Chapter XVa
Jokes and Other Aesthetic Matters

1. The Aesthetics of Humour

The Joke I Didn't Get

Kenny was the humorist in my eighth-grade class. One day he told a number of us this joke:

> **Two elephants are sitting in a bathtub. One of them says, "Pass the soap, Millicent." The other replies, "No soap—radio."**

Kenny grinned nervously at the end of the joke. The listeners smiled politely and half-heartedly. We walked away, wondering what was supposed to be funny.

I puzzled over this event a long time. Years later I was able to figure out what had been going on, after I read the following description of a classical practical joke. You and a group of others who are in on the plot find an unwitting victim. You tell the victim that pointless "no soap—radio" story. At the end, you and your confederates, as you have pre-arranged, all pretend to collapse into helpless laughter, watching the victim who, embarrassed by not getting it and not wanting to appear to be the only one who didn't, pretends to crack up too.

But Kenny didn't do it right: he had no confederates. Nobody laughed. What must have happened was that Kenny himself had previously been the victim of this practical joke. Thinking that the "no soap" story must be hilarious even though he didn't get it, he told it to us. The joke continued to be on him.

It's interesting that the tradition for playing this practical joke includes telling exactly that "no soap—radio" story, when any pointless story would do. The reason for this is, I suppose, that it's very difficult to come up with a genuinely pointless and unfunny story—more difficult

than thinking up a funny one. The "no soap—radio" story is actually a very artful and clever creation: it's a story with all the form and rhythm of a joke, but utterly lacking the funny content. Whether or not you approve of practical joking, you have to admire the skill involved in the creation of this one.

Two questions are suggested here. One is this: what, really, is joke form? Everyone who has heard jokes told badly knows that, to be funny, jokes need to have exactly the right structure and need to be told exactly right. This one has the form exactly right, and Kenny was a master of joke execution. But form and execution aren't sufficient to make something funny. The second, and more difficult question, is this: why is some content funny?

Prison Humour

Here's a joke about jokes that illustrates these questions.

> **A man is spending the first day of his sentence in prison. He is at lunch in the huge prison dining hall; all the inmates are quietly eating. Suddenly one inmate shouts out, "Sixty-three!" and everyone laughs. A few minutes later, another inmate yells, "Three hundred and four!" and everyone laughs again.**
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> **The new arrival is puzzled. "What's going on?" he asks the man sitting next to him.**
>
> **His neighbour replies: "We've all been together so long that we've heard each other's jokes over and over again, and we have all the jokes memorized. To save effort, we've given each joke a number, so all we have to do to tell one of these jokes is to give its number."**
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> **"Hey, that's a good idea," says the new arrival. "I think I'll try telling one." He shouts, "Ninety-seven!" Silence. Nobody even smiles. "What did I do wrong?" he asks his neighbour.**
>
> **The neighbour replies, "Well, some people just don't know how to tell a joke."**

There is, by the way, an entire genre of jokes about jokes. (They're sometimes called *metajokes*.) Here are some more:

> A passenger in a train was watching the puzzling behaviour of the old man across the aisle: he'd mumble a few words to himself, then smile, then raise his hand and stop talking; then repeat the sequence, then do it again, over and over, for an hour.
>
> Finally the passenger became overcome with curiosity, and went across the aisle. "Excuse me," he said, "but I couldn't help noticing what you were doing. Is something wrong?"

The old man replied, "No, everything's fine. When I take a long train trip I tell myself jokes to keep myself from getting bored, and that's why I was smiling."

"But why did you keep raising your arm?"

"That's to interrupt myself because I've already heard that joke."

A clown, a nun, and a duck walk into a bar. The bartender says, "What is this? Some sort of a joke?"

This last one is a lawyer meta-joke. It's from a speech given at a law school by Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court William Rehnquist:

> I've often started off with a lawyer joke, a complete caricature of a lawyer who's been nasty, greedy and unethical. But I've stopped that practice. I gradually realized that the lawyers in the audience didn't think the jokes were funny and the non-lawyers didn't know they were jokes.[1]

Laughter Is the Best Medicine

> "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."—E.B. White[2]

White speaks the truth. But when there's something to analyze, you can't stop philosophers from trying.

Immanuel Kant is among the most ponderous of philosophical writers, but even his writing contains a few jokes (presented in connection with his theorizing on humour). This is one:

> The heir of a rich relative wants to arrange for him a very solemn funeral service, but complains that things are not quite working out: for (he says) the more money I give my mourners to look grieved, the more cheerful they look.

Another Kantian joke is the story of

> the grief of some merchant who, during his return trip from India to Europe, with all his fortune in merchandise, was forced by a heavy storm to throw everything overboard,

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1 Quoted in Marc Galanter, *Lowering the Bar: Lawyer Jokes and Legal Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

2 Quoted in Robert Byrne, *1,911 Best Things Anybody Ever Said* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988), p. 383.

> **and whose grief was such that it made his *wig* turn grey that very night. [Kant's—or his translator's—italics]**

Kant remarks that the second joke "will make us laugh," and that the first "evokes ringing laughter in us." Whenever you read philosophy, you must ask yourself whether what the philosopher says is true.

Kant theorizes that "Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing." He gives a physiological explanation of how laughter results, and consequently of why we enjoy humour:

> **For if we assume that all our thoughts are, in addition, in a harmonious connection with some agitation in the body's organs, then we can pretty well grasp how, as the mind suddenly shifts alternately from one position to another in order to contemplate its object, there might be a corresponding alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic parts of our intestines that is communicated to the diaphragm.... The lungs, meanwhile, rapidly and intermittently expel air, and so give rise to an agitation that is conducive to our health. It is this agitation alone, and not what goes on in the mind, that is the actual cause of our gratification in a thought [by] which [we] basically present nothing.[1]**

The well-known American psychologist Michael Gassaniga relays this hypothesis about Kant:

> **"... a young French doctor ... wanted to talk about Immanuel Kant's brain lesion. His what? Dr. Jean-Christophe Marchand had been reading about Kant's life and medical history. Until Kant reached the age of forty-seven or so, his writings were straight-forward and, believe it or not, clear. After this age, Kant began to write his great philosophical works, which emphasize that innate cognitive structures exist independent of emotions. Nearly impossible to read, his works make Jean Piaget's 'writing' seem lucid. But Marchand's points are tantalizing. Kant began to complain of headaches and other maladies and gradually lost vision in his left eye. Dr. Marchand deduced that Kant had a left prefrontal lobe tumor—growing slowly but there. Damage to this area affects language ability and the ability of our emotional system to cue us toward good cognitive strategies. Is it possible that all those Kantians have saluted a man who was writing nonsense—a philosophy for those who do not have a normal cognitive and emotional system?"[2]**

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1 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §54. Translated as *Critique of Judgement* by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

2 *The Mind's Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 120.

The great American humorist Robert Benchley may have been aware of this low-point in Kant's philosophical writing when he inserted this footnote in his parody of an academic analysis of humor: "Schwantzleben, in his work *Humor After Death*, ... says 'All laughter is a muscular rigidity spasmodically relieved by involuntary twitching. It can be induced by the application of electricity as well as by a so-called "joke."'"[1]

(Benchley is quoted as remarking, "Defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people.")

Kant is not the only one with theories about what makes something funny. A 1990 issue of *The Realist* carries a report of a conference on popular culture at which a paper was given titled "The Illusion of Ontotheological Reality in the Three Stooges." According to this article, none of the Stooges graduated from high school; but Moe's daughter, who spoke at the conference, reported that her father frequently expressed his concern about the ensemble's ability to create the illusion of ontotheological reality.[2]

(No, I don't know what "ontotheological reality" means either.)

Not Funny

Here's a Jewish joke, in the form of a riddle.

Q: Who are the three cowboys in Adon Olam?
A: Billy Reysheet, Billy Tachleet, and Kid Ruchi.

Ha ha! Cowboys! Get it? Neither did I. I picked this joke precisely because in order to get it you'd have to have some fairly specialized knowledge. You'd need to be familiar with the Jewish hymn "Adon Olam." The Hebrew words of the hymn mean

Master of the World who was king,
before any form was created.
At the time when He made all through His will,
then His name was called 'King.'
And after all is gone,
He, the Awesome One, will reign alone.

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1 "Why We Laugh—or Do We?" in *The New Yorker*, 1937; reprinted in *The Benchley Roundup* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1983).
2 Robert Myers, "Pop Goes the Culture!" *The Realist* No. 113 (Summer 1990): 5–6. <http://www.ep.tc/realist/113/05.html>.

And He was, and He is,
and He will be in splendor ...

and so on—nothing whatever to do with cowboys. The joke depends on the fact that the Hebrew words include these phrases:

be-li rei-shit
be-li tach-lit
kid ru-chi

which more or less sound like names in English beginning with "Billy" or "Kid," which are imagined to be cowboy names. So the joke depends on puns on those Hebrew phrases, together, I expect, with the massive incongruity of associating cowboys with the text of this hymn.

Whew! There's the whole explanation! Now do you think the joke is funny?

No.

Neither do I. I suspect that the joke is not exactly fabulously hilarious anyway, even to people who know all about the Hebrew hymn. But whatever small humour is in it is certainly killed when it's given a tedious explanation after having been told.

So two facts about the humour of jokes have been illustrated here: (1) Getting some jokes depends on the hearer's having background knowledge. (2) Providing the background knowledge after telling the joke does not convert it into something funny.

In his wonderful book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*,[1] Ted Cohen argues that a major function of humour is to establish a communal bond between the teller and the tellee: they both have the specialized background knowledge already.

A Joke for Babies

Notwithstanding all this, it's clear that there is some humour that doesn't depend on specialized background knowledge. Consider the case of Anna's giggles. Anna Martin is a granddaughter of mine, so she is, of course, exceedingly intelligent and precocious, but for the first few months of her life, her specialized knowledge of things wasn't exactly encyclopedic. Were she able to talk then, she would need only two words to express her reactions to the

1 Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

external world: "Huh??" and "Food!!" But at ten weeks, she started laughing at things. The joke most reliably able to crack her up was when her mother opened her eyes wide and made kissy noises. (Just try to explain to me what's funny about *that*.)

The incredibly early arrival—before almost every other complicated capacity—of a sense of humour in babies appears to show just how basic it is to us humans.

The Koestler/Pinker Theory of Jokes

THE BEST ACCOUNT OF The Funny I've seen is due to the writer Arthur Koestler, as reported and refined by the psychologist Steven Pinker.[1] According to the Koestler/Pinker theory, there are three ingredients of humour: *anomaly*, *resolution*, and *indignity*. The anomaly is a matter of bumping one train of thought against an event or statement that makes no sense in the context of what came before. The resolution of this anomaly occurs when one shifts to a different frame of reference in which this does make sense. And within that new frame, someone's dignity has been downgraded. One of Pinker's examples is this often-told story:

> **Lady Astor said to Winston Churchill, "If you were my husband, I'd put poison in your tea." He replied, "If you were my wife, I'd drink it."**

Pinker's analysis, in terms of the three ingredients:

> **The response is anomalous in the frame of reference of murder, because people resist being murdered. The anomaly is resolved by switching to the frame of reference of suicide, in which death is welcomed as an escape from misery. In that frame Lady Astor is the cause of marital misery, an ignominious role.[2]**

Maybe the elements of anomaly and resolution are something like what Kant had in mind when he said that laughter arises when "a tense expectation is transformed into nothing." Even if all humour is the result of a surprising shift of frame, it's pretty clear that not every surprising shift of frame is funny. In the Greek tragedy, this sort of shift occurs when Oedipus discovers that a man he killed long ago was actually his father, and that the woman he's now married to is

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1 Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Dell, 1964); Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 545–54.

2 Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, p. 550.

actually his mother. Oedipus does not collapse in giggles as a result. Nobody finds this play a laugh-riot.[1]

There is some agreement among those who have thought about humour that it characteristically inflicts an indignity. Aristotle wrote, "Wit is educated insolence."[2] The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes thought that whenever we joke we affirm our supposed superiority to others by making fun of them. George Orwell quipped, "The aim of a joke is not to degrade the human being but to remind him that he is already degraded."[3]

Something like a confirmation of this view is provided by recent trends. Nowadays there is, in many contexts, zero tolerance of anything that offends, or might offend, anybody, and this has meant a spectacular decline in telling jokes.

> **Q: How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?**
> **A: That isn't funny.**

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: The Koestler/Pinker account seems to work pretty well for the Churchill joke; how well does it account for other jokes? Test these ideas on your favourite jokes. No doubt some of them degrade, but do they all?

Whatever your theory of The Funny, the questions remain: Why do we joke? Why do we enjoy humour? What is humour for? Pinker has some interesting ideas about this that appear to be related to Cohen's claim that humour establishes a bond. Pinker thinks that it functions to defuse aggression and status hierarchies, and thus to establish friendly relations.

Pinker's and Cohen's books, by the way, are noteworthy exceptions to the rule that theorists of humour write ponderous books with nothing funny in them at all. Both books are full of giggles.

2. What's So Good about Art?

I Loved That Movie! I Cried the Whole Time!

The theory of humour is tucked into a corner of that branch of philosophy called philosophical aesthetics. A more major concern of philosophical aesthetics is explaining why we like to experience art.

The experience of art is really quite peculiar:

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1 Nevertheless, as Martin Boyne pointed out to me, arguably the cathartic effects of tragedy and comedy are very similar, and Kant's description might strangely apply here too.

2 *Rhetoric* II.

3 Sonia Orwell et al., eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters*: Vol. 3 (Boston: Godine, 2000), p. 295.

> **It seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end.... The whole art of the poet is employed in rousing and supporting the compassion and indignation, the anxiety and resentment of his audience. They are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, swollen with the tenderest sympathy and compassion.**[1]

Some art is quite grotesque, brutal, ugly, or disturbing. Nevertheless people *want* to experience it—they *enjoy* it. How can that be? People who watch horror movies sometimes have intense feelings of terror. Other movies are effectively designed to reduce the whole audience to uncontrollable tears. Terror and sadness are not the sorts of emotions most of us enjoy. We'd go out of our way to avoid them. But we pay to have these emotions created by art. What's going on here?

One suggestion that has been made is that the sort of terror we feel at a horror movie isn't *real* terror. It's just in some ways similar to real terror. Similarly, the revulsion we feel at some particularly bloody movie scene isn't the same feeling as we'd get if we came across a real and horrible automobile accident.

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: Do you enjoy movie-terror and movie-sadness? Why? Are these the same as real terror and sadness? If so, then why does anyone enjoy them? If not, then what's the difference? Here's another question. Fear of something subsides when you learn that what you're afraid of doesn't exist; but you can feel afraid of movie-monsters that you know perfectly well don't exist. So is this real fear?

FOR FURTHER READING: One influential theory of emotions toward fiction is due to Kendall Walton; see his *Mimesis as Make-believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

How Do You Like Them Apples?

The central questions in philosophical aesthetics are, of course, "What makes something a work of art?" and "What makes something a *good* work of art?" (Sometimes these are taken to be the same question. When you say, "Now, that's *art*!" you probably mean, "Now that's a *good* work of art!")

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1 David Hume, "Of Tragedy," in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose (London: Longman, Green, 1875).

A good work of art is one that's beautiful. Right?

Well, maybe not. Read some book or movie reviews; look at what's written by critics of music or architecture; listen (if you can bear to) to what those pompous and mannered people who talk too loudly in art galleries say to one another. "Beauty" is a word that's almost never used. (Does that mean that beauty is irrelevant to the worth of a work of art?)

In any case, this answer isn't very helpful because it immediately raises a second question: What makes something beautiful? It seems that this depends on the kind of thing you're talking about. For some kinds of things, the answer is fairly clear. Suppose, for example, that you are presented with a bushel of apples, and you're asked to sort out the most beautiful ones (just to look at, not to eat). What characteristics do you look for? The large and symmetrical ones are probably more beautiful than the small and lumpy ones. Bright colour and shine are probably also plusses. The ones that contain rotten bits or worm holes are out. A nice curved stem, perhaps with a single perfect leaf attached, helps.

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: Okay, fine, but what characteristics make for a beautiful painting? Are there any characteristics that in general make for beauty in painting? Or—even less likely—that make for beauty in art in general?

The Human Faux Pas Performance Art Collective is a Vancouver-based company of avant-garde artists. One of their performances consists of unintelligible happenings inside a huge inflated plastic cube. A poster for this event includes this review by David Wisdom of the CBC: "Whatever this is, it doesn't get any better." This is a good joke. "It doesn't get any better" means "it's the best of that sort of thing," but Wisdom indicates he hasn't any idea what sort of thing it is. And the suggestion above was that all evaluation of any particular thing has to be evaluation of it *as* a certain kind of thing.

But there are even problems with apples: you and I might sort the same bushel quite differently. You might put the ones that are uniformly red into the "most beautiful" pile, while I might want to put the ones that have some green parts on that pile. Who is right? Is *either* of us right?

We're tempted to say that there is no "correct" way to sort the apples—it depends on who is doing the sorting. You like the looks of the uniformly red ones, I like the two-toned ones, and that's all there is to say about it. Maybe we could even find someone who makes her "most beautiful" pile out of the small, dull-coloured, wormy, bruised ones. She just likes the way they look. Maybe beauty—even in apples—is only in the eye of the beholder.

But maybe not. People who put together those expensive fruit baskets for sale as gifts pick the most beautiful apples for their baskets—they're the pros at apple aesthetics. Other pros work in apple packing houses, grading the apples, partly on the basis of aesthetics, for sale in different categories, at different prices; the more expensive ones are the more beautiful ones. These pros have know-how we ordinary apple-eaters don't. They have trained apple-perceptions. So perhaps you should trust them to pick the ones that are genuinely beautiful, even if you can't see it.

On the other hand, maybe all they're doing is sorting out the apples that will appeal to most people. Maybe their expertise is not in recognizing genuine apple beauty; maybe it's just in recognizing which apples they can sell at the highest prices. They're pros in apple marketing, not in apple aesthetics.

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: So does it really come down to just a matter of what you like, after all?

We've had some troubles deciding about the "objectivity" of judgement about the beauty of apples, and the same sort of considerations seem to transfer, more or less, to questions about the "objectivity" of judgement about art. It's sometimes thought that in art, too, it really does come down to just a matter of what you like.

Yummy Yummy?

Here's another problem. apple-critics look for characteristics that will appeal most to most people. But art critics don't. Merely in terms of general appeal, Beethoven's relatively obscure Second Symphony is beaten hands down by "Yummy Yummy Yummy (I Got Love in My Tummy)," though you couldn't find a single music critic who thinks that "Yummy" is better than Beethoven's Second. For every person who really enjoys looking at Vermeer paintings, you might easily find several thousand who much prefer toreadors painted on black velvet.

How about those people who prefer those toreador paintings. Who has the right to say their taste is terrible?

I do.

Anyway, next time you're in an art museum or at a symphony concert, concentrate on the audience rather than on the art. Are they enjoying themselves, or are they suffering through a boring experience they think they ought to like but don't? Some people do show signs of enjoyment, but it could be that many of them have been brainwashed into thinking that there's something wonderful there.

Le Bateau, a painting by Henri Matisse showing a sailboat and summer clouds and their reflections on the water, was accidentally hung upside down in New York's Museum of Modern Art between October 17 and December 3, 1961. An estimated 116,000 visitors passed through during that period, but nobody noticed. At last it was brought to the museum's attention by the artist's son.[1]

"Abstract art: a product of the untalented sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered."—Al Capp[2]

If you think that that Beethoven symphony really, *objectively* beats "Yummy," just try convincing someone who disagrees. You might be able to bully or shame them into admitting you're right, or even into pretending to prefer Beethoven, but it's not at all obvious that there are rational considerations to be brought to bear to convince someone genuinely.

Bach Fights Crime

A newspaper article reports that a street corner in West Palm Beach was a favourite hangout for loiterers, sometimes as many as two hundred at a time, many of them up to no good: the immediate area was notorious for drug deals, shootings, and thefts. Police mounted a set of speakers on an abandoned building on the corner, and started playing Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven twenty-four hours a day. The result was an enormous decrease in loiterers and a big decrease in neighbourhood crime.[3]

What's relevant to us is just how much those people react to "good" music. It's not merely that they prefer other kinds. It's that they'd move their normal activities elsewhere just to avoid hearing it.

Arguing with the CBC

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada's public broadcaster, used the opposite tactic to solve the opposite problem. One of their networks was playing a lot of classical music, but this attracted a small and aged listening audience. No doubt as the result of pressure from a Conservative government that feels that using public money for high culture is suspiciously communistic, they decided they wanted to scare away those listeners and attract some

1 Reported by Stephen Pile, *The Book of Heroic Failures* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).
2 Quoted in Jon Winokur, *The Portable Curmudgeon* (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 10.
3 "Classical music keeps criminals away from Florida street corner," *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto] July 9, 2001: A7.

young people instead, so they drastically reduced the amount of classical music, substituting mostly pop. It's clear that this was the right strategy. The few of us that like classical music have turned off the radio (or died of old age). I had plenty of nasty things to say to the CBC about this change, but what I didn't have was a good argument about why they did the wrong thing. Do you?

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: If the majority of people are indifferent, at best, to classical music, how can it be "good"? I'm not suggesting it isn't good; in fact, this music ranks among the most important things in my life. I'm asking what makes my view correct, and the majority view wrong.

One answer you might consider is that what makes music good has nothing to do with whether anyone enjoys it, but is a matter of the objective properties of the music itself. This would make the goodness of a piece of music a completely "objective" property, like the weight of a rock. The fact that Rock A weighs more than Rock B has absolutely nothing to do with Rock A's feeling heavier to anyone. It would still weigh more even if it (for some reason) felt lighter to everyone, or if nobody ever picked it up—even if there were no humans at all. But could we imagine that Beethoven's Second would still be better than "Yummy Yummy Yummy," even though most people prefer to listen to "Yummy"? Or suppose nobody ever heard either of them; would the Beethoven still be better? How about if there weren't any humans at all, and the sheet-music for the two just appeared by accident because of spots of mildew on tree bark?

If the idea that the value of a piece of music is a completely objective matter doesn't seem right to you, then are we stuck with the notion that the preference of the majority is the only test for its value? Or is there another possibility?

Critical Disagreement

Now that certain composers have achieved the status of certified immortal geniuses, you can hardly find anyone who has a bad word to say about them or their compositions. But earlier on, there were plenty of detractors. Some samples:

> **"The Scherzo [of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony] is insufferably long-winded. The Finale is ... dull and ugly.... Oh, the pages of stupid and hopelessly vulgar music! The unspeakable cheapness of the chief tune."—Philip Hale, *Musical Record*, Boston, June 1, 1899**

> **“The First Symphony of Brahms seemed to us ... hard and uninspired.... It is mathematical music evolved with difficulty from an unimaginative brain.... Noisy, ungraceful, confusing and unattractive example of dry pedantry.”—Boston *Gazette*, January 24, 1878**

> **“Liszt is a mere commonplace person, with his hair on end—a snob out of Bedlam. He writes the ugliest music extant.”—*Dramatic and Musical Review*, London, January 7, 1843**

> **“The drooling and emasculated simplicity of Gustav Mahler!”—*Musical Courier*, New York, November 9, 1904**

> **“An affectation of originality, a superficial knowledge of the art, an absence of true expression, and an infelicitous disdain of form have characterized every work of Robert Schumann....”—H.F. Chorley, *Musical World*, London, April 9, 1853**

> **“I played over the music of that scoundrel Brahms. What a giftless bastard! It annoys me that this self-inflated mediocrity is hailed as a genius. Why, in comparison with him, Raff is a genius.”—Tchaikovsky’s diary, October 9, 1886**

> **“We don’t like their sound. Groups of guitars are on the way out.”—Decca Recording Company when turning down the Beatles in 1962 (The group was also turned down by Pye, Columbia, and HMV)[1]**

The degree of disagreement by art critics (at first, before accepted wisdom becomes solidified) is astounding. It makes you wonder about the validity of the enterprise of art criticism. Just imagine what we’d say about engineering if experts disagreed to that extent about whether a bridge would stand up or fall down!

Maybe we gradually come to know better about art as time goes on. But maybe, instead, there aren’t any facts to know about, involved in judgements of how good a work of art is.

Philosophers on Art

That poll of philosophers we’ve been mentioning (details in Chapter 2, p. 47) showed 41 per cent of respondents were inclined to think that artistic value was an objective matter, and 34 per cent that it was subjective.

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1 The first five of these quotations are from an amazing collection of excerpts from bad reviews of composers—a whole book-full!—from the past 200 years: *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven’s Time*, by Nicolas Slonimsky (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1972). The last two are reported by Pile, *The Book of Heroic Failures*.

Sing Along with Ludwig

The examples we looked at above are a small sample of a familiar phenomenon in the history of music (and art in general): when something is produced that's highly original, that breaks new ground, almost nobody understands it (or likes it). But after a while, the iconoclastic becomes the conventional, and it starts being widely appreciated.

But peculiarly this hasn't happened (yet) with some twentieth-century musical forms. What's called "atonal" music sounds just as meaningless to most people now as it did when it was first introduced by the Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg and others.[1] But that introduction was a hundred years ago, so it seems to be about time for the public to come around. Maybe the stuff really is meaningless.

Anyway, at around the same time, another Austrian was working on one of his ground-breaking masterpieces: Ludwig Wittgenstein finished his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921. Wittgenstein's philosophy is also hard to understand. He wrote in a peculiar, indirect, non-linear form, and there are many competing interpretations of what he really must have meant. As a student in Cambridge (the legend goes), he showed Bertrand Russell a paper he had written, saying that if Russell thought he had no talent for philosophy, he'd become a hairdresser instead. Russell looked over the paper and said to Wittgenstein, "Just take a little off the top and shape the sides." Later, however, Russell came to think that Wittgenstein's work was hugely important and wrote an enthusiastic introduction for the English translation of the *Tractatus*, talking about its great philosophical achievements.[2] But Wittgenstein told Russell that he had the *Tractatus* all wrong.

So what's the connection? It's this. In 2007, a musical piece for soprano and various "musical devices" was premiered in Vienna. The music, by Austrian composer Baldwin Sulzer, was in the tradition of unintelligible modernism. The words were entirely taken from the *Tractatus*.

This is, in a way, not a surprise. Wittgenstein's words have for decades held an attraction for composers and other artists, representing for them a kind of obscure profundity. (The first sentence in the *Tractatus* is "The world is everything that is the case." The last is "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence." Deep, eh?) It's clear, however, that few artists have a clue what Wittgenstein is talking about. Wittgensteinian scholars mostly agree with David Pears's claim that "Wittgenstein is a philosopher's philosopher and his writing can hardly

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1 Schönberg was writing atonal music as early as 1908; he was also a pioneer in the development of the "twelve-tone" style (beginning in around 1920); this differs in structure but sounds very much the same.

2 "Mr Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, whether or not it prove to give the ultimate truth on the matters with which it deals, certainly deserves, by its breadth and scope and profundity, to be considered an important event in the philosophical world." Given Russell's British aversion to effusion, this counts as a rave review.

be understood by anyone without previous acquaintance with the work of his predecessors and contemporaries."[1] (But this doesn't imply that someone *with* that previous acquaintance can understand it.[2])

So we can only imagine what the composer, performer, and audience make out of the words to this opera (which, according to some reviews, was performed with very clear diction, so that everyone could tell what was being said).

Reviews of this performance, in German, are available on the Internet.[3] I've had occasion earlier in this book to share my enjoyment of computer translations, which turn originals into gobbledygook barely hinting at what was originally meant. It seems quite appropriate, in this case, to present some bits from Google's mysterious, barely communicating translation of these reviews into something like English:

> **Baldwin Sulzer approaching Wittgenstein's early philosophical ascetic type of border text cunning in. He catapulted the text by recitative chant, Gregorian chant, baroque Passion reporting and "pierrotscher" Wortgestik alternates between 'in a zone, your own perception between text and music can swing open and the.**
>
> **After a while it has its own text-receiving conceivability-barrel full and you completely forfeit Sulzer monodic force: Man finds himself in an archaic twilight, in which the composer Wittgenstein to a walk-forest trees can be set.**

How to Write Bad Tunes

MUSICAL CREATION, LIKE ARTISTIC creation in general, seems to be a mystery to us. We talk about inspiration—a magical facility the musician has of creating something out of nothing. How is it done? Nobody can say, right?

> **"Music is a difficult subject—anybody's music.... Its creation is a mystery. There are mathematical principles to guide its construction, but no mere knowledge of these can produce the emotional eloquence some music attains. We are made sad or happy, romantic, thoughtful, disturbed or peaceful by someone else's singing heart. To me this is a most exciting and inexplicable phenomenon. I should hate to be a music critic with the task of telling people what is good or bad in a musical composition or what are its component elements. One might as**

1 "Mill to Wittgenstein," by David Pears and Anthony Kenny (the Preface mentions that Pears wrote the portion of this article about Wittgenstein) in Kenny, ed., *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 272.

2 "No one can seriously claim to understand clearly what the *Tractatus* says about anything."—J. Albert Coffa, *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap: To the Vienna Station* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 405, n. 4.

3 <http://www.ampammer.de/wittgenstein_presse.htm>.

well try to explain to a group of children at the seaside the chemistry of salt water and sand, and the source of the sunlight or the breeze that romps with them along the shore.... What music can sometimes do to us is quite beyond the ken and lingo of academicians."—Oscar Hammerstein II[1]

Well, not *quite* beyond. Textbooks on composition technique give some very good rules for making a good melody. Here are some of them:

- Nearly all notes in the melody are to be chosen from the seven-note scale upon which the melody is based. When any of the remaining five chromatic notes are used, they generally should appear in positions that are unaccented and unemphasized so as not to undermine the prevailing harmony.
- Most of a melody's notes should be adjacent scale notes. Jumps should be few, and large jumps rare.
- To avoid monotony, individual notes should not be repeated too much, particularly at emphasized positions in a melody.
- A melody should have only one instance of its highest tone, and preferably also of its lowest tone.
- Jumps should always land on one of the seven scale tones, not on one of the five chromatic tones.

Of course, this list is not a recipe for writing good tunes—you can write ones following these rules and the other rules found in composition textbooks and still come out with a bad one. And there are a few tunes that everyone thinks are good that violate a rule or two on these lists. But nevertheless, these rules are very good ones. Studies of hundreds of actual successful melodies have confirmed the validity of the list of generally accepted rules for composition that the ones I've given above are taken from. Think of some of your favourite tunes and note how they follow the rules I've given. Melodies that break some of these rules are likely to be awkward or ugly.

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: Okay, so there are rules for distinguishing good and bad tunes. But we surely don't consciously *use* these rules for evaluating a tune. For example, when you judge (as almost everyone does) that the Beatles' song "Eleanor Rigby" has a great melody, you surely don't reason to yourself that there's only one instance of its highest tone (on the word 'do' in "where do they all come from?"). Does this show that these "rules" for judging good tunes aren't really the ones we use? In fact, you don't apply any rules when you hear and judge

1 Foreword in *Rodgers and Hart Song Book*, by Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951).

that song. You just hear it and react, "Wow, what a great song!" and that's all there is to it. Does this show that there aren't any rules at all?

> This set of rules describes remarkably well what tunes we judge bad and good. So it seems to follow that, in some sense, our brain is subconsciously applying these rules in making its judgements, even though we're not aware of them.

FOR FURTHER READING: The list of rules for good tunes is taken from a longer one in *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination*, by Robert Jourdain (New York: Avon, 1998), pp. 85–86. Jourdain's book is full of interesting information and speculation about how and why music works.

That Old X from Place B

Even if there aren't rules that will automatically produce good (or even middling) art, it's clear that, in some art forms anyway, there are rules that you have to follow—that are necessary even though not sufficient. Certain art forms have a standard form you've got to stick your creativity into. Here's an illustration of standard form; it's a template for limericks which has been circulating around the Internet.

> There once was an X from place B,
> That satisfied predicate P,
> He or she did thing A,
> In an adjective way,
> Resulting in circumstance C.

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: Limericks are lightweight art, not the kind of thing that's respected by highbrow art-lovers. But serious art—the kind you hated when it was forced on you in high school, and maybe, just maybe, you came to like later—has its formal requirements too. Maybe you had to learn, at some point, what the form of a sonnet had to be. (Don't worry, I'm not going to drop any of those in here.) Anyway, you should have a look at examples of your favourite kind of art, and notice that it has some general formal requirements: that most or all the examples have several things in common, in terms of shape or content or something. The interesting question is: why? What is there about art that fits into a recognizable form that's appealing?

"My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit."—Igor Stravinsky[1]

Random Creativity

Well, okay, let's admit that rule-following (whether conscious or not) is an important part of good art creation. But this leaves out a really important feature of art: the *creation* of these tunes in the first place.

It has often been said that real creativity has nothing to do with rules at all.

"There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."—W. Somerset Maugham

"Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead."—Gene Fowler[2]

Maybe we got a hint about what creativity involves when we looked at RACTER, the "creative" computer, back in Chapter X in the section called "Artificial Insanity."

In 1984, William Chamberlain, the co-author of RACTER, published a book called *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed*.[3] Here's an excerpt:

At all events my own essays and dissertations about love and its endless pain and perpetual pleasure will be known and understood by all of you who read this and talk or sing or chant about it to your worried friends or nervous enemies. Love is the question and the subject of this essay. We will commence with a question: does steak love lettuce? This question is implacably hard and inevitably difficult to answer. Here is a question: does an electron love a proton, or does it love a neutron? Here is a question: does a man love a woman or, to be specific and to be precise, does Bill love Diane? The interesting and critical response to this question is: no! He is obsessed and infatuated with her. He is loony and crazy about her. That is not the love of steak and lettuce, of electron and proton and neutron. This dissertation will

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1 *The Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947).

2 Both quotations given by Byrne, pp. 368, 46.

3 New York: Warner Books.

show that the love of a man and a woman is not the love of steak and lettuce. Love is interesting to me and fascinating to you but it is painful to Bill and Diane. That is love!

The introduction claims, "With the exception of this introduction, the writing in this book was all done by computer," but it's clear that a lot of modification of RACTER's databases was necessary to produce the text of this book, and that some of the wackiness in the book is the result of deliberate wackiness in the databases that the author constructed and fed to RACTER. In any case, a substantial portion of the creativity we see in the product is the result of RACTER's random processes: things are strung together by processes that keep things more or less grammatical, and at least slightly relevant, but with wild leaps of sense.

Compare RACTER's output with this passage, written by the man often considered the father of postmodern prose, Donald Barthelme:

Thinking of my friend Max who looks like white bread. A brisk bout with my head in a wire cage. The Slash Waltz from "The Mark of Zorro." And in the shower a ten for Max, because his were the best two out of three. He put it in his lacy shoe. With his watch and his application to the Colorado School of Mines.[1]

There's a strong resemblance in these two products, though at first glance, the processes of construction used by the two authors seem quite different. Barthelme considered each word very carefully and chose the one he judged exactly right for his purposes, while RACTER's choices were essentially random and senseless (though governed by certain rules that kept it from churning out total nonsense).

Barthelme's aims in choosing his words obviously include the avoidance of good clear literal sense, and the production of a strongly randomized surprising product (which, however, makes *near*-sense). How does he do this? We might imagine that he has somehow trained his imagination to spew out completely random strings of ideas, and that from them he discards the small number that make good sense and the large number of equally unacceptable ones that make no sense at all. It's the randomness of the initial production that results in the surprising creativity.

Maybe this also explains how people create good tunes: they have some sort of randomizing ability in their brains that makes a huge number of tunes—bad ones and good ones—just pop into their heads. *Then* they apply the rules for what makes a good tune and what makes a bad one, and they throw away all the bad ones.

But this couldn't be exactly the way creativity works, because there are far too many random

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1 "Can We Talk," originally published in *The New Yorker*, reprinted in a collection of Barthelme's pieces called *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 101. You can find a lot of Barthelme on the web; try: <http://www.eskimo.com/~jessamyn/barth/>.

nonsense sentences (or bad melodies) to sort through in order to find just one funny near-sense sentence (or one good tune). Anyone who worked that way would be deluged with a steady stream of useless textual or musical nonsense ages before a good bit showed up.

To see this, consider that a random string of notes would be extremely unlikely to satisfy all those rules for good tunes listed above, and there are, as I said, several more rules to be added to this list. Try the random-music-generating program at

http://tones.wolfram.com/generate/

You can generate tunes till the cows come home and never get one that's anywhere near good. Mere random generation followed by systematic culling couldn't be how good tunes are created.

In the search for new forms of music, some avant-garde composers have turned to randomness. It's clear, of course, that the object here is not to create good tunes, and nobody pretends that there's much of an audience for this kind of music. John Cage was a leading practitioner of this musical form, sometimes called *aleatoric music* (*alea* means "dice game" in Latin). One of his better known compositions, *Imaginary Landscape no.4* (1951), is written for twelve radios and twenty-four performers who twiddle the tuning and volume dials of the radios according to minutely detailed instructions in the score, but what the audience hears is whatever happens to be broadcast at that point on the dial—if anything—at the time.

Here is an account of a performance of Cage's opera *Europera*:

> **It consists of a random assortment of sixteen-bar swaths taken from older, out-of-copyright operas. Exits, entrances, all aspects of the composition have been determined by chance throws of the sacred I Ching [an ancient Chinese method of divination involving flipping coins or dividing up plant stalks]. As one diva arrives on stage by jeep, another leaves in the belly of a giant fish. Arias are sung from inside bathtubs, coffins, garbage pails. One enterprising singer wields a fishing pole at the front of the stage, hoisting her catch from the orchestra pit. This goes unnoticed by the players, who sit on a hydraulic platform that rises and falls unpredictably. In fact, most of the scenery is continuously shifting in and out, up and down. Lest the audience doze off, at the denouement a zeppelin is launched above the stalls.**[1]

Cage's most famous piece, however, is titled *4'33"*. It's four minutes and thirty-three seconds of complete silence. The UK orchestral premiere of this work took place in January 2004, when a version of the piece scored for full orchestra was performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra,

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1 Jourdain, p. 236–37.

conducted by Lawrence Foster. At the end of the performance, the audience applauded enthusiastically as Foster bowed, asked the orchestra to rise, shook hands with the concert-master, left the stage and returned for two curtain-calls. You can see (and hear?) this performance on YouTube.[1]

"I have nothing to say and I'm saying it."—John Cage

Portrait of the Artist as an Unintelligible Young Man

Here's a small sample of the kind of thing you'll find in hundreds of pages of James Joyce's famous book *Ulysses*:

heave under embon *senorita* young eyes Mulvey plump years dreams return

Joyce's writing isn't random; it's extremely carefully calculated. The problem is that what it's meant to communicate is so obscure that a minor army of English literature professors has been attempting to decode it, bit by bit, ever since it was published in 1922. For all that passages like the one quoted mean to the average reader, it might as well be random. Yet everyone agrees that *Ulysses* is among the greatest literary works of the twentieth century.

It turns out, by the way, that the original edition of *Ulysses* had thousands of errors in it, the result of its meaninglessness to typesetters and Joyce's failing eyesight and faulty memory. The passage above omitted ten words from Joyce's original. The 1986 edition, which made about five thousand corrections, substitutes

heave under embon *senorita* young eyes Mulvey plump bubs me breadvan Winkle red slippers she rusty sleep wander years of dreams return

Isn't that better?

My newspaper reports a performance by Berlin artist Wolfgang Flatz. While he hung naked from a crane accompanied by recorded music and mooing, a dead cow stuffed with fireworks was dropped ninety metres from a helicopter, exploding on impact with the ground. A thirteen-year-old animal lover, determined to stop Flatz's performances, took him to court, arguing that she would suffer a "spiritual shock" if she saw the dropping exploding cow. I

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUJagb7hL0E>.

liked this story because it combined two familiar features of our age: the absurd artwork and the absurd lawsuit. I also enjoyed the neatness and clarity of the outcome of the lawsuit: the court rejected the animal lover's plea, saying she did not have to watch.[1]

And, speaking of the intersection of the legal and the artistic: Marimba Jones is a playwright reported as "quietly revolutionizing the theatre community with her exploration of concepts of plagiarism in modern drama." Her play *There She Goes Again* is a word-for-word retelling of Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* in lower-case letters.[2]

The Brillo Box as Philosophy

The Brillo Box is a groundbreaking 1964 work of art by Andy Warhol. It's an extremely realistic exact replica of a carton of Brillo soap pads, made out of painted plywood.

The reaction that most people have to this work of art is, "Huh?" Arthur Danto, the distinguished philosopher of art, asks the question that clearly needs asking: "Why is something that looks exactly like a Brillo box a work of art, but a Brillo box is not?" His answer is that it's not something you see—it's your knowledge of the history of art. That history, from one era to another, shows a series of changing attitudes toward the relation of art objects and reality. As artistic technique changed and improved, artists played with this relation in all sorts of different ways; but with the Brillo box, some sort of final solution had occurred: there was no longer any visible difference between this work of art and the reality it represented other than the fact that you saw Warhol's work as art, and a real Brillo box as just a carton of soap pads. The difference between art and reality had disappeared, except for what's in the mind of the beholder. Nothing is communicated by Warhol's Brillo box but the statement, "This is art." Danto thinks that Warhol "was really doing philosophy."[3]

Well, if it's philosophy, it's of a rather unusual sort. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, another work of philosophy, runs in a recent edition to 784 pages—that's a lot to say. How many pages do you think it would take to express the Brillo box's philosophy? Kant's work can be bought in paperback for $20, but Warhol's work would cost millions, if it were for sale. Should we compare philosophical content per dollar?

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1 "But is it art?" by Kim Honey, *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto] July 21, 2001: R1.

2 "Honorable Mentions: Near Misses in the Genius Department," by Yoni Brenner, *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2009, p. 100.

3 Danto's earlier reflections on the Brillo box are in his paper "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61.19 (1964): 571–84; and later in his book *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Good and Bad Poetry

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1623–73) was a hugely prolific writer. Nowadays, she's sometimes given belated credit as being a ground-breaking female writer, writing under her own name when female authors usually published anonymously, and aggressively publicizing herself. But this sort of respect was not always awarded her. Samuel Pepys, in the April 11, 1667, entry in his famous *Diary*, called her play *The Humourous Lovers* "the most ridiculous thing that ever was wrote." But you should judge the worth of her writing yourself. Here's a sample of her poetry:

> **All that doth flow we cannot liquid name**
> **Or else would fire and water be the same;**
> **But that is liquid which is moist and wet**
> **Fire that property can never get.**
> **Then 'tis not cold that doth the fire put out**
> **But 'tis the wet that makes it die, no doubt.**

Another poet famous for being terrible is the Scot William McGonagall (c. 1825–1902). His most famous work is "The Tay Bridge Disaster"; its subject is the collapse of a bridge in Dundee, killing 75 (not 90) passengers in a train passing over it. The poem begins

> **Beautiful railway bridge of the silv'ry Tay**
> **Alas! I am very sorry to say**
> **That ninety lives have been taken away**
> **On the last sabbath day of 1879**
> **Which shall be remembered for a very long time.**

And it ends:

> **Oh! Ill-fated bridge of the silv'ry Tay**
> **I now must conclude my lay**
> **By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay**
> **That your central girders would not have given way**
> **At least many sensible men do say**
> **Had they been supported on each side with buttresses**
> **At least many sensible men confesses**

For the stronger we our houses build
The less chance we have of being killed.

And here, for your further reading pleasure, is an excerpt of a third poem.

AND I came here in my young youth
and lay there under the crocodile
By the column, looking East on the Friday,
And I said: Tomorrow I will lie on the South side
And the day after, south west.
And at night they sang in the gondolas
And in the barche with lanthorns;
The prows rose silver on silver
taking light in the darkness. "Relaxetur!"
11th. December 1461: that Pasti be let out with a caveat
"*caveat ire ad Turchum*, that he stay out of Constantinople
"if he hold dear our government's pleasure.
"The book will be retained by the council
(the book being Valturio *"Re Militari"*).

Let's compare these three. The first two rhyme, the third doesn't. The first two use ordinary ways of speaking (at least for the time in which they were written. The last (published in 1924) was written in an obscure style that's very hard to understand, certainly with little sympathy for the ordinary reader who would have little idea what all that was about.

Well, as you've probably guessed, the third is from a work considered a landmark of high art. It's an excerpt from Canto XXVI, by Ezra Pound.

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: Which of these three poems do you like the best? Be honest.

You'd be pretty hard-pressed to find somebody who actually reads Ezra Pound for pleasure. (Reading him as a class assignment doesn't count.) Of the people who claim to really like Pound's poetry, some are faking. Why is the judgement of the very few who really like him correct?

The Fate of Ditters

Does the name Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf ring a bell? I didn't think so. A name that sounds that silly is one you'd remember if you'd heard it. He's not a famous guy.

Ditters (1739–99) was a Viennese composer, during his day compared favourably to Haydn, who was just about his age. He was known as a violinist as well (there were performances by a string quartet including him and Haydn on violins, and the younger Mozart on viola).

Why don't we hear more of him nowadays? The answer, it's been suggested, lies in the vigorous and successful attempt by Richard Wagner, the giant force in nineteenth-century music, to destroy his musical reputation. Why? Because Ditters was Jewish.

Wagner was a virulent anti-Semite, much more than was usual at his time; he is historically important as a cause, not merely as a reflection, of German anti-Jewish feeling. Hitler and the Holocaust were still decades in the future when Wagner died in 1883, but he's now counted by some historians as the spiritual father of Nazism. His vicious anti-Jewish writings include what's often interpreted as a thinly veiled suggestion for a "Final Solution" to the Jewish "problem"—their extermination. But of most particular importance to him was spreading the view that Jewish culture was inferior and should be suppressed. A work published in 1850, *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (literally *Jewishness in Music*, but usually translated as *Judaism in Music*), argued that music written by Jews was cold, trivial nonsense, a confused mixture of styles; and that its publication and performance would result in disaster for the morality of the nation.

It's clear that Wagner's influence drastically diminished the place of music by Jewish composers in Germany, and, because of the strong influence of German musical culture, everywhere else also. The evaluation of the work of composers other than poor Ditters suffered from this: it's sometimes thought that Mendelssohn's and Mahler's compositions never received the full acclaim they were due because of Wagner. (This despite the fact that both composers, born Jewish, converted to Christianity.)

The musical reputation of Wagner himself was also considerably influenced by political considerations, but in this case, it benefited. His operas were ultranationalistic, extolling the mystical legendary spirit of the Teutonic race; its heroes were perfect Aryan types, and its villains equipped with characteristics recognizable by audiences of the day as Jewish stereotypes. Hitler loudly and of course influentially proclaimed that Wagner's music was his favourite.

What all this goes to show is that considerations other than purely musical ones influence what people take to be great or less-than-great music. Wagner himself would be the first to approve of this. His often-expressed view was that the experience of art must be a total, inclusive one, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—an "all-embracing artform," combining all various arts, and requiring audience response on all sorts of levels.

“I can’t listen to that much Wagner. I start getting the urge to conquer Poland.”—Woody Allen

“Wagner’s music is better than it sounds.”—Mark Twain

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: If Wagner is right about the desirability of response to art on all sorts of levels, then does this mean that it’s okay to count his anti-Semitism against his music?

A Lot of Bull

Bullfighting presents an interesting case of the intersection of art with morality. It’s sometimes considered an enormously sophisticated and subtle art form, sometimes a sport, sometimes a gross immorality, and sometimes just a silly and arbitrary bit of tradition.

The biggest deal about bullfighting for many people raised outside countries where it makes its home was the writing of the famous[1] American author Ernest Hemingway, in whose fiction it frequently occurs. “Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters” he wrote.[2] His 1932 book *Death in the Afternoon* is exclusively about bullfighting, discussing its metaphysical, ritualistic, aesthetic, and cultural aspects.

Not everyone is impressed. P.J. O’Rourke writes:

> **Seriousness ... makes unimportant people feel as important as what they’re discussing. Of course, it’s necessary to make sure everyone understands how important the topic is. Hemingway was just a tourist watching Spaniards tease farm animals. But if he could make cattle-pestering a grand and tragic thing in the eyes of the public, he’d become grand and tragic too, because he’d been there while somebody did it.[3]**

But the loudest objection to bullfighting is moral. PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) calls the name of the sport “an inaccurate term for events in which there is very little competition between a nimble, sword-wielding matador (Spanish for ‘killer’) and a confused,

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1 Or maybe not so famous anymore. Ken Korczak, in the *Kittson County* (Minnesota) *Top News Examiner*, December 3, 2009, reported that after he was surprised by the fact that three high-school seniors he happened to be chatting with had never heard of Ernest Hemingway, he undertook an unscientific poll of 100 people aged 16–20. Ninety-eight of them had never heard of Hemingway; the other two had, but hadn’t read anything by him. More information can be had by Googling “Who the hell is Ernest Hemingway?”

2 *The Sun Also Rises*, Chapter 2.

3 *Give War a Chance* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1992), p. 88.

maimed, psychologically tormented, and physically debilitated animal." Its website gives rather horrifying details.[1]

A peculiar incident in the sport occurred in Canada. The little town of Lindsay, Ontario, about 45 km west of Peterborough, decided to put itself on the map by hosting, in 1958, the first Canadian bullfight. The event however, ruled by typical Canadian care for livestock safety and humane practices, was less than successful. Six bulls bred and raised for fighting were imported from Mexico, but they were placed in quarantine for a week when it was found they had ticks. During that time, the imported Mexican bullfighters had to return home due to previous engagements, and local stand-ins were found, of doubtful ability. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals raised strong interventions about inhumane treatment of the bulls in normal bullfights, so the organizers decided that the matches would end, instead of with the death of the bulls at the bullfighter's sword, by a symbolic sword-tap on the bull's shoulder blades. This resulted in more problems, because nobody knew how to corral the annoyed bulls at the end of the matches, and it took over an hour to get the second bull on the program off the field. It was widely believed that after this Canadian-style bullfight, the bulls soon wound up in the local slaughterhouse where they were turned into hamburger.[2]

The "Mona Lisa" by Schmidlap

Lots of people have reproductions of famous paintings hanging on their walls, presumably because they like the painting, and the original isn't for sale, and even if it were, it would cost millions of dollars. There's nothing wrong with getting a reproduction: they're affordable and nice; they give pleasure. But when you see the original, you realise just how much you're missing in the reproduction. Even the most expensive reproductions, made using a great deal of care and advanced technology, are clearly distinguishable from the originals, and nowhere near as good.

But now imagine that there's a company that can make a reproduction that looks exactly like the original—that even experts at looking at paintings couldn't distinguish them when they're side-by-side. That would be great, right?

It seems pretty clear, however, that rich art collectors and museums would still want the original, and that visitors to the Louvre would feel cheated if they found out that what they had been gazing at was merely a perfect reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, not the real thing. The reason is that the real *Mona Lisa* was really painted by Leonardo, starting around 1505 or 1506 in

1 <http://www.peta.org/mc/factsheet_display.asp?ID=64>.
2 My account is based on several news-items from local newspapers, plus a summary, "The Worst Bullfight" in Pile's book.

Florence, and finishing several years later in Milan or Rome. But the reproduction was made by the Acme Photoengraving Company in 1996 in Passaic, New Jersey.

What this shows is that the value of a painting to us is not entirely a matter of how it looks. It's also a matter of the historical facts about that object. We want to see the actual object Leonardo made—not something that looks just like it. Similarly, in a history museum, we want to see (for example) the actual bed George Washington slept in, and not a bed that looks just like that one.

But someone might object that these historical facts about a painting have nothing to do with the value of the painting *as art*. They give it value as an antique, or as a historical artifact, or as something created by a celebrity. This shouldn't have anything to do with our genuinely *aesthetic* appreciation of the thing. When we're talking art appreciation, it shouldn't matter whether something was created by Leonardo in the early 1500s, or Schmidlap in the late 1900s, or by the accidental action of wet fallen leaves on a canvas left outside last fall.

Is this right?

Truth is Better than Fiction

Comparing what happens when you read "romances" (fiction) and "true history," David Hume has this to say:

> **If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both; tho' his testimony has not the same influence on them. The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents. He enters deeper into the concerns of the persons: represents to himself their actions, and characters, and friendships, and enmities: He even goes so far as to form a notion of their features, and air, and person. While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars; and except on account of the style and ingenuity of the composition, can receive little entertainment from it.**[1]

Is he right about this comparison?

Hume himself wrote "true history": in fact, he was much more famous during his lifetime for his six-volume best-seller *History of England* than for his philosophy.

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1 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section vii.

3. Do Philosophers Enjoy Themselves?

Philosophers on Food

Philosophers have had very little to say about food; but here are some of the exceptions:

- Plato complained, in his dialogue *Phaedo*, that food was a distraction from higher things. His *Symposium* features a banquet with a great deal of talk, but no food.
- Aristotle argued against the role of music in education, saying, "If they must learn music, [then] on the same principle they should learn cookery, which is absurd."
- Schopenhauer approved of still-life painting unless it showed food. A depiction of fruit still on the vine was okay, because it could be contemplated by reason for its beauty. Depicted as food, however, it would act as a stimulus to appetite, which makes us prisoners of the object-enslaved will.
- Wittgenstein, according to his biographer Norman Malcolm, "did not care what he ate so long as it was always the same." When Malcolm's wife served Wittgenstein bread and cheese, he would exclaim, "Hot Ziggety!"[1]
- Sartre was philosophically annoyed by the body's regular cry for nutrition. He rarely ate fruit or vegetables unless they were mixed into something like pastry. Sausages, sauerkraut, and chocolate cake were among his favourites. He did ingest vast quantities of other substances: two packs of strong cigarettes per day, with a pipe smoked constantly in between; many glasses of wine, beer, distilled alcohol, tea, and coffee; amphetamines and barbiturates. He was revulsed by seafood and one day, in a mescaline-induced trance, imagined himself being stalked by a lobster.
- David Hume was one of only two philosophers known to have been good cooks (the other was Aristippus, the Hellenistic proponent of hedonism). Hume dedicated himself in later life to "display [his] great Talent for Cookery."

Hume a Hog?

In a highly unscientific poll[2] conducted by my philosopher-friend Sheldon Wein, philosophers were asked which famous historical philosopher they'd most like to have over for dinner, and the clear winner was Hume.

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1 Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 69.
2 I suspect he may have asked only me and himself.

Hume was a very nice guy to be around. Anthony Kenny remarks that Hume was a "genial man, ... described by the economist Adam Smith as having come as near to perfection as any human being possibly could."[1] D.G.C. MacNabb writes that he was "sociable, witty, kind, ingenuous in his friendships, innocently vain, and devoid of envy, ... known to French friends as 'le bon David,' and in Scotland as 'Saint David.'"[2] Bertrand Russell quotes the eulogy Hume wrote for himself: "I was a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments." Russell remarks, "All this is borne out by everything that is known of him."[3] The (more scientific) poll of philosophers I mentioned first in Chapter II asked philosophers which dead philosopher they "most identify with" (whatever that means), and the clear winner, again, was Hume.

Hume's love of food was attested to by his ample girth. In his day, he was sometimes referred to as "the fattest hog of Epicurus' sty," a line of a poem by the (now obscure) English poet William Mason.[4] Calling someone fat was, in those days, however, not an insult. A corpulent frame was then considered a mark of wealth and happiness.

No Fun in Hume

When Prof. Wein did a computerized search of Hume's writings, he found that the word 'fun' appears nowhere in them. What explains this absence in the philosopher most likely to be interested in that concept?

The answer is clearly that, when Hume was writing, that word would have been considered too slangy for such writing. It did exist—in the sense we're familiar with, its first written instance recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* was in a 1727 work by Jonathan Swift; but the *OED* says that Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary* "stigmatizes it as 'a low cant word,'" that is, as lower-class slang.

FOR FURTHER READING: Boisvert, who reported most of the above material on the food attitudes of philosophers, thinks they are not trivial, irrelevant sidebars. He links antipathy to

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1 "Descartes to Kant," in *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 163.

2 "Hume, David," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan & Free Pres, 1967), V. 4, p. 74.

3 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 601.

4 Epicurus was an ancient Greek philosopher widely (and mistakenly) believed to have been a moral nihilist and an advocate of unbridled pleasure-seeking. The word "epicurean" nowadays has lost much of its negative flavour, merely referring to someone devoted to good food and comfort. Mason's poem referring to "David Hume from the remotest north" (i.e., Scotland) is "An Heroic Epistle to Sir William Chambers, Knight" (1773).

good food to the philosophical "lie" that humans are isolated minds, not flesh and blood, and advocates instead a "stomach-affirming" philosophy. You can read his views in *Philosophy Now* magazine, Issue 31 (March/April 2001).

Into the Mainstream of Philosophy

Philosophical aesthetics studies some difficult questions. One thing philosophers try to do here is to explain what art is. When you stop to think about it, art seems like quite a peculiar thing. People spend a great deal of effort dabbing pigments on canvas, or arranging a series of noises. What are they doing *that* for? Imagine yourself trying to explain art to an uncomprehending Martian.

Both philosophical aesthetics and ethics can be included in one field: value theory. In aesthetics we face the same sort of problems as we do in ethics. Are there any sorts of general principles that summarize why we value certain sorts of things? Is their value an objective matter, or does it exist solely in the eye of the beholder?