which trades on political myth is morally blameworthy comedy that is abusing its power and ought to be condemned, no matter who delivers it.

Cassirer’s analysis of the politics and morality of comedy show that it may be the perfect weapon to combat the latest batch of political mythology. Comedy can meet the irrational interlocutor where they are, and guide them toward epistemic virtue. To be clear, I do not believe that Cassirer’s position on comedy can be presented as a singular solution to the disease of political mythology. I find it much more in line with Cassirer’s philosophy to interpret his position as one possibility. Cassirer sees comedy as a way in which disruption is possible—but there is no guaranteed awakening that comes from the experience of comedy. I instead understand Cassirer’s position in Husserlian terms, in that comedy can act as a catalyst to jar us out of the “natural attitude” of routine existence and into a reflective and questioning attitude. This “revealing” feature of comedy, explicit in Cohen’s aesthetics, remains present in Cassirer. But the move from awareness to action cannot come externally. The individual must make the choice to turn inward. In this way, comedy can make awareness of political myth *as myth* possible, but is limited in its ability to take its audience beyond this step.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “[B]efore man thinks in terms of logical concepts, he holds his experiences by means of clear, separate, mythical images” (Cassirer 1946a: 37).

<sup>2</sup> Cassirer argues particularly for the existence of this trend in Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, but it is not difficult to find examples of this theme in the humour and theatrical comedy of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Cassirer 1953: 170-171).

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