

The Philosophical and Ethical Significance of Humour: The Simpsons as Humorous Ethical Truth-Telling

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ABSTRACT. Rooted in the Socratic care of self, Michel Foucault (2011) has outlined a trans-historical ethical truth-telling (ethical *parrhesia*) that breaks radically with established conventions and lifestyles. I will outline a humorous form of ethical truth-telling that relies on humour, irony and satire to battle and transform the social ethos. A handful of scholars have acknowledged the significance of humour to the Socratic care of self (Zwart 1996; Vanheeswijck 1993; Schutz 1977), but humour's philosophical significance has nonetheless often been neglected (Hadot 2002). I will understand humour cognitively as incongruity and socially as perspective, and root my discussion of philosophical humour in irony as infinite absolute negativity (defined by the young Kierkegaard) and the image of the silenus (used by Alcibiades in *Symposium*). In contrast to the 'pop culture and philosophy' book series, my philosophical approach to popular culture will not be instrumental or introductory. Instead, I will discuss *The Simpsons* as a modern-day form of humorous ethical truth-telling, in a textual analysis that will understand the series in a tradition of limited animation and critical comedy.

KEYWORDS. Humour and ethics, *parrhesia*, philosophy of film, satire, *The Simpsons*

I. INTRODUCTION

At the heart of Socratic philosophy lies, as Michel Foucault (2011) has outlined, the 'care of self'. The Socratic care of self has stimulated two types of truth-telling (*parrhesia*) that have been fundamental to the development of Western philosophy (Foucault 2011, 158ff.; 245ff.; 315). The first type of metaphysical truth-telling investigated the true reality of the self that one must care for and developed into a metaphysics that contemplated the soul as a separate reality from the body. By contrast, the second type of ethical truth-telling investigated which form the care

of self should take in order for a life to be beautiful and developed into an aesthetics that took life as its object of philosophical inquiry. Ethical truth-telling rooted in the Socratic care of self was taken up and radicalised by Classical Cynicism. The Cynical movement had a rudimentary theoretical framework rooted in common philosophical insights about the truthful life in antiquity (Foucault 2011, 178; 201). However, by consequently living out these virtues, the Cynics turned them topsy-turvy (Foucault 2011, 251). They transformed the virtue of unconcealedness into shameless nakedness; independence into poverty; straightness into animality; and sovereignty into philosophical militancy (Foucault 2011, 283). The movement reacted against contemporaneous philosophical opinions and was strongly rooted in the historical context of antiquity. At the same time, however, Classical Cynicism revealed the life devoted to ethical truth-telling as a life that is and must be radically *other* (Foucault 2011, 245ff.). Foucault has argued that the ethos of the true life as *other* life established itself as a trans-historical ethical experience the West (2011, 315).

The ethos of the *other* life equals a philosophical militancy that breaks radically with the ethos of society in order to transform it (Foucault 2011, 280ff.). Ethical truth-telling reveals the untruthfulness of the social world in order to establish a new world with an *other* ethos. By transforming the relationship individuals have to self – by urging them to take care of self and, in doing so, take care of others – the philosophical militancy of ethical truth-telling aims at “the political transformation of the world” (Frédéric Gros in Foucault 2011, 345). Foucault has identified at least three diverse modes of existence that have functioned as continuations of ethical truth-telling in Western culture and invite further scholarly investigation (2011, 181ff.): (i) early Christian asceticism and monasticism, and later the mendicant orders of the middle ages, such as the Franciscans. These modes of existence were not all that far removed from the original Cynical existence; (ii) the political revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century, such as nihilism and anarchism, which revived the spirit of Cynicism by interpreting life as a scandalous manifestation

of truth; (iii) artistic production, which has often expressed themes of the *other* life. Foucault thinks of modern art in particular, but he also explicitly mentions the medieval carnivalesque literature studied by Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as ancient satire and comedy – which he considers to be privileged sites of Cynical expression in antiquity.

Ethical truth-telling in the satire and comedy of antiquity and its continuation in the literature studied by Bakhtin is inextricably linked to the concept of Menippean satire. Menippean satire, so named after Menippus the Cynic, is often understood as the prosaic counterpart of poetic Juvenal satire, but its exact meaning and the nature of its continuation beyond antiquity are far from undisputed (Condren 2012, 383ff.). Bakhtin employed the generic label ‘menippea’, to refer to a serio-comical tradition of literature that comprises Menippean satire, Socratic dialogue as well as the literature of Rabelais and Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 1984, 106-118; 127). Some of the most important features of menippea are a combination of comedy, fantasy and a scandalous violation of norms as a means to search for truth (Bakhtin 1984, 114-118). Similarly, Northrop Frye considered Menippean satire to be the ancient manifestation of the literary form ‘anatomy’, which is a humorous and morally critical prose form that deals with intellectual themes and attitudes (1990, 309-311). According to Frye, the anatomy continues outside antiquity in the oeuvre of authors like Erasmus, Voltaire, Lewis Carroll and Aldous Huxley. Scholars of ancient Menippean satire, such as Howard Weinbrot (2005), have acknowledged the continuation of Menippean satire outside antiquity. However, they typically deplore the fact that other scholars such as Eugene Kirk (1980), in the wake of Bakhtin and Frye, have turned Menippean satire into a meaningless umbrella term that incorporates any literature combining humour, fantasy, irony and moral criticism in some way.

Menippean satire is ultimately a concept that is too muddled to be of real use to my discussion, but it does suggest the trans-historical continuation of a humorous moral criticism with roots in the satire of Menippus

the Cynic. In this respect, Peter Sloterdijk (1987) has identified a tradition of satirical resistance, rooted in Classical Cynicism, which employs mockery to criticise hegemonic discourses. In this article, I will outline such a tradition of satirical resistance, originating in the Socratic care of self, which I will identify as humorous ethical truth-telling: truth-telling that employs humour, irony and satire as means to transform the falsity of the social ethos. According to Pierre Hadot, philosophers have typically least retained humour and irony from the Socratic care of self (2002, 50). Only a handful of studies have given humour a central place in Socratic philosophy (Zwart 1996; Vanheeswijck 1993; Schutz 1977), while any ethical potential of humour has commonly been understood as instrumental and not considered as essential to morality (Morreall 2007, 240). Only recently, E. M. Dadlez (2011) has made a case that philosophy should consider the function of satire and humour, such as the news parody of *The Colbert Report* (*Comedy Central*, 2005 – present), as moral criticism and the revelation of moral truth.

In this article, I will draw on Søren Kierkegaard's (1989) analysis of Socratic irony as infinite absolute negativity and Alcibiades' characterisation of Socrates as a 'silenus' in *Symposium* to explain how the Socratic care of self has fostered a humorous ethical truth-telling. I will understand humour cognitively as incongruity and socially as perspective, to explain that humorous ethical truth-telling reveals a discrepancy between ethical ideal and unethical reality that is fundamentally ridiculous. I will further show how humorous ethical truth-telling is characterised by self-ridicule, because of the truth-teller's own limitations in living up to the ethical ideal. In the second part of this article, I will analyse *The Simpsons* (*Fox*, 1989 – present) as a modern-day form of humorous ethical truth-telling. The strong social satire of this long-running animated sitcom is well-established, but not unique (Alberti 2004, xiv; Marc 1997, 193-195). Nonetheless, I will limit myself to *The Simpsons* because it paved the way for various other contemporary TV satires, such as *The Colbert Report* or *South Park* (*Comedy Central*, 1997 – present). Although there is no accepted

definition of satire (Condren 2012), Northrop Frye has usefully described satire as militant irony characterised by humour rooted in fantasy, a moral standard and an object of attack that is revealed to be absurd (1990, 223-224). Following Frye's description of satire, I will outline how *The Simpsons* has employed comedy and animation to create "a whole satirical universe" (Turner 2005, 56). The satire of *The Simpsons* was established gradually. In its first two seasons (1989-1991), *The Simpsons* focussed on a representation of the American family in all its imperfection. In season three and four (1991-1993), the series expanded its scope from the family to society and established an all-encompassing satirical worldview, to which I will devote my textual analysis. From season nine onwards (1997-1998), the series arguably ceased to function as humorous ethical truth-telling as it became increasingly outlandish in an attempt not to repeat itself and spun off into its own crazy universe.

My analysis of *The Simpsons* as a modern-day form of humorous ethical truth-telling and irony as infinite absolute negativity will break with several readings that have understood the series as an expression of post-modern irony, which sets out to demystify all claims to truth (Ott 2003, 60) and puts 'truth' between scare quotes (Steeves 2005, 267). These readings have argued that *The Simpsons* uses irony to reveal the fallibility of all affirmative statements or viewpoints (Dettmar 2004, 91), because it has no consistent moral agenda (Matheson 2001, 71) and offers no positive alternative to the social reality it mocks (Beard 2004, 288). For these reasons, James Wallace has argued that the viewpoint promoted by *The Simpsons* is "at once nihilistic (everything is a target) and conservative (the traditional social order endures)" (2001, 147). Instead, my textual analysis will reveal that the irony of *The Simpsons* holds on to an unexpressed moral standard, which allows its comedy to function. I will argue that *The Simpsons* attacks the validity of the social ethos, but offers no well-defined solutions for the situations it denounces, because it is aware of its limitations to define ethical truth. It is exactly this awareness of one's imperfection that explains why the humorous ethical truth-teller must

take the shape of the silenus or mocking satyr. Not only does the social ethos appear as ridiculous compared to the ethical ideal, but so does the truth-teller. For this reason, I will argue that the ethical message of humorous ethical truth-telling, in casu *The Simpsons*, cannot be expressed except through humour.

II. THE TRUTH-TELLING SILENUS: IRONY AND SATIRE AS HUMOROUS ETHICAL TRUTH-TELLING

The Socratic care of self has stimulated two major lines of philosophical development in Western culture, of which ethical truth-telling established life as an object of philosophical inquiry. Ethical truth-telling is concerned with the philosophical inquiry into life and involves both taking care of self and urging others to take care of self (Foucault 2011, 152-153; 159). In order to distinguish between what is ethical and what is not, this care of self is organised along the formative principle of an ethical test. Throughout one's life, one has to give account of oneself by testing one's behaviour against the touchstone of *logos* or the discourse that gives access to truth (Foucault 2011, 145-151). Underlying the formative principle of the ethical test is the fundamental paradox of Socratic philosophy. Infamously, the god Apollo declared Socrates to be the wisest person in Athens; to which Socrates replied that it is actually the god who is wise and that human wisdom entails nothing more than acknowledging one's ignorance (Plato, *Apology*, 20ff.). Certainly, Socrates possessed some ethical wisdom, but in comparison to the wisdom of the god it amounted to nothing (Hadot 2002, 32-33; 47). It is namely the god whose wisdom is truly 'absolute', i.e. perfect, complete, unqualified, not understood in comparison to something of the same kind. It is the god who has access to *logos*, not Socrates. The Socratic care of self is therefore characterised by irony in the sense that it is "defined by what it lacks – that is, by a transcendent norm which escapes it, yet which it nevertheless possesses within itself in some way" (Hadot 2002, 47).

Socratic irony, according to Pierre Hadot “is a kind of humour which refuses to take oneself or other people entirely seriously” (2002, 26). In a similar way, the young Kierkegaard defined Socratic irony as ‘infinite absolute negativity’ in *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates’ entire existence was characterised by an irony that he qualified as negative “because it only negates” (1989, XIII 213), as infinite “because it does not [just] negate this or that phenomenon” but directs its destructive ironic criticism at society in its entire actuality (1989, XIII 338) and as absolute because “that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not” (1989, XIII 335). Kierkegaard identified Socratic irony as the means through which Socrates broke radically with other forms of existence in search of an *other* life. Socrates employed irony as he “stepped out of line with his age” and denied the validity of society (Kierkegaard 1989, XIII 334-335), because it could not live up to the absolute moral standard of *logos*. Yet Socratic irony also included a dimension of self-irony, as Socrates himself had to acknowledge that he could not completely fathom the moral standard that belonged to the gods.

The young Kierkegaard’s definition of Socratic irony as infinite absolute negativity has been criticised by John Lippit (2000, 146). Lippit explains that Climacus, a pseudonym of the later Kierkegaard, identified Socrates as an exemplary ethical thinker and therefore could not have conceived of Socratic irony as infinite absolute negativity. According to Lippit, in order for Socrates to function as such an ethical example, there must be a degree of stability or rootedness to his irony, which allows him to posit exemplary positive insights (2000, 136-137; 155). Such a stability or rootedness is allegedly absent from irony as infinite absolute negativity, which Lippit compares to ‘unstable’ irony as defined by Wayne C. Booth (2000, 148-149). Unstable irony can be distinguished from ‘stable’ irony, which expresses a positive insight that can be accessed if one ‘sees through’ the irony (Lippit 2000, 149). Instead, unstable irony undercuts any possible affirmative or stable position, because it holds the

world to be absurd (Lippit 2000, 154). Used in the sense of unstable irony, infinite absolute negativity would equal the postmodern irony that is often ascribed to *The Simpsons*: the ironic affirmation of nihilism or the affirmation that nothing can be affirmed. Although I do not contest that Kierkegaard has criticised his early account of Socrates, I do argue it is incorrect to equal infinite absolute negativity to unstable irony, because it perfectly captures the fundamental paradox of ethical truth-telling.

Infinite absolute negativity does not express that the world is absurd beyond redemption, but instead holds on to a certain moral standard. After all, Kierkegaard ascribes an absolute aspect to infinite negativity, because – as already explained – “that by virtue of which it [irony] negates is a higher something that still is not” (1989, XIII 335). The higher something that still is not is the “transcendent norm” Hadot refers to as the guiding principle of the Socratic care of self, which nonetheless remains elusive to Socrates (2002, 47). It is the discourse that gives access to truth or the wisdom of the god; the wisdom that is truly absolute and to which all other insights are relative, but which is itself relative to no other insights. The fundamental irony that characterises ethical truth-telling is therefore that this truth-telling sets out to destroy the validity of the current actuality of society in its entirety, but does not possess the absolute standard that motivates this destruction. The ethical truth-teller no longer believes in the ‘old’ ethos of society,

[b]ut on the other hand, he [sic] does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea. [...] In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know (Kierkegaard 1989, XIII 334).

Ethical truth-telling cannot destroy the old with the new, because it does not have the new in its possession; consequently, it destroys the old with the old (Kierkegaard 1989, XIII 338). Its irony, therefore, does not rectify what it perceives as ridiculous, but makes it even more ridiculous;

it caricatures the fundamental falsity of society until it collapses under its own weight (Kierkegaard 1989, XIII 357). In this sense, infinite absolute negativity shares essential characteristics with satire, described by Northrop Frye as militant irony that holds on to a moral standard to reveal an object of attack as absurd, by means of humour rooted in fantasy (1990, 223-224).

Traditionally, there are three major theoretical approaches to humour, i.e. superiority, incongruity and release theories. Isabel Ermida has argued that these traditional theories typically focus only on a particular aspect of humour and either over- or underdetermine the phenomenon humour (2008, 14; 28). Jeroen Vandaele thus argues in favour of an approach that combines incongruity and superiority (2002). The basic idea behind incongruity is that people have developed certain patterns about how the world works. Humour is an experience of something that ordinarily does not fit these patterns (Morreall 1987, 130), but becomes nonetheless appropriate following a spurious or illegitimate logic (Oring 2003, 1; 8). The basic idea behind superiority is that we laugh because we feel superior to the object of humour. Jeroen Vandaele has expanded the meaning of superiority and redefined it “as the aggregate of social elements in humor dynamics” (2002, 239), which typically also includes elements of play (Martin 2007, 5) and non-seriousness (Chafe 2007, 1). My own understanding of the social dimension of humour is that humour puts its object in perspective. The concept perspective in fact incorporates other concepts such as play, non-seriousness and superiority. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun ‘perspective’ as “[t]he true understanding of the relative importance of things” and the phrase ‘in perspective’ as “correctly regarded in terms of relative importance”. Humour robs its object of any absolute importance it may claim; in other words, making it playful, non-serious or inferior. For this reason, the things a culture cannot laugh at are the things it does not want to or cannot put in perspective, e.g. death or religion.

Ethical truth-telling involves the continuous ethical test of testing self and society against the touchstone of an ideal moral standard. Hub

Zwart explains, “[f]rom the point of view of laughter, the philosophical attitude is one of experimentation, of relentlessly putting established conventions to the test: the ‘crucible of laughter’” (1996, 200). The humour of the ethical test arises out of the discrepancy between ethical ideal and unethical reality (Schutz 1977, 83; 95). Any cognitive incongruity between ethical ideal and unethical reality is experienced as literally *ridiculous* on a social level, because it strips the unethical reality of any absolute importance it may claim. Guy Vanheeswijck has distinguished two dimensions to this philosophical humour, namely self-criticism and social satire (1993, 22). The comic principle of the ethical test first of all reveals that the philosopher strives for ethical wisdom, but does not possess it (the fundamental paradox of the Socratic care of self). Out of this discrepancy arises a self-deprecatory laughter and self-irony (Hadot 2002, 25; Vanheeswijck 1993, 193; Schutz 1977, 79). The ethical test further reveals how the current actuality of society in general is ethically lacking in comparison to the moral standard and has a satirical dimension that exposes ignorance and urges people to change their way of life (Foucault 2011, 233; Vanheeswijck 1993, 193).

The Socratic care of self, ethical truth-telling and the mechanism of the ethical test have a fundamental humorous dimension. Socrates used humour as a way of revealing truth (Hadot 2002, 47-50) and as a means of critique and self-critique (Zwart 1996, 95; 108). His use of humour made him into a ‘divine fool’ (Schutz 1977) whose comic logic broke radically with the established conventions of his time. Similarly, the Cynics, who took up and radicalised Socratic ethical truth-telling, chose comic wordplay, sarcasm and clever witticisms as their dialogic weapons (Sloterdijk 1987, 264; Branham 1996, 25; 93) and their unconventional behaviour made them into inherently comic figures continuously at odds with society (Branham 1996, 87). For the Cynics, “the entire human world appear[ed] as an immense madhouse and vertigo-producing series of circus acts, meaning nothing and accomplishing nothing” (Navia 1996, 29).

The entire humorous dimension of the care of self is captured in *Symposium* (215a-c), where Alcibiades infamously compared Socrates to a silenus. The silenus was an ugly, drunk, lecherous, old satyr-like creature from ancient mythology that nonetheless possessed a kind of wisdom. Statuettes of these silenuses that were sold on markets in ancient Greece looked ugly on the outside, but when opening their bellies they revealed beautiful images of gods on the inside. Similarly, Alcibiades explains

[i]f you chose to listen to Socrates' discourses you would feel them at first to be quite ridiculous; on the outside they are clothed with such absurd words and phrases – all, of course, the gift of a mocking satyr. His talk is of pack-asses, smiths, cobblers, and tanners [...] so that anyone inexpert and thoughtless might laugh his speeches to scorn. But [...] first of all you will discover that they are the only speeches which have any sense in them; and secondly, that none are so divine, so rich in images of virtue (Plato, *Symposium* 221e-222a).

The image of the silenus may appear trivial, but in fact it captures the whole dimension of what I have explained about the relationship between humour and Socratic care of self.

Pierre Hadot has stated that “*beneath* irony and humour, [the silenus] *hides* the most profound conceptions” (2002, 48; italics mine), while Luis E. Navia has argued that “*beneath* their [the Cynics'] often clownish antics and preposterous pronouncements, there *lurks* an air of earnestness and urgency” (1996, 11; italics mine). These remarks rightfully link humour to care of self, but fail to stress that, from the perspective of the silenus, care of self is impossible without humour. Not beneath or despite an appearance that is humorously anomalous, but exactly through a humorous moral test and irony as infinite absolute negativity, the silenus denies the validity of society and puts the self in perspective in search of ethical wisdom. In this respect, the Socratic care of self did not only instigate a trans-historical tradition of ethical truth-telling, it also instigated a particular humorous ethical truth-telling: a philosophical militancy that employs humour to reveal truth about self and society. Crucial to

humorous ethical truth-telling is irony in the sense of infinite absolute negativity, which denies the validity of the social ethos in its entirety, but is aware of its own limitations in establishing truth. Such irony can function as the militant irony that characterises satire, alongside fantasy and humour, in the description of Northrop Frye. Cognitively, satire can be understood as the humorous transgression of established social patterns, rooted in a logic that is considered illegitimate by society (Vandaele 2002, 234). The social dimension of satire is that it passes moral judgment on established social patterns with an eye to their correction, by revealing their ridiculousness in perspective to an absolute moral standard (Hutcheon 1985, 16; 43). If satire employs irony as infinite absolute negativity, it functions as a form of humorous ethical truth-telling. For this reason, I will argue that the satire of *The Simpsons* can be understood as a modern-day form of humorous ethical truth-telling.

III. THE SIMPSONS AS HUMOROUS ETHICAL TRUTH-TELLING

The Simpsons and other forms of contemporary satire have been linked to philosophy in the tradition of Socrates and Diogenes by several scholars and critics. Jonathan Gray has offered the most interesting investigation (2005, 153-155), linking the reflexive media cynicism he distinguished among viewers of *The Simpsons* to philosophical ‘kynicism’¹ as elaborated by Peter Sloterdijk (1987). Nonetheless, Gray’s discussion has remained introductory and discusses kynicism in a certain postmodern perspective from which I will stay clear. Julian Baggini has also called *The Simpsons* ‘philosophical’ because of its ‘postmodern awareness’ of the absurd, ability to abstract, and satirising of human claims to wisdom (2006; 2007). Steven Keslowitz has identified *The Simpsons*’ search for truth and critique of authority as Socratic, but his own reading of the series is far from Socratic (2006, 15-23).² Several contributions to the ‘pop culture and philosophy’ book series³ have linked other television satire to Socratic and Cynic philosophy. Richard Hanley has claimed that *South Park* shares

a similar “bullshit alarm” with Socrates (2007). William W. Young III has linked the controversy the series has generated to its ‘philosophical’ critique and role as ‘Socratic gadfly’ (2007). Paul Cantor has compared *South Park*’s mix of vulgar humour and ‘philosophical’ (read: libertarian) depth to the Socratic silenus (2007). Judith Barad has linked *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to Socrates because of its reformatory intent and unpretentious moral criticism (2007). Steven Michels and Michael Ventimiglia have identified Stewart, the ‘equal opportunity satirist’, as a Socratic gadfly (2007). Alejandro Bárcenas has done the same and has further called Stewart a modern Cynic who uses humour to break with authoritative conventions in the search for truth and self-sufficiency (2007). Finally, Mark Ralkowski has stated that *The Colbert Report* finds a predecessor in Socrates’ street philosophy, as both use irony to expose faulty reasoning and moral values in authority figures (2009).

Some of the contributions to pop culture and philosophy books offer interesting insights about the similarities between contemporary TV satire and ethical truth-telling. However, their aim is ultimately very different from the aim of this article. William Irwin, the driving force behind the pop culture and philosophy concept, has explained that the book series do not intend to offer the kind of scholarship found in peer-reviewed journals (2010, 54). Instead, contributors try to make philosophy available to a lay audience who would ordinarily not be interested in philosophy. Popular culture like baseball, iPods, *Alice in Wonderland*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, hip hop and poker are not considered objects of philosophical inquiry themselves, but instruments to introduce basic tenets of philosophy (Engelen 2011, 13). In the introduction to *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, Irwin therefore explicitly states that “none of the contributors to this book believes there is a deep underlying philosophy to [creator Matt] Groening’s cartoon” (2001, 5). By contrast, I do intend to show that *The Simpsons* is philosophically interesting in itself, by which I do not mean it formulates answers to complex metaphysical questions. Some philosophy of film scholars have argued that films such as *The*

Matrix trilogy (Wartenberg 2007) or the *Alien* quadrilogy (Mulhall 2002) make genuine contributions to metaphysical discussion on epistemological relativism or the basis for morality. Without judging the validity of these studies, I employ a very different interpretation of philosophy and the philosophical potential of popular culture in this article (a difference that runs parallel to the distinction between metaphysical and ethical truth-telling explained in the introduction). In my textual analysis, I will not claim that *The Simpsons* engages in a metaphysical investigation of the basis for morality, but instead that it holds on to a morality in a way that can be interpreted from a philosophical perspective. Taking into account the historical background of its comedy and animation, I aim to show how *The Simpsons* functions as a modern form of humorous ethical truth-telling, as it employs irony to denounce the ethos of society in order to transform it.

Humour, as already discussed, depends on an incongruity about how we think the world operates. Thus humour offers the oppositional potential to rethink the world (Critchley 2002, 2-3). Not all comedy⁴ realises this potential, but *The Simpsons* is part of tradition of comedy with strong oppositional sentiments that originated in the United States shortly after the Second World War (Ortved 2009, 190; 238; 279; 283; Turner 2005, 47; Alberti 2004, xxx). A group of ‘new’ comedians with distinct individual styles – such as Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Jules Feiffer, Harvey Kurtzman of *Mad*, Tom Lehrer, etc. – collectively distinguished themselves from the previous generation by not making jokes about mothers-in-law, but instead critically addressing the world (Zoglin 2008, 3; 9; Nachman 2003, 47; Hendra 1987, 2). *The Simpsons* brought this comic tradition successfully to primetime television (John Alberti quoted in Ortved 2009, 279) and stimulated the development of the American TV satire, which currently flourishes in globalised Western popular culture (Gray *et al.* 2009). This ‘new’ or ‘new wave’ comedy showed affinity with humorous ethical truth-telling in the sense that it questioned the status quo in all its aspects (Kercher 2006, 113; Turner 2005, 10; 47;

Nachman 2003, 65; Hendra 1987, 5; 454; Zoglin 2008, 2; 223; Marc 1997, 37-38). New wave comedy's ethos of 'terrible honesty' broke radically with the immorality of society (Kercher 2006, 6-7), while these comedians were considered as "advertisements for honesty and authenticity" (Zoglin 2008, 3) and not only criticised society, but "were [also] ruthlessly honest about themselves" (Nachman 2003, 21). Such ability to put the self in perspective distinguished new wave comedy from the hegemonic worldviews it criticised (Kercher 2006, 99; Hendra 1987, 10; 266).

Animation, similar to humour, is a representation of the world that breaks with ordinary perception and thus has the inherent potential to subvert the physical and socio-cultural laws of the world (Wells 2002, 5; 17). *The Simpsons* is part of a long tradition of subversive animation that liberates audiences by questioning society's interpretative moral and cultural frameworks (Wells 2002, 6; 12; 75). For economic reasons, made-for-television animation like *The Simpsons* typically employs limited animation, which distinguishes itself from full animation by the amount of images used per second of film (Furniss 2007, 133-134). With the traditional frame rate of twenty-four frames per second, full animation consists of one image per frame or per two frames; anything less constitutes limited animation. The consistent use of a limited aesthetic in American animation was introduced by the United Productions of America. Influenced by abstract modernist art, UPA countered the dominant Disney aesthetic by not aiming to represent the world in a realistic manner (Furniss 2007, 136). Instead UPA wanted to caricature the world (Beck and Ball 2004, 147). Made-for-television animation aimed solely at child audiences, however, soon diluted UPA's artistic vision into a mere cost-efficient process that limited the amount of drawings needed per animated cartoon. Although such economical use of limited animation has long stigmatised animation, *The Simpsons* has managed to combine cost-efficiency and artistic vision, by employing limited animation in a way that "seem[s] to enhance the depiction of the characters and their activities"

(Furniss 2007, 146). The series' iconic use of colours with high intensity and bright value – or, put more intuitively, 'pure', 'clean' and 'shiny' colours – as well as backgrounds without shade, cancel out a naturalistic representation (Furniss 2007, 72-73; 147). *The Simpsons* is clearly a representation of our world – it is not an autonomous world of superheroes – but it is a representation that completely caricatures and ridicules the naturalistic as well as social conventions of that world.

The town of Springfield in *The Simpsons* functions as a caricatural microcosm, which denies the validity of our society in its entirety. Following Ken Tucker who talks of “tiny, throw-away details that accumulate into a worldview” in *The Simpsons* (1993, 48), I will show how comic bits and pieces across the episodes of season three and four constitute a philosophically ironic worldview. The irony in *The Simpsons* is not so much unstable or nihilistic, but instead shows great affinity with the infinite absolute negativity described by the young Kierkegaard. Such irony sets out to destroy the validity of the social ethos, but does not completely grasp or cannot completely live up to the absolute moral standard that motivates this destruction. Infinite absolute negativity therefore destroys the social ethos, not by rectifying its ridiculousness and offering an alternative, but by making it even more ridiculous in order to let it collapse under its own falsity.

A good example of *The Simpsons*' affinity with irony as infinite absolute negativity is its treatment of nuclear energy. Homer Simpson works in Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, owned by business tycoon Montgomery Burns. The work has made Homer sterile and infected with radiation (*Homer's Triple Bypass*). The plant's pollution has also mutated Springfield's wildlife, in the form of Blinky the three-eyed fish. Mr Burns undertakes no action whatsoever to prevent such health hazards and environmental disasters. At the most, batches of nuclear waste get labelled *Toxic Waste – Do Not Eat* (*Marge versus the Monorail*). It is true, Homer and his co-workers should have been more critical of Mr Burns's malpractices:

Marge: Don't you have a health plan at work?
Homer: We used to, but we gave it up for a pinball machine in the lounge.

(Homer's Triple Bypass)

The lack of critical thinking and political action of the plant's employees in fact even makes them complicit in Burns's crimes against nature and mankind:

Marge: I'm not sure about the people Bart's working for. I think they're criminals.
Homer: A job's a job. I mean, take me. If my plant pollutes the water and poisons the town, by your logic, that would make me a criminal.

(Bart the Murderer)

However, Springfield's lack of citizenship does not justify the continual violation of human well-being by Burns and his assistant, Waylon Smithers, in order to maximize the profit of the power plant:

Smithers: Well, sir, where should we dump this batch [of nuclear waste]? Playground?
Burns: No. All those bald children are arousing suspicion.

(Marge vs. the Monorail)

The Simpsons does not rectify what it perceives as ridiculous about nuclear energy in the form of a more sustainable energy policy, responsible entrepreneurship or active citizenship. Nonetheless, the jokes about nuclear energy denounce the situation motivated by the belief that something can and should be done about it. In order for the humour about nuclear energy to work, an ideal of a better world is presupposed, compared to which the current situation can be revealed as morally lacking. Although three-eyed fish, bald children and sterile employees may at first seem incongruous to real life, on second thought, they represent the genuine dangers of nuclear energy taken to their true consequences (danger to

health and environment, profit before people, lack of civil protest, etc.). The humour about nuclear energy in *The Simpsons* thrives on the incongruity between how the world is in essence revealed to be and how it should be, even if the series provides no examples of better alternatives.

The humour of *The Simpsons* limits itself to critique and mockery without offering positive solutions to the situations it denounces, but not because it holds the world to be absurd beyond redemption. Instead, such humour may be sidestepping a dangerous trap. Chris Turner has argued that the political and ethical worldview of *The Simpsons* is generally progressive, but “tempered with an abiding conviction that extreme beliefs of any stripe inevitably produce the kind of hypocrisy and pomposity that the show is genetically predisposed to satirising” (2005, 239). *The Simpsons* therefore does not only mock society, it also includes itself in the mockery:

Homer: Oh, Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh.

(*Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington*)

Lisa: The writers [of *Itchy & Scratchy*] should be ashamed of themselves!

Bart: Cartoons have writers?

(*The Front*)

The tendency of *The Simpsons* to include itself in the mockery may be understood in light of its larger animated and comic tradition. Throughout its historical development, the American animated cartoon established itself as a reflexive genre that does not ignore, but instead highlights its 'low' status through self-deprecating humour (Savage 2004, 199). Similarly, new wave comedy is characterised by “a self-deprecation, an awareness of itself, sometimes bordering on self-destruction, that doesn't take its essential seriousness too seriously” (Hendra 1987, 10). Including itself in the mockery is exactly what makes the criticism of *The Simpsons* possible without being pretentious or insincere (Gray 2005, 146-147).

The humour of *The Simpsons* shows affinity with infinite absolute negativity, because it puts itself in perspective as it caricatures society in its entirety until it collapses under its own falseness. The entire town of Springfield, which functions as a microcosm of society, is ridiculed throughout the series. The inhabitants are repeatedly revealed as an uncritical mob incapable of critical reflection. When special guest Barry White expresses his horror about the town's lust for clubbing snakes, the mob responds by applauding and cheering:

Barry White: [To Mayor Quimby] Were they even listening to me?
Quimby: I, uh, don't think so.
(Whacking Day)

By the end of the episode, the mob has changed its mind about killing snakes, much to the dismay of mayor Diamond Joe Quimby, who tries to impress his citizens with a dozen fake wax snakes:

Mob: Boooo!
Quimby: I'm sick of you people. You're nothing but a pack of fickle mush heads.
Woman: He's right.
Man: Give us hell, Quimby!
Mob: Yeeeeej!
(Whacking Day)

Mayor Quimby is an opportunistic politician who likes to keep up appearances and is not really interested in the well-being of his citizens, but only in securing votes and staying in office:

If Marge Simpson goes to jail, I can kiss the chick vote good-bye!
(Homer Alone)

Alongside Mayor Quimby, every figure of authority in Springfield is revealed as incompetent, stupid or both. The humour of *The Simpsons* attacks society by attacking its figures of authority. Springfield's police

chief, Clancy Wiggum, is an incompetent idiot who is clearly more interested in winning the jackpot than protecting the community when the lottery numbers are announced on television:

[Picking up the phone] No, you got the wrong number. This is nine-one... uh... two.

(Dog of Death)

The judicial system only promises ‘liberty and justice for most’ in Springfield and is fuelled by the greed of lawyers and the society that needs lawyers in abundance:

If there’s one thing America needs, it’s more lawyers. Can you imagine a world without lawyers? [All races harmoniously hold hands and dance under a sunny rainbow]

(Marge in Chains)

The Protestant pastor Reverend Lovejoy, who likes to bore his parishioners with the Lamentations of Jeremiah (the long version), is revealed as a cultural chauvinist who is bafflingly ignorant of other religions:

Lovejoy: [God] was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbours when they came to your aid, be they [points to Flanders] Christian, [points to Krusty] Jew, or [points to Apu, thinks]... miscellaneous.

Apu: Hindu! There are 700 million of us.

Lovejoy: [Patronising] Aw, that’s super.

(Homer the Heretic)

In the classrooms of Springfield Elementary, pupils are subjected to other lamentations in the form of standardised tests, such as the ‘Career Aptitude Normalizing Test’ or CANT:

Question sixty: I prefer the smell of (a) gasoline, (b) French fries, or (c) bank customers?
[...]

Janey: Well, that was a waste of time.
Lisa: Janey, school is never a waste of time.
Ms Hoover: Since we have fifteen minutes until recess, please put down your pencils and stare at the front of the room.
(*Separate Vocations*)

Though caricature and mockery, the humour of *The Simpsons* denies the validity of society's authoritative institutions: politics, police, legal system, religion, school and, last but not least, television. In similar fashion to the way Lenny Bruce's stand-up comedy was preoccupied with showbiz, because Bruce thought that it was from showbiz that society received its phony values (Hendra 1987, 128), *The Simpsons* is fascinated with television. The Simpson family is intoxicated by TV's magical world of appearance and phony commercial values:

[After the family escaped from a zombie attack]
Marge: Well, I'm sure glad we didn't turn into mindless zombies.
Bart: [Like a zombie] Shhhh... T... V....
Homer: [Also like a zombie] Man... Fall... Down... Funny...
Family: [Like zombies] Mmmmm...
(*Treehouse of Horror III*)

The success of television's array of questionable entertainment in Springfield reveals a world with questionable values in general:

Live, from Hawaii's beautiful Molokai Island ('We're not just for lepers anymore'), it's *Carnival of the Stars!*
(*Mr. Plow*)

Media in Springfield are hardly distinguishable from such questionable entertainment in their quest for ratings. News anchor Kent Brockman can never quite tell the difference between important news and light entertainment:

[Casually, as an afterthought]...leaving the Vice President in charge.
[Enthusiastically] And now! Leaning Tower of Pisa, eat your heart out

and move over. This is one story that's not on the level. [A story about *The Simpsons'* leaning house follows]

(Marge Gets a Job)

The humour of *The Simpsons* ridicules the phony commercial logic that thrives on television and stands in direct opposition to human well-being.

We take eighteen ounces of sizzling ground beef, and soak it in rich, creamery butter, then we top it off with bacon, ham, and a fried egg. We call it the Good Morning Burger.

(Bart's Friend Falls in Love)

Commercial interests transgress all boundaries of taste and decency in *The Simpsons*. When the town thinks a little boy is trapped in a well, an amusement park is soon built around the scene, where shops sell beer, hot dogs, pizzas and 'I survived Timmy O'Toole Getting Trapped in a Well' T-shirts (*Radio Bart*). The personification of these commercial practices in Springfield is children's TV star Krusty the Clown and his plethora of merchandise.

Talking Krusty Doll: If I break, buy a new one!

(A Streetcar Named Marge)

Nothing is too sacred to be commodified in Springfield:

[Radio commercial] Gabbin' about God, sponsored by Ace Religious Supply, where they say, "If we don't got it, it ain't holy".

(Like Father, Like Clown)

The above examples provide an overview of how *The Simpsons* functions as a satirical representation of our society. As explained, Northrop Frye describes satire as militant irony in fantasy and humour to reveal a social object of attack as absurd (1990, 223-224). In this regard, the limited animation of *The Simpsons* offers a fantastic representation of our world,

which caricatures and ridicules that world's established socio-cultural conventions. In the tradition of new wave comedy, the series employs humour as an all-encompassing criticism of the social status quo. The militant irony of *The Simpsons'* satire shows affinity with irony as infinite absolute negativity, in the sense that it holds on to an absolute moral standard to deny the validity of society in its entirety, even if that standard remains unexpressed. *The Simpsons* puts the ethos of society to an ethical test that society fails completely. The satire of the series thrives on a clash between a fantastic representation of reality, which nonetheless reveals how the world really is in essence, and an unexpressed ideal of how the world should be. The irony of *The Simpsons* presupposes an unexpressed ethical standard compared to which life in Springfield is lacking, otherwise its satire would not be so funny. Ultimately, we laugh at mayor Quimby, because we know politicians should not be corrupt; at lawyers, because they should not be so greedy; at Mr Burns, because capital is not more important than human wellbeing; at Homer, because he should be more critical and informed; etc. Finally, we also laugh at *The Simpsons* itself, which makes no claims to possess absolute ethical wisdom and distinguishes itself from the cultural hegemonies it ridicules by including itself in the mockery – in the self-reflexive tradition of American animation and new wave comedy.

Ethical truth-telling is the truth-telling concerned with how one should lead one's life and has established the true life as an *other* life that aims to transform the social ethos. The philosophical militancy of ethical truth-telling has been interpreted in various ways throughout the ages, and one way is as humorous artistic production that battles for an *other* life in an *other* society. Ethical truth-telling involves an ethical test that can be understood as a humorous test: any incongruity between unethical reality and ethical ideal is revealed as fundamentally ridiculous in the sense that the unethical reality is robbed of any absolute importance it may claim. The satire of *The Simpsons* functions as modern-day form of humorous ethical truth-telling as it reveals social reality as immoral and therefore ridiculous.

As we laugh at the satire of *The Simpsons*, we ridicule the social ethos. We destroy it, so it no longer holds any validity for us and we are urged to look for an *other* social ethos, rooted in the unexpressed moral values that are the motor of *The Simpsons*' satire. *The Simpsons* does not outline a straightforward morality that tells us how to live our lives, but rather a toolkit with instruments of ridicule and self-ridicule that we can use in our daily lives to reveal truth about society and self. As it urges us to take care of self and have the courage to reveal truth about a society that refuses to take care of self, the satire of *The Simpsons* inscribes itself into the trans-historical tradition of ethical truth-telling and philosophical care of self.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed ethical truth-telling as the philosophical reflection on the moral life and understood *The Simpsons* as a modern-day expression of such ethical philosophical reflection. I am well aware that my reading of *The Simpsons* has highlighted some aspects of the series (most importantly its satire) and left others unmentioned (to name a few: its emotional realism, its representation of gender or examples of its humour that are just funny without being moral). I do not claim that my analysis of *The Simpsons* as humorous ethical truth-telling is the only 'correct' reading of the series, only that it is interesting because it shows how humour can be a fundamental aspect of morality – and perhaps even must be, from the perspective of the silenus or mocking satyr. I do defend that the true significance of the satire of *The Simpsons* is best understood from the perspective of humorous ethical truth-telling. In future research, I aim to further develop conceptual tools for the analysis of comedy and animated cartoons as humorous ethical truth-telling, which will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of humour, animation, as well as philosophical care of self. For now, I hope this article will help to stimulate interest in the moral dimension of humour and scholarly investigations of the philosophical potential of popular culture as ethical truth-telling.

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For the actual episodes, I refer the reader to the DVDs of season three and four of *The Simpsons*:

The Simpsons – The Complete Third Season. 1991-1992. 20th Century Fox, 2003.

The Simpsons – The Complete Fourth Season. 1992-1993. 20th Century Fox, 2004.

I further refer the reader to the episode transcripts by fans on The Simpsons Archive, which have been most helpful in preparing my textual analysis: “The Simpsons Archive – Episode Capsules.” *The Simpsons Archive*. <http://www.snpp.com/episodes.html> [accessed April 3, 2013].

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NOTES

1. Working in the German tradition, Sloterdijk distinguishes Classical *Kynismus* from *Zynismus* in its contemporary meaning (1987).
2. Keslowitz's argues that one of the show's messages is that it does not matter what people think of you, as long you are happy with yourself (which is diametrically opposed to the Socratic ethical test devoted to self-investigation and self-improvement) (2006, 230).
3. There are three such book series: the *Popular Culture and Philosophy Series* (2000 – present, Open Court), *The Philosophy of Popular Culture Series* (2005 – present, The University Press of Kentucky) and *The Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture Series* (2009 – present, John Wiley).
4. I use comedy to refer to cultural or artistic productions that are primarily humorous in their intent.