According to Manuel Davenport in his *An Existentialist Philosophy of Humor*, "The best humorists—Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Bob Hope, and Mort Sahl—share a mixture of detachment and desire, eagerness to believe, and irreverence concerning the possibility of certainty. And when they become serious about their convictions—as Twain did about colonialism [or slavery, racism, unfettered capitalism, or religion]... they cease to be humorous." I like what Davenport has to say in the first part but not the second, as he does not provide examples of Twain’s attempts at satire that fail to be humorous. I will examine some of the very serious issues Twain addresses through humor and irony and show how his commentary and argument, though serious, is still funny while not falling into frivolity.

The Laughing Philosopher

The moniker “laughing philosopher” comes from Twain’s ability to be humorous without falling into buffoonery. Although he is no fan of titles, he might live with this one given that at least once he admitted he prefers to be considered a philosopher before being seen as a humorist. The title fits because he is capable of deep analysis of serious issues about human suffering while remaining in a playful attitude. He plays with thought not unlike philosophers who present their arguments in the form of thought
experiments about serious metaphysical or ethical matters. There is something
playful, if not amusing, in mulling over the possibility that we might
be nothing but brains in vats, or that a famous violinist has been surrepti-
tiously attached to our back.  

The original "laughing philosopher" was Democritus, who was also
called the " mocker" as he was prone to laugh at the arrogance and igno-
rance of his fellow citizens. Democritus and one of his near contemporaries,
Xenophanes, were both skeptical of religion and gods created in the images
of men (sometimes women), yet their critiques were often lighthearted.
Twain's philosophical lineage extends back in their direction, with Scho-
penhauer, Hume, and Voltaire along the way. Each of these philosophers
has critical insights into the religious mind, and each of them had clever
rebuttals to theological dogma.  

There is a philosophical thread running through Twain's scathing humor
that attacks arrogance and a presumed sense of certitude. These two vices,
arrogance and certitude, are often found together, and they are a destructive
combination that sustains many of the institutions that he confronts: racism,
slavery, colonialism, excesses of capitalism, and the often dogmatic, oppres-
sive, and ludicrous nature of a great deal of organized religions.

Twain used humor as an indirect method to at once engage and disarm
his audiences when submitting his blistering critiques of serious matters
concerning our presuppositions and inconsistencies, which are central foci
of philosophers. But the opening quotation from Davenport gives the impres-
sion that he could not mix his humor with issues that were important to him.
He was either wholly serious, lacking playful humor, or he was funny, but
inconsequential in his satire. Twain was aware of this dilemma:

It's an awful thing to gain a reputation for being witty and humorous. Every
time you talk people expect you to tell a story or say something funny. You
can't always live up to it. We are all only human beings. . . . What I like about
it [a story about him in the London Chronicle] is that it takes me just a bit seri-
ously. You see, though I love England from my heart, and I'd go over many seas
for the welcome that you've given me, you generally seem to expect a joke if
I'm anywhere by. In America I reckon they've got a bit used to my jokes, and
they look out for something else now and then.  

While Americans might have gotten used to his jokes, it is another thing
to say they no longer found them humorous. I think that part of that "some-
thing else" they looked for is the serious element of Twain's wit that playfully
undermines the feelings of certitude that so many people possess, especially
regarding their most cherished but undefended beliefs.
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Only the dullest of dullards would proclaim that Mark Twain is not funny. That person, of course, should be prosecuted, then banished. But does Twain deserve to be called a philosopher and can he demonstrate his philosophical convictions and be funny simultaneously? The short answer is yes. Borrowing from Bertrand Russell, “People often make the mistake of thinking that ‘humorous’ and ‘serious’ are antonyms. They are wrong. ‘Humorous’ and ‘solemn’ are antonyms. I am never more serious than when I am being humorous.” Twain had his share of “solemn” occasions, especially later in a life that was rife with tribulations, some brought on himself by foolhardy financial speculations, and others by what he often viewed as a deterministic universe that took away those dearest to him, such as his beloved daughter Susy, his newborn Langdon, his youngest daughter Jean, and his wife Olivia. But his writings on the momentous matters of death and suffering of innocents are not devoid of humor. Twain is serious about these concerns, but not in the absolutist sense presumed by Davenport.

Davenport describes the relation between humor and seriousness in this way: “Humor . . . requires a detachment from seriousness. The serious man—the man with undeviating confidence that his values are absolute is no more able to laugh at himself than the serious God.” I agree with his general notion that playful humor attacks absolutism. But I think Twain would agree also, and there is no shortage of self-deprecating humor in his writing.

To make sense of this, we can look at one of Twain’s unlikely philosophical ancestors, Arthur Schopenhauer: “The opposite of laughing and joking is seriousness. Accordingly, it consists in the consciousness of the perfect agreement and congruity of the conception, or thought, with what is perceived, or the reality. The serious man is convinced that he thinks the things as they are, and that they are as he thinks them.” The common connotation of seriousness is synonymous with such words as grave, solemn, somber, severe, sober, stern, and so on. All of these might be peripherally related to Schopenhauer’s conception, but they do not get at its core. This is so for Twain too: he is serious in his humorous appraisals of the type of seriousness about which Schopenhauer and Davenport worry. It will be helpful to describe Twain’s playful assaults on seriousness through the lens of existentialist thought to further clarify the seriousness and playfulness found in Twain’s critiques of Christianity and religion in general. “What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know. It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.”

This, attributed to Twain, is the sort of certainty and complacent seriousness that his humor attacks. The “just ain’t so” bit will be hard to defend epistemologically, so I qualify it: we claim to “know for sure” all sorts of things that we really have no good reason to believe in the first place, and a
hefty amount of reason to not believe. This is the negative sort of seriousness that Twain rails against, and it is the same described by Schopenhauer and many later existentialists.

For example, the salient feature in Jean-Paul Sartre's, Simone de Beauvoir's, and Lewis Gordon's descriptions of seriousness, what they refer to as the spirit of seriousness, is the absolutist, dogmatic, otherworldliness, and the unquestionable nature of the values and meanings held by serious people. Relating to one peculiar institution, Beauvoir says, "The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature, by the gods, by the powers against whom revolt has no meaning."14 Here, seriousness is closer to an attitude that takes reality, with all of its horrors, as inevitable. Slaveholders continually used particular biblical passages in this way to "justify" their peculiar way of life—they could do no other, and any slave attempting to subvert the power structure would be akin to doing battle with a hurricane or any other natural disaster. This makes not thinking about such matters easy: there is nothing you can do about it, so "why bother?"15 This conceit is fortified with the assurances of dogma so often accompanying reverence for an omnipotent deity: the world is the way it is because the God made it so.

Because this God is all good, the world must be as good as it gets; the faithful are humble, and this is known with certainty. As Twain notes, when one begins with confidence of this sort, incongruities melt away: "The Christian begins with this straight proposition, this definite proposition, this inflexible and uncompromising proposition: God is all-knowing, and all-powerful. . . [and yet] The poor's most implacable and unwavering enemy is their Father in Heaven."16 It is comforting to feel certain that there is purpose and structure, and that everything happens for a reason. Twain sees this most evidently with the common lot of the poor the world over; to paraphrase the Bible, there will always be the poor among us (so why bother?) and God has His reasons for permitting their suffering. But, Twain points out, God is prone to exacerbate the suffering beyond human moral comprehension.

The spirit of seriousness is an attitude that perpetuates mental inflexibility, or what Lewis Gordon calls epistemic closure: "In the act of epistemic closure, one ends a process of inquiry. In effect, it is the judgment 'say no more.' . . . In contrast, epistemological openness is the judgment 'there is always more to be known.'"17 He writes this in the context of racism and the failure to recognize the complex identities of human beings, but it is also connected to values and meanings associated with power and comfort found in the faithful, who unquestionably hold onto the morals putatively handed
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down by an omnibenevolent God—a God who, according to Twain, curi-
ously refrains from following his own commandments.18

It does sound odd to say that Twain can be serious and humorous at the
same time, but that is likely due to an overreliance on a single sense of the
term “seriousness.” For instance, John Morreall claims that seriousness is dif-
f erent than humorousness in this way: “For us to be serious is to be solemn
given to sustained, narrowly focused thought. It is also for us to be ear-
nest, that is, sincere, in what we say and do. We say only what we believe,
and act only according to our real intentions.”19 In contrast, a humorous and
playful attitude is one in which we are frivolous, unconcerned with reality
in the moment, only interested in “delighting” others.20 These are the com-
mon meanings of these terms, but they do not account for the playfulness or
seriousness employed by Twain.

Twain is not devious in his insincerity, but he is often explicit that it will
be difficult to determine what exactly his “real intentions” are (you might
even be shot if you try to divine them, as he warns in the Notice to Huckle-
berry Finn), and he tells us outright in his Autobiographies21 that much of what
he writes there is fiction. But as with his humor, it is not mere or pure fiction.
Like the positive image of Socrates, Twain does not really know indubitably
what the answers are,22 and his irony is more of a tool to uncover the igno-
rance of those who think they do know for sure, including himself, than it
is a prideful judgment from above that cannot itself be questioned. Critical
reflection does not require absolutism; revealing erroneous thinking in others
does not entail you must already have the answer.

Twain manages to do what Hume did philosophically against religion but
with an unmatched humorous wit. You do not just nod your head in vigorous
agreement with Twain’s “arguments”; you laugh audibly. I think this is what
Twain ultimately desired: to be funny but taken seriously, and to make people
laugh about significant issues. He says as much in his Autobiography:

Humorists of the “mere” sort cannot survive. Humor is only a fragrance, a
decoration. Often it is merely an odd trick of speech and spelling . . . There are
those who say a novel should be a work of art solely, and you must not preach
in it, you must not teach in it. That may be true as regards novels, but it is not
ture as regards humor. Humor must not professively teach, it must not professedly
preach; but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years.23

Davenport’s claim about Twain and seriousness would be supported if
he could demonstrate instances of Twain’s attempted humor that merely
and professedly teaches and preaches. Twain explicitly professes that he
intends neither.
His humorous yet serious analysis is open, dynamic, and subject to change upon receipt of counter-evidence and compelling argument. This is so even with his most trenchant criticisms of Mary Baker Eddy. For instance, he is open to learning even from the objects of his irony: "he is careful to explain that he does not condemn Christian Science out and out. There is something in the theory that mind can exert a powerful influence upon the body in conditions of disease." His humor pokes holes in the thin façade of prefabricated presuppositions, but without offering a dogmatic Truth to stand in its stead. This does not mean Twain is a nihilist only concerned with removing any and all values, anymore than Socrates was a nihilist, or Sophist, in his ironical disputations with his serious interlocutors who presumed to possess certain knowledge. But it does imply that Twain intends to engage in serious subversion. Bruce MJehlson offers a broad conception of humor in his analysis of Twain's satire: "A working definition then, heavily pruned, almost primordial: humor as a subversion of seriousness."25

Man is the Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal.
He is the only animal that has the True Religion—several of them.26

Twain is surely one of the most quotable quippers ever, but these are not simply slogans. Twain takes matters of religion as seriously as he did that other peculiar institution—slavery. He even considered preaching from the pulpit professionally:

"I never had but two powerful ambitions in my life. One was to be a pilot, & the other a preacher of the gospel. I accomplished the one & failed in the other, because I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade—i.e. religion... But I have had a "call" to literature, of a low order—i.e. humorous. It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit." He vowed to concentrate his attention on "seriously scribbling to excite the laughter of God's creatures."27

Self-deprecation aside, Twain possessed a deep understanding of scripture and an insight into the closed dogmatic attitude of many true believers. His failure at theology was not due to a lack of understanding. On the contrary, he understood too well and perhaps thought too deeply to be able to stomach what he saw as the many inconsistencies, or incongruities, of religious thinking.

The religious life is meant to be one of holiness, devout worship, and love of God, the very same that commands such loving worship. The Christian in particular is to manifest humility before that all-knowing, all-
powerful, all-good deity. But many of the very same people are certain that they are saved, and they catch no glimpse of the irony that hell for their hubris likely awaits them according to their own theology. Those with a touch less pride are still dead certain that God has all those Omnis, and no matter what, this must be the best of all possible worlds created for us—the "damned human race"! This view is maintained, Twain says, even as the common housefly spreads disease and death upon those created in the image and likeness of God: "The housefly wrecks more human constitutions and destroys more human lives than all God's multitude of misery-messengers and death-agents put together."28

He is earnest in his analyses of faith, but his sense of humor does not dissipate in proportion to that sincerity. He even goes so far as to suggest the opposite of humor is religious faith: "I cannot see how a man of any large degree of humorous perception can ever be religious—except he purposely shut the eyes of his mind & keep them shut by force."29 The concern here is "epistemic closure": the mindset that ignores any hint of cognitive dissonance and only seeks the manufactured comforts in the feelings of certitude. This is willful ignorance, and Twain sees it creep into many facets of American identity both home and abroad.

It is much easier, as a peak into any century of the past will reveal, to torture and kill a person when "God is on your side." This is so even when those slaughtered are women and children, an event that occurred in the Philippines that Twain discusses at considerable length. Here is one example that is apropos given current events:

When a country is invaded it is because it has done some wrong to another country—some wrong like the United States did in taking the Philippines—a stain upon our flag that can never be effaced. Yet today in the public schools we teach our children to salute the flag, and this is our idea of instilling in them patriotism. And this so-called patriotism we mistake for citizenship; but if there is a stain on that flag it ought not to be honored, even if it is our flag. The true citizenship is to protect the flag from dishonor—to make it the emblem of a nation that is known to all nations as true and honest and honorable. And we should forever forget that old phrase—"My country, right or wrong, my country."30

I think this is the sort of commentary that Davenport felt was bereft of humor, and this is not surprising as there is not much to laugh about when a U.S. regiment of well-armed soldiers is shooting down at a band of "savages" trapped in a crater who are poorly armed, or not at all. To echo Twain, we should not expect even the greatest comedians to never have a moment of solemnity. The
subject of analysis is not in itself amusing, and admittedly, Twain is not intending to merely delight his readers on this occasion. But he is also not merely preaching, condemning, or ridiculing from an absolutist perch.

This is primarily political critique, but Twain rarely dissociates the political from the religious because the two were seldom detached in American public life at the time. The reports from the battlefield and the newspaper headlines laud the “heroism” and “gallantry” of the “Christian soldiers.” Twain juxtaposes these plaudits with the facts mentioned above—that the majority of the enemy was poorly armed and already trapped—but also in contrast with the horrifying casualties on both sides during the American Civil War. He satirically describes the Philippine incursion this way: “This is incomparably the greatest victory that was ever achieved by Christian soldiers of the United States.”31 There is irony in this illustration of incongruity between American ideals, morals, and values and the reality of governmental actions driven by a globalized “manifest destiny.” He knows, as would anyone else who could see beyond their patriotic-religious fervor, that such a massacre “would not have been a brilliant feat of arms even if Christian America, represented by its salaried soldiers, had shot them down with Bibles and the Golden Rule instead of bullets.”32 Twain brandishes the Golden Rule like a weapon to crack open the spirit of seriousness that permeates and perpetuates the “my country right or wrong” attitude.33 In contrast to Davenport’s assessment, Twain cleverly and amusingly exposes the seriousness, arrogance, and complacent sense of certitude embedded in religious nationalism.

Twain does the same with more straightforwardly theological matters. For instance, consider how Twain puts his scorching irony into the mouth of a toddler in his short story “Little Bessie.” Bessie relentlessly questions her mother about the natures of Christ, God, and human suffering: “Mamma, is Christ God? Yes, my child. Mamma, how can He be Himself and Somebody Else at the same time? He isn’t, my darling. It is like the Siamese twins—two persons, one born ahead of the other, but equal in authority, equal in power.”34 From this, Bessie reasons: “I understand it, now, mamma, and it is quite simple. One twin has sexual intercourse with his mother, and begets himself and his brother; and next he has sexual intercourse with his grandmother and begets his mother. I should think it would be difficult, mamma, though interesting.”35 Admittedly, the particulars offered by Mamma might not be the most nuanced view in Christendom, but the mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation, and of course, Immaculate Conception, require an impressive degree of mental acrobatics to avoid little Bessie’s absurd description. Apparently, Bessie has pondered these matters more so than many of the zealously faithful—and she does not stop with Christology.
Bessie, like Twain after the loss of so many of his own family members, worries about the suffering of the most vulnerable and innocent of God's creatures: "Did [God] give Billy Norris the typhus? Yes. What for? Why, to discipline him and make him good. But he died, mamma, and so it couldn't make him good. Well, then, I suppose it was for some other reason. We know it was a good reason, whatever it was." Bessie continues: "What do you think it was, mamma? Oh, you ask so many questions! I think; it was to discipline his parents. Well, then, it wasn't fair, mamma. Why should his life be taken away for their sake, when he wasn't doing anything? Oh, I don't know! I only know it was for a good and wise and merciful reason. . . . He does nothing that isn't right and wise and merciful. You can't understand these things now, dear, but when you are grown up you will understand them, and then you will see that they are just and wise."

Mamma denies that humans are capable of knowing the whys and wherefores of an infinite being such as God: so shut up already! I call this Ad Hoc Mysterianism. This where no conceivable counter-evidence will ever suffice because we always have the phrase "for all we know" that evades any potential inconsistencies. "Mysterianism" typically applies to complex religious notions in a positive sense. For example, a central conception like the Trinity is to be revered but not fully unraveled as if it were a problem. I use the term in a negative sense, coupled with ad hoc, to imply an all-too convenient tactic to sustain the internal coherence of an idea in the face of otherwise compelling counter-evidence. Twain calls this attitude "insane, rotten, and irrational."

Mamma, finally growing weary of coming up with adequate answers to her three-year-old's inquiries, ultimately gives up, unable to protect "an innocent child's holy belief": "There, now, go along with you, and don't come near me again until you can interest yourself in some subject of a lower grade and less awful than theology. Bessie, (disappearing.) Mr. Hollister says there ain't any."

The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow.

There is no humor in heaven.

What of Heaven and salvation in the end for all of those who followed the commands of God? Recall that this is the very same God who designed humanity with a specific nature, namely, one that makes us really enjoy sex, but it is a nature we are constantly ordered to deny, as Twain has Satan inform us in Letters from the Earth: "To wit, that the human being, like the immortals, naturally places sexual intercourse far and away above all other
joys—yet he has left it out of his heaven!” The vast majority of Twain’s Christian contemporaries proclaimed the desire for salvation and heaven, yet it is unclear what that actually meant; they just knew it’s going to be good. Satan’s letter continues: “The very thought of [intercourse] excites him; opportunity sets him wild; in this state he will risk life, reputation, everything—even his queer heaven itself—to make good that opportunity and ride it to the overwhelming climax. From youth to middle age all men and all women prize copulation above all other pleasures combined, yet it is actually as I have said: it is not in their heaven; prayer takes its place.”

Not only do we lose a good, we gain a negative in prayer, along with other unpleasantries Twain catalogues, like group singing—eternally. Can we really be the same people in heaven that we are on Earth if our desires seem to be so vastly changed? Are we even the same type of beings in heaven? If not, why, Twain implicitly asks, do we constrain ourselves with the Lord’s unbending commands here and now for rewards that somebody else might receive?

What are some of these Godly commands that must be obeyed to permit entrance into Heaven, where there is only praying, singing, and absolutely no sex? “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is a command which makes no distinction between the following persons. They are all required to obey it: Children at birth. Children in the cradle. School children. Youths and maidens. Fresh adults. Older ones. Men and women of [forty]. Of [fifty]. Of [sixty]. Of [seventy]. Of [eighty]. Of [ninety]. Of [one hundred].” Again, most Christians simply follow the commands of an all-knowing being without giving them much thought. This is because if you start with certainty that God is, and is all the Omnis, complacency quickly sets in. But even a brief rumination on just this one command, Twain shows, uncovers a range of absurdities:

The command does not distribute its burden equally, and cannot. It is not hard upon the three sets of children. It is hard—harder—still harder upon the next three sets—cruelly hard. It is blessedly softened to the next three sets. It has now done all the damage it can, and might as well be put out of commission. Yet with comical imbecility it is continued, and the four remaining estates are put under its crushing ban. Poor old wrecks, they couldn’t disobey if they tried. And think—because they holily refrain from adulterating each other, they get praise for it!

Admittedly, with the advent of Viagra and other remedies for “blessed softening,” disobeying the command is not entirely impossible today, so there could still be a stiff penalty for it.
Man is the Animal that Blushes.

He is the only one that does it—or has occasion to.\textsuperscript{46}

It seems Twain is a bit embarrassed about humanity, or a large portion of it at least. He might wish that more of his fellow creatures would in fact blush, and more often than they do. Twain sees much to blush about related to religious doctrines and indoctrinations. There is so much that is funny in the “Huh, that’s strange” sense, and that is significant because the beliefs about these issues have actual consequences in the real world. Twain is able to take these “funny-strange” cases, and maintain their seriousness but add to them a “funny-ha-ha” element.\textsuperscript{47} This humor can offer a relief for himself and his readers, but that is not the only goal of his satire.

According to Michelson, “It goes without saying that talk of God’s absence and the general nastiness of the human condition can be serious business. But it also can be a way of blowing off steam about things solidly mundane: family trouble, business downturns, old age and failing health.”\textsuperscript{48} Perhaps we have a different notion of “mundane.” Death of family members, bankruptcy, aging, and imminent death of self, while they happen all-too often (and this might be all that Michelson means here), do not meet my understanding of mundane. These are all serious matters that have deep religious, theological, philosophical, and ethical implications that Twain views as worthy of our sincere contemplation.

Twain does not shy away from them in his writing, nor is he simply hiding behind his humor as a release from the pressures that everyday suffering imposes, suffering for which, if God of the Bible existed,\textsuperscript{49} God would ultimately be responsible. He is making the case that this is not a God worthy of worship. Rather, it is an idea invented by a few humans who have failed to recognize that the “moral sense” the deity is supposed to have imparted to us is nowhere found in Him:

Our Bible reveals to us the character of our God with minute and remorseless exactness. The portrait is substantially that of a man—if one can imagine a man charged and overcharged with evil impulses far beyond the human limit, a personage whom no one, perhaps, would desire to associate with, now that Nero and Caligula are dead. . . . To Adam is forbidden the fruit of a certain tree—and he is gravely informed that if he disobeys he shall die. How could that be expected to impress Adam? Adam was merely a man in stature; in knowledge and experience he was in no way the superior of a baby of two years of age . . . he had never heard of a dead thing before. The word meant nothing to him. If the Adam child had been warned that if he ate of
the apples he would be transformed into a meridian of longitude, that threat
would have been the equivalent of the other, since neither of them could
mean anything to him.30

And yet, men toil to provide food, women suffer childbirth and often die
from it, and children die of disease because of the Adam-child’s single trans-
gression. Serious indeed, but Twain is not so dogmatic that he cannot find a
humorous and enlightening analogy in it.

Back to Davenport’s partly insightful conception of humor as a “mixture
of detachment and desire, eagerness to believe, and irreverence concerning
the possibility of certainty.”31 Morreall would agree with Davenport that we
fall out of the playful mode when we are too close emotionally to the con-
tent of our potential humor. In such cases, we fail to achieve the appropriate
distance to think humorously about the issue, and worse, we lose the critical
perspective as well. Twain maintains both of these in his discerning humor.

Twain’s seriousness is not the closed-minded dogmatic seriousness that
his humor attacks; instead, it is an attitude toward a given issue that he
views as consequential. With his humor, he is able to step back enough to
retain a critical eye and play with the significant beliefs in the way well-
trained philosophers can often do. The philosopher needs some degree of
emotional attachment to the subject matter, or else there would be no
motivation to even think about it. But this does not preclude her from find-
ing the right degree of detachment to see a problem for what it is. Twain
seems to have found that emotive and cognitive sweet spot that enables
both humorous and critical reflection. It is not coincidental that these two
virtues often go hand in hand in the process of recognizing the incongrui-
ties between professed ideals and reality that so often falls short of them, or
scrutinizing purported Truths about the cosmos. With Twain, we can laugh
while we think. The reverse is true too.