***Many a True Word hath Been Spoken in Jest***

*Graham Priest*

*CUNY Graduate Center, the University of Melbourne, and the Ruhr University of Bochum*

**Introduction**

The present volume is about the interplay between oppositions and the crossing of boundaries. Philosophy being what it is, it can profitably employ the interplay between oppositions and cross boundaries in many dimensions. The essays in the volume show a number of these. In this piece, I want to treat an opposition/boundary that is much less obvious: that between philosophy and humour—not by theorising it, but by doing it. The first part of this piece is a short (and I hope humourous) story concerning the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre. The second is a brief commentary on this.

**A Discussion about Nothing (in Particular)**

Martin was enjoying an early morning cigarette on his patio. Spring had come early to the Black Forest this year, and the trees were already beautiful shades of green. Somewhere in the distance could be heard a cuckoo.

‘That’s a being I haven’t heard for a while,’ he thought. ‘Maybe it’s been looking for its “is”,’ Martin speculated.

He returned to his cornflakes. ‘These things are bloody awful,’ he thought. Still, the economy was in ruins. You couldn’t get any decent German food, like Bratwurst and Blood Sausage.

‘We have to put up with all this American crap. They just send it to add insult to injury,’ he mused.

The cornflakes were going soggy.

If only the Führer had listened to his advice. We wouldn’t be in this mess now. But he *had* to go and open up the Eastern Front. Silly bugger. It was obvious that the call of being was from the other direction.

‘I wonder if he ever did read the copy of *Sein und Zeit* I sent him? And I personally signed it. Hm… Hitler’s copy, personally signed by Martin Heidegger. That should be worth a mint some day. I hope it didn’t go up in flames with him.’

‘Still, maybe it was all the stuff about death in Division Two that gave him the idea to end it all. Probably the only really authentic thing he ever did,’ Martin ventured.

‘Well, there you go anyway. He’s gone for sure. I wonder where *his* “is” is now? And he’s left the rest of us staring down into the abyss. And when you stare into the abyss, the Americans stare back.’

‘No, that can’t be right. No nation that could come up with cornflakes is even worthy of getting into the abyss. They’re just *too* abysmal.’

Since losing his job at Freiberg, Martin had been at a bit of a loss. He’d gone back to his place in the Black Forest. That was alright. But now he didn’t have all those students to befuddle any more.

‘Yea. I’d get them looking for being. They’d have to look inside their books, then under their desks, then in each other’s pockets. That was a real giggle… Can’t do that any more.’

‘I’ll just have to carry on writing without a captive audience,’ he thought. ‘But what on Earth can I write about? It’s probably a good idea to give the blood and soil thing a miss for a bit,’ it occurred to him. ‘I could go back to writing about the call of being—maybe it sounds a bit different after you’ve eaten cornflakes. No. I can’t do more of the being stuff. People really will start to think I’m a real one trick pony.’

The cornflakes had now turned into a soggy mush.

Martin pondered. Nothing occurred to him. ‘Gott in Himmel! I can talk about that! I’ve said a few things about it before, but I could really go to town on it, saying it all in a much more obscure way. ’

‘Hmmm…. But what can I say about about this nothing? There doesn’t seem to be a lot more to be said.’ Indeed, Martin reflected, there doesn’t really seem to be anything at all to say about nothing. There is nothing there to say anything about. So you can say nothing about nothing. ‘Hey! That sounds pretty profound,’ it struck him. ‘Maybe I can work that up into something. Add in a few logical connectives to make it sound as though there’s some kind of argument there, and some rhetorical questions that make the reader feel a bit insecure. Yea. That might work.’

Satisfied with his brainwave, Martin decided to take his morning stroll. He gazed at his walking shoes sitting against to wall, to see if they would tell him something about the being of their owner. They didn’t. So he put them on, and then set out along one of his favourite Holzwegen. After the dust and destruction of the German cities, the air was fresh. ‘Why, you can almost smell being in it’, thought Martin

He had been being going for about an hour, when he came across a small clearing. He decided to stop and have a cigarette. As he puffed quietly, he saw someone approaching from a different pathway. The man was quite short, and was carrying a baguette and a bottle of red wine. ‘Looks like he’s out for a picnic’, Martin thought. ‘I wonder if he’d like some company?’ Red wine was a rare commodity in Germany now, and a baguette had to be better than cornflakes.

As the man came nearer, he saw Martin and waved. He approached, and they stood face to face. Martin wondered whether the man was looking at him or at some non-existent person next to him. Still he looked like a reasonable fellow. Maybe, Martin thought, he could tell him all about being.

‘Guten Tag’

‘Bonjour’

There was a long silence.

‘Sprachen Sie Deutsche?’

‘Für mich es is sehr difficile—er, schwer?’ He said in a faltering accent. ‘Parlez vous Français?’

Actually, Martin could speak French quite well, though with an appalling accent. When they spoke, thought Martin, Frenchmen always look as though they want to kiss you. Anyway, he was buggered if he was going to speak that language. How could you possibly explain being in a language tailored to gastronomy? Then a brainwave:

‘Ξερεις να μιλας ελληνικα?’

The Frenchman clearly didn’t understand. ‘Yea, well, it *was* a long shot’, thought Martin.

‘English?’ said the Frenchman.

‘Oh, alright.’ Martin hated that language too, but his options for getting a glass of red wine were running out.

‘I’m just going to have a picnic,’ said the Frenchman. ‘Care to join me?’

‘With pleasure,’ said Martin.

They sat on the grass. The Frenchman poured out the wine into a couple of glasses, and gave one to Martin. Then he broke the bread and offered some to Martin. Thoughts about transubstantiation surfaced somewhere at the back of Martin’s mind, but he forced them down. He’d always thought it absurd that a Catholic priest could perform that bit of hocus-pocus. Still, the French are quite good at hocus-pocus.

‘To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?’ said Martin.

‘My name’s Sartre, Jean Paul Sartre, but please call me JP. That’s what my friends call me.’

‘And what brings you here, JP?

‘Well, I had to leave town for a while. I was having a bit of trouble with my girlfriend. A small affair. Nothing serious, you understand. But Simone didn’t quite see it that way.’

‘Typical Frenchman,’ though Martin.

‘So, I thought I’d see a bit of Germany I’d never seen before. I’m staying in a small town about 5km away.’

‘And what to do you for a living Mr Sartre… er, JP?’

Martin had been weighing up his lunch companion. ‘Doesn’t look like any kind of military man. Looks like a bit of a nerd. Maybe an accountant? No, a shopkeeper. That’s how he could get hold of the wine.’

‘I’m a philosopher.’

‘A philosopher!’ spluttered Martin, spilling red wine onto his Lederhosen. ‘Well, I’d never have thought it. But what a piece of good luck. I can tell him all about being. He won’t understand it, but it will be amusing to see the puzzlement on his face.’ On reflection, Martin mused, he’d never really understood it either. But he was always able to talk about it with such earnestness that no one had ever caught on.

‘And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?’ said Jean Paul.

‘My name is Martin Heidegger.’

‘Really?!!’

‘Yes. You’ve heard of me?’

‘I certainly have’ said Jean Paul. I studied *Being and Time* when I spent a few months in Germany before the war. I couldn’t understand a word of it.

‘Of course’, thought Martin.

‘But I really admired the way you could explain such simple ideas in such a complicated way.’

‘Oh, maybe he’s on to me’, thought Martin.

‘In fact, I’ve just published a book of my own. I sort of stole the title from you. It’s called *Being and Nothingness*. I thought about *Being and Space*, or *Being and Space-Time*, but they didn’t sound very catchy. *Nothing* has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?’

‘Bugger,’ thought Martin. ‘There goes my next book.’

‘Yea. I guess it could catch on—though it might sound better in German. But, er, what do you say about this nothing?’

‘Ah,’ said the Frenchman, a smile appearing across his face. ‘That’s the clever part. I think that there are bits of it in the world.’

‘Like a boring Sunday afternoon?’ said Martin helpfully.

‘Not exactly… Look over there,’ said Jean Paul pointing to what seemed to be nothing in particular. ‘ Do you see an elephant?’

Martin wondered for a moment whether one had escaped from a local circus. He peered into the distance trying to make out a pachyderm shape amongst the trees.

‘Erm… no.’

‘Exactly,’ said Jean Paul.

‘Exactly what?’

‘What you see is the absence of an elephant. An absence is a kind of nothingness. So you can see a nothingness.’

Martin felt as though the Frenchman was trying to pull a fast one on him, but he couldn’t figure out what was wrong with his reasoning, so he simply congratulated himself on the fact that he must have such good eyesight, since it was as much as most people could do to see ordinary things at such a distance—even with glasses. Still, a sense of uncanny unease was coming over Martin.

Jean Paul could see that he was on top of the discussion, and visibly relaxed. He pulled out a small pouch from his pocket, and from within that, what appeared to be a roughly rolled cigarette. He lit it up and took a few long drags. ‘Smoke?’ he said.

The tobacco smelled like nothing Martin had even smelled before. ‘Er, what is it?’ he said.

‘A joint’ said the Frenchman.

Martin was puzzled. It didn’t seem to be a joint between any two things. Maybe it joined two bits of nothingness.

The Frenchman giggled.

‘No, er, no thanks,’ said Martin.

Jean Paul continued. ‘Now, one of these nothingnesses is somewhere you really won’t expect to find it.’

‘Really?’ said Martin. He was afraid that Jean Paul was going to get him to look in his pockets for it.

‘Yea. It’s in your mind!’ said the Frenchman, with the air of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Martin pondered. The fumes from the jointy thing were making him start to feel a bit strange.

‘Like, when your mind goes blank sometimes?’ Martin ventured.

‘Certainly not,’ said Jean Paul, giving Martin a withering look. ‘It’s what stands between you and any action.’

‘You mean nothing will prevent me *doing* something?’

‘Yes. So, you see, you are absolutely free! There is nothing to stop you doing anything!’.

The smell of the jointy thing was making Martin feel a bit of nausea. Still, he couldn’t let the Frenchman get away with sounding so clever.

‘I’ve though a bit about nothing’, he said.

‘Oh,’ said Jean Paul, sounding a bit deflated.

‘It’s really the same thing as being.’

‘Oh, come on. Pull the other one,’ said JP.

‘Yes.’ Martin cleared his throat and in this best Anglified Hoch-Deutsch said:

‘*Being, pure being*—without further determination. In its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with respect to another; it has no difference within it, nor any outwardly. It is pure indeterminateness and emptiness.—There is *nothing* to be intuited in it, if one can speak here of intuiting; or, it is only this pure empty intuiting itself. Just as little is anything to be thought in it, or, it is equally only this empty thinking. Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing.’

The Frenchman was about to interrupt, but Martin cut him short. ‘It took me bloody ages to memorize this,’ he thought. ‘So I’m going to give him the rest of it.’

‘*Nothing, pure nothingness*; it is complete emptiness, complete absence of determination and content; lack of all distinction within.—It makes a difference whether something or *nothing* is being intuited or thought. To intuit or to think nothing has therefore a meaning; the two are distinguished and so nothing *is* in our intuiting or thinking; or rather it is the empty intuiting and thinking itself, like pure being.—Nothing is therefore the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure *being* is.’

There was a long silence. Jean Paul was trying to think of something to say, but he couldn’t get the thought of elephants out of his mind. ‘That’s bloody good,’ he said at last. ‘Did you make it up yourself?’

‘Ignoramus,’ thought Martin. ‘Of course not. It’s Hegel.’

Jean Paul had a soft spot for Hegel. As a student in Paris before the war, he used to carry around a copy of Hegel’s *Logic*. He’d never been able to understand a word of it, but it impressed all the women.

‘Oh, I see,’ he said. ‘Then I guess nothing really is being then.

‘Ah, I’ve got you now,’ thought Martin.

‘Well then, Mr Sartre. If there is *nothing* between you and your actions, then there is *being* between you and your actions.’

It was now Jean Paul’s turn to feel troubled. ‘So?’ he said.

‘Well,’ said Martin, warming to his task. ‘You see, being is not itself a being. It’s what makes beings be.’

Jean Paul wasn’t sure that this was actually an English sentence, but he let it pass.

‘*So*,’ continued Martin ‘there is an ontological difference between you and your actions—which are beings—and being, which, according to you, is sandwiched between them.’

Jean Paul couldn’t see where this was going, but he started to feel a distinct sense of angst.

‘In other words, between you and your act there is this ontological gap. There is no way you can get across it. It you were to try, you would fall down into the gap of, well, nothingness.’

Now Jean Paul could see where this was going, but it was too late.

‘So, Mr Jean Paul, there is this unbridgeable gap between you and any action. You can’t do anything. You’re not free; you’re totally impotent.’

Jean Paul blanched slightly. This sounded like something that Simone would say to him in one of her nastier moods.

He couldn’t think of anything to say, so he decided to change the subject. ‘Let’s go for a stroll,’ he said.

Martin was satisfied that he had demolished the Frenchman, so he was happy to walk for a while.

They packed up the remains of their lunch, and set off at a gentle pace down a pathway, Martin gently humming *Deutschland, Deutschland, über Alles*.

Nothing was said for some time. Jean Paul was wrapt in thought. After a while he said: ‘Martin… this ontological difference you talk about’.

‘🎶 … über Alles 🎶,’ yodeled Martin quietly.

‘Sorry?’

‘Nothing.’

‘This ontological difference you talk about. You mean that being is no kind of being at all. It’s a quite different kind of thing.’

‘Indeed.’

‘So it’s not like a hammer, or a person, or a tune, or anything of the kind you can talk about?’

‘Indeed not.’

‘But did’t you just talk about it?’

It was now Martin’s turn to feel uncomfortable again. He was well used to this kind of jibe from his drinking companions. ‘Oh yea, Herr Prof. Dr. Dr. Martin,’ they would say. ‘You’re going to tell us all about this ineffable being thingy again?!! Perhaps it becomes just a little bit effable when it peeks out through yer Dasein!’. And they’d laugh. Martin would laugh with them—or pretend to. After the next round of Weissbier it would all be forgotten. But the exchange with the Frenchman was no drinking banter. This was a *serious* philosophical discussion.

Martin wracked his brains.

‘Yea. I did talk about it, but I didn’t really *mean* it,’ Martin said, somewhat lamely.

‘So you didn’t really mean it when you said I was impotent?,’ Jean Paul flashed back.

Martin knew that that line wasn’t going to work. He wracked his brains again.

‘Well, I sort of meant it,’ he prevaricated. You can’t really talk about being, but the stuff you say kind of shows you being—if you are clever enough to see it.’

Martin hoped that that would kill the conversation. If the Frenchman carried on now, it would be a tacit admission that he wasn’t clever enough.

It was starting to rain.

Jean Paul wasn’t deterred.

‘Ok. I get it’, he said. Martin felt thwarted.

‘So, you showed me the gap, the nothingness, between myself and an action.’

‘Yes.’

‘And any attempt to cross it would fail, since I would fall into this abyss.’

‘Yes.’

‘So you’re telling me that this nothingness forms an unbridgeable gap to stop me acting’.

‘Yes, yes, yes.’ The Frenchman seemed to be going nowhere.

‘Then you *are* telling me something about this ineffable nothingness.’

‘Yes, of course I am… Er… No.’

Martin realised that he had fallen into the trap.

It was raining more heavily now. Both Martin’s spirits and his jacket were dampened.

Martin was running out of ideas. Then he remembered his brainwave of the morning.

‘Nothingness calls to Dasein. If man must answer the call, he must choose to speak or not to speak. But he cannot not speak. If he did, would he not be hapless in the face of being? Dasein must answer the question. What can the answer be, but *nothing?* But everything is something, so nothing is nothing. Yes, being invokes the nothing of nothingness. Is this to speak? Of course not, for it is to say nothing. Yet does not this nothing speak the unspoken? We must think this question. It is to answer the call.’

Jean Paul was lost for words. His emotions were mixed. He had clearly lost the argument, and was annoyed by this. But he couldn’t help but feel a profound admiration for Matin’s intellect.

It was now raining quite hard. Martin realised that he was not far from home, and decided that he should end the conversation while he was on top.

‘Well, Herr Sartre, it’s been a pleasure talking with you. May you enjoy the rest of this fine day.’

Martin knew that Jean Paul was a long way from the village where he was staying, that the rain had set in, and that the day was not going to be fine at all.

‘Germany 1, France Nil,’ he thought.

Jean Paul trudged despondently back to where he was staying. By the time he got there, he was soaked through. When he arrived back, he rifled thorough his suitcase. Some dirty socks, cigarette papers, some pornography, a pair of Lederhosen (‘Well, you never know,’ he thought), a copy of Hegel’s *Lesser Logic.* (This was better than the *Logic* itself, Jean Paul had discovered, since it was easier to fit into a suitcase; and, well, there might just be some young Fräulein who would be impressed by it.) He found what he was looking for: an old bath robe.

He took off his wet clothes and put it on. Then he poured himself a glass of Scotch, and went to sit in front of the log fire. He was still fuming over being bested by Martin in discussion.

‘Old Kraut,’ he mumbled. ‘For the next edition of *Being and Nothingness*, I really must introduce a third category. *Être en soi* and *être pour soi* were okay. But another one was really needed: *être en haut soi*, a being up itself.’ Yea, that category would be just right for Martin.

Jean Paul rolled another joint and took a few drags. Having decided how to get back at Martin, he was at a bit of a loss. Should he write to Simone? No, she’d probably just ignore it, and use the back of the pages to make notes for that book she had been working on. What was it called—*A Better Kind of Sex*? He really must have a world with her about that title.

Jean Paul was starting to feel more relaxed. His mind drifted back to Martin. He *was* a pretty impressive thinker, after all. And he clearly knew his Hegel. Maybe Jean Paul himself could learn a few lessons from old Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. After all, philosophical writing didn’t come much more obscure than his.

He wandered back to his suitcase, picked up the copy of the *Lesser Logic*, and went back to the fire.Now, what was the bit that Martin had been referring to? Oh yea, it was the bit about being and nothingness. ‘Hm….’ He thought that sounded a bit familiar. He read the relevant bits till he came to the statement that being and nothingness are the same thing.

‘So, to be is not to be,’ he pondered. That sounded absurd enough to be profound. Much better than ‘to be is to be the value of a bound variable’, though doubtless some idiot would come up with that too.

‘Martin Heidegger is. That seems right. So Martin Heidegger is not.’ ‘Well, that would be nice,’ he thought, ‘but somehow it doesn’t seem right.

Jean Paul read the text again. *Nothing is the absence of determination*. ‘Nothing sounds bit like me when I’m trying to stay faithful to Simone!’ he thought. Still, as far as he knew, nothing (as opposed to no one) had never had an affair with Simone.

‘Er… no… Absence of determination…’

‘Hm… Could that be…? ‘

‘Yes. It’s a like the absence of an elephant!’

‘But then you can see it… What could it look like?’

Jean Paul stared into the fire, and took a last drag of his joint.

‘So I guess it *is* like my lack of determination after all! It’s what I look like when I don’t have any.

‘*And,’* he continued, ‘that’s why I have affairs. There’s nothing to stop me! I’m free!’

Jean Paul smiled with a big grin. In one fell swoop, he had refuted Martin, proved that his existence preceded his essence, and justified what he had been telling Simone about his affairs for all these years. Hegel was indeed a great philosopher.

From the pages of the *Lesser Logic* came the faint sound of mocking laughter.

**Reflections**

I want now to comment on some of the philosophy at issue in the story—not, I hope, to ruin the jokes, but to try to bring out the philosophical import of some of the humour.

But let me start by making it perfectly plain that the story is not written to ridicule the historical Heidegger and Sartre or their philosophies. On the contrary, humour is often generated by the juxtaposition of incongruous things. (Think, for example, of the Monty Python sketches about philosophers.) In the present case, the story combines the profundity of some philosophical views with the travesties of the fictional Heidegger and Sartre it creates. One of the great masters of such a juxtaposition is Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll). His *Alice* stories generate much humour with jokes and puns which depend on philosophical ideas, as is brought out by Peter Heath in his masterful *The Philosopher’s Alice: the Thinking Man’s Guide to a Misunderstood Nursery Classic* (London: St Martin’s Press, 1974).

Neither is the point of these comments to go through the story explaining each philosophical joke, as does Heath for Carroll—though there is an allusion to an incident in the *Alice* stories, which I shall leave the reader to find for themself. Those who know their *Alice* will not find this hard. Nor is it to draw the reader’s attention to the many philosophical allusions in the story—such as those to Nietzsche’s ‘battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you’ (from *Beyond Good and Evil*); Quine’s ‘to be is to be the value of a variable’ (from ‘On What There Is’); or De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Again, these will be obvious enough to those who know their history of philosophy.

The central incident of the story is a discussion between Heidegger and Sartre on the topic of nothing(ness). The point of the present comments is simply to provide the background to this, showing how it informs the back-and-forth, and how the humour foregrounds some of the central philosophical issues on display.

Let us start with Heidegger. At the beginning of his *Being and Time* of 1927 Heidegger asks the *Seinsfrage*: what is being? The rest of his whole philosophical career was built around meditations on the question. In *Being and Time* Heidegger immediately avers that being is a quite different kind of thing from beings. Being is that which grounds the fact that they *are* beings. (This is the so-called “ontological difference”.) As such, it cannot be another being; it must be a quite different sort of thing. He gives no arguments for this, though there are many he could have drawn on in the history of Western Philosophy, and by which he was probably influenced. The vein of Neo-Platonism running through Western philosophy is a rich source here. At any rate, once this point is endorsed, an obvious problem arises. Any answer to the question must say something of the form ‘being is *such and such*’; and in so doing it precisely treats being as *a* being by predicating something of it. Indeed, for this reason, being is ineffable. This is the core of the fictional Sartre’s critique of the fictional Heidegger in their discussion.

Let us now turn to nothing(ness). In his essay ‘What is Metaphysics’ of 1929, Heidegger points out that exactly the same problem arises with trying to answer the question ‘What is nothing?’. Any answer to the question treats it as *something*, which, by definition, it is not. Indeed, drawing on some thoughts of Hegel in his *Logic*, he argues that being and nothing are the same thing: what makes a being a being is that it “stands out” against nothingness.

The topic of nothingness was taken up by Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* of 1943. The influence of Heidegger on the book is patent; but Sartre takes the topic of nothing off in a quite different direction. In the first chapter of Part 1 Sartre argues that one can see absences, a kind of nothingness. So nothingness is part of reality. (His example of Pierre is replaced by elephants in the story.) In particular, he argues that it is centrally present in human consciousness. Indeed, it is precisely the fact of this absence in consciousness which makes it possible for me to do anything I choose. There is nothing there to prevent it. This grounds his subsequent account of human freedom, and the anguish delivered by the realization of its presence.

There is a central issue to be faced here, however. In German, French, and English, the word ‘nothing’ (*Nichts*, *rien*) is ambiguous. It can be a noun-phrase or a quantifier. In German and French the noun phrase would often be signalled by a definite article (*das Nichts*, *le rien*). In English one cannot do this: the best one can do is add the suffix *ness*. The argument of at least the fictional Sartre would appear to betray a confusion generated by this ambiguity, since it moves from the premise that *nothing* (noun phrase) is present in consciousness to the conclusion that there is *nothing* (quantifier) to stop me doing anything, and so to limit my freedom to act.

The fictional Heidegger can’t put his finger on the problem, and so takes his critique of the fictional Sartre off in a different direction, drawing on the ontological difference (opening him to Sartre’s subsequent counter-attack). In fact, the fictional Heidegger is subject to the same confusion in his ruminations on nothing over his morning cornflakes. The historical Heidegger was actually well aware of the ambiguity of the word ‘nothing’, and points it out in his lectures of 1928 subsequently published as *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. However, I ignored this bit of historical accuracy in the cause of humor. Indeed, the ambiguity is a rich source of humour. (See the very amusing entry on *Nothing*, again by Peter Heath, in the old *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, London: Collier MacMillan, 1967.) Of course, the ambiguity can be the source, not just of humour, but of serious philosophical confusion—into which many philosophers have, I am afraid, fallen, in their discussion of nothingness.

A final word on Hegel. The fictional Heidegger’s long quotation on being and nothing is verbatim from a standard English translation of Hegel’s *Logic*. And the fictional Sartre’s ‘nothing is the absence of determination’—which permits the extended pun on ‘determination’ which follows—is likewise drawn from a standard translation of Hegel’s *Lesser Logic* (Part 1 of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*). Why the reader is amused by the final sentence of the story (if they are) I leave them to figure out.

Of course, the philosophical detail I have just reviewed will be well known to many readers. But for those for whom some of it is news, I hope it serves to help appreciate—and not just ruin—some of the jokes. In the other direction, philosophers’ views and the arguments they use for them are often much clearer when they are not embedded in dense and often complicated philosophical prose, rather than standing out in comic relief. The story may, then, not just give the reader a good chuckle sometimes (I hope it does), but may prompt them to muse on the philosophical views in play here.