Philosophy as Laughter
Prof Andrea Hurst: Inaugural Lecture SUMMARY

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SUMMARY
Contextualising my current philosophical preoccupations within the framework of my understanding of my task as a philosopher, I engage with the proposition that philosophers have a double task: firstly learning (and teaching) how to think, and relatedly, unexpectedly, learning/teaching how to laugh.

Accepting that Philosophy has, first and foremost, styled itself as the discipline of thinking, the first half of the lecture offers a critical overview of Philosophy's task of thinking. It is not controversial to describe Philosophy as deeper level critical thinking, or to say that Philosophy involves critical thinking about a certain kind of subject matter related to the meaning of life or the human condition. Philosophy traditionally asks what it means to be human, and considers: the nature of things; the meaning of freedom, love, compassion, identity; how best to live well; what counts as knowledge, truth, good, evil; how to understand divinity, treat others, create a just society; and so on. It is when philosophers look at their own activity or, that is, think about thinking, that the characterisation of the philosopher's task becomes more contentious. The traditional explanation of what thinking means is challenged by a more contemporary explanation that takes account of complexity. The heart of the difference between these explanations lies in their different conceptions of "the truth". On a traditional account, a truth is understood to be as a piece of knowledge about the human condition that one may have in hand forever. On a contemporary account, the truth is described as the insight that every aspect of the human condition reveals a precarious condition of radical uncertainty. Wary of the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by zealots who believe they have knowledge, in the discussion to follow, I embrace contemporary complexity thinking and the notion of "radical uncertainty".

In the second half of the lecture, I turn to the question of characterising Philosophy as more than an intellectual discipline of thinking. I consider Philosophy as a practice, or as a way of life. I engage specifically with a text by Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1892] to put forward a way of practicing philosophy as the task of learning how to laugh well. Learning how to laugh well turns out to be an extremely complex ethical task. It involves a strategy of lifelong learning and teaching in which there is a shift from immature to mature versions of at least four kinds of laughter. Nietzsche offers gripping metaphors for three of these; namely, the laughters of the camel, lion and child. I draw the fourth metaphor from Nietzsche's contrast between two kinds of "fire-dog". The final "outcome" of the extremely difficult and laborious ethical task of learning to laugh (or, that is, the ethical task of self-overcoming or self-mastery) is the fittingly paradoxical insistence that it is ultimately necessary to renounce this outcome, since it represents a misconception of the ethical task as one of making linear progress from worse to better, ugly to beautiful, evil to good, and so on. Instead, immersion in a life of learning to laugh is its own reward, along with all of its pain, hardship, suffering and ugliness, as well as, importantly, the radical uncertainty of a better outcome. Nietzsche teaches us that the most important philosophical and ethical task is to make your tangible reality count so much that you can embrace its eternal recurrence.