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“Comedy Is Democratic”: Dmitri Nikulin on Humor, Dialogue, and the Tragedy of the Modern Self

Dmitri Nikulin is a philosopher who ranks among the leading interpreters of ancient and European philosophical traditions. His work focuses on dialogue, comedy, boredom, subjectivity and modernity. He is the author of numerous books, including *On Dialogue* (2006), *Comedy, Seriously* (2014), *The Concept of History* (2017), *Facets of Modernity* (2021), *Critique of Bored Reason* (2022), and *Non-Being in Ancient Thought* (2025). At a time marked by social fragmentation, permanent distraction, and growing isolation, Nikulin’s philosophy represents a distinctive attempt to rethink human existence through dialogue, shared action, and comic relationality rather than through the modern ideal of the autonomous and solitary self.

Ivana Ryška Vajdová (IRV): In his memoirs, Alexandre Dumas writes that as a child he was “bored to tears.” It is somewhat paradoxical that from such a bored kid emerged one of the most adventurous storytellers of the 19th century. What determines whether, in the midst of emptiness, something creative, destructive, or degenerative is born?

Dmitri Nikulin (DN): There is a special term, *littérature d’ennui*, or literature of boredom, and it was in the nineteenth century that the term was coined. As you can see, people were bored even in the time of Napoleon. We know that everyone gets bored, children included. Animals get bored too. I guess horses can get bored easily. But at a certain point, especially in the nineteenth century, it became a cultural and then later a philosophical problem. When I started writing this book, my question was why people get bored.

I discovered that in ancient classical Greek times, in the age of Plato, they had terms for just about everything, but, to my surprise, they did not have a concept, even in ordinary language, for boredom and I naturally asked myself,

“Why?” Certainly, people back then were bored in ordinary life but did not have a word, a concept. That came only later in Roman times with the notion of *taedium*, for example.

Now, to answer your question whether boredom can be destructive or creative: I think it can be both. Kant once said jokingly that an English gentleman can commit suicide out of a sense of boredom. On the other hand, we know that when people get bored, they do not have much sensory excitement or entertainment. They might begin thinking or doing something else, something new, and produce something very original.

Nowadays, I think the sense of boredom has become so profound that people even stop noticing it, because they try to escape it through entertainment. Neil Postman wrote the famous book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. One of its ideas is that people are not really being entertained very much, because 24-hour entertainment becomes very routine, tedious, and therefore boring. By trying to escape boredom, they become even more bored. This is, I think, a serious problem, and it shows that boredom is in fact profoundly modern.

IRV: In one of your most recent books, *Critique of Bored Reason*, you develop the thesis that boredom is deeply connected to the modern concept of the subject. One might ask whether today’s epidemic of boredom is also related to the decline of the religious dimension of life.

DN: Maybe. What is the situation when I am personally not bored? That is one of my questions. I am not bored when I have something to do, to think about, to read. But most of all, I am not bored when I am talking to other people, when I am in conversation, in dialogue. There is always something new to think and to learn. Here we come to the core of my book, which analyses why a culture of boredom develops and becomes so strong and prominent, and why this could happen only with the advent of the modern subject.

What we call the modern subject is not a person. It is not you or me, but a historical and philosophical construction of a subject that becomes totally autonomous theoretically and practically. I am referring especially to Kant’s concept of freedom and morality. The modern subject is somebody who autonomously, from within itself and by its own rational will and volition, establishes moral law, which then becomes universal because from now on it is binding as freely established by the subject itself. Everyone should accept and also be the source of this moral law. This autonomous subject that establishes everything from within itself becomes quasi-divine and also very lonely.

But the moral subject is really always busy with itself rather than with the other. This concept of morality is criticized, for example, by Dieter Henrich, who says that the simple point of morality is reaching out for the other, acting in front of the other in expectation of a response. Kant's subject, however, does not need the other. It is, in fact, a solipsistic subject.

Such a subject is tragic. It realizes that it is, as Heidegger says, being-towards-death, which is the ultimate limit beyond which there is nothing. The modern subject faces its finitude and mortality alone. This is precisely what tragedy is all about. It is about seeing and perceiving one's mortality, one's end. The modern subject is autonomous, lonely, and tragic. And the consequence is also that it is inevitably bored. So, this condition of boredom is very deep. It is really at the heart of the structure and constitution of modern subjectivity.

Nowadays many people would tell you that they are not bored because they are busy thinking about various agendas and crises. But deep down, in fact, they are very bored, and they try to distract themselves from it.

IRV: In one part of *Comedy, Seriously*, you propose an interesting shift: instead of a tragic understanding of existence—for instance in Heidegger's notion of being-toward-death—you speak of the possibility of a “comic” mode of being. Why do you think modern philosophy so often privileges a tragic view of existence? Is it simply a logical consequence of reflecting on one's finitude in a world where God and salvation no longer figure?

DN: This work on comedy started quite a number of years ago with Ágnes Heller, a colleague and friend here at the New School. We once asked ourselves the question of how it is possible that libraries are filled with so many great philosophical works that discuss tragedy—and I mean especially the modern ones from the nineteenth century onward—but as soon as the topic turns to comedy, you find almost nothing among them. Only in recent years original philosophical works on comedy have started to appear. Almost all of them are written by women: Ágnes Heller, Anja Gerigk, Véronique Sternberg, Alenka Zupančič, and others.

The thesis of my book is that comedy resonates with philosophy because comedy is a representation of the universal autonomous subject, who, as I said, is lonely and is being-toward-death. That is a tragic condition, and therefore this is a tragic subject, who suffers without any reason, as contemporary people suffer for no apparent reason. There is no way to overcome this kind of fate. But then I started reading ancient comedy, where there is a very different description of subjectivity. I mean not *Palaia*, the Old Comedy of Aristophanes and Eupolis,

but so-called *Nea* or New Comedy represented by Menander, a student of Theophrastus. Then we have the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence, who died young and left behind only six comedies, which I think are exceptional. All of European comedy comes out of that. It goes straight to Shakespeare and Molière, who actually read Terence in Latin. And then much of modern comedy follows from there.

I realized that comedy represents a very different human subject. First of all, in tragedy there is one heroic, lonely, suffering figure who is usually of royal origin. If the figure is female, she has to be a princess or a queen. These are not people like us. By contrast, Aristotle says that comedy is about people like us, common people. A tragedy always begins when everything is fine and then ends in disaster. Comedy begins when the situation is very complicated. There is some kind of trespassing, sometimes even a crime. And then at the end, it gets resolved. This ending, however, is not a banal Hollywood kind of happy end, but a genuine resolution of the current conflict. Unlike Aristophanes' Old Comedy, the solution does not come by a stroke of fate or by *deus ex machina* but is very carefully planned. The structure of comedy is extremely complex, refined, and very rational. So, in that sense, I think it really is isomorphic to the structure of philosophical arguments.

A good playwright is somebody who is capable of producing a very complicated chain of steps. And that is why good plots are valued. They get recycled. You can simply populate them with different characters. They are like good arguments. They need to be preserved. In the middle of a comedy, you see no way out, but then you find a way.

At the end of tragedy, you need to kill everyone or let everyone die, often without a reason. Why does everyone have to die and suffer at the end of *Hamlet*? Because it is tragedy. People have to suffer without apparent reason. But in comedy, you need to be able to bring the plot to a conclusion, to a solution of the current problem, which is difficult yet possible.

In philosophy, for me, this figure is paradigmatically represented by Socrates, Aesop, and Diogenes the Cynic. Diogenes was an immigrant. If he were living in New York today, he would be taken by ICE for sure. Aesop was a slave. Socrates was a citizen, but he was very, very poor. These are the people who can think and thus steer action behind the scenes, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not, and then direct everyone toward the resolution of the conflict.

So, on the one hand, everyone is involved in the action; on the other hand, there is somebody who is very smart, sometimes without formal education,

sometimes a woman, a maid, someone who is capable of directing everyone toward the solution. And then in the end, everyone is happy.

This is a very different reading of subjectivity. Comic subjectivity, for me, is a subjectivity where everyone is involved in action as equals and as capable of solving very complex problems without even having a formal education. In this sense, it is democratic. That's why I wrote on democracy and the politics of comedy.

IRV: So, the claim that a life might be comic rather than tragic also seems to have a political dimension. Do you think comedy has a structural affinity with democratic politics?

DN: Definitely. My argument is that it is about everyone. It's not about the so-called middle class, which is a modern invention. In antiquity, in Aristotle's view, democracy is the rule of the poor or the dispossessed. In the contemporary world, with increasing inequality, people really are getting poorer. Especially here in New York, economic inequality is staggering. This brings me back again to the question of democracy as it emerged two thousand years ago. Democracy is the rule of everyone.

IRV: In today's digital culture, humor and irony, especially stand-up, have achieved enormous popularity fueled by the internet, Netflix specials, and reels on social media. Do you see this as a genuine antidote to boredom or merely another placebo or momentary distraction?

DN: For me, this is more of a distraction, really, because I have a particular reading of comedy. I think it is defined for me by its structure, which is isomorphic with the philosophical argument, and by its comic character, who is somebody from the people, sometimes really in a lower social position.

And also, I think that comedy is not necessarily about laughter. Stand-up comedy is about making jokes that make people laugh. Of course, laughter and jokes are present in comedy, but there is also a serious comic genre that is not defined by laughter as such.

Laughter itself is a very interesting philosophical topic. It is a bit enigmatic. There is a famous book, *Argument of Laughter* by D. H. Monro where he identifies four different kinds of laughter, but does not explain why there are four. One is laughter of superiority. Another is release from restraint. Then there is laughter caused by incongruity and laughter caused by ambivalence. I did not discover any counterexamples or any other kinds of laughter. What we need to find is the common source of laughter.

But to return to the structure of comedy, it is not necessarily about laughter. Yes, it is present there. It uses jokes. But a joke itself, I think, is a kind of condensed form of a comic plot or argument.

IRV: In Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, the comic often arrives when reality suddenly overturns expectation. And this moment, for me, was always somehow liberating. Could this capacity for a liberating reversal be one of the reasons why comedy is, in a strong sense, the opposite of boredom? Is the comic structure, in fact, a structure of constant novelty that breaks rigidity within us?

DN: For me, comedy is liberating. It is a liberation not only from boredom, but from the constant forms of oppression in everyday life. And why is it liberating? Because, in my understanding, it is all based on a kind of dialogical interaction with others. And in dialogue, people do not get bored.

For me, dialogue is not about finality. It is not about reaching some kind of conclusion, some kind of insight, or understanding of something. It is really more about being. My thesis is that for human beings, to be means to be in dialogue with others. We physically still exist when we are not in dialogue, but we are properly human only in the moment when we talk to others, when we communicate.

Comedy can ask very important philosophical questions, existential questions about who we are, what we want to do in this world, how we should treat other living beings and how we should treat the world so as not to destroy it.

There will never be a definite solution to any kind of problem. We will always be facing new ones. But we should be able to address them if we act together and try to address them, again, as equals and as people who take each other very seriously. Hence the title of my book, *Comedy, Seriously*.

IRV: Why do you think that philosophy has so long underestimated comedy? Is it because the authors wanted to be serious, and serious things are actually tragic?

DN: Exactly. We were speaking about modern philosophy, in which there appears the autonomous, lonely subject who is tragic. But in order to get comedy, we need the other, a real other with whom we can live, communicate, interact, and be in dialogue all the time. The lonely subject has no friend and is always bored with itself, with no way out. And that is why I think that from the very beginning, modern philosophy, based on the construction of the modern subject, paid so much attention to tragedy and disregarded comedy.

IRV: Many intellectuals would identify with the figure of the *flâneur*, the person who simply strolls through the city and observes. Your analysis of the figure of the *flâneur*, drawing on Benjamin, made me think about today's digital experience, which is in fact only a kind of loafing around among the images and expressions of others. Are we not in a much worse position than the original *flâneurs*, because on the internet we are more or less homeless?

DN: The *flâneur* is a very peculiar figure. When I was teaching in Paris, I also tried *flânerie* myself. It can be practiced in Vienna, in Leipzig, and I assume also in Prague. And actually, I think you can do *flânerie* quite well here in New York, because there are many little corners. The *flâneur* does not go to the places where all the tourists go, as Benjamin says. We now have a feminist version too, the *flâneuse*.

In any case, it is somebody who is solitary, who lives on the margins, observes the world, and then reports somewhere. In the past, he wrote for a newspaper. Today, perhaps for a blog or something like that. But *flânerie* means a personal presence. It's not virtual. It's not online. The *flâneur* needs to move.

IRV: In the book *On Dialogue*, you present dialogue as a fundamental structure of the human world. In *Dialectic and Dialogue*, you suggest that philosophical dialectic itself originally had a dialogical nature. In *Comedy, Seriously*, dialogue appears as a comic structure of the world; in *The Concept of History*, as a conversation between generations of thinkers and in *Critique of Bored Reason*, we encounter the opposite situation: a subject enclosed in its own monologue, where dialogue disappears and boredom emerges. Is it therefore possible to say that the question of dialogue lies at the center of your philosophical project? Could one think that your philosophy is, at its core, a defense of the dialogical world against the world of monologue?

DN: Maybe. For me, dialogue is not about attempting to get some knowledge about something or somebody, but it is about being with others, which presents us with a different view of normativity that does not come from the strict normativity of the autonomous subject. I would call it non-boring dialogical being. That, I think, is perhaps the bottom line of many of my undertakings.

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