

Humor and Humility

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Mark Twain appeared on the cover of Time magazine this month—almost a century after his death.¹ Reports of his living influence are not greatly exaggerated. He is one of America's great humorists and one of our most humbling critics. The article says of Twain that, "[he] was righteous without being pious, angry for all the right reasons and funny in the right ways. You might say he gave virtue a good name." If Mark Twain had a particular human excellence it was the virtue of humor. It may come as a surprise in the age of Borat, Zohan and The Love Guru, but humor is sometimes listed as a moral virtue.

It's tough to give a philosophy talk on humor. As a group, we philosophers are often pictured as long-faced, pensive, scratching our chins—perhaps suffering from too much seriousness. It's said of one German philosopher, if you're looking for a doer hour, read a little Schopenhauer. Nonetheless, while the ancient philosopher Socrates was famous for being really ugly (he's described as having a snub nose and wide-set, bulging eyes), he had some interesting things to say about beauty. It might be worth seriously considering humor as a virtue.

What would make humor a virtue? How does it help us to become better people? Those of us who tend toward too much seriousness have probably heard the advice: "You need to learn to laugh at yourself. Don't take yourself so seriously." This is good advice. Too much seriousness leads to inflated feelings of self-importance. If one lacks a sense of humor, it could be an indication of a lack of humility. Humility is the capacity for lucid, self understanding, not a lack of self-worth. The humble person understands their moral limitations; they do not minimize or inflate them. The humble person, borrowing Twain's words, has a redeeming awareness of their petty vices.

Humility and humor seem to be coworkers in perfecting our character. As the popular Twain quote observes: "Man is the only animal the blushes. Or needs to." We all need to blush from time to time. Humorless virtue isn't really virtue, because it never blushes. Twain notes: "few things are harder to put up with than a good example." The priggish moralist is full of pride. He needs a little prick of humor to let out the hot air and bring him down to earth. Humor helps us to become better people by keeping us humble in a positive way. It allows us to smile at our limitations, avoiding despair. It is a form of constructive criticism that we welcome in the front door. Humor allows us to relax our guarded ego. It humbles us without harming us.

¹ *Time*, July 14, 2008.

However, not everything that makes us laugh is humorous—some things just shouldn't be funny. It might be useful to make a distinction between humor and sarcasm. The Times article claims that many of the popular political comedians today are descendents of Mark Twain. This may be only partly true. The article says that with popular programs like the Dailey Show and The Colbert Report, we are living the “the golden age of sarcasm.” These shows are very entertaining and they frequently rise to the level of real humor, but they also rely on large helpings of sarcasm to entertain us and make laugh. The kind of laughter that helps us become better people is not sarcasm.

The problem with sarcasm, as opposed to humor, is it laughs at other people, not with them. While it is certainly entertaining and sometimes useful to see pompous and self-important people brought down a notch or two, it doesn't do us any good. When Mark Twain remarked that, “Often it does seem a pity that Noah and his party did not miss the boat” he includes himself in the joke. Sarcasm is never sarcastic about itself. Its target is other people. It is more a coworker of pride than humility, because it excludes the one making the joke from the joke. As one thinker notes: Sarcasm is destructive, mocking and wounding; it's the laughter of conflict. Sarcasm is funny, but contemptuous. Humor, on the other hand, is self-effacing and includes everyone in the joke.²

Mark Twain's continued influence is due to his ability to use humor to humble us. Because of this capacity he was able to help us confront deep, almost untouchable flaws in our national character, like racism. He was a seriously funny man, as the Times' article reminds us. Because of his greatness Twain was able to teach America deep lesson about race.³

However, I wouldn't take these comments too seriously. Woody Allen once said, “I read all of *War and Peace* in twenty-minutes. It's about Russia.” Humor is a big, complex subject to cover in 5 minutes. It's about happiness.

² Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*.

³ Stephen L. Carter, “Getting Past Black and White,” *Time*, July 14, 2008.