

**HUMOR, EDUCATION,
AND THE QUEST FOR A GOOD LIFE**
PhD course at Faculty of ARTS, Aarhus University
May 30-31, 2024



VintageArt Nr. 9322 © Grafik Werkstatt "Das Original" www.gwbi.de

Description:

“When nothing goes right, go left” – this humoristic postcard inscription invites its readers to laugh, or at least smile, about the situations in which we seem to have ended up in a cul-de-sac, a dead end, a blind alley. We are re-directed from the one end to the other end, without knowing whether ‘left’ is better than ‘right.’ When being caught in an ethical dilemma or a double bind, either way reaches an impasse.

How can we regain hope and the courage to live despite finding ourselves in rather desperate situations, for instance in regard to the current climate crisis, conflicts and wars as well as personal life crises?

This course and conference will explore responses that involve (1) humor as a powerful tool for managing unresolvable conflicts and for reviving one’s spirits in one’s way of relating to oneself and others, (2) education for peaceful and environmentally sustainable solutions to global problems and, more generally, (3) the quest for a good life, whatever this means in concrete cases.

In her book *Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition – Taking Ridicule Seriously* (2019), Lydia Amir argues that the *homo risibilis* resolves the tensions and contradictions of our *conditio humana* without epistemological cost by addressing life’s ambiguities without losing sight of its tragic overtones, thus bringing along far-ranging personal and social benefits. This thesis will be discussed in an interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy, educational science, literary studies, theology, religious studies, and other relevant disciplines – thereby showing connections between humor and human flourishing.

Register by **April 30, 2024**, via <https://phdcourses.dk/Course/113584>

The course aims to

1. show connections between humor and human flourishing in classical texts
2. provide an introduction into and a critical discussion of theories and practices of educating younger generations in life orientation, conflict resolution and approaching the climate crisis
3. outline an interdisciplinary approach to the quest for a good life.

Course convenor: Claudia Welz (Aarhus University)

Venue: Frederik Nielsens Vej 2-4, Aarhus C, auditorium M1.1 in building 1421, room 118 – and online via Zoom (please contact clw@cas.au.dk for links)

Program

Course day 1 (May 30): Humor and Education

- 9:00-9:15 Welcome and introduction by course convenor Claudia Welz
- 9:15-10:00 Reading session 1: Wonder-based education since Socrates
- 10:00-10:30 Coffee break
- 10:30-11:15 Keynote lecture1 : Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (Aalborg University):
“On the Deep Relation Between Wonder, Humor, and *Eco-Bildung*”
- 11:15-12:00 Discussion
- 12:00-12:45 Lunch break
- 12:45-13:45 PhD paper 1 by Erik Evensen (University of Agder, Kristiansand):
“*Bildung* and the Ethics of Practice – A Critique of Rationality in *Bildung*-Centered Educational Philosophy”
- 13:45-14:45 PhD paper 2 by Lone Vesterdal (University of Southern Denmark):
“Humor in Pastoral Care”
- 14:45-15:00 Coffee break
- 15:00-16:00 Lecture by Essi Maria Ikonen (University of Helsinki): “Imagines for a Sustainable Future: Learning from Animal Stories”

Course day 2 (May 31): Humor and the Good Life

- 9:15-10:00 Reading session 2: Kierkegaard & Amir on humor and the good life
- 10:00-10:30 Coffee break
- 10:30-11:15 Keynote lecture 2: Bernhard Obsieger (Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus): “Irony, Humor, and the Quest for a Good Life”
- 11:15-12:00 Discussion
- 12:00-13:00 Lunch break
- 13:00-14:00 PhD paper 3 by Igor Ahmedov (University of Tartu):
“Can we Teach the Good Life? Learning from and of the Paradox”
- 14:00-15:00 Lecture by Tami Yaguri (Ono Academic College):
“Kierkegaardian Humor’s Way to Self-Knowledge”
- 15:00-15:30 Open discussion and ‘wrapping up’
- 15:30-16:00 Course evaluation and suggestions for future courses

Abstracts

Keynote lecture 1: Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (Aalborg University): “On the Deep Relation Between Wonder, Humor and Eco-Bildung”

The maybe most important kind of edifying education (*Bildung*) today is Eco-*Bildung*, which is an eco-education or eco-literacy that lets humans get into a new reverent, befriending, and ontological relation and resonance *with* the ‘more-than-human-life’ on this earth. How do we make such a mind shift and get into such a relationship?

In this keynote, I will take my practical departure from the philosophical action research project at Aalborg University Hospital where we are working on the relationship between ‘Culture Medicine’ and ‘Existential Health’ as something different than physical and mental health. We are here applying a new dialogical model, ‘The Wonder Compass,’ where deep nature and art experiences are followed up by dialogical ‘Communities of Wonder’ among cancer patients and their relatives.

Theoretically, I want to dwell on the relationship between Kierkegaardian humor and contemplative philosophical wonder because this form of humor and wonder seems to help the participants in ‘The Wonder Compass’ better to ‘get in tune’ with nature again in a deeply contemplative and existential health-enhancing way.

Keynote lecture 2 by Bernhard Obsieger (Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus): “Irony, Humor, and the Quest for a Good Life”

This lecture will address the role of irony and humor in the three different approaches to life distinguished by Kierkegaard. I will discuss the nature and the relation between the aesthetic, ethical and religious “stages” of life by looking at their comical counterparts. While irony is essentially related to the aesthetic life, humor bears an intrinsic reference to the religious form of life. In contrast, the intermediate ethical form of life is characterized by an earnestness that is opposed to the comical. From this Kierkegaardian perspective, I will try to show how irony and humor involve a split and a contradiction within the self, and how they contribute to the transition from one form of life to another.

**Lecture by Essi Maria Ikonen (University of Helsinki):
“Imaginaries for a Sustainable Future: Learning from Animal Stories”**

We have an abundance of knowledge about the destructive influence of our lifestyles on the environment, yet this knowledge lacks power to promote changes in lifestyles. Thus, many scholars agree that changes in worldviews are needed to rethink the impasse we are placed in, and to motivate responsible choices. But how do we imagine and form new, more responsive and responsible relationships with nature? Paul Ricoeur maintains that stories can open possible worlds which transcend the limits of our actual world thus expanding our future possible worlds. Indeed, looking at fables, myths and folktales, we find a variety of responsive relationships between animals and human beings. For instance, animals can appear as helpers, messengers and protectors of human beings in ways that go beyond scientific and common-sense beliefs about their capacities. Developing the notion of listening-imagination as a holistic mode of learning, I will discuss the potential of animal stories in imagining sustainable relationships to nature, the potential of listening to imbue care in imaginative processes, and the significance of humor in building up imaginative spaces of learning.

**Lecture by Tami Yaguri (Ono Academic College):
“Kierkegaardian Humor’s Way to Self-Knowledge”**

Irony, comic jest and humor are existential categories in Kierkegaard's three spheres of existence. Kierkegaard humorously lures the one who wishes to believe. Tempted by humor, one is readying onto a leap of faith. The leap may fail; one can fall, crash, and be left empty-handed. Yet, avoiding humorous temptation means giving up the deep passion for eternal happiness—giving up on faith.

**PhD paper 1 by Erik Evensen (University of Agder, Kristiansand):
“*Bildung* and the Ethics of Practice – A Critique of Rationality in *Bildung*-
Centered Educational Philosophy”**

What is good pedagogical practice? In *Bildung*-centered philosophy of education, good pedagogical practice enables *formation* (*Bildung*). However, this ethos is under pressure from *instrumental* and *efficiency-based* reasoning, a threat confronting not only pedagogy, but other practices as well. Hence, beginning with the premise that *processes of formation* take place in practices which are endangered by corrupting forces of modernity, I attempt to answer the following question: *How can we maintain the integrity of formation-enabling pedagogical practices in the face of modernity’s challenges?*

My exploration draws on Dietrich Benner’s action-theoretical understanding of formation. Benner argues that formation requires an *experimental* and *embodied* type of practice – a view threatened by instrumentalist rationality and technicism. While I find Benner’s conception of formation and analysis of the practice-endangering forces of modernity compelling, his lack of a robust *ethics of practice* makes his project vulnerable, leaving the practice of pedagogy susceptible to the very forces he critiques. This is due, I shall argue, to his separation of *substantive* ethics from pedagogy, thus forces pedagogy to justify itself through *insubstantial* arguments.

I propose that Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of practice from *After Virtue* can address this gap. Practices, in MacIntyre’s view, are defined in terms of the internal goods recognized and pursued by the practitioners. This links rational agency to ethical, substantial goals *within the practice* but also points towards a *way of the good life*, suggesting practices can be understood as *vocations* and activities worth doing for its own sake. However, modern practices rely on institutions for sustainment, creating tension between the rationality and goods *internal to the practice* and efficiency-oriented mindset of the institution. This tension affects pedagogical practices within schools and other educational institutions. In emphasizing the crucial importance of the virtues of *courage*, *truthfulness*, and *justice* for maintaining practices and resisting the corrupting effects of institutions, MacIntyre challenges *Bildung*-centered educational philosophy, suggesting it must develop a more robust *ethical self-understanding* to guide pedagogical action and thinking and ensure the survival of educational practices.

**PhD paper 2 by Lone Vesterdal (University of Southern Denmark):
“Humor in Pastoral Care”**

“With the distance of humor, it is possible, together with a conversation partner, to get a glimpse of possibilities in situations where these possibilities otherwise are not seen,” writes the Danish pastor and author Hanne Pahuus in *Samtaler om Eksistensen* (Aalborg Universitets Forlag 2017, pp. 95-105). In her book on pastoral care and existential conversations, Pahuus offers a chapter on humor in pastoral care. Her experience is that humor can contribute with at least four important aspects to pastoral care:

1. introducing a relieving distance between the confidant and her/his problems,
2. introducing equality between the confidant and the pastoral care giver,
3. bringing in new perspectives on the confidant’s life,
4. bringing back power and authority to the confidant.

To my knowledge, Pahuus is the only theological writer in Denmark who writes about humor in pastoral care. In this presentation, I will thus present her writing on humor. I will also reflect on Niels Henrik Gregersen’s writing on humor in *Kritisk forum for praktisk teologi* 50 (1992). Based on the work by Pahuus and Gregersen, I will also reflect on my own experiences with humor in pastoral care and their theological aspects.

**PhD paper 3 by Igor Ahmedov (University of Tartu):
“Can we Teach the Good Life? Learning from and of the Paradox”**

Lydia B. Amir’s *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy* (2014) is an illuminating study of the place of ‘humor’ in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard. There, Amir suggests the view that, for young Kierkegaard, (1) contradiction is both comic and tragic and hence humorous, and (2) Christianity is the good life. For the later Kierkegaard, Amir argues, humor becomes the boundary of religiousness B. For Kierkegaard, humor is insufficient compared to faith in addressing the paradox, as humor does not engage with the suffering aspect of the paradox (CUP1:292). Humor has no place in the good life but is the second-best life (Amir, 2014:181). Furthermore, and more importantly, humor serves the person along his/her way through the spheres of existence.

I propose a view of education found in *Philosophical Fragments* that learns everything about the paradox from the paradox (PF:53; Tubbs, 2017:151). This view of education is based on the British philosopher of education Nigel Tubbs’ re-reading of Kierkegaard in *God, Education, and Modern Metaphysics* (2017), where God is retrieved as ‘Education’ for the modern rational mind that is offended at the paradox. Thus, the good life is understood as the life of education itself. I examine what role humor (as an example of a paradox) can play in such education and what it means for the teacher to teach in the context of such education.