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**GRAPHIC NOVELS as
PHILOSOPHY**

Edited by Jeff McLaughlin

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University Press of Mississippi / Jackson

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Asterix, Carnival, and the Wonder of Everyday Life

Jeremy Barris

René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's *Asterix* novels present us with a charmingly silly world. Their shared premise is that, during the time of the Roman Empire, a tiny Gaulish village has a magic potion that makes its inhabitants extremely strong and fast, and this allows the village to keep the entire Roman Empire at a hopeless disadvantage. The main character is a wily little warrior named Asterix who, with his good, very large, and not very bright friend Obelix, has many absurd adventures as he travels in the Roman world and beyond. I shall explore *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, in which Asterix and a group of the villagers compete in the Olympic Games in ancient Greece. I shall try to show that the charmingly silly, unpretentious humor of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* does not just offer us escapist entertainment, but also embodies and so offers us a deep appreciation of the ordinary and everyday. (I should say that I have no objection to purely escapist entertainment; I just think that more is going on in this particular case.)

Because the style of humor is the same in all of the *Asterix* novels, I could have chosen any of them to explore this point. As a result, if what I say about this particular novel is right, it should help us to recognize some of what is to be appreciated in the others too. I shall try to show that *Asterix at the Olympic Games* achieves the possibility of this deeper insight into our everyday world paradoxically, by departing from the most basic functioning of that world and so by taking us radically out of the ordinary and everyday. This paradoxical achievement has strong similarities with that of the carnival tradition that the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin describes in connection with medieval

folk festivals, in which, for example, a peasant is made to be mock lord for a day, and the festivities include making undignified fun of the nobles. The comedy of this carnival tradition, Bakhtin argues, turns the everyday world thoroughly topsy-turvy, with the result that we are given a holiday from, and a fresh perspective on, the familiar structures and proceedings of our lives and of the world as a whole.

Carnival and the Paradoxical Perspective on the Everyday World as a Whole

Bakhtin argues that "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (1984 [1965], 10), creating "a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal" (7).¹ Carnival does this in the form of humor, of "a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliation, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (11). As we shall see, all of these elements are also present in *Asterix at the Olympic Games*. As a result of this liberation from established truth, "The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity" (11): we see the world as one in which nothing is absolutely fixed, nothing is the way things always have to be. But part of this liberation is that while this "folk humor denies [the world it parodies], . . . it revives and renews at the same time" (11). The carnival spirit "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (34). And in the humor of this kind of carnival, Bakhtin argues, "each image is subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming" (149).

Generally, in order for us to be aware of something, we need to be at some distance from it, not entirely immersed in it. For example, if we are completely absorbed in reading a book, we stop being aware that we are reading and instead become lost in the content of what we are reading. When we are interrupted, we often get a little startled at the reminder that the regular world, where we are reading, is the one we are actually in. The idea that we need some distance to be aware of something is also true of our general awareness of the everyday world; we can only be aware of the everyday world to the extent that we are not wholly immersed in it. In regular everyday life, for instance, when we are thoroughly absorbed in what we are saying, we are not usually aware of the grammar of our sentences as we talk. We only notice how we are forming our sentences when, say, we have difficulty expressing

ourselves, and are then pulled out of being absorbed in what we are saying and so can reflect on how we are saying it.

Unlike with most other things, however, being unreflectively immersed in the ordinary and everyday *defines* a great deal of the ordinary and everyday and, with it, the bulk and substance of our lives and world. Reality, after all, is exactly what we take for granted as independent of our perspective and reflection, what we take as what we can rely on without having to think about it. As the great Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein points out, "I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; . . . No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (1969, 15e), a picture or background that is already in place before I start reflecting on and making sense of things. That background picture of the world consists in a host of meanings and their relations. For example, before I can decide whether an idea about or perception of a tree is true or false, I first have to have at least the idea of a physical thing, and to have that idea I must have the ideas of three dimensions or more generally of space, and of solidity, and of a surface or ground that the tree or object can be located on, and of various kinds of materials that the tree and ground can be composed of, and so on. If there are meaningful objects to ask questions about, and meaningful questions to ask, then the world is already divided into a variety of objects and the kinds of connections they can have with each other, and also the kinds of thoughts that compose the questions we are asking. Without such a general, basic outline of the world already in place before I start reflecting, I cannot reflect on anything, because there is not yet anything meaningful to reflect on.

Our reflection, then, depends on a pre-existing grasp of the sense of the world or reality, a grasp that must have been in place before we began to reflect on that sense. And this necessarily unreflective grasp of the sense of reality is part of what makes up our everyday experience of the world, in which we take for granted that, for example, there is a world, and objects in it, and that those objects operate in certain ways, and that we ourselves operate in certain familiar ways.

The everyday world, then, is partly defined as what we are unreflectively immersed in. As a result, in giving us a perspective on and so a distance from the everyday as a whole, the humor in *Asterix at the Olympic Games* takes us thoroughly and altogether out of our familiar lives and our world as a whole. In particular, as I have noted, the everyday includes the basic sense that the world makes, that is, the basic ways in which the world is meaningful, logically coherent, and therefore understandable. Consequently, in taking us thoroughly out of the ordinary, the book's humor in fact takes us not only out of what is familiar, but out of the most basic ways that the world and our lives

make sense. As Bakhtin notes about carnivals too, their language, for example, builds on "intentionally absurd verbal combinations, a form of completely liberated speech that ignores all norms, even those of elementary logic" (422).

Let me clarify that I do not mean that *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, like all fiction, takes us into an alternative, fictional world, and that this alternative world gives us a perspective on our everyday world and life through the contrast it makes with it. I mean that the humor of this book takes us outside of the most basic ways that the world as a whole, or reality in general, makes sense, with the result that the sense of *any* part or kind of reality becomes unclear and uncertain, including the sense of any imaginary realities we might come up with. In other words, what the book's humor contrasts with is all sense, in general, whatever it might be the sense of. As a result, the perspective it offers us is on the nature of sense itself, that is, on meaningfulness and coherence and logic themselves, in general. This perspective is therefore also on the sense—the meaningfulness and coherence—of reality in general or as a whole. As Bakhtin argues, this kind of humor turns the whole world topsy-turvy, and allows us a fresh perspective on *everything*, nothing excepted, not even stories or imaginations of contrasting realities—and not even what it means and how it works to have a perspective! In other words, with Bakhtin, I am proposing that the perspective the book offers us is so deep that it allows us freshly to reconsider the meaning and so the truth of things in the most fundamental and all-inclusive way (including even the meaningfulness and value of engaging in this kind of deep reconsideration or reflection). Not bad for a deliberately silly cartoon novel!

Of course, we can and should ask how such a radical reflection is possible, how we could conceivably reflect on things when the sense of our own reflections themselves is made uncertain. A little below, I will discuss how this might be possible.

As I shall try to show, then, the humor of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* repeatedly violates the principles or logic that structure the world's sense. And in doing so, it brings our attention to this sense. As a result, we can come to recognize and wonder at the fact simply that the world is as it is: that there is a world, that there is a sense to things, and that this particular world with its particular meanings and sense happens to be the one we are given. (In fact, I would argue that this kind of humor not only can but *does* give us this perspective, this wondering recognition that the world is as it is; I would argue that the particular pleasure this type of humor gives us is exactly this experience of charmed wonder at the world, and perhaps a sense that the world is a better place for having such works in it. We usually would not think of our amusement that way, but I suggest that is because we usually just do not

realize that this is what we are experiencing. But I will not insist on this now. My discussion of the specific working of our book's humor, though, should give some support to this view.)

Bakhtin's own concern is primarily with awareness of our social world as a whole, but the Western philosophical tradition takes up the same theme of reflecting on the world as a whole in a way that goes beyond the social world. In the Western philosophical tradition the recognition simply of the existence of the world and of its sense is the basis of metaphysics: the recognition of and wonder at, not this or that reality, but reality or being itself. As Plato explains in his dialogue *Theaetetus*, philosophy "has no other origin" than the "sense of wonder" (1969, 155D), and in pursuing the sense of wonder, the philosopher's thought "takes wings, as [the poet] Pindar says, 'beyond the sky, beneath the earth,' . . . everywhere seeking the true nature of everything as a whole" (173E–174A). This recognition of existence is also what, in the twentieth century, Wittgenstein identifies as insight into the mystical. He writes, "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists. . . . Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical" (1961 [1921], 73).

It is not accidental that something like silly humor can be connected with the same kind and depth of insight as metaphysical reflection. For the same reasons that a perspective on the everyday puts us at a distance from familiar sense, serious metaphysical reflection, or reflection on the whole of reality, moves beyond all given sense, and so, like silly humor, involves all sorts of obvious failures to make complete or proper sense. As Karl Jaspers argues, the words and concepts we use in reflecting on the nature of reality in general "had their original meaning for definite things in the world," but "now . . . they are used to go beyond the limits and are not to be understood in their original sense" (1997 [1935], 111). As a result, he writes, "Through reason I catch sight of something which is only communicable in the form of contradiction and paradox. Here a rational a-logic arises, a true reason which reaches its goal through the shattering of the logic of the understanding" (112). Similarly, Wittgenstein famously argues at one point that his own metaphysical statements are in fact "nonsensical" and must be used "as steps—to climb up beyond them," and that is what allows us to "see the world aright." The reader of his statements "must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it" (1961 [1921], 74).²

As I noted, we could and should ask whether this kind of reflection and perspective on reality as a whole is really possible. If this reflection involves our stepping outside of the whole of sense, then, surely, it simply does not make sense. In addition, a perspective on the whole of reality includes a perspective on ourselves, and this means we need to be entirely outside of

ourselves, which is clearly impossible. I will not attempt to offer an adequate defense of this kind of metaphysical, ultimate insight into reality here. I will only point out that this very objection, that insight into the whole of reality is impossible, itself decides that something would not make sense with respect to the whole of reality, and so in fact reflects on that same whole of reality that it claims we cannot reflect on. For instance, this objection claims to understand what "the whole of reality" means; otherwise it could not draw conclusions about what makes sense in connection with that concept. As a result, it claims the kind of insight that it argues we cannot possibly have. By its own conclusion, then, we cannot take it seriously.

My point here is not that insight into the whole of reality definitely is possible, but that this is a very difficult question to answer one way or the other—that *either* answer lands us in illogicalities. As a result, then, we can at least keep open the possibility that, as inconceivable as metaphysical insight or insight into the whole of things may seem to be, its inconceivability is not the last word, and that it *might* be conceivable and achievable. We certainly cannot rule it out in a way that clearly makes sense.

In other words, this question about whether metaphysical insight is possible is exactly the kind of question, about the whole of sense, that metaphysical reflection asks, and it has exactly the kind of deeply conflicted and uncertain sense that I have argued this kind of reflection has. (I should clarify that this is not a victory for my argument. A perspective like the one I am exploring here has built into it that it might not always be making sense and so its *prima facie* success might be overturned. This kind of perspective succeeds by giving us a fresh consideration, even of itself and its own value, and so does not work by winning or losing. The ending of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* will illustrate this nicely.)

It might help us a little to conceive how this kind of insight might be possible if we bear in mind that we are in the territory of paradox, and that as a result, not making sense in this logically paradoxical context might be compatible with also making sense. For example, if we are wholly outside sense, we cannot be making no sense at all, because then what we are doing *would* make sense as being simply and clearly nonsense. (In fact, this is how the view rejecting the possibility of metaphysical insight in the previous paragraph understands it and so makes sense of it). We know what nonsense is; it is the opposite of sense, whose nature we also understand. In other words, being wholly outside sense is also being outside the sense even of "being wholly outside sense," and therefore includes making or being inside sense!

Another way to see this is that in this context of trying to get a perspective on the sense of the whole of things, the only reason we step outside sense

is that we are trying to make sense of sense, and this requires us to get a distance from it and see it to some extent from the outside. In other words, it is the commitment to making sense itself that requires us to depart from sense. Consequently, when we leave sense in this particular context, we are also obeying the requirements of sense.

I have argued that either answer to the question about whether reflection on reality and sense as a whole is possible seems unable to make clear sense. And I have suggested that the deep difficulty of this question leaves it open for us reasonably to explore this type of reflection and awareness as a real possibility. If it is a real possibility, it is, I think, also an important one that is worth trying to understand and achieve. In that light, I now return to exploring and proposing it as part of what *Asterix at the Olympic Games* offers us.

While the metaphysical awareness of existence is interesting and valuable enough, the humor of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* also brings about an appreciation and celebration specifically of the *unquestioningly taken for granted* character of the everyday and of the basic sense of things. In other words, it allows us to notice and appreciate the meaningfulness of the everyday as what is just ordinary and so as specifically what we *not* notice and reflect on! And even more oddly, it does so in the very act of removing us from the everyday and its sense and so removing our taking them for granted. (This reflection that, illogically, does not interfere with not reflecting is again possible, I suggest, because in the territory of logical paradox, what genuinely does not make sense does not exclude also making sense.) It achieves this paradoxical maneuver by couching its violations of the world's basic sense in a humorous and charming atmosphere and in the context of very familiar, everyday aspects of our lives. As a result, the destabilizing of the everyday and its sense only brings out, by contrast, their safely unshakeable solidity. In this way, the very ordinary, familiar world as we unreflectively live it is opened up to our reflective awareness and appreciation, without in that process losing the homey, taken for granted character that is essential to it.

In this respect, the awareness offered by *Asterix at the Olympic Games* is the extreme opposite of another typical aspect of metaphysical insight, in which the experience of the familiar world as unfamiliar makes it unsettlingly strange. Here, nothing we know is quite as it is supposed to be, and this creates a dream-like, uncanny alienation from our world and lives. In fact, a number of Russian literary scholars contemporary with Bakhtin, known as Formalists, argued that the central function of literary art was to allow us freshly to see the world exactly by "defamiliarizing" or "estranging" us from our familiar experience of it.³ Even in the case of the charming world of *Asterix*, this uneasy dimension perhaps comes into play when we put the book down and

at some point are struck by the gulf between the charm of the fantasy world of the book and the drearier aspects of real life.

But as I have noted, and as I shall discuss further at the end of the next section, the wonder that *Asterix at the Olympic Games* brings about is not just a fantasy, but is an insight into the basis or foundations of reality and truth, into the presence and solidity of reality that we otherwise take for granted. In fact, both of these dimensions of metaphysical insight, the sense of the world as uncanny and the sense of it as wonderful, are legitimate and in the end essential to a full metaphysical awareness. But I suggest further—in keeping with the violation of everyday sense that occurs in this perspective from “outside the world”—that even though these insights thoroughly conflict with each other, still, because each of them is an insight into the nature of the *whole* world or the *whole* of reality, each is also true in a way that is entirely unaffected by the other. Each by its very nature is an insight into the whole of things, and so leaves nothing out to conflict with it. That is, the truth that each insight succeeds in capturing is wholly the truth, without need for qualification or emendation, even though the conflicting truth the other insight captures is also wholly and without qualification the truth.

In fact, this is sometimes illustrated in the case of putting the book down that I mentioned above, since in the lingering context of the appreciative perspective the book gives us, even the contrast with unpleasant aspects of life that might strike us when we put the book down can be experienced as a kind of poignant wonder, for example, wonder at a world that, despite often being dispiriting and harsh, can still include such heartwarmingly transporting experiences as a book like this can provide. In this experience of being transported, we feel a delight completely independent of and unaffected by the harsh aspects of life; as a result, when we become aware of those aspects again, they can strike us, at least for a moment, as less important in the larger scheme of things.

Exactly how it might be possible to put together conflicting and in fact mutually exclusive metaphysical perspectives (or, in other words, conflicting wholly true views about the same whole reality) is a story for another time.⁴ In the meantime, I have proposed that the *Asterix* books offer the dimension of metaphysical awareness that is the sense of the wonder of things; and I have argued that even though this is only one dimension of metaphysical insight, it will remain an unqualified and undiluted insight even when we take contrasting dimensions of metaphysical insight into account. It is therefore an insight that we can legitimately explore in its own right without considering those other possible dimensions of metaphysical awareness.

It is also important to note that a number of the essays in this book, true to one of the most important roles of graphic novels and comic books, highlight some of the politically skewed or otherwise deeply troublesome aspects of life. While I argue that *Asterix at the Olympic Games* shows us the wonder or meaningfulness of things, I should emphasize that this is not at the cost of neglect of or collaboration with suffering and social wrongdoing.⁵ I shall return to this issue in the final section of this essay.

The Topsy-Turvy World of *Asterix at the Olympic Games*

I have hinted at, but not yet shown, that the humor of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* brings about an appreciation of the meaningfulness of the unquestioningly taken for granted character of our everyday lives and of the familiar sense of things, and that it does so by violating that sense in the context of a humorous and charming atmosphere. I have also suggested that the unsettling of the everyday and its sense brings out, by contrast, their safely unshakeable solidity. I will now try to show that the book establishes these violations of sense and also its charming atmosphere through word, image, and story structure.

For a start, the premise of the whole series of *Asterix* books is topsy-turvy. As I described it earlier, a tiny Gaulish village has a magic potion that makes its inhabitants extremely strong and fast, and this allows the village to keep the entire Roman Empire at a hopeless disadvantage. The legend to the frontispiece, present in all the *Asterix* books, reads, "Gaul is entirely occupied by the Romans. Well, not entirely . . . one small village of indomitable Gauls still holds out . . . And life is not easy for the Roman legionaries who garrison the fortified camps of Totorum, Aquarium, Laudanum and Compendium."⁶

The plot of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* is paradoxical as well. First, our heroes' life-mission is to resist the Romans' conquest of their country, but because only Greek and Roman citizens are allowed to participate in the Olympic Games, our heroes enthusiastically enter the games as the citizens Rome claims them to be. Then, when the Gauls find out that using magic potion is against the rules of the games, they trick the Romans into stealing their potion and using it. As a result, all the Roman competitors, fuelled by the potion that has always given the Gauls the advantage over them, win their race against Asterix, the lone Gaul running against them. Asterix himself comments during the race, "This is all topsy-turvy!" (2004 [1968], 46).⁷ But Asterix then exposes the Romans and they are disqualified for using the

potion, leaving Asterix as the winner. The outcome, in other words, is that the Gauls win as a result of the way in which they lose. Finally, at the end of the novel we discover that Asterix has given his victory palm to the Gauls' traditional enemy, the Romans, in sympathy. As Asterix explains, "I gave it to someone whose need was greater than mine" (48). The final panel in the book, usually devoted to celebration in the Gaulish village, instead shows us the bad guys ending up happy and promoted, and "For once . . . Caesar is pleased!" (48). (As I mentioned in the previous section, the deep perspective the book's humor offers does not work by winning or losing, by simply either succeeding or failing!)

The logical and rhetorical substance of the whole novel is also topsy-turvy. The conversations between the characters and the presentation of the story are each a tissue of contradictions, non sequiturs (completely irrelevant leaps of thought), equivocations (expressions that mix up mutually irrelevant meanings, here often in the form of puns), conceptual confusions (mistaking one type of meaning or situation for another), and circularities (supporting an idea's truth on the basis of its own claim to truth).

For example, when centurion Gaius Veriambitius⁸ discovers that the fearsome Gauls are going to claim Roman citizenship and enter the Olympic Games against the champion who is supposed to bring him victory and promotion, he fumes indignantly, "I ask you! You fight people, you massacre them, you invade and occupy their territory, and then they turn against you for no reason at all!" (14). The joke here turns on an emphatic contradiction, or perhaps an extreme conceptual confusion: a cluster of glaringly good reasons is taken not to qualify as any reason at all. A less elaborate version of this kind of combination occurs later, when they have all arrived in Athens and Asterix says, "Speaking of foreigners, here come our fellow countrymen!" (25).⁹

Non sequiturs are a particularly prominent feature of the novel's humor. Early on in the story, Asterix, our hero, and Obelix, his trusty comrade, come across the Roman champion, Legionary Gluteus Maximus, training in the forest.¹⁰ When Obelix was a baby, he had fallen into the cauldron of magic potion, and so he is permanently very strong and fast (e.g., 16). He is also very large. He and Asterix casually overtake the sprinting Roman without apparent effort and accidentally show him up in other ways. Gluteus Maximus is furious, and confronts Obelix: "You fatty! I'll take you on at ordinary wrestling, all-in wrestling, boxing! I'll wallop you at those! I'm the greatest! I'm . . ." (9). He is interrupted at that point because Obelix, without changing his casual posture, hits Gluteus Maximus so hard that he disappears from the panel altogether and lands high up in a nearby tree. As Obelix hits him, he comments quietly, "I'm not fat!" (9). That is, Obelix, both in word and in

the casual posture we see in the drawing, disregards the threats and all the emphatic claims about skilled strength in the statement he is responding to, and instead responds only to what is a trivial side-issue with respect to what that statement focuses on communicating. In other words, he responds with a non sequitur. The next panel consolidates this non sequitur. Obelix turns to Asterix and asks earnestly, "Tell me straight, Asterix, once and for all: do you think I'm fat?" Asterix replies, "Of course not, Obelix. Your chest has slipped a bit, that's all. Come on, are we going to get those boars?" And in the following panel we see them stroll off (9). The actual issue the Roman raised so elaborately has now completely disappeared from their attention.

At the same time, however, Obelix has very thoroughly refuted those claims—and he has done so in the very act of disregarding them so completely. Because he beats Gluteus Maximus thoroughly but for a reason that entirely ignores his claims to skilled strength, Obelix's actions both show his superior strength and point us away from paying attention to the issue of skill or strength at all. And in this way they bring out even more starkly and clearly how trivial the Roman's claimed abilities are. Gluteus Maximus's abilities are entirely disregardable.

By its humorous exaggeration, then, the non sequitur actually works to make the centrally relevant aspects of the original topic especially clear: in relation to our Gaulish heroes, Gluteus Maximus's superior skills and strength are only imagined.

In the following example, things get interestingly complicated. At the start of the story, the aged Geriatrix¹¹ reports that he was picking mushrooms near the Roman camps, and was puzzled by overhearing the Romans engaged in some kind of high-spirited celebration. When the chief of the Gaulish tribe, Vitalstatistix,¹² muses that he does not "know what to make of them," Obelix (who is very large and always hungry), comments, "Mushroom soup is very nice" (6). In the next panel, Chief Vitalstatistix turns red with rage and roars, "Soup?! . . . Is that all you can think of, Obelix?!" But then, in the following panel, he declares, "When you get mushrooms you should make an omelette. That's how the real gourmet eats them!" (6). And in a further panel Obelix, Vitalstatistix, and Geriatrix are walking off while debating how to prepare the mushrooms. "I was thinking," says Geriatrix, "perhaps on toast" (6).¹³

Obelix's comment is a non sequitur, which is made explicit in the next panel; but in the following panels it is turned into and remains the main issue, so that the original issue is altogether abandoned in favor of the non sequitur. On the one hand, this sequence ignores the logic of what is relevant to the issue under discussion. On the other hand, however, its humor involves tripping us up, and this depends on our expectation that the sequence will follow

the logic of what is relevant. In other words, the sequence also relies on that same logic of relevance.

The visual separation of the panels helps to achieve and underline this combination of emphasizing the mistaken nature of the logic and yet also disregarding that mistake. The chief's furious focus on the mistake has a panel to itself, isolating it so that it captures our attention in its own right; but treating the non sequitur as not a mistake then also occurs in its own panels, and so in its turn is isolated from the recognition of the mistake.

In the light of this combination, then, this kind of humor does not simply violate the sense of the world, but as Bakhtin points out, it both disregards it and also at the same time takes it seriously. This kind of humor gives us a perspective on the world—on what the world is and how it is—that has not yet made up its mind. "Each image," Bakhtin writes, "reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming" (1984 [1965], 149). Consequently, the perspective this humor opens up allows and requires us to contemplate the world without stable preconceptions, to be aware of it simply for what it is or might be, even down to the still undecided possibilities of its fundamentally making sense or of its not making sense at all.

Asterix and the wise druid, Getafix,¹⁴ have witnessed this exchange about the Romans and the mushrooms. Getafix comments, "Sometimes I get the impression our friends don't take things seriously enough. . . . It may be a bad sign for us if the Romans are in a good mood" (6). When Asterix asks what he would suggest, Getafix says, in the next panel, "Let them stew in their own juice!"¹⁵ In the context of the serious concern about the Romans he has just expressed, we naturally take this to be a metaphor, though it also mischievously makes a kind of pun on its literal reference to the topic of cooking that sidetracked the other Gauls. But in the following panel, he adds, "It brings out the flavour" (6).¹⁶ So we are still talking about mushrooms after all! Getafix's last comment has no exclamation point, and he makes it with a deadpan expression, suggesting that he is not joking, and this is confirmed by Asterix's deeply startled reaction in the same panel. That is, Getafix, the very embodiment of wisdom and good sense, who of all people should know better, immediately repeats the same recognition and then commission of the logical error we have just seen happen with the other characters.

But in this case, Getafix repeats the combination in a sort of pun. In logical terms, a pun is a humorously meant equivocation, an expression that works with mutually irrelevant meanings without differentiating them.¹⁷ As a result, it initially looks as though Getafix is joking, and so creating nonsense only in order to direct us good-humoredly to the sense that contrasts with it. Seen in this context, perhaps this apparent maneuver even works, as we have

said this kind of humor can do, to bring that contrasting sense out into relief so that we appreciate its solidity all the more. But then he turns out not to have been joking after all. The joke, like the other responses to Obelix's non sequitur, turns out to have been the same mistake we thought it was helping to correct. As a result, in this case, the joke now is that the original joke was not a joke after all.

If the apparent pun really had been a joke, its nonsense would have worked to confirm the contrasting sense; but because it turns out not to have been a joke after all, its straightforward nonsense simply commits the logical mistake that the joke had originally appeared to avoid. But as we saw in the combination of recognition and then commission of the mistake above, in order for the discovery that the original joke was not a joke to surprise us and so to constitute a joke of its own, we first had to react to the original joke as genuinely a joke. In other words, in this case, the humor of its turning out not to have been a joke depends on reliance on it as originally working as a joke.¹⁸

In the panels preceding Getafix's comments, the humor combined reliance on and disregard of logic, and in this way suspended our clarity about the contrasting roles and contributions of sense and nonsense. Here, our clarity about the contrasting roles in and contributions to sense that humor and seriousness themselves provide, too, is suspended. As Bakhtin writes about carnival humor, "It is also directed at those who laugh. . . . The people's ambivalent laughter . . . expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (1984 [1965], 12). The "sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (11) that Bakhtin argues the carnival spirit embodies is radical, and applies also to its own humorous and relativist truths.

As silly as Goscinny's and Uderzo's humor is, then, it should be clear at this point that it is also doing something radical. It goes down to the roots of sense, including the sense of its own process and achievement in doing so. And again, this coincidence of extremes, of silliness and profundity, is not an accident, but results logically from the paradoxical nature of making sense of sense. The substance of the serious metaphysical perspective consists exactly in suspending our most basic preconceptions about how sense works, and putting us in a position where it is not yet settled what is what.

Bakhtin argues that only the mutual contrasts of "an active plurality of languages" allow one to "place oneself outside one's own language" and so give one "the ability to see one's own media from the outside" (1984 [1965], 471). This allows "the modern time," or the time we are currently in, to become "conscious of itself" (468). The humor of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* brings about this awareness of our own particular historical culture too. Different languages and cultures are juxtaposed throughout the novel: for example, the

Romans intersperse their conversation with exclamations and proverbial sayings in Latin, each cultural group constantly invokes its own gods, and Egyptians talk in images made to look like hieroglyphics.

The nonsensical humor intensifies this contrast and the bringing into relief of our own culture that the contrast produces. When the Gauls arrive in Athens, they behave like modern tourists. The Parthenon "reminds me of Burdigala," one says. "No," says another, "there's a little square in Massilia" (25). At dinner at an open-air restaurant, Obelix muses, "D'you remember that little restaurant near Lugdunum where we had that delicious veal?" (26). These anachronisms are a kind of conceptual confusion. In another, one of the Gauls poses for a portrait (to be painted on a Grecian urn), and the painter holds up his brush and says, "Hold it there!" (25),¹⁹ in the way a photographer might who can capture the instantaneous pose.

In a nice touch, our authors make fun even of themselves, and in a similarly mixed-up way. Behind the registration desk for entry into Olympia, where the games will be held, a wall panel shows two characters arguing. It is the only place where actual Greek language and lettering is used, but it is used to indicate speech in a way similar to the "speech bubbles" of modern comics and that is not at all characteristic of Greek painting. One character is saying "*Tyrannos*" to the other, and the other is saying "*Despothe*" back, and underneath the respective characters are carved "*Gosciunny*" and "*Uderzo*" (29).

All of this topsy-turvyness is presented in connection with very ordinary, familiar aspects of our lives, and in a way that is charming. It is all endearingly silly rather than judgmental or biting, with quaint figures and caricatures, and shown in warm and pleasing colors. Even the violence is safe and too silly to be distressing. As Bakhtin writes of the carnival tradition, because of their "participation in the whole" of things, the images of carnival humor "are devoid of cynicism and coarseness in our sense of the words" (1984 [1965], 149). They express an appreciation of the elements of the world as each a part of the whole, and not a rejection of any of them. Because of the charming character of this perspective, it confirms our feeling safe and at ease in the world or, in other words, our taking the sense of the world for granted.

In fact, I suggest that it is only at this point, when we confirm our grasp of the sense of the world as that grasp is *before* deep reflection on it, that we genuinely achieve the metaphysical perspective that grasps the whole of things. For that unreflective taking-for-granted is itself part of the whole of things, and until it is included, we have not yet grasped the whole. In other words, in proper keeping with the paradox of stepping outside of sense to grasp sense as a whole, metaphysical or deep reflection is only complete when it includes

what *it* in turn automatically, and so unreflectively, excludes from itself: the unreflective or shallow awareness of unconsidered life.

Differently expressed, to get a perspective on sense as a whole, we also need to step outside the sense of “being outside sense.” But if where we are is outside of everything that makes sense, and we aim to step away from there, the only place left over from the “outside of everything” is the inside of everything. So if we step outside of being outside all sense, this means stepping back into the “inside” of sense. Truly to step outside of sense and the world, then, is in fact partly to relax unquestioningly and so entirely (because no longer with any reflection from the “outside”) within it.

Even expressed in this deeply paradoxical way, this is one of the central insights of, for example, Zen Buddhism. As the modern Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki expresses it, “When you are trying to give up everything, you haven’t given up everything yet” (2003, 117). For instance, the Buddhist goal of not being attached or limited to your self or ego “does not mean to give up your own individual practice. . . . As long as you believe, ‘My practice is egoless,’ that means you stick to ego, because you stick to giving up ego-centered practice [for example, you are still there in the form of your commitment to an idea of how the practice should best be; and you also conduct the practice with reference to avoiding your self, which means that your self is still indirectly shaping your activity]. . . . True egolessness . . . is not just egolessness. It also includes ego practice, but at the same time it is the practice of egolessness that is beyond ego or egolessness” (86, my insertion).

This appreciative awareness of the meaningfulness of unreflective, regular life, I think, is also the deep metaphysical lesson that the humor of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* (and with it the humor of the other *Asterix* novels) offers.

Verbal/Visual, Abstract/Concrete, Meaning/Matter

All of the logical carnival in *Asterix at the Olympic Games* occurs as much in image as in word. I have already noted the ways the separation of the panels and the drawings of posture and activity help to make and consolidate some of the logical connections and disconnections. The drawings also often portray physical impossibilities in the speed, force, and boundaries of activities; for example, they show characters shaking their heads so fast that there is just a blur of motion.

There is a nice example of the combination of visual and verbal conceptual confusion when the Gauls are competing among themselves to decide who

their champions in the Games will be. Obelix tells the brawny blacksmith, Fulliautomatix, that Obelix's little dog, Dogmatix, is better than Fulliautomatix; this consternates Fulliautomatix, and Obelix asks, "Well, can you scratch your ear with your hind leg?" (16).²⁰ Several panels later, we see Fulliautomatix, in a dog-like posture, proudly confounding the villagers by scratching his ear with his foot (16). In addition, as I have mentioned, the charm that is crucial to expressing the meaning that the carnival spirit shows us in the world is largely conveyed in the warm colors and endearing or quaint appearance of the images.

Will Eisner (1985), in his seminal book on the art of comics, explains about one of his own panels, which includes several different events, that "a description of the action in this panel can be diagrammed like a sentence. The predicates of the gun-shooting and the wrestling belong to separate clauses. The subject of 'gun-shooting' is the crook, and [the victim] is the object direct. The many modifiers include the adverb 'Bang, Bang' and the adjectives of visual language, such as posture, gesture, and grimace" (10, insertion added).²¹ He also points out that "the visual treatment of words as graphic art forms is part of the vocabulary" (10). In *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, for example, heavily bolded lettering expresses great emphasis, anger, or alarm, and Greek characters "speak" in the kind of angular lettering we might find on ancient Greek carvings in stone. In fact, this last example consists not only in a visual expression of meaning but also in several different kinds of conceptual confusion (letter shapes do not play a part in sounds, the requirements of carved letters do not apply to penned writing, and carved Greek lettering does not make modified shapes of French or English script).

It is not, however, simply that images and words cooperate with each other. Something much deeper is made noticeable here. Because the art of graphic novels shows that words and images are so plainly capable of doing closely related things—the words can describe physical objects, and the pictures can express logical connections and disconnections—we can recognize that what makes this possible is that they *are* closely related things. The world we experience by seeing it, the world of physical images and equally, for that matter, the world of physical things, makes *sense* in certain ways and not in others; and, reverse-wise, the meanings of our statements and thoughts express the sense of the physical things or states of affairs that they are, after all, often statements *about*.²² It is true that the meanings of particular words and the particular things they mean or refer to are very different from each other. Nonetheless, as Peter Winch (1958) very helpfully explains, when we are concerned with the ultimate nature of things in general—in his words, when we are concerned with "the nature of reality as such and in general" (8)—we should remember, for example, that "when we speak of the world we

are speaking of what we in fact mean by the expression ‘the world’” (15). In other words, in the end, “The world *is* for us what is presented through those concepts” given in our language (15). When we talk about things, we refer to something that we *mean*—even when we talk about things that are separate and different from our words, or about reality that is separate from our concepts—and this meaning *is* what our words and concepts express.²³

Consequently, the intimate cooperation of words and images helps us to see that, when we “step outside” the sense of the world as embodied in words and images to get a perspective on and reflect on that sense, what we are seeing freshly is not just a theoretical interpretation of the world, not just our concepts, separate from the world, but the sense of the world itself that those concepts express. The kind of carnival in which the *Astérix* books consist, then, truly gives us insight into the very reality of our everyday lives and of the things of our world, and not just into our views about them.

A Note on Metaphysical Wonder, Political Injustice, and Suffering

As I mentioned in the first section, while I argue that the *Astérix* books show us the wonder or meaningfulness of the everyday world, it does not do so at the cost of neglect of or collaboration with suffering and social wrongdoing. In fact, for Bakhtin himself, the medieval folk festival tradition to which I argue the spirit of *Astérix* is similar was fundamentally political, in that it expressed the equality of the people at large in opposition to the established hierarchies of social power and privilege. These festivals, he writes, “were linked to moments of crisis, to breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. . . . They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (1984 [1965], 9).

Further, although I focus on the ways in which the comprehensive or cosmic perspective that Bakhtin shows in this festival tradition includes all of our basic structures of sense or meaning, that perspective still remains fundamentally political even in this extended context, in that the sense of the everyday world that it is a perspective on is partly structured or informed by political norms. As, for example, the political philosophers and cultural critics Louis Althusser (1971), Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]), and Michel Foucault (1980) have very powerfully argued, political ideology in fact works most effectively by becoming part of our taken for granted ways of understanding our world. In this way, that ideology seems simply to express reality and not to be an ideology or interpretation that serves particular interests at all.²⁴

But precisely because the metaphysical perspective takes us fundamentally out of the familiar world as a whole, including out of sense itself in general, and not only out of the political dimensions of our lives, it puts us in a position to reconsider the potential biases on all sides. After all, political perspectives that aim for justice and truth have their assumptions too, and the role of what we perhaps unjustly take for granted, without realizing it, cuts both ways, and affects how we understand justice and the issues on both sides of each political divide.

This position of general re-examination also helps us to resolve a problem that has become fundamental to political debate in the last half-century or so. On the one hand, in the light of the influential idea I have mentioned that ideology and the favoring of particular interests that it disguises are built into our most basic ways of making sense, injustice is built into our fundamental structures of understanding the world, so that any political alternatives we can conceive, no matter how apparently just or supportive of equality and freedom, are themselves inescapably still shaped by the unjust assumptions and logic of those structures of sense. For example, Jean Baudrillard (1975) argues that Marx's concept of production, which is the main instrument of Marx's critique of capitalism and of his proposed movement beyond it, still embodies some of the basic, untransformed presuppositions of that same capitalism. It was in the context of capitalism, after all, that Marx learned how to think and make sense of the world. As a result, precisely to carry out Marx's liberatory goals, we would need to come to think in a way that is unavailable even to Marxism. In fact, Marx himself insisted on this same point, which is why he wrote very little about what the future state of society would look like.²⁵ The problem, however, is that if the biases of ideology are built into our most basic structures of sense, it is hard to see how we could possibly come to think in a way that is free of those biases.²⁶ Unless, to anticipate my point, we can in some way "step outside" our ways of making sense as a whole.

On the other hand, in the light of the same idea that injustice is built into our fundamental ways of making sense, even if we do somehow succeed in establishing genuinely alternative ways of understanding the world and carry them out, we will then, by definition, be operating with an altogether different way of making sense from the old one, sharing none of its basic ways of making sense. As a result, as our many-cultured and many-subcultured world has brought into sharp focus, the two ways of understanding the world will have no common ground that would allow us to compare them and establish which way of understanding things is right or better. We will no longer mean the same things by the same issues, or understand the relevant logic and evidence the same way, and there is then no way to establish our way of

making sense as more legitimate than the old one, or than alternative new ways of understanding the world. As a result, we run the risk of arbitrarily and unfairly imposing our own commitments on others, those whose way of making sense of the world is still the old one, or those with yet other alternative new ways of understanding the world.

Still, the metaphysical stepping outside of sense in general helps us to move toward resolving both sides of this problem. It does so by allowing us to reconsider even the most fundamental structures of sense in our society, and to do so without first pre-deciding which are oppressive and in what ways, in what contexts, and to whom they are so.²⁷

That being said, this problem is not the main concern of this essay. I am concerned here with the meaningfulness of life and our world—not excluding its politically unjust and otherwise negative dimensions, but including these in all the many diverse meaningful dimensions of life and reality. In the carnival tradition too, as Bakhtin emphasizes, even death “is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part of life as a whole—its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth’s life-giving womb” (1984 [1965], 50). In this perspective “death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all.”

But even without going as far as that thoroughly and confidently positive viewpoint, the bad sides of life require our recognition in their own unmitigated, sometimes terrible right, the wonder of life is also fundamental to reality, and this is the dimension of reality that, I believe, the metaphysical perspective of the *Asterix* books brings out. What is more, as I have suggested, in doing so it does not avoid the bad things, but in fact can help us to be sure that we are seeing them truly and so can help to put us on the path to doing justice to them. The issue is not to know what is what in advance—since, for the reasons of ideological bias I have discussed, this is something we cannot be sure we can do—but to come to sort out what is truly positive and negative, good and bad. And what allows us to do this, rather than, without realizing it, to begin already guided by our taken for granted assumptions about what the answers are, is the perspective that wonders about life and reality as a whole, and as a result steps outside of settled sense so that we genuinely do not know definitively one way or the other. In the end, if possible, I think the issue is also to come to see what place the bad aspects of the world have in a meaningful life. To arrive at all of these decisions responsibly, we first need to unsettle our sense of all of these things so that we are no longer immersed in their taken for granted familiarity, but can see

them, as it were, from the outside. And this is part of what the humor of the *Asterix* books allows us to do.²⁸

Notes

1. I have put the original date of publication of the works I cite in square brackets after the date of the edition I have used when there is more than a few years' difference between the two dates.
2. Wittgenstein's friend and student Norman Malcolm reports that Wittgenstein also suggested that "a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes*," although he also insisted that the jokes should not be "facetious" or with "no serious purpose" (1958, 29).
3. For a helpful introduction to formalism, see Bennett 1979, 20–25.
4. I explore the possibility and nature of this kind of coordination of mutually exclusive, equally legitimate overall perspectives in Barris 2015.
5. Many political theorists argue that what I have described as the homey, everyday sense of things that we do not reflect on is the most insidious operation of political ideology, since we do not even notice that this unreflective sense of things embodies biases and agendas, but simply see it as expressing the way things are. Roland Barthes, for example, argues that middle class ideology "transforms . . . History into Nature. . . . Bourgeois ideology yields an unchangeable nature" (1972, 141–142). As I have suggested, however, and as the Wittgenstein quotation in the first section argues, our unreflective sense of things is also the basis for truth, whether political or otherwise, and so has a much wider significance than just a political one. I shall discuss this further in the final section.
6. In the original French, "Totorum" is *Babaorum*, a phonetic spelling of *baba au rhum* or "rum baba," a small cake soaked in rum; and "Compendium" is *Petitbonum*, a phonetic spelling of *petit bonhomme*, which is both "little fellow" and bread cut in the shape of a little person.
7. In French, "*C'est vraiment le monde à l'envers!*" (1968, 46), which translates straightforwardly as "this is truly all topsy-turvy!"
8. In the French, *Tullius Mordicus* or "Obstinate Tullius."
9. "*À propos d'étrangers, voici des compatriots!*" (1968, 25).
10. An obelisk is both a kind of tall pillar and the typographical dagger that is used as a sign for a footnote once an asterisk has already been used: it is the asterisk's sidekick! "Glu-teus Maximus" in the French is *Claudius Cornedurus* or "Claudius Hardhorn."
11. In the French, *Agecanonix*, or "Very Advanced Age."
12. In the French, *Abraracourcix*, a phonetic version of *à bras raccourcis*, "with arms raised ready to fight," or more colloquially, "with fists flying."
13. In French, Geriatrix is "rather thinking of a mushroom salad" ("*moi, je verrais plutôt les champignons en salade*" [1968, 6]).
14. In the French, *Panoramix* or "Wide View."
15. "*Il faut les faire sauter!*" (1968, 6), or roughly, "let them jump!" or "let them fry!"

16. "*Les champignons gardent toute leur saveur quand ils sont sautés*" (1968, 6): "Mushrooms keep all their flavor when they're fried (sautéed)."

17. In this case, in the English version, it is an amphiboly, or an ambiguity set up by the grammar of the sentence and not located in any of the words on their own. In French, we could think of it as an equivocation on *sauter* ("jump" and "fry," or perhaps, alternatively, on "fry" taken both literally and metaphorically).

18. This suggests that there is a sense in which, at the time of the original joke, it *was* a joke, and only retroactively, in the subsequent panel, became what was never a joke (!). This is in keeping with the general paradox at work in "stepping outside of sense in general," that sense and logic are both taken seriously and disregarded: things are not what they are, but they also are just what they are. The humor of the discovery that Getafix's statement was not a joke after all depends on reliance on it as originally working as a joke; but once we reject it as a joke, of course, it turns out originally really *not* to have been a joke at all. The sense of the humor requires that both are true, and that both are not true.

In other words, when we are reflecting, as we are, on a metaphysical perspective that suspends (while also not suspending) the functioning of sense, our own reflection or commentary on that metaphysical exploration is itself working at the level of suspended sense that belongs to the perspective that is its topic, and so our own reflection or commentary shares its illogical (and also logical) texture.

For a technical defense of the legitimate sense of this kind of retroactive and paradoxical shift of truth over time, in the context of "backward induction" in rational choice theory, see Dupuy (2000).

19. "*Ne bougeons plus!*" (1968, 25), or very literally, "Let's not move anymore!"

20. In the French, "Fulliautomatix" is *Cétautomatix*, or "It's Automatic," and "Dogmatix" is *Idéfix* or "Obsessively Unchangeable Idea." Although *Idéfix* does not make a corresponding pun to Dogmatix's pun on "dog," it does make a sort of bilingual pun on different written expressions of part of the name's sound. It is a phonetic spelling of *idée fixe*, and as a result very neatly fits the regular French "-ixe" to the "-ix" ending of the Gaulish name.

21. In the context of linguistics and cognitive science, Neil Cohn (2013) argues that "the mind/brain treats all expressive capacities in similar ways," so that certain "general properties of cognition emerge in the visual-graphic modality just as they do in verbal and signed languages" (195), although they occur with differences that result from the nature of "the channel and properties of the behavior itself" (196).

22. There are some very reasonable objections to the idea that words and images are closely related in this kind of way. Eric Vos (1998), for instance, quite rightly argues that words and images work in some ways that are so different as to be mutually exclusive (144), so that we cannot simply treat them as expressing the same sense. And for a very helpful and subtly nuanced book-length defense of the essentially different natures of words and images in the context of comics—and also for a very fine account of what comics distinctively do and how they do it—see Miodrag (2013). I suggest, however, that meaning or sense itself is not fully a simple, self-same "thing." This is why, for example, it is not only possible for us "step out" of sense to get a good grasp of it, but why sense itself *requires* us to "step outside" of it to get a good grasp of it. After all, we cannot be sure what sense we are making or

whether it really is the appropriate sense until we have a perspective on it; and as I argued in the first section, we can only have that perspective on something by being at some kind of distance from it. It is built into meaning or sense, then, that it works by being at some kind of a distance from itself, or by not being fully the same as itself. Because of this, I suggest, even fundamentally unlike forms of expression, such as words and images, can after all express the same meaning or sense. I explore this “non-self-coincidence” of sense in detail in Barris 2015, most directly in the concluding chapter or Coda.

23. In addition to the contemporary lines of thought of which Winch’s argument is an example, there is a long-standing Aristotelian tradition, from Aristotle’s own work to the late medieval taking up of Aristotle, that explores the idea that concepts succeed in connecting with their particular objects and expressing them because both the concept and the object are shaped and in fact made to be what they are by one and the same “form” or structuring principle. This form provides the defining character of both the object that the concept expresses and of the concept itself, and so is more or less what I am describing as their “sense.” For a brief contemporary defense of this kind of idea, see Bonjour 1998, 149–151, and 180–185.

Scott McCloud (1993) describes the cartoons that are a central element of the art of graphic novels and of other comics as “stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’ by ‘focusing on specific details’ (30), and he argues that “by de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (41). (Notice that McCloud draws on the idea of “form” here, our contemporary sense of which came about partly in the Aristotelian tradition mentioned above. This is also true of the connected idea of “essence” that he makes use of in this passage.) I have argued in this section, further even than this very illuminating point he makes, that cartoons can do this because the physical world itself is already partly in the world of concepts. McCloud writes a little later, “There’s a lot more to cartoons than meets the eye” (45), and I would add that this helps us to see that there is a lot more to whatever we see than meets the eye.

In this light, McCloud’s description of cartoons as expressing an image’s essential meaning or concept implies that cartoons also express what is essential about the things or situations that the images or concepts reflect. In other words, cartoons can capture the essences of things, and so are in fact one form of the most deeply realistic and accurate kind of representation.

24. For instance, see the quotation from Barthes in note 5.

25. David McLellan (1975) writes, “on Marx’s own principles . . . any detailed predictions were bound to be baseless. For all ideas were rooted in the socio-economic soil of their time, and descriptions of the future would thus be rootless ideas without any foundation in reality” (66–7). As Marx himself insisted, for example, when communist society first “emerges from capitalist society,” it is “in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges” (1977 [1875], 568).

26. An alternative approach to dealing with this problem, one form of which was very influentially argued by Michel Foucault, is to embrace this situation. In this view, since it is inescapable that our structures of sense shape us in ways that support particular interests at the expense of others, we should all accept this and exercise our freedom by creating novel ways of making sense of our lives and so of shaping them, and encourage others to

do the same. But in that light the people who prefer to oppress us are equally justified in making sense of the world as they do and in shaping their lives as oppressors, as are any others whom our ways of understanding and living may conflict with. We fight for what we want, and they fight for they want, and there is no basis beyond that on which to defend our aims—even to ourselves—or to criticize theirs. The result is that we still have not avoided the injustices, but instead are ignoring them and in fact actively participating in them. For this kind of criticism of Foucault, see, for example, Michael Walzer, who argues that Foucault's approach to political wrongs does not "give us any way of knowing what 'better' might mean" (1986, 61).

27. In a wonderful account of radical social change that is in several ways closely related to the themes of this discussion of *Asterix*, Paolo Virno (2008) argues that fundamental political change requires an escape from our entire system of meanings to a completely different one. Because these systems of meanings are mutually exclusive, the transition between them involves radical shifts in the meanings of what we are talking and thinking about. In other words, this transition consists in a tissue of logical errors (in fact, all the standard fallacies that critical reasoning textbooks teach us to avoid). And as Virno argues, these errors correspond to different types of jokes.

28. I would like to thank Jeff McLaughlin for his thorough and very helpful comments, which have helped me to clarify and deepen my discussion considerably. I would also like to thank Steve de Wijze for his careful and encouraging reading of the essay, as well as for his illuminating insights into the world of *Asterix*. And I thank Paul Turner for helping me to get clear on and so to try to avert some likely misunderstandings of my in many ways counter-intuitive theme.

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Further Reading

The Adventures of Tintin novels, by the Belgian cartoonist Hergé (this was his pen name; his given name was Georges Remi), also include a lot of charmingly silly humor and so establish a space that is partly outside of logical sense, but they make an interesting contrast with the *Asterix* books. The *Tintin* stories have a contemporary setting, and typically involve suspenseful and dangerous adventures, often in the world of international intrigue. As a result, the silliness often also partly serves as comic relief. But because their art work, although it is impressively precise and detailed, is that of comics, and in particular has much of the same

kind of cartoon-work and of pleasingly charming coloring and quaintness of characters as we find in the *Asterix* books, it constantly reminds us that it is a pleasurable fantasy, and so largely takes the reality out of the danger and suspense, and, like the *Asterix* books, confirms that the familiar world it shows so charmingly is safe to relax into and take for granted. But this still remains a more serious and dangerous world than that of the *Asterix* books and, as a result the *Tintin* books bring about a strange and interesting combination of the delightful wonder of the everyday and the unsettling defamiliarizing of the world that are both dimensions of metaphysical awareness.