# The Aesthetics of Comedy: Amusement, Incongruity, and Morality

**by**

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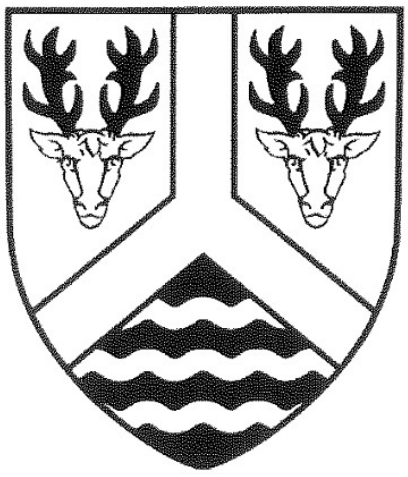

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## Abstract
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The goal in this thesis is to identify and describe the important themes of the philosophy of comedy and to justify the conception of comedy as an aesthetic activity. I distinguish among laughter, amusement, humor, and comedy, as well as other terms which are often interchanged with these. I describe laughter as the mere physiological response to some stimulus or mental state and make a case that it is therefore too broad to account for humor or for the art of comedy. Amusement, which I show to be an involuntary, intentional, disinterested, non-emotion-dependent mental state of some sort, could much more accurately account for the nature of humor and comedy. I explain why traditional theories of laughter do not provide a satisfactory account of amusement; I then build my own account whilst considering Roger Scruton's suggestion that the 'formal object of amusement' is something resembling 'the human in it's broadest significance.' Amusement, and therefore humor and the art of comedy, is a rational activity important to rational beings. It requires self-reflection as well as engagement with others. It can serve a purely aesthetic purpose in the traditional sense – i.e. to be enjoyed for its own sake – or it can be a 'social corrective' as Henri Bergson puts it. Contra the Bergsonian view defended by Ronald de Sousa and Joseph Boskin, however, humor should only serve the latter purpose when aimed toward truth rather than, as they argue, to perpetuate a postmodern narrative of social justice at the expense of truth. The final chapter will be dedicated to this theme. In conclusion, I will hope to have shown comedy to have aesthetic value and to be virtually free from moral concerns over its subject matter when expressed in a sophisticated, artful way. Such concerns, however, are intentionally raised by the postmodern points of view of de Sousa and Boskin. It is this kind of point of view that encourages audiences of a joke to take offense even in cases where it is not intended. As comedy, like any art, has no limits for the subject matter it can cover, whether it be founded on fact or fiction, a cultivated sense of humor will rather take a joke, no matter how offensive in its technique, to be a joke unless there is clear evidence of malicious intent. The value of comedy as an art comes from a social value for the sovereignty of the individual over that of the collective group, in the cases where comedy has such a significance at all.

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## Introduction – Comedy and Humor

Before I begin, it is important to define a few terms. By 'comedy' I am referring to any work which exemplifies its aesthetic value by being humorous and amusing an audience. This kind of art was made popular in Classical Greece through satirical plays, or '*comodiai*' such as those of Aristophanes, and has since slowly expanded to account for many different forms. There are still theatrical productions of satire to this day. There is also comedy in the forms of sketch, film, and television writing, as well as stand-up comedy. A comedian, therefore, is any person who creates and/or performs such a work.

Humor is a characteristic of comedy, but there is still some discrepancy between humor and comedy when we take a look at the definitions of humor. As a noun I will refer to it as the quality of being amusing or comic. Secondarily, humor is a state of mind. The first issue here is that the definition of humor contains the adjective 'comic' which is the quality of causing or meaning to cause amusement. Although it would be reasonable to presume that 'comic' is simply the adjective form of the noun 'comedy', I have defined comedy as the art form intended to amuse an audience. So there appears to be an instance of circularity here. As a verb, 'humor' is to comply with the wishes of someone in order to keep them content, however unreasonable such wishes might be. Here another question arises: is the purpose of comedy to possess the quality of being funny or to comply with the wishes of the audience to remain content? Perhaps it depends what the wishes of the audience are and what would in fact keep them content. Comedy could satisfy both descriptions if the audience's wishes are for to be amused, for that would in turn keep them content (and it would often require the person humoring them to be unreasonable, as the definition would suggest). Or, should the comedian strive to keep his audience content even if that is sometimes at the expense of being funny?

My inclination, and a thread I will maintain throughout this thesis, is that the main purpose of comedy, both necessary and sufficient, is to be funny. This may seem like an uncontroversial position to defend, but some experts in the world of comedy would disagree, and this would carry some weight under a Dickian account of humor as an art.[1] According to Dickie it is the behaviors and opinions of the 'art world' that determine the status of works as art. There have been professional comedians of the recent past who have, as it seems to

[1] See e.g. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 216.

me, made, neither humorous amusement nor contentment, but rather education the primary goal of their work, leaving humor and contentment as secondary goals or not goals at all. George Carlin and Bill Hicks, two American standup comedians who are considered by many to be a legends of the art, were more social and political commentators than they were comedians by my definition of comedy. Their acts, especially toward the ends of their respective careers, were often amusing but not funny; they often received claps and cheers for their remarks rather than laughs. On the other hand, there were humor purists such as Chris Farley and Jim Carrey who would do anything, no matter how ridiculous, to get a laugh, and would often do so without words. There were comparatively few claps or cheers at their shows, but only laughs from virtually every member of the audience for the duration of the performance. Their shows were by no means educational or enlightening, but rather slapstick in style and lacking in intellectual content. They were therefore humorous in both the noun and verb uses of the term. These examples are of two extreme purposes that professional comedy can serve. Both have proven successful by institutional standards, and most comedians reach success with some combination of these styles indicating that both laughter and truth can serve as goals of the art. However, I still have not sufficiently addressed the verb definition of humor which will be crucial to the final chapter.

If we are to take seriously the definition of humor as a verb – to comply with the wishes of the audience to keep them content, without humorous amusement as even a necessary condition – it seems that we should be forced to face ethical considerations regarding the audience's desires, beliefs, and emotional states which are all, very problematically, out of the performer's control. One way to keep the audience content, of course, is to not offend them. How is this possible? Answering this question will take us back to the Superiority Theory of humor which was supported by many important thinkers ranging from Plato to Thomas Hobbes. This theory states generally that some form of immoral ridicule – a belittling of a person – lies at the bottom of laughter. It was put to rest for a time by Francis Hutcheson, but it has had a resurgence in recent years under the influence of thinkers including of Ronald de Sousa and Joseph Boskin who argued that what we find funny is necessarily degrading to the object and reflective of deeper-seated cultural beliefs. Is this correct? Moreover, what role does or should belief play in comedy, humor, and amusement? Must the comedian and those who laugh at a joke be or feel superior to the object of a joke? If so, is this a problem? What role does intention play in this? I will address all of these questions throughout this thesis. First, I will have to do some groundwork in showing why amusement is foundational for this discussion, and after fleshing out what I

think are the most important aspects of the nature of amusement, I shall in turn say something of substance regarding the philosophical nature of humor and comedy. This will involve dealing with the verb definition of 'humor' which the contemporaries mentioned above support. It will be my goal to show that amusement has an aesthetic spirit, disinterested from moral concerns and to, in the process, show the connectedness regarding all of the concerns above.

# Chapter 1 – Amusement

## 1.1 Laughter and Amusement

In the introduction, I mentioned the comedic styles of two different camps: the educational camp and the laughter camp. The likes of Chris Farley and Jim Carrey were at the extreme end of the laughter camp. Their only goal was to make their audience laugh no matter how ridiculously that was to be achieved. The likes of George Carlin and Bill Hicks were more educational. Their main purpose was to put forth a view of the world, leaving laughter as an afterthought. Regardless of whether we should consider both to be forms of comedy by my definition, we can say that they are both amusing. This raises the important distinction between laughter and amusement. My aims in this chapter are twofold. First, I aim to draw the distinction between laughter and amusement in a philosophically precise way. Secondly I aim to show that amusement is the more fundamental concept in our understanding of humor and comedy, and that this is because amusement has intentionality; it is an intentional mental state. Intentionality, as I will also show, is crucial in our accepting some expressions of amusement as aesthetic.

First, laughter can be voluntary or involuntary. It can be voluntarily forced out by an actor in a film in order to represent the genuine laughter of a fictional character, or it can be an involuntary, mere physiological response to being tickled. The actor does not express genuine laughter. He is mimicking genuine laughter for some end. The person being tickled has no control over their response, which may or may not involve laughter, so it must at least be genuine. And yet it is a mere physiological response. The sort of laughter we should be concerned with here is of the genuine sort but which is not merely physiological, for even rats can exhibit laughter from being tickled.[2] Laughter from amusement involves thought, understanding, and our being situated in relation to others. It can only be exhibited by a rational, self-conscious being.

Descartes gives an elementary account of how laughter physically occurs. He explains the movement of blood through the particular chambers of the heart while air rushes through the lungs, all of which 'cause motion in the facial muscles, which have a certain connection with them. And it is just this action of the face with this inarticulate and explosive voice that

[2] Jesse Bering, 'Rats Laugh, but Not Like Humans', *Scientific American*, 1 July 2012, pp. 74-77. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/rats-laugh-but-not-like-human/> [accessed 1 August 2018]

we call laughter.[3] But, this does not explain why one laughs or what connects it with amusement. This same process is likely in rats being tickled, or hyenas cackling, just as when humans laugh from being tickled. When one laughs at a joke or an event, however, one laughs for a reason – at something. One laughs because one is amused. Why does one become amused?

Descartes' account, as many of those who came before him, was vague concerning the concept of amusement. He observed that people laugh at many different things but did not at length explore the different types of laughter that there might be. His theory focused more on the behavior of laughter in general while adding peripheral notes on what implications that might have for virtue and morality. He thought that joy, or some positive feeling of amusement, can only cause laughter in moderation. Joy alone cannot repeatedly inflate the lung, for it is always full of blood, so it must be accompanied by a mix of more intense emotions such as hatred and surprise (Art. 125). We are 'naturally inclined toward sadness,' for thin joyous blood gets exhausted, and thicker, sad blood returns to the heart (Art. 126). So, the thickness of one's blood, and it's ability to pass between the lungs and heart accompanied by a combination of positive and negative emotions, is a determining factor of whether or not laughter will ensue from those emotions.

Emotions, like genuine amusement, manifest involuntarily. Could emotion in the broadest sense be that thing that amuses one? Descartes adds:

> When (laughter) is natural, it appears to proceed from the joy that we have in observing the fact that we cannot be hurt by the evil at which we are indignant, and… from the fact that we find ourselves surprised by the novelty or by the unexpected encountering of this evil… joy, hatred, and wonder contribute to it. (Art. 127)

Let us suppose that by 'laughter,' Descartes was referring to involuntary laughter from amusement. Must laughter, then, be an expression of joy felt from observing evil that is not threatening to us? Plato was inclined to include similar conditions for laughter in the *Philebus* (48-50) when he states that we feel pleasure when we laugh at delusions of ignorance in others – delusions which are grounded in evil.[4] Because we are distanced from the evil and not threatened by it – it is the other who possesses the evil ignorance, not us –

[3] Rene Descartes, 'Passions of the Soul Part II: The Number and Order of the Passions and Explanations of the Six Basic Passions', in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. by Elizabeth Haldane and G. Ross (Cambridge: Cabridge University Press, 1911), Art. 124-181. Further references to 'Passions of the Soul' are given after quotations in the text.

[4] Plato, *Philebus*, trans. by Dorothea Frede, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 52-59

we may laugh at it.

Let us suppose, as Descartes did, that the claim that joy is a condition for genuine laughter needs no questioning. Is evil, then, a condition for genuine laughter from amusement, or can we imagine at least one contrary case in which laughter from amusement does not involve evil at all? Cicero gives an early account of humor which does not hold evil as a condition at all. He rejects that great vice and misery, forms of evil, we could call them, are appropriate subjects of humor. One should be conscious of how others might be affected by humor: '...do not speak rashly of those who are personally beloved.'[5] If humor is not to acknowledge the evils of others, then what is left? As an orator, Cicero was less concerned with what sort of content we might consider funny and more so with the tactics applied in a joke.

> Whatever is wittily expressed consists sometimes in an idea, sometimes only in the language used. But people are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by the idea and the language together.[6]

Good wit makes for a good joke, and a good joke satisfies the purpose of humor in making its audience laugh. That can come by using many different linguistic tools such as pun and alliteration. Consider the alliteration in this poem:

> A flea and a fly in a flue
> Said the fly "Oh what should we do"
> Said the flea "Let us fly"
> Said the fly "Let us flee"
> So they flew through a flaw in the flue[7]

This short poem might make one laugh, and, if so, not on the basis of evil. In part, the alliteration is necessary for the humor. One could take the premise of a bee and a gnat in a duct, eliminate the rhyming, and tell the same story, and it would likely not be funny at all. If the form in which a joke is applied better explains genuine laughter, and therefore the

5 Cicero, *On the Character of the Orator* trans. by J. S. Watson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), pp. 257-260 (p. 257).

6 Cicero, p. 260.

7 Attributed to Ogden Nash by Karen Ahlstrom in her blog, 'Karen's Poetry Spot', 9 August 2008, <http://karenspoetryspot.blogspot.com/2008/08/flea-and-fly-in-flue-by-ogden-nash.html> [accessed 31 July 2018]. This poem does not appear in any of Nash's published works, and so this attribution may be erroneous.

amusement, then it seems that no good case can be made that evil should be a condition of all genuine laughter. Furthermore, would this poem make one laugh because it makes us feel something? Certainly, it could evoke joy, but, if anything else is evoked, hatred for the fly or the flee or for any other component of the poem seems unlikely. We could very well say, however, that this poem brings the reader joy, which Descartes considers necessary but not sufficient for laughter.

Natural laughter, for Descartes, proceeds from a mix of joy, hatred, and wonder. These, we might say, are sorts of emotions. So, need laughter be rooted in emotion? Furthermore, is amusement also an emotion since it is from amusement that joy stems? First, not all laughter stems from joy. Being tickled, again, is an example of natural laughter as it is involuntary, and some animals are capable of this as well. The laugh, along with some flailing motions, is only a physical response that it is neither caused nor constituted by emotion, though it might well cause joy or annoyance. Someone might very well laugh at being tickled although they hate it and take no joy from it at all. It doesn't follow, then, that natural laughter must proceed from emotion. Although, Descartes still may very well agree, as he states not specifically that these positive and negative emotions are causes of laughter, but, rather, that they contribute to it.

Let us again suppose, however, that by natural laughter, Descartes is talking about laughter which results from genuine amusement. Let's consider the second question above: is amusement an emotion? A case for this is put forth by Robert Sharpe in his essay 'Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is An Emotion'. These seven reasons, at the risk of caricaturing them for the sake of brevity, are: (1) They both have an object, (2) they both admit of degrees, (3) We have the power to suppress behavioral manifestations of both, (4) both may be the subjects of self-deception, (5) many emotions are intrinsically pleasant or painful; amusement is a sort which is most often pleasant, with rare, ludicrous exceptions, (6) it is usual to distinguish between cause and object in emotion (e.g. One's own death is often an object of fear, but hardly the cause. Likewise, an audience can be amused in anticipation of a comedian's punchline, making it the object but not the cause since it has not yet happened. The cause is, rather, their guess of what the punchline will be.), (7) amusement is similar to our response to aesthetic objects, and those objects, much like people, are capable of receiving our love; expressions of love for both art and people are, at least in part, matters of taste which can be cultivated.[8]

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[8] Robert Sharpe, 'Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is An Emotion', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 208-211.

The most interesting of these points is the seventh, I think, for at least two reasons. The first reason is because, if it is true, emotion and amusement seem to be cultivated in very different, but not universally-applicable ways. Taste in amusement seems to be cultivated toward the good, while it is not emotion *per se,* but rather one's awareness and managing of emotions that is improved. The second reason is that, although Sharpe makes no clear case for this, it could lead one to wonder if amusement has an aesthetic quality. I will deal with the latter point later. For now, I will examine the idea that that amusement can be classed as an emotion on the basis that it satisfies Sharpe's seven criteria. I will argue that Sharpe's criteria face important difficulties in virtue of which they cannot plausibly be used to judge whether amusement is an emotion. I will then present two arguments that amusement is in fact not an emotion.

It is peculiar that, whereas Sharpe uses fear as the exemplary emotion to demonstrate the first six points, he uses love to demonstrate the seventh.[9] Assuming both love and fear are emotions, and without getting too technical regarding the philosophy of love, do the conditions these emotions also hold up as examples of the conditions they are not used to demonstrate if we are to swap their roles? I will start with love. Does love meet the first six conditions?

Love, like fear, has an object, whether it be a person or a work of art. It also admits of degrees, for we don't love everyone equally. We wouldn't as often act selflessly toward a stranger as we would toward a close friend or family member. All things being equal, the converse is true of fear; the extent to which we lack familiarity with someone is roughly equal to the likelihood that we might fear them. The behavioral manifestations of love can also be consciously suppressed, for we may let go of someone we love because that love is not reciprocated, for example. We can likewise suppress the behavioral manifestations of fear of strangers in order to make in effort to get to know them. Love can also be the subject of self-deception. We can act foolishly in love, as in letting a non-reciprocal relationship persist for longer than we should. Likewise can we fear someone based on an unreasonable prejudice. It seems, without the need for much evidence beyond common human experience, that love meets the first four conditions quite easily.

The fifth condition is a bit more complex. Is love also intrinsically pleasant or painful? Again, from experience, it seems somewhat clear that genuine love should be pleasant, although a certain degree or frequency of pain often accompanies a meaningful relationship. Perhaps a relationship is meaningful because of what the pain affords: growth

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[9] Sharpe, pp. 208-211.

and cultivation. This condition seems to fit love well enough for these purposes, but clearly only with some qualifications.

Lastly and most difficultly, can we distinguish between an object and a cause in love? Firstly, Sharpe's example of death being the object of fear leaves out what might be the cause of fear in that same case. Perhaps it is some suppressed psychological phenomenon characterized by condition (3) or (4), such as a Freudian predisposition founded in some childhood experience, or maybe an element of one's temperament suppressed in their Jungian shadow. Whatever the case, we do know that it cannot be death itself, for all one's own death causes one, we shall presume, is the decomposition of the body. It remains in the future and therefore cannot cause anything psychological since one will not live to experience the effect.

It is also conceivable that objects of fear other than death might cease to be such objects once faced. One way to overcome an object of fear is often to move closer toward it in order to see that it is merely an object of fear to begin with, rather than a cause. The object of a child's fear that a monster is in his closet is not a monster at all, but rather an imaginary thing. The cause is his misconception that there is a monster in his closet, and that is loaded with the further misconception that monsters, as he understands them, exist. His parent makes him walk to the closet and open the door to find that there is no monster in it, leaving him to acknowledge that the object of his fear was of his own imagination and that no such cause exists at all. Fear is a strong emotion for which I struggle to think of a concrete cause rather than a hypothetical or imaginary one. Even in the case that one has good reason to believe that a future event – worthy of evoking fear – will occur, it should still be maintained that a future event is incapable of causing anything. Such fear would serve as an effect, and an effect must be preceded by its cause.

This presents a problem for fear to be used in place of love as an example for Sharpe's seventh condition, i.e. that taste in it can be cultivated. Whereas in love or in amusement, experience, knowledge, and reflection contribute to the cultivation of taste, the opposite seems to happen for fear. Exposure to an object of fear through cognitive behavioral therapy, for example, instilling one with experience and knowledge of that object, more often contributes to the elimination of fear. Backwards learning of an object through a traumatic experience leading to post traumatic stress disorder more closely parallels cultivation of taste. It's effect, however, is opposite of the cultivation of taste in love of people or in amusement at good music or comedy. We might call this, rather, the cultivation of *distaste*.

Sharpe's goal in his article is to provide seven reasons why amusement is an emotion.[10] The seven reasons start, as Sharpe presents them, as chief characteristics of emotion that he believes amusement also possesses. Insofar as amusement can be shown to possess those characteristics, he would then have a strong case for amusement to be an emotion such as fear or love. I have shown, however, that these characteristics are not even straightforwardly possessed by the two emotions he uses as examples, rendering them implausible criteria for status of being an emotion. Therefore, they cannot be considered a standard by which to determine amusement's status as an emotion either. To refute Sharpe's premise is not to refute his conclusion, however. There may, of course, be another way of proving amusement to be an emotion, but this measure has failed that purpose.

There are two more reasons why I think it is a mistake to consider amusement an emotion. The first is that emotions are, as John Morreall puts it, 'episodic states' of the mind reflective of some predisposed positive or negative attitude.[11] This is related to Sharpe's condition (5) which states that emotions have the characteristic of being intrinsically pleasant or unpleasant, and Descartes' idea that a combination of positive and negative emotions must accompany natural laughter. An emotion is always positive or negative to some degree. Love, joy, glee, and excitement are all positive in varying degrees. Fear, hate, sadness, and resentment are all negative in varying degrees. By contrast, amusement need not come from a positive or negative attitude. One can be amused from a positive, negative, or emotionally-neutral perspective. One can be amused by something, that is to say interested enough in it so it hold's one's attention, without having a preference or prejudice for that thing.

The second reason is related to the first. For a positive or negative attitude to accompany the expression of an emotion, some belief about the object is also needed.[12] To fear an object is to believe that it is harmful, whether or not it actually is. To love a person, one must, at the very least, believe the person exists. To be amused by a person – a clown for instance – one need not believe even that. Suppose after a clown amuses one, he pulls off his mask to reveal that he is a robot and not a person at all. This would not have any effect on one's having been amused by the clown. In fact, this may in some cases contribute to the amusement. Similarly, one does not have to believe that the story – or any of the details – of a film is true to sit through it with their eyes glued to the screen for two hours. One can be

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10 Sharpe, p. 208.

11 John Morreall, 'Humor and Emotion', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 212-224 (p. 214).

12 Morreall, 'Humor and Emotion', pp. 214-215.

amused by a thought which has no basis in belief but which is merely entertained. We merely need to see something *as* something in order to be amused by it. I will return to this point when I make a case for amusement's being aesthetic and again in the second chapter. For now, it should serve as evidence that amusement is not an emotion.

So far, we have determined that genuine laughter is involuntary, comes from amusement, and that neither evil nor emotion serve as the basis for it. This should give us some guidance in understanding how laughter situates the subject in relation to others. Advocates of the Superiority Theory say this happens hierarchically, but I am convinced that that only accounts for some cases. To explain why that is, we must make a distinction between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at.'

## 1.2 Laughing With vs Laughing At

Laughter, as we should know by now, can occur with or without amusement. Many things cause us to laugh, and our laughs can also be directed in a number of different ways. Amusement can certainly be a cause of laughter, but it is not a necessary component of laughter in general. Mere physical examples aside, one reason for this is that in comedy, for example, laughter from amusement is an end in itself, while at the same time it is clear that laughter is often caused by or directed toward things other than amusement (e.g. the evil cackle of a convict being sent to the execution room). What other ends might there be for one's laughter? Why are they less important than amusement for founding a theory of humor or comedy? To explain this, I will now distinguish between laughing with and laughing at.

To 'laugh with' establishes something between the subject and object. It is not an expression of amusement. Laughing with requires the audience of a joke, which must be a rational subject, to treat the object of the joke as another rational subject. To laugh with one can be to sympathize with someone. The definition of humor as a verb – i.e. to comply with the wishes of another, no matter how unreasonable – comes into play here. We might laugh with someone, in fact, in order to sympathize with, or to humor them. This would be, at least in part, a voluntary, interested behavior directed toward some end. One example might be a pro-life voter who forcibly laughs with the rest of the party at someone's abortion joke (let us assume it would not be funny to one of cultivated taste in humor) in order to maintain civility at a dinner party. One person here is disregarding the object of the joke to keep the other subject's interests in mind. Another example would be when one young person laughs at every word spoken by a new acquaintance whom she finds attractive, not because anything the other says is actually funny, but in order to express interest in that acquaintance.

She is ultimately not investing interest in what is being said, but rather in the subject who is saying it. Why might one do such things? It is because one acknowledges another as a rational being like oneself – one with whom one can relate or by whom one might be judged. If the pro-life voter responds to the object of the joke, then irrational chaos, desired by no one, might ensue at the party. If the smitten girl remains silent at her acquaintance's lame jokes, then he may not want to go on impressing her as she wants him to. In both cases, as in countless others we might think of, laughing with seems to involve some interest or end involving other rational beings – to humor them and prioritize treating them as subjects over responding honestly to the object of amusement and allowing it to spark amusement in them. Laughing with neither needs to come from or be aimed toward genuine amusement. It rather involves the opposite – the conscious suppression or mimicking of the behavioral manifestations of amusement for some end that is known.

'Laughing at' is a different type of behavior. It is an expression of amusement which does not necessitate any end other than itself. It mustn't since it is involuntary. That is not to say that there is no other baggage attached to it, however, or that it does not in some way situate us in relation to others in the cases in which others are involved. It may, as one theory suggests, presuppose a hierarchy of superiority in which the subject and object are situated. Let us suppose that to laugh at an object is to put into view the respective positions of the subject and object within that hierarchy. I struggle to think of a case in which the object – the one being laughed at – could be of the higher status. It seems unlikely that one would be genuinely amused by another who triumphed over him in athletic competition, for example. Perhaps this might cause laughter in some rare cases – if one was dominated to such a degree that it seemed ridiculous beyond comprehension, a laughter of self-pity might ensue – but could it be the source of genuine amusement?

Proponents of the Superiority Theory (ST) believe this to be impossible. In fact, a condition of humor according to ST is that only the opposite can account for why we laugh. Thomas Hobbes was the first to explicitly defend ST as we understand it today when he says '… laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.'[13] Aristotle, who was critical of Plato's early version of ST, mentions nevertheless that comedy is the 'imitation of characters of a lower type.'[14] (Poetics, 1449a) Roger Scruton, who otherwise does not defend ST, still admits 'If people dislike being laughed at it is surely

[13] Thomas Hobbes, 'Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,' in Sir William Molesworth, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols (London: Bohn, 1839-45), vi, p. 47.

[14] Aristotle, *Poetics* trans. by S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1902), p. 21.

because laughter de-values its object in the subject's eyes.'[15] It could be the case, then, that to be laughed at is, on some simple level, to be triumphed over.

One's laughter at being dominated in sport would seem like a clear rejection of this idea. It might have more of an affinity, rather, with the laugh of the subject who did the dominating, if he were to laugh at the event. It could, on one hand, come from sympathizing with the victor. It would in this case require one to self-reflect – to separate entirely from whatever emotional response would have resulted from being defeated. Laughter in a case contrary to ST's condition does seem possible, but it is still unclear whether this laughter could come from genuine amusement.

Without getting too much deeper into ST here, I can point out that every version of ST requires both subject and object to be rational agents, or at the very least for the subject to have the capacity for rational judgment and for that about the object which causes one to laugh to resemble something rational in the subject's eyes. The subject and object must be perceived as being of the same kind. Otherwise, the subject would not be able to have the feeling of superiority over the object. In order for one to be superior to another, the two must share something in common which justifies the comparison. This is reminiscent of what one does when one 'laughs with' another. The victor, for example, acknowledges the object of the joke as a subject, considers how he might feel as a result of losing, but then laughs anyway. It is unclear in the victor's case whether this laughter might be the result of genuine amusement or of the same self-reflection that would be required of his opponent were his opponent to laugh at himself. Contrary to ST, the object of the humor, one might say, is actually not the defeated subject at all, but is rather something more abstract and objective: the manner in which one was defeated. Self-reflection is required for genuine laughter at this because it requires him to separate his feeling of defeat from the humorous fact about how he was defeated. Self-reflection on the part of the victor might lead to the opposite. It might deter him from laughing and rather persuade him to pity his opponent. Anyway, the humor in this case, when it is acknowledged at all, is found in being disinterested in anything but the abstract object of humor.

Though the smitten young lover in the earlier example is not laughing at the objects of the jokes the new acquaintance is telling, she does nevertheless seem to be genuinely amused by something. It is more so that she is amused by his character as she perceives it than, again, by what he is saying. We know that laughter of smitten lovers happens, this also

[15] Roger Scruton, 'Laughter', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 156-171 (p. 168).

seems to contradict the premise of ST that the one laughing should hold a position of status superior to the one being laughed at. Her laugh could be an indication of admiration. Admiration, we could say, is a form of amusement at something or someone who we perceive to be of equal or greater status than ourselves. Otherwise, we couldn't admire them. When I watch a clip of an instructional drumming video by Thomas Lang or Eric Moore, two high profile solo artists, I often burst into laughter at their level of expertise, for they seem ridiculous in the classical sense. My laugh in this case is from, in some important sense, my distancing myself, and observing from that objective point of view my own surrender to and in admiration of the other's superior skill.

One might laugh at another on the grounds of feeling superior or inferior. Both seem possible. But, one might also laugh at another on the grounds of feeling some affinity with the object. For example, two squirrels chasing each other around a tree might prove humorous for some, not because of the feeling of superiority it gives one, but rather because it reminds one of chasing his wife around the house before bed while the kids are away for the weekend. It is also possible, and perhaps common for some, to laugh at inanimate objects, made by man or nature, to which one cannot relate as subject to subject at all. One might find humor in the magnitude of a storm on a map, separated from what unfunny consequences might follow from that storm, or in the dirty condition of a refrigerator, separated from the unfunny fact that one might have to clean it up. Both cases result in laughter for no apparent reason regarding the different positions of subject and object within a common hierarchy. These objects of humor spark amusement from disinterested interest, though not of a sophisticated kind. 'Laughing at' is an expression of genuine, uncontrolled amusement in which no sympathy for the object is required. In fact, the opposite may be the case – one might laugh at an object because one does not or cannot sympathize with it. This cannot be true for 'laughing with' which requires both the subject and object to be capable of rational sympathy and, very often, for the object of amusement to be disregarded entirely.

The general distinction between laughter and amusement should now be clear. One can laugh with or at an object. Only laughter at something is founded on amusement and thus constitutes genuine, involuntary laughter. I now move on to the crucial topic of the intentionality of amusement, which serves to further distinguish amusement from mere laughter.

## 1.3 Amusement as a Mental Phenomenon

Now that I have established the difference between laughter and amusement, it is amusement which I hold as the more important aspect of humor and comedy, for it is that which, at least in part, causes genuine laughter. It is important to explore in more depth what qualifies amusement to be the kind of thing on which to found a theory of humor or comedy. I mentioned earlier that thought should play a role in genuine amusement, for it is only rational beings which are capable of having a sense of humor. Voluntary laughter is the direct consequence of a conscious thought, such as in the case of an actor who can simulate the facial expressions and sounds in order to mimic genuine laughter in a convincing way, but amusement is different. If it is natural and involuntary, what sort of thought is required for it to occur? Perhaps in the case of the actor, he brings to his consciousness a funny joke he heard or a funny video he saw the day before. The mere thought of these things, rather than his witnessing them in real time, can be genuinely amusing. Even though the actor is bringing these things to consciousness for some ulterior end, it is still those mental manifestations of those events toward which his amusement is directed. One attribute that amusement possesses which sets it apart from mere physical laughter, we might then consider, is intentionality. Whereas laughter alone can, to some degree, be explained in terms of its materiality in the nervous system, blood, lungs, facial expressions, etc., these physical features are merely consequential with regards to amusement, for amusement is more intimately linked with the workings of the mind. The reasons one might give for expressing amusement through laughter are not merely causal.

We might regard amusement as mental rather than physical for this reason: we believe something material exists, at least in part, because of the empirical fact of it – we can detect it with our senses – but whether or not what amuses us is factually true makes no difference to us. From a television program, for example, we might just as well, perhaps more so, be amused by a fiction than by a history documentary, or by a cartoon as well as a performance acted out by humans. Even someone's telling a story, or a comedian's telling a joke with no visual images at all, can do the same justice in amusing us. When we watch a funny television show, what amuses us is not the television set or any of its constitutive material parts, nor the physicality of the movements and words of the performers, but rather the meanings of the dialogues and happenings we perceive in them. These things could just as well evoke amusement in a live theater setting, or even in our minds as we play back bits and pieces of them from memory later on. The aforementioned case of the actor's bringing to consciousness the memory of something's being amusing is another such example of this. Unless such a memory can be traced to a single neuron, group of neurons, or, at the very

least, some highly consistent pattern of neuronal activity inside the brain, then one would, I imagine, have a difficult time proving that objects of amusement are essentially material. Objects of amusement seem to be abstract objects that transcend space and time, unlike anything merely physical or more concretely nonphysical that can be quantified (e.g. the force of gravity on an object). A joke can stick in one's mind and amuse one just as much the day after one hears it. This is an abstract mental phenomenon.

The nature of the mind and mental phenomena is a topic which philosophers of mind and phenomenologists are likely a long way off from firmly grasping. Though some ground has been covered on this topic, some traditional attributes for mental phenomena still hold. Chief among these is Franz Brentano's notion of 'intentional inexistence'. Brentano summarizes this concept in these famous two paragraphs:

> Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.
>
> This intentional inexistence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves.[16]

As Brentano admits, the details of this idea are not without ambiguity. A few questions arise as a result of that ambiguity, but I think that what clarity he does provide us with will serve us well enough. One question is about the distinction between 'reference to a content' and 'direction toward an object' in the first sentence. Whether these phrases represent two distinct ideas or are references to the same idea makes no difference in that the object of the corresponding mental state or attitude is not wholly the same as the mental

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[16] Franz Brentano, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1874), pp. 88-89.

phenomenon *per se*. In other words, the phenomenon constitutes the experience, or the interplay between the subject and the object, whereas the object alone (or content) can be partly divorced from a quale in which one might acknowledge its presence. It cannot be wholly subjective – in the head, as Locke would put it – for others experience that phenomenon too. To love, hate, desire, etc. in any individual case is unique, but love, hate, desire, etc. are not unique in themselves. We should also be able to consider amusement as this kind of mental thing. As in love there is one who is loved and in desire there is something which is desired, in amusement, there is something which that amusement is directed toward. That thing, Brentano says, '…is not to be understood here as meaning a thing.' This is where another ambiguity shows up.

It is impossible to know, based on this text alone, exactly what Brentano means by 'a thing', but we should be able to safely assume that at least any material object alone, devoid of context and purpose, would qualify as a thing here. There may be a material aspect of the thing being loved, desired, amusing, but it is the intentional characteristic of that thing which sets it apart from other things. In the case of love, there is the thing which is loved. That is not a mere physiological human, but rather a person, a subject, perhaps less physically attractive than other humans, yet unique in the eyes of the subject who is capable of reciprocating that love. In the case of desire, there is the thing which is desired which makes it unique to the subject among other materially similar objects worthy of being desired. What is it that one finds amusing?

As stated earlier, it cannot be the mere material objects involved, although they may play a crucial role, but rather it is some sort of meaning that one perceives in the object. It is that object's aspect of meaningfulness as intentionally represented which one enjoys for the sake of itself and is often so difficult to explain. The question 'why do you love me' is often dreaded in the context of a relationship, for there seems to be a lack of sufficient observable evidence to satisfy that question. It is often just as difficult to explain why something, among all other things in the moment, captures one's attention and sparks in one a genuine laugh. This sort of action may have reason, but that reason would be of some class of 'non-observational knowledge,' as G. E. M. Anscombe would say, rather than involuntary of the sort which is merely reactive – whether to physical stimuli or immediately in opposition to a belief held.[17] The latter we could better explain through physiology alone. The broadest honest answer one might give to why they find something funny is 'I just do.' In the case of genuine laughter, one might accept this answer given the involuntary nature of the laugh and

[17] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (London: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 12.

that one may sympathize that the object is amusing for its own sake. To understand this sort of phenomenon, reason – even if it is described as no reason – matters. It will give us some guidance as to how to categorize an object of genuine amusement in addition to its being mental, in the sense specified here. In the sort of case I have been dancing around in this section – one of reflective disinterest, much like when one appreciates a work of art or music – it seems there could be an argument in favor of bringing amusement under the category of the aesthetic.

### 1.4 Amusement as Aesthetic Experience

These points about genuine laughter from amusement being intentional, and thus being experienced from a stance of disinterested interest, indicate that there could be something aesthetic about the experience of amusement. The sort of interest one has in the aesthetic, if we are to take a traditional view, is that of disinterest.[18] We enjoy things of aesthetic quality – art, music, even beauty in nature – for their own sake rather than for some end. Similarly, good humor is something we enjoy for its own sake. People pay for a ticket and pile into the same theater in which they might experience a live orchestra in order to listen to a stand-up comedian in hopes that he will amuse them and maybe even make them laugh. One might even say that these things evoke amusement in us.

John Morreall applies this traditional conception of aesthetics to amusement: 'We must be sufficiently 'distant' from the aesthetic object so that it is not part of our practical life where we think about what we can do with the objects, how much they cost, and so forth.'[19] He says that amusement fits this description: '...to the extent that we can laugh about something, we have achieved a level of objectivity and emotional neutrality toward it.'[20] Aesthetic experience must be met with a sense of neutrality. One must have a disinterested sort of interest in the aesthetic object. So too can one have such interest in an object of amusement. One's degree of genuine laughter at an object is determined by one's personal distance from it.

Mike W. Martin challenges Morreall's idea that amusement can be aesthetic on this traditional basis. He rather holds closely to an Incongruity Theory of aesthetics, implying that if he believes that amusement can be an aesthetic object, then he also must hold an

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[18] See e.g. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 42-50.

[19] John Morreall, 'Humor and Aesthetic Education', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (1984), pp. 55-70 (pp. 60-61).

[20] Morreall, 'Humor and Aesthetic Education', p. 62.

Incongruity Theory of amusement as well.[21] He suggests that aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities need not involve amusement. One can view a work of art, for example, and allow it to hold one's attention for hours – i.e. to grant one an aesthetic experience – without being amused. In addition to this Martin raises the question in response to Morreall: 'does all amusement at the humorous constitute aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation?'[22] His answer is that 'Amusement is aesthetic experience when the primary reason for enjoying incongruities is the incongruities *per se*, rather than further ulterior reasons.'[23]

One problem I see with Martin's criticism is his ambiguous conception of what constitutes amusement. This ambiguity is revealed when he states that one's attention could be glued to a work of art for hours, and that this would mean one would be having an aesthetic experience, but it would not necessarily constitute amusement.[24] While this might be true, he does not acknowledge that the opposite could also occur. One could stare at a work of art for hours and be silently amused by it whilst having no understanding of the work and thus no aesthetic experience. The mere action does not account for the intention.

While Martin seems to be challenging Morreall for being too simplistic in the idea that if something is amusing, then it has an aesthetic quality, we can see by these brief quotations alone that Morreall's claim is founded on a much broader assumption about aesthetics, and it is that assumption which Martin is concerned with. Morreall is emphasizing the importance of the traditional conception of aesthetic quality over what one might find amusing, and then trying to argue in favor of amusement's candidacy as aesthetic. An object of amusement can also be an aesthetic object as long as we are objective and emotionally neutral toward it. Does he make a claim of sufficiency on this ground? It is hard to say. Martin responds by raising the Incongruity Theory of amusement to a theory of aesthetics. In other words, at the very least, a necessary condition for something to be of aesthetic value is that there be something incongruous between it and the subject's perception. In order to know whether this could account for all things of aesthetic value, Martin would have to elaborate on his Incongruity Theory of Aesthetics. He does not do this, so we should seek other grounds on which to determine whether amusement can be aesthetic.

If amusement can be aesthetic, I think that a good place to start to qualify it as such would be on the grounds of the traditional view that I have already mentioned – i.e. that it

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21 I will discuss the Incongruity Theory at greater length in the next chapter.

22 Mike W. Martin, 'Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 172-186 (p. 180).

23 Martin, p. 183.

24 Martin, pp. 177-179.

can be enjoyed for its own sake, distanced from the subject's practical concerns. To remain consistent, I will approach this bearing in mind the characteristics of amusement that I have already identified: amusement is involuntary, it has intention but is not an emotion, it can produce an instance of 'laughing at,' and a sense of amusement, as with art, can be cultivated. Roger Scruton has formulated four criteria that amusement must meet in order to be of aesthetic value.[25] They are as follows: (1) Amusement is a mode of reflective attention to an object. (2) It does not have the purpose of serving beliefs (e.g. discovering new ones, verifying old ones, etc.). (3) It is not a motive to action. (4) Enjoyment is to be explained by the thought of the object, and it is not felt for some ulterior reason.

There seems to be an affinity with (1), (3), and (4) in that they point to aesthetic experience being something of which only rational beings are capable. I have already mentioned that only rational beings can be genuinely, intentionally amused. It is characteristic of animals to direct their actions toward survival and protection of their young and territory. One may attribute beliefs to these behaviors at their peril, but it seems that (2) is the only condition which any non-rational being is capable of satisfying to any degree, and not from any conscious effort, of course. A person, on the other hand, is capable of reflecting on their own beliefs and separating them from their actions. Amusement, just as art does, seems capable of not only calling beliefs into question, but of freeing one of the shackles of one's belief-ridden conscience. To have one's attention drawn from one's beliefs, out of positive enjoyment or novel interest, even if it is for a moment, constitutes some degree of reflection. An open mind may be amused in doing so and in exploring the reasons – alone in solitary reflection or through others in discourse – for why an object has had such an effect. This is the sort of meditation that great art or music elicits in order to be understood and appreciated. That art has points on which to reflect – structure in the lines, shapes, transitions, and rhythms, etc. as well as meaning presented through context, novelty, and beauty itself. Amusement can have all of the same. Technically, as Cicero points out in the passages cited earlier, objects of humor can be presented as things or language, all of which have some structure that leads one to see and understand the object in a way which has potential to elicit interest.

My inclination is to think that amusement can be aesthetic – keeping Scruton's criteria intact – whilst possessing the structure and the meaning necessary to also be an object of taste both subjectively and objectively. Can amusement, like art, music, or nature, be beautiful, however? Beauty in the visual and auditory sense of the word does seem to evade

[25] Scruton, p. 170.

amusement in the comedic arts. I would like to propose that whereas the traditional modes of aesthetic interest can, but need not, possess the characteristic of beauty which is enjoyed for its own sake, amusement – even in the comedic arts – can but need not produce laughter in order to be understood and appreciated. Amusement remains regardless of whether it produces laughter or not. For laughter shall remain understood as a physiological consequence of something much deeper, and as with art, the perspective from which we enjoy, understand, appreciate, etc. an object of amusement possesses a similar spirit. That spirit still leads us to speculate about why these objects, and the effects they have on us, matter to us.

## 1.5 Conclusion to Chapter 1

In this chapter, I have pointed out the crucial difference – which many early writers on the topic of laughter fail to make – between laughter *per se* and amusement. Laughter comes in many different forms. Some is a mere physiological response to a stimulus, such as in the laughter of rats or humans as a direct result of being tickled. Only involuntary laughter at an object comes from, or is a form of, amusement. It possesses something resembling Brentano's 'intentional inexistence' which is to say it is a phenomenon of the non-emotional mental sort which continues to raise many unsolved mysteries. This laughter from amusement is the sort I shall be concerned with for the rest of this thesis. Next I will examine the traditional and theories of humor under the light which I have just shed on the concept of amusement. Those theories have mainly been concerned with laughter *per se*. However, I will explore what may be salvageable from them if we are to apply them to amusement more specifically and, perhaps, attempt to identify a 'formal object' of amusement.

# Chapter 2 – Incongruity and the Formal Object

## 2.1 What Traditional Theories Get Wrong

I hope to have established at least these three points in the first chapter: 1) a clear distinction between laughter and amusement, 2) why amusement is the more fundamental concept we should grasp before we are to formulate adequate theories of humor, comedy, etc., and 3) that amusement has the characteristic of intentionality and therefore has a case for being aesthetic. Genuine amusement is directed toward something. We are amused at or by something. Is there something in common among all things that amuse us? In this chapter I will explore this question by considering a number of perspectives.

In his paper entitled 'Amusement,' Michael Clark attempts to formulate a version of the Incongruity Theory which he believes to be more defensible than traditional theories with regards to amusement. He does so by devising the concept of the 'formal object' of amusement, and he claims that incongruity fits that category. Before explaining the formal object concept, Clark briefly identifies what he believes to be the most fundamental problem with traditional theories of humor: they attempt to provide a list of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for what causes one to laugh while neglecting amusement on the whole.[26] I think that this fault of the traditional theories that Clark points out is vital, but he does not go to any great length to show why that is the case. It will be my goal now to give a more thorough explanation of why Clark is correct. I will deal with the formal object concept afterward.

The three traditional theories are the Superiority Theory (ST), the Relief (from restraint) Theory (RT), and the Incongruity Theory (IT). The ST began with Plato and has expanded to comprise many variations up to the present day. But common among all of these variations is the view that a superior or privileged attitude over an object is both necessary and sufficient for laughter. RT holds that laughter is a physiological release caused by psychological tension. Philosophically, this equates to the claim that it is a necessary and sufficient condition for laughter that some surplus of tension is present in an individual, and

[26] Michael Clark, 'Amusement', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 139-155 (pp. 139-141).

that the humorous event pushes that person past their limit to keep that tension restrained. The IT has the widest range of variations but universally holds that necessary and sufficient for laughter is the incongruity between what is expected of an event and what is perceived to actually happen.

## 2.2 Superiority Theory

Neither Plato nor Aristotle produced a clear theory of laughter, but they speak of laughter from ST-type assumptions, setting the groundwork for later superiority theories. As I mentioned in the first chapter, Plato stated in his *Philebus* (48-50 that we feel pleasure when we laugh at delusions of ignorance in others.[27] Aristotle stated that comedy is 'imitation of characters of a lower type.'[28] (Poetics, 1449a) What is similar between the two views that follow from those quotations is that they place concerns of virtue and morality at the core of the ST. They arrive at different conclusions, however, regarding the acceptability of laughter.

Plato was hostile toward the idea of laughter. Because it is caused by one's witnessing the ignorant delusions of another, it must be more fundamentally rooted in the evil and pain of that individual. The pleasure of laughter is always accompanied by pain at someone else's expense, and it is on that basis that it is wrong, though, oddly, only when it is at a friend's expense, for it is not wrong to ridicule one's enemies; that would not in turn cause oneself pain.[29] Plato's view does not seem to imply, however, that because someone else is deluded by ignorance, then that makes the witness any less ignorant in his own right. In other words, to lower the object's position is not necessarily to raise one's own position.[30] One can witness the ignorance of another and laugh accordingly but still be ignorant to the same degree regarding something else. If I am talking to a friend who is not a football fan about football, and he makes a remark founded in complete ignorance, I might find humor in that remark. Similarly, if I make a ludicrous remark about a sport that I am unfamiliar with – e.g. cricket – then he might find that equally hilarious as I am roughly as ignorant about cricket as he is about football. Therefore, one laughs at another because the other is contextually inferior but not because he or she is an inferior character. The attitude that lies at the bottom of the person laughing, however, is still perceived as a superior one in that moment. But because no harm is intended, it is not clear that it is the superiority that is the cause of the humor. In

[27] Plato, *Philebus*, trans. by Dorothea Frede, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 52-59.
[28] Aristotle, *Poetics* trans. by S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1902), p. 21.
[29] Plato, pp. 54-57.
[30] Roger Scruton, 'Laughter', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 156-171 (p. 168).

another case, lowering the object may not be the object of humor at all, but rather, one may simultaneously lower oneself and find that the source of humor is in shared ignorance. For example, the mere fact that both I and my friend are ignorant regarding each others' pastimes may be humorous. The object of this humorous fact is, then, the kinship we share in being inferior to others.

Aristotle, on the other hand, states that the object of laughter is something or someone of an 'inferior type,' implying that it is inferiority on the whole, not just as a matter of perception in a given context, but as a matter of justifiable and general fact, that is involved here. Despite this, Aristotle was not as hostile toward laughter as Plato was. He primarily acknowledges laughter as a form of leisure and thus as a fundamental human need.[31] The virtue of laughter lies not in the fact that another is suffering, ignorant, evil, etc., but in the degree to which that laughter is tactfully expressed. He distinguishes between the buffoon, who is a reckless joker who unwittingly laughs at every opportunity, and the boor, who takes offense to too much and contributes nothing to healthy laughter.[32] A virtuous laugh is one of good sense, neither of the buffoon or the boor, but one of taste equal to one's cultivated character. Laughter is a need, and it is like any other such thing that can and should be cultivated and aimed toward the good.

This distinction between the buffoon and the boor is, for one thing, an acknowledgment that individuals possess varying degrees of need to satisfy themselves via laughter. Plato quite rigidly attaches moral baggage to laughing itself rather than to the object of amusement which gives rise to it. I would argue as Aristotle might that this would ground the evil of the person partly in the person's capacity and need to laugh. This would imply that humans cannot help but to be evil as long as they need to and can laugh. Aristotle would probably not say – and this is surely plausible – that there is evil or malice in the fact that we laugh, but rather that there is potential for such in expressing joy unwittingly. In other words, laughing is not equal to ridicule, but laughter can be used to aid ridicule intended to cause another pain. That is an evil that one would be capable of steering clear of in order to willingly cultivate one's own virtue in the way Aristotle claims we should in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.[33]

Despite these key differences, and regardless of whether they hold with regards to laughter, the precursors of ST found in Plato and Aristotle suffer from the same deficiency –

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[31] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* trans. by F. H. Peters, 10th edition (London: Kegan Paul, 1906), pp. 72-79, 131-132 (pp. 131-132).

[32] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 131-132.

[33] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 72-79.

i.e. they set conditions which cannot be expanded to account for all that might make one laugh, and so neither can they account for amusement. If we start from Plato's premises that there is always a mixture of pleasure and malice in laughing at a comedy or at a friend's misfortune, and that the ignorance that causes such a misfortune must be grounded in evil, then we are left wondering how 'funny language,' as per Cicero, could ever amuse us. Clearly, however, it does. If we examine Aristotle's idea that laughter is a fundamental human need, then we might better look to science to show why that is the case as laughter alone is merely a physiological behavior. If we try to expand this view to account for amusement, we are still led to ask why it is that some things amuse us and others don't on an objective basis separate from an individual's state of character, how it is that one's sense of humor can be cultivated, and how it might be that amusement is an aesthetic attitude. One interesting question that comes from Aristotle, however, is 'could one's character reflect the extent to which one may achieve an aesthetic response to a comedy?' As both character and aesthetic taste can be cultivated, they may be so to serve each other. Humor can aid in the development of character when it makes light of taboo issues, allowing one to better understand them, and the general cultivation of character does, of course, result in heightened openness, widening the range of topics one can understand and appreciate from a disinterested point of view – that is important for many comedic and philosophical endeavors. I will consider one more traditional perspective to determine whether the ST can be expanded to account for amusement.

Thomas Hobbes was the strongest traditional supporter of ST and the only one whose thoughts about laughter constituted a theory. To reiterate a crucial core idea of his mentioned in the first chapter: '… laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.'[34] It is an expression of applauding oneself for being superior, regardless of whether or not that position is justified. That superior attitude is one of cowardice, implying that laughter, at the very least, is a consequence of a disingenuous disposition. This is contrary to the purpose a 'great mind' should serve: 'to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.'[35]

Hobbes at first glance seems to be able to account for more than Plato did in his conception of the foundations of laughter. For example, in comparing ourselves with 'our

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[34] Thomas Hobbes, 'Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,' in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1839-45), vi, p. 47.

[35] Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1839-45), iii, p. 36.

own (infirmity) formerly,' we are able to laugh at ourselves by treating our former self as an object, whereas Plato seemed to limit laughter to direct subject-to-object interaction. This would be an advancement because, in order to laugh at the ignorance of oneself, some self-reflection is required. Amusement, as I hope to have shown in the first chapter, requires the thought and understanding of a rational being, even if that being is oneself. Being amused at one's former ignorance should qualify as a progression of the cultivation of one's character, as Aristotle might agree. This would show laughter to have potential positive value while not rejecting what negative value it could possess if expressed under different conditions. Rather, Hobbes holds to the premise that laughter must be bad. Had he expanded his theory to account for amusement, we could consider his theory a clear advancement over Plato's and at least on par with Aristotle's. Hobbes would be correct to say that amusement can help to serve the purpose of the great mind in freeing others from scorn. Indeed, others later note this as one of the primary utilities of humor.[36] Instead, Hobbes chooses to limit his conception of humor to laughter *per se,* rather than to amusement, holding people morally accountable for a physiological function that is involuntary in its genuine forms. Hobbes embodies the perspective of the boor, as described by Aristotle, perhaps, one might suspect, in order to remain consistent with the rest of his social contract theory.

This negative moral attitude toward humor is one which has had a resurgence in the contemporary period. I will deal with that in more detail in the next chapter. For now, there is one other criticism of Hobbes that I must point out for the purpose of showing why the traditional ST is insufficient to account for amusement. Francis Hutcheson points out two conditions of Hobbes' ST of which only one must be met if his account of laughter is to hold true: 1) There can be no laughter caused by anything but comparison to others or past versions of ourselves, or 2) every sudden appearance of superiority must excite laughter.[37] (1) implies that the more inferior someone is to us, the more that should move us to laugh, but we often see that the opposite happens. We are amused by animals' being human-like – e.g. birds chasing each other just as children or lovers do. (2) limits forms of laughter to one source – i.e. ridicule. Yet, while ridicule is one source of laughter, it is not the only source, and there are many counterexamples to ridicule's being necessary for laughter. Seeing another person in pain may lead one to weep rather than to laugh. 'The opinion of our superiority may raise a sedate joy in our minds, very different from laughter; but such a thought seldom arises in our minds in the hurry of a cheerful conversation among friends,

36 See e.g. John Morreall, *Humor Works* (Amherst: Human Resource Development Press, 1997), pp. 125-128.

37 Francis Hutcheson, 'Reflections Upon Laughter', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*; ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 26-40 (p. 27).

where there is often high mutual esteem.'[38] Neither weeping nor joy, although either may serve as an accompaniment to laughter, require the presence of amusement as amusement is not an emotion. It is neither the mere response to a stimulus, nor is it an immediate impulse from a deeply-held belief – of one's superiority over another or otherwise. Amusement is an involuntary mental state intended not to put down others – although it could serve that purpose in its less tactful manifestations – but to be enjoyed for the sake of itself. It can be cultivated to be enjoyed on a higher level just as any object of aesthetic taste, such as music or wine, can. Therefore, the traditional forms of the ST as I have described them here seem to be insufficient to account for the nature of amusement. However, there are two important things to take from the ST. The first point comes from Hobbes. Although he is a rigid proponent of the ST, he hints at what seems to be a necessary condition for amusement which will lead into another theory. In *Human Nature*, he acknowledges that there are many things we laugh at, and 'Whatsoever it be that moves laughter, it must be new and unexpected.'[39] It is characteristic of the Incongruity Theory, which I will discuss in the next section, that the object of laughter be new and unexpected, at least in the eyes of the audience. The second important point of the traditional ST is that, because it depends on the devaluing and sometimes pain of another rational being, it forces us to be concerned with the morality of humor if there is any. The final chapter will be devoted to this latter point.

## 2.3 Incongruity Theory

We have found the Superiority Theory to be insufficient to account for the nature of amusement, as there are many counterexamples to it, and its proponents mainly focus on laughter *per se*. However, some superiority theorists agree that some form of incongruity is at least present during laughter and in some cases even necessary for it. Descartes, who I discussed in the first chapter, is often regarded as a superiority theorist because he claims that hate for an object must accompany laughter, but he also admits that laughter is accompanied by a sense of novelty or surprise, for the influx of air necessary for laughter depends on that. Hobbes' strong ST grants that the object of laughter 'must be new and unexpected' even though the consequence – i.e. laughter – of one's perception of that object 'is nothing else but a sudden glory…' The sudden glory constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition, but the necessary condition, as it is worded, of novelty and surprise, is not

[38] Hutcheson, p. 30.
[39] Hobbes, *Human Nature*, p. 47.

explained further. If a superior attitude over an object is neither sufficient nor necessary to describe amusement – nor to describe laughter, for that matter – then what is left of this idea that even the superiority theorists have that incongruity might be necessary for laughter? My goal in this section is to show that, although the Incongruity Theory comes closer to satisfying the task at hand, it doesn't completely do so because of the more general questions concerning human perception that it raises.

Whereas the superiority theorists before them attempt to describe the essence of laughter's being some form of ridicule, Kant is the first to place something resembling incongruity at the center of importance regarding it. He is also the first to discuss 'humor' in the general sense, attempting to account for all things one might find funny, whether that be the ridicule of someone or an artful display of joke-telling. Most other supporters of the IT are equally general in their conception of humor, immediately granting the IT at least one advantage over the ST. Laughter, Kant agrees, is a physical process, but it is not to be explained at the expense of the mental; it is an expression of the 'free play of sensations' and 'an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.'[40] Laughter is physical, but it is more deeply caused, as the latter quotation suggests, by something resembling what Herbert Spencer refers to as 'descending incongruity' whereby one perceives an event to be less significant than one expected it to be.[41] This results in lighthearted laughter whereas the contrary, 'ascending incongruity' is more likely to cause fear or anxiety. Arthur Schopenhauer clearly states his case for the IT when he says: 'the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself, is just the expression of this incongruity.'[42] In other words, comic incongruity is a matter of difference between one's abstraction of an object and the corresponding objective reality. William Hazlitt formulates his IT in this way: 'habitual stress in the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events, following one another with a certain regularity and weight of interest attached to them.'[43] The ludicrous is the 'unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress below its usual pitch of intensity… the essence of the laughable then is the incongruous.'[44] Søren Kierkegaard gave a characteristically

[40] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928). pp. 42-50.

[41] Herbert Spencer, 'The Physiology of Laughter', from *Essays on Education. Etc.* (London: Dent, 1911). pp. 298-309 (pp. 306-307).

[42] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* trans. by R. B. Haldane and John Kemp, 7th edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1907-1909), pp. 94-98 (pp. 94-95).

[43] William Hazlitt, 'On Wit and Humor', in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (London: George Bell, 1885). p. 4.

[44] Hazlitt, p. 4.

existentialist version of the IT when he described tragedy and comedy to be 'both based in contradiction,' where the only difference between the two is that the tragic causes pain while the comic offers a way out.[45]

There are notable differences in how each of these thinkers conceptualize incongruity and in what sorts of questions should follow. In humor, Kant charges one 'voluntarily to put oneself into a certain mental disposition, in which everything is judged quite differently from the ordinary method, and yet in accordance with certain rational principles in such a frame of mind.'[46] The humorous attitude is a disposition of disinterested judgment aimed at the consistency of reason. This is where the essence of humor, as with virtually everything for Kant, lies. Schopenhauer, rather, indicated that the essence of humor was in the mismatch between the conception and the reality itself. There is something more formal and less metaphysical in this view, but it indicates that there is a larger gap, than Kant describes between the noumena and phenomena, between human perception and the realities toward which those perceptions aim. Spencer thought something similar to Schopenhauer, though he emphasizes that the degree of 'significance' is specifically that which differs between the abstraction and the reality. Hazlitt says incongruity is the catalyst for the release of stress caused by some expectation. This resonates with the Relief Theory that I will explain in the next section, raising important psychological concerns. Kierkegaard attempts to show that incongruity raises moral concerns whereas the others do not connect incongruity with morality at all. He places humor in the middle ground between the ethical and religious 'spheres of existence' as 'the last stage of awareness before faith.'[47] Despite these differences, there are two core similarities that almost all of these traditional versions of IT have in common.

The first thing that the traditional versions of IT I have covered (with one exception noted below) have in common is that they either assert or leave open the possibility that comedy is a kind of art. Kant described humor as a pleasant, rather than a beautiful, art. Whereas beauty shows proper worth in itself, requiring seriousness in presentation and in being judged from good taste, humor shows its worth precisely in not being serious but while still conforming to 'certain rational principles.'[48] This lack of seriousness grants the possibility of aesthetic value to Spencer's descending incongruity concept as well, in which the object causes laughter solely because it is less serious than it was expected to be.

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45 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swanson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 448-468 (p. 453).

46 Kant, p. 50.

47 Kierkegaard, p. 448.

48 Kant, p. 50.

Schopenhauer notes the 'art of the jester' being 'secret wit' employed to unite diverse objects under one concept.[49] Spencer, insofar as his theory would remain consistent, would agree that the jester's joke-telling could have some aesthetic value not in the mere incongruity of expectation, but in the incongruity of the object's significance from what was expected. Kierkegaard is the only exception, however. As he sandwiches humor between the ethical and religious spheres of existence, the aesthetic sphere can be found opposite from it. The middle ground between the ethical and aesthetic spheres, he argues, contains irony, which is not the same as humor in that irony does not contribute to one's leap to faith. It is merely a change in perception. Had Kierkegaard associated both irony and humor with what I refer to as amusement, perhaps he would have considered them to be in the same spheres, or perhaps amusement would have led him to question the 'three spheres' concept entirely. Both irony and the various forms of humor have potential to amuse. Sometimes there is truth at the bottom of a joke, and sometimes there is not. Sometimes it comes from or aims toward faith in such a truth, and sometimes it does neither. Regardless, it cannot be said that a disposition concerned with the development of faith is at all necessary for one to understand and be amused by a joke, from incongruity or otherwise. Kierkegaard's connection among humor, ethics, and religion may very well have disappeared had he been alive to witness the various forms of comedy today. Unfortunately, we must move on in the absence of certainty regarding how Kierkegaard would have defended humor's non-aesthetic nature.

The second thing in common among the versions of the IT I have covered is that there is always a mismatch between what is expected and what is perceived to occur. This is, therefore plausibly a necessary condition of humor, for otherwise we should have to conclude that all of these great thinkers are completely off the mark here. But, as other factors weigh into each theory to varying degrees – e.g. rational disposition in Kant's, belief in Kierkegaard's, etc. – incongruity is not claimed by any of them except Schopenhauer to be alone sufficient for laughter or humor. Schopenhauer gives a clear definition of incongruity's being laughter's cause 'in every case.' Schopenhauer's, we could then say, is the only fully committed version of the IT. This emphasis on the 'cause' of laughter may lead us to wonder what sort of thing incongruity might be, then, and if that is the sort of thing that could have aesthetic value, barring any indication from the last paragraph that that this might be so. What, we should now ask, would be the cause of anything – e.g. this expression, your jumping, or that wheel going round? 'You trace a mechanism,' Wittgenstein would respond.[50]

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[49] Schopenhauer, p. 95.

[50] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Lectures on Aesthetics', *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1966), p. 13.

Does a priority placed on the cause of laughter, physical or otherwise, account for its essence? Based on all that I have argued so far in the first two chapters, it seems that some abstract object, rather than an observable, causal one will be more likely to satisfy us.

Incongruity can manifest in at least two different ways with regards to the techniques of comedy. In the case of a joke, there is often some premise which causes the audience to expect one thing, while the punchline diverts and brings to light another thing, incongruous with that which was expected. Incongruity can also occur without diversion, but from the standpoint of neutral expectation of the audience. This is more common in the storytelling style of comedy. A story on the whole is generally free of this 'setting up expectations incongruous from the point', although some of its details may be intended to divert one's attention from that which is to come. The audience sits and listens, waiting patiently for the funny bits detailing the journey, and/or for the climax of the story which sparks some surprise, since the non-expectation point of view is necessarily incongruous with everything which might follow from it. Viewing incongruity in this light reveals that there is something essential about incongruity from a psycho-perceptual perspective. It could be argued that perceptual incongruity is not just necessary for humor, but that it is necessary for learning and understanding in the broadest sense. If this is so, then the mention of incongruity with regards to humor is arbitrary. The psychological perspectives which support the Relief Theory's important connection with the formal object concept will give a strong indication that this is the case.

## 2.4 Relief from Restraint Theory

I have saved the Relief Theory for last because it is the least philosophical and is widely regarded as having the smallest role to play in accounting for the nature of amusement. But, as I will explain, I believe RT makes interesting contributions to our understanding of comedic technique, and regarding a counter-view to the moral concerns which will be raised in the next chapter. Although he is not a proponent of RT, one could argue that RT began with Kant when he described laughter as an expression of the free play of the senses which is beneficial to physical health.[51] Though he went on to prioritize the mental aspect of humor as the foundation of laughter, the mention of physicality inspired others to limit their understanding of laughter to mere physical processes as scientific thought developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was often at the expense of what I have been

[51] Kant, pp. 42-50.

calling 'amusement.' George Santayana revealed his influence from this trend by using 'laughter' and 'amusement' interchangeably:

> Amusement is a much more directly physical thing (than incongruity). We may be amused without any idea at all, as when we are tickled, or laugh in sympathy with others by a contagious imitation of their gestures.[52]

Santayana seems to equate amusement with laughter here, and that causes further ambiguity with regards to what the rest of this passage in *The Sense of Beauty* concerning humor is actually about. Is it amusement as I have described it, or is it mere laughter? We know that laughter itself is indeed a physical thing, but from what does it come, or toward what is it directed? Laughter is present in the case of being tickled, but that is not the sort of laughter which comes from amusement. It can indeed be the opposite. It is merely a physical impulse caused by a stimulus. Laughing 'in sympathy with others by a contagious imitation of their gestures' raises the question of the difference between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at' that I addressed in the first chapter. Laughing with requires sympathy with others, as Santayana seems to agree, but that does not require genuine amusement either, for one can laugh on the basis of sympathy, directing that behavior toward some interested end – e.g. to laugh at an unfunny joke *to humor* someone – i.e. to stay in someone's good graces. Genuine laughter from amusement is, as I hope to already have established, disinterested.

Santayana also refers to amusement as an emotion, which, like the feeling of relief, is expressed 'in proportion as our sympathy attaches more to the point of view surrendered or to that attained.'[53] If by amusement he means the mere physical laughter that accompanies what we have defined as 'amusement,' then he might have a case here. Laughter on its own can come from joy or surprise, both of which, arguably, are emotions. If we further equate surprise with the realization of incongruity, then the case would be strengthened further. It is unclear, however, if that is what he means by amusement, and it is unclear that such emotions constitute amusement. But, if my view is correct, that amusement is not an emotion, but rather that it is aimed toward interest of the aesthetic sort, then the opposite of Santayana's claim should be true – i.e. our amusement is expressed, roughly, in *opposite* proportion to the extent that our sympathy attaches to a point of view. Our rational understanding of a joke constitutes understanding that it is a *joke* which can, and perhaps

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52 George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Scribner's, 1896), pp. 245-258 (p. 246).
53 Santayana, p. 246.

should, be separated from a point of view interested in sympathizing with others.

George Santayana is not exactly a supporter of RT, but the few things I have just pointed out in his thoughts about laughter are also characteristic of the limited versions of RT that exist. Herbert Spencer, having been strongly influenced by nineteenth century science, presents a soft version of RT from which he assumes the mental aspects of humor should be explained secondarily to the physical. He accepts the premise of some theories that came before him – i.e. that incongruity always seems to be involved in the humorous – but he identifies the central question regarding laughter as 'How comes a sense of the incongruous to be followed by these peculiar bodily actions?'[54] He then examines the degrees of intensity of these movements rather than the mental states that, we may suppose, ground those movements:

> It becomes manifest both that emotions and sensations tend to generate bodily movements, and that the movements are violent in proportion as the emotions or sensations are intense…without detailing the specific ways in which these may be influenced by our mental states.[55]

My question here is why one should prioritize the consequential movements of laughter over the conditions and reasons for laughter? Science seems much better fitted to deal with the causal-physical aspect, and it should do so quite easily if genuine laughter were caused by raw emotion, but we have found this to be a difficult thing to prove. Why not, then, focus on 'the specific ways in which these (movements) may be influenced by our mental states?' Could incongruity, for example, account for those details? Spencer does not address these crucial questions. He does, however, raise an interesting distinction which will lead us into the final version RT. He notes on the basis that movements which accompany laughter are involuntary that, from a psychological perspective, they are a species of the unconscious. To elaborate on the concept mentioned in the previous section, there are two different types of incongruity. One is 'ascending' which reveals something great from a smaller expectation. This causes emotions such as wonder, surprise, and fear. Conversely, 'descending' incongruity shows that something which was expected to be great is actually insignificant. This results in laughter from a feeling of relief that one overestimated the significance of the matter at hand. Despite the bold implication here that all laughter, and

[54] Spencer, p. 298.
[55] Spencer, p. 299.

therefore laughter from amusement, arises from the incongruity between *how significant* something is perceived to be and how significant it actually is, indicating that a special version of the IT may be underlying his thought, Spencer is still keen to conclude that the important aspect of this is the physical one. 'So long as such movements are unconscious, they facilitate the mental actions... because they draw off a portion of the surplus nervous excitement.'[56] Ascending incongruity demands more nervous energy and therefore rarely, if ever, results in laughter. Descending incongruity releases that energy, resulting in laughter which is an expression of a positive feeling.

This talk of laughter's being an expression of the release of surplus nervous energy buried in the unconscious mind leads us straight into Freud's version of the Relief Theory which he bases on his hydraulic theory of psychic energy. Freud does not make the same mistake as the last two perspectives in reducing humor's importance to the physical, but he agrees 'pleasure derived from humor has its source in a saving in expenditure of affect.'[57] Humorous pleasure results from the release of an internal buildup of emotion. As a psychoanalyst, Freud does not take this to be a purely mechanical process. A conceptual ambiguity arises in the quotation above, however. If pleasure can be 'derived from humor,' then the humor itself must also, at least in part, be its source. A number of interesting philosophical questions can be derived from this ambiguity: 'What is the source of humor, which would, in turn, also be a source of the pleasure from which it derives?', 'Why does pleasure derive from humor?', and of course 'What is the essence of humor?' Freud goes to no length to address these philosophical questions, but rather shows how the humorous attitude functions as part of the hydraulic system. He acknowledges that there is benefit in this; wit, he says, is the catalyst for humor which liberates us by aiming 'either simply to afford gratification, or, in so doing, to provide an outlet for aggressive tendencies.'[58]

Freud's hydraulic theory describes the three aspects of the human psyche and the roles they play in one's personality and motivation. Freud writes that humor may take place in (1) one's adopting a humorous attitude while a spectator derives pleasure from it – e.g. a stand-up comedian telling jokes to a crowd, or (2) two or more are directly involved in the humor, one regarding the other in a humorous light. The latter is what the ST generally involves, and it has in common with the ST's more defensible aspects that the object of humor can be oneself, implying that some degree of self-reflection is involved in the

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56 Spencer, pp. 308-309.

57 Sigmund Freud, 'Humor,' in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* trans. by James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1974). pp. 111-116 (p. 111).

58 Freud, p. 113.

understanding of a joke. In contrast with the ST, however, Freud does not attribute negative moral implications to this process. It is, rather, a morally-neutral social activity, and it can also be a means for psychological growth within oneself. This reveals some overlap with proponents of the other two traditional theories, for both Aristotle (ST) and Hutcheson (IT), to name just two, have made similar claims regarding the utility of humor already stated. For Freud, the motivation to laugh is primarily a function of the pleasure-seeking id – the innate, self-centered part of the psyche concerned with satisfying one's primal needs. We take pleasure in that which is psychologically and physiologically beneficial to us. Of course, we also take pleasure in many things which do not benefit our primal needs – e.g. addictive personalities take pleasure in the dopamine surges from excessively consuming drugs and alcohol, or taking unnecessary risks counter to well-being. There are also many psychological and physiological needs which must be met in ways that cause us pain – e.g. cognitive behavioral therapy, life-saving surgeries, etc.

As a philosophical theory, Freud's seems implausible, but there is a very insightful element to Freud's thought which will be vital in the final chapter. Just as one must often endure fear in therapy in order to overcome it, as one may need to endure the physical suffering of recovering from surgery in order to extend one's life, there may be an element of pain in the cultivation of one's sense of humor – i.e. a process of death and rebirth in overcoming the 'boor' tendency, as described by Aristotle, to take offense from jokes which do not intend it. If we view relief from restraint as one of many tactics one may employ in order to overcome the reactive inclinations of humor – which are founded in some belief or motive aimed toward an interested end – then one would, in turn, be using it to elevate one's aesthetic sensitivities at the expense of moral concerns.

ST's champion, Hobbes, perhaps unknowingly accepts that laughter is a mere physiological response to something deeper when he describes it as an impulse, but he fails to account for what the cause or reason of that response is, which would in turn account for amusement. RT rightly accepts that laughter is a mere physiological matter, and that is the sort of thing that is better dealt with by science. It also offers unique insight regarding comedic therapy. If we are to take RT as a philosophical account of amusement, however, then the conceptual errors I have mentioned above prevent it from holding its ground. The IT seems to be the best of the three traditional theories at accounting for amusement on the whole rather than merely laughter. But, as I have argued, incongruity in one form or another seems to be necessary not only for humor but for human perception in general. Is it accurate, then, to consider it the 'formal object' of amusement?

## 2.5 The Formal Object of Amusement

In the first chapter I attempted to explain the difference between object and cause in order to demonstrate that amusement is not an emotion. To put it generally, I found that emotions, which are mere responses from an interested and often belief-based perspective, are caused to happen whereas amusement, as an intentional, disinterested attitude of some sort, is aimed toward an object. We could say that mere laughter is often caused by the realization of an incongruity, but that does not answer what causes amusement. Schopenhauer advantageously does not restrict his theory to account for laughter alone. However, to think of the essence of humor as a causal force is, if we take this to be a mechanistic process, Schopenhauer's largest drawback. He defines the cause of laughter 'in every case' as being the mismatch between a conception and an object, but he does not elaborate on how that might describe the same with regards to amusement, or whatever mental state he would have associated with mere laughter. Therefore, perhaps we should not think of the nature of amusement in terms of cause and effect. But, is this the type of cause and effect Schopenhauer was alluding to – i.e. a cause brought about by some mechanistic or conditional object? One alternative approach for understanding this is to describe amusement in terms of its 'formal object.'

The formal object concept was devised by Michael Clark once he found, for similar reasons to those presented above, that the three traditional theories are inadequate to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for humor. He states that versions of the Superiority Theory simply cannot account for all that one might find amusing. A superior attitude of the subject or audience over the object is neither necessary nor sufficient for something to be amusing, so ST cannot be right. Versions of the Relief (from restraint) Theory are faulty in that cursing or swearing, for example, though they do provide relief from restraint, do not necessarily amuse us because they do so. There are additionally countless other cases of amusement that RT cannot account for. The Incongruity Theory, although seemingly the strongest of the three traditional theories, suffers from a nearly identical deficiency when it is presented against the background of the same premise as the others – i.e. that the best way to think about the essence of humor is on the basis of what one identifies to be the condition(s) sufficient to cause one to laugh.[59] If one thinks of humor in this way, Clark sees no way to resolve the issue that the incongruity of a joke or event, though it seems to always be present, cannot always sufficiently account for why one might be amused. He does see it,

[59] Clark, pp. 139-141. Further references to 'Humor and Incongruity' are given after quotations in the text.

however, as a necessary condition for amusement. In other words, where there is amusement, there is also incongruity, but that incongruity does not always provide a full explanation for one's amusement (pp. 153-154). Instead of looking for conditions, Clark argues that we should search for a formal object which he describes as some categorical family relation – i.e. under what genus do all species of amusement fall (p. 144)? This is to be contrasted with an informal object which would be some mechanistic causal relation. The advantage of a formal object is that it can account for categories of humorous phenomena whereas an informal causal object would only account for one humorous experience at a time. Clark sees incongruity as the only thing that all instances of amusement have in common, whether it is the cause of laughter or not. 'That which is seen as incongruous' gives the formal object of 'being amused by (p, 145.)' The emphasis of 'seeing as' is to describe the incongruous as Schopenhauer puts it: 'If an event (or state of affairs) amuses someone, then he sees it as involving the incongruous subsumption of one or more instances under a single concept.'[60] If we consider that 'concept' to be the 'genus,' Schopenhauer's perspective seems less mechanistically causal.

The formal object concept was elaborated by Roger Scruton as 'the description under which anything must be thought to fall if it is to be laughed at.'[61] However, if we take incongruity to satisfy that description, concerns regarding the ambiguity of what constitutes the incongruous arise. 'What is funny in a caricature is its simultaneous proximity to and deviation from an individual.'[62] If a caricature is humorous because of its incongruity, it also must be so because of some deeper congruity. Satire, for example, must be accurate as well as exaggerated, for to be exaggerated, it must be somewhat accurate. So, something congruous may also be amusing, as well as hurtful in the case of ridicule. If Clark is right about incongruity's being the formal object, then he may have attributed to it misleading implications, for there would be no mechanism left for separating the real from the imagined. As we know, amusement does not discriminate between the two as it often comes from what is imagined just as well as what is real. The incongruous concept stands alone for its objective realness, and its 'perceptual realness' becomes of primary importance. Wittgenstein writes an example of this:

> How does one play the game: "It could also be this"?..."I see (a) as (b)" might still mean very different things. Here is a game played by children: they say of a chest, for

60 Schopenhauer, p. 95.
61 Scruton, p. 156.
62 Scruton, p. 161.

> example, that it is now a house; and thereupon it is interpreted as a house in every detail. A piece of fancy is woven around it. Does the child now *see* the chest as a house? He quite forgets that it is a chest; for him it actually is a house. Then would it not also be correct to say he *sees* it as a house?[63]

Need a chest be seen as a house? No, but it can be so for the purposes that children adopt for it – i.e. the game of playing house. Therefore, the child's purpose justifies its conception. Scruton importantly points out that Clark's conception of the formal object of amusement points to 'what *can* be amusing,' and this may point to any of an infinite number of interpretations. What we should now be concerned with, especially regarding amusement as aesthetic, is 'what is *justifiably* amusing.' This Scruton calls the 'proper object.' Otherwise, no qualitative judgments would be made between one amusing thing and another, generally implying that the cultivation of one's taste in humor could not be so, or at the very least that it would be irrelevant. So, what we should technically look for is not a relative formal object, but rather a proper object aimed toward the goal of humor's fulfilling its aesthetic goals of being enjoyed for the sake of itself disinterested from the subject of truth, or for its social one as Henri Bergson describes it – i.e. 'to correct men's manners' in a continuous process of *becoming*.[64]

Regardless of which purpose humor serves in any case – and also in light of those purposes– there seems to be something uniquely human about it. Humor, perhaps, can be of benefit to the human mind and body as Aristotle, Kant, and Freud all thought, but it need not contribute to survival alone which, arguably, every action of a non-rational agent aims toward. So, need the formal object and the contents of amusement's nature be anthropomorphic? Scruton suggests:

> 'If I were to propose a candidate for the formal object of amusement, then the human (in its widest significance) would be my choice. But I am certain that I should be quickly forced to withdraw the suggestion, and to content myself merely with emphasizing the importance of the human, its centrality, among the objects of laughter, and perhaps hazarding the guess that someone who could be amused at

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63 Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'The Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment', *Philosophical Investigations* 4th edition, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 217e.

64 Henri Bergson, 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic', trans. by Clondesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 3-22 (7-8).

nothing human could be amused at nothing.'[65]

I will hold on to this suggestion for now, however, despite Scruton's skepticism toward it. The mere act of 'seeing as' as Wittgenstein describes it, to the extent that we could push that ability, is one that is in itself uniquely human, and I see no reason for believing that the ability to 'see something as nothing' would not be at least as anthropomorphic since this is in part what aesthetic experience – as any rational activity – entails. Scruton and many others see both aesthetic experience and amusement as indicators of humans' being of a different kind rather than of simply having a greater degree of perception of those things than other animals do. I don't see this kind-degree dispute as an important part of Scruton's thesis, however, even if we are to consider aesthetic amusement to be anthropomorphic. The degree of abstraction to which a person can perceive and make use of a material object is so far greater than that of any other being that we may very well then be considered another kind on the basis of that degree. Regardless of the plausibility of Clark's case that incongruity is the formal object of amusement, his pointing out that it is present in all cases of humor is important. This raises a general concern, though, in that I also see incongruity as being necessary for all cases of conceptual perception. If a formal object of amusement exists, it may, then, be something as general as the nature of the person itself, and on the individual level, '...the occasions of laughter must be as different as their opinions and dispositions...'[66]

In conclusion, Clarke plausibly argues that instead of looking for the cause of humor we should be looking for its formal object – i.e. the kind to which all objects of humor necessarily belong. Scruton adds that we should be even more interested in the proper object of humor – i.e. the kind to which all objects of humor *ought* to belong, or *would* belong if humor were always experienced in an appropriately aesthetic manner. It is very difficult to determine what the formal object of humor is. Perhaps Scruton is right to suggest that it may be the human in its widest significance. We might be able to make some headway, however, by examining directly what the *proper* object of humor is. In order to do this we need to consider what one *ought* to find humorous, and what, if anything, one ought *not* to find humorous. To answer this question we need to investigate the connection between humor and morality, and it is to this that I turn in the next section.

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[65] Scruton, p. 168.

[66] David Hartley, 'On Wit and Humor', in *Observations on Man* # editions (London: 1810), v, p. 43.

# Chapter 3 – Morality and Not Taking the Subject Seriously

## 3.1 A Postmodern Approach

It is peculiar that of the three major theories of laughter the one which has had the strongest resurgence in recent years is the Superiority Theory, for that is the one which I have spent the most time showing to have missed the point with regards to amusement and humor. I have shown laughter, in its genuine, involuntary forms, to be a mere reactive, physical behavior often founded on amusement. There are also forms of laughter not founded on amusement, such as that from being tickled, and such as any case of voluntary laughter including 'laughing with.' Amusement is a sort of intentional mental state, at least similar to an aesthetic one, which, much like all cases of human perception and understanding, involves some degree of incongruity, but which aims toward a formal object whose nature still evades us. The Superiority Theories we have discussed, Plato's and Hobbes' in particular, have largely glossed over this concept of amusement and have focused on laughter *per se*. They have concluded that laughing is evil, but they have failed to account for all possible examples of humor, both real and hypothetical, and for the positive ends that some humor can serve. One would hope that a contemporary defense of the ST would correct these errors, but I will now show that at least some of them have not done so and have rather taken a further step backward, radicalizing the moral discussion about humor. The two perspectives I will discuss in this chapter – those of Ronald de Sousa and Joseph Boskin – attempt to remain more or less consistent with Henri Bergson's idea that laughter can serve as a social corrective, and also with his three conditions of 'the comic': 1) that it is not distinct from the human, 2) that laughter at it is often accompanied by an absence of feeling, and 3) that comic intelligence must remain in touch with others, for it reverberates through social affiliation.[67] My goal in this chapter is to show that the views of de Sousa and Boskin are counterproductive with respect to one of the primary utilities of humor – i.e. it can be used to express truths and correct falsities or to correct truths and express falsities. Although the group, for simplicity's sake, will often do the latter, the good comedian and

[67] Henri Bergson, 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic', trans. by Clondesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 3-22 (3-5).

comedic fan should do the former insofar as such a responsibility exists. I will show that de Sousa and Boskin are interested in the latter, for a distinctly postmodern spirit hovers over their view. By 'postmodern' I mean the contemporary philosophical movement whose premises Stephen Hicks outlined in his book *Explaining Postmodernism*. This movement has four important components. It is: 1) metaphysically anti-realist, 2) epistemologically against the notion of an objective reality, 3) a collectivist philosophy of human nature, and 4) ethically and politically socialist, characterized by identification with and sympathy for groups perceived to be oppressed by conflict with more privileged groups, and willingness to enter the fray on their behalf.[68] I will conclude on that basis, as well as on the basis of many things I have already established in this thesis, that de Sousa and Boskin contribute nothing of value to this philosophical topic. Their views, as I will show, are well contained within the parameters of postmodernism which Hicks correctly regards as anti-philosophical.[69]

### 3.2 The Two Contemporaries

In his article entitled 'When is it Wrong to Laugh?' Ronald de Sousa commits one of the same basic errors as the traditional philosophers do – i.e. he discusses laughter at the expense of amusement, although he attempts to do so while trying to account for a 'hypothetical' formal object. The closest thing to amusement that he describes is 'the Funny': 'things of which formal objects are… the comical, the ridiculous, accompanied by an emotional response' which may be accompanied by laughter or not.[70] More generally, he concerns himself with the role of those accompanying emotions in the context of 'moral life' and explores when, if ever, expressing those emotions, and underlying 'emotional attitudes,' is morally permissible (p. 227). He makes several distinctions, the first of which is between emotional attitudes and mere beliefs: mere beliefs are consciously adopted, whereas 'attitudes are beliefs that one cannot hypothetically adopt.' (p. 241) De Sousa associates mere beliefs with one's propensity to 'laugh with' another, and he associates emotional attitudes with one's propensity to 'laugh at' (p. 243). To laugh with is an expression of the angelic side of human nature much like love, admiration, and indignation. It is to identify with the object of one's laughter. To laugh at is an expression of the demonic side of human nature much

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68 Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Roscoe, IL: Ockham's Razor Publishing, 2011), p. 6.

69 Hicks, p.6.

70 Ronald de Sousa, 'When is it Wrong to Laugh?', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) pp. 226-249 (p. 227). Further references to 'When is it Wrong to Laugh?' are given after quotations in the text.

like lust, envy, and resentment. It is to alienate the object of one's laughter. The morality of any case of laughter is decided by whether or not one has a right to laugh, and the ability of one to identify with its object of laughter is that determinate factor: 'I cannot really laugh at you unless I have the right to laugh; and I only have the right to laugh at you if there is a clear possibility of identification with you.' (p.243) One must be exacting in their calculation of whether or not laughter is appropriate in every case. For a white man to laugh at a joke about black people is likely to be racist and therefore inappropriate because he cannot identify with the experience of 'blackness.' To raise hypothetical counterexamples to this point, as de Sousa mentions in his definition of 'emotional attitude,' is not enough. Such laughter would be grounded in an emotional attitude which can only be experienced and understood from the collective black point of view. For a white man to laugh at a joke about a black man's 'maleness' is appropriate, however, (as long as the joke is about maleness and not, or at least moreso than, blackness) because he can identify with being male. Most generally for de Sousa, the moral appropriateness of a joke is based on the subject matter of the joke and the extent to which one can literally identify with it, without regard to the joke's aesthetic form. The 'phthonic element' of a joke is the centerpiece – that which rests 'not merely on beliefs, but on attitudes,' and which 'requires endorsement.' (p. 240) Phthonic jokes could involve a motivation of identification but an aim of alienation which 'involve an important variety of emotional self-deception… constitutes a kind of denial of reality.' (p. 244) 'Comedy relies on generalities and stereotypes and therefore distorts and obfuscates the world.' (p. 245) If comedy is to remain artful, 'it must make no use of categories and stereotypes,' and it can only bring us closer to reality, and therefore be good, if the simplifications it employs aim toward identification, or at least against alienation (p. 246). De Sousa then renames the article 'When is laughter good or bad for the adequacy of our attitudes to the objective world?'

Before I move on to describe Boskin's theory, I will point out two of many possible unique problems I see with de Sousa's. First, to calculate one's privilege to laugh before laughing implies that virtuous laughter is voluntary. I hope to have already established that genuine laughter from amusement is disinterested and involuntary. Therefore, by my understanding, any mention of 'laughter' by de Sousa points to interested, voluntary laughter. This will become more clear later. Second, it is not clear how a 'phthonic joke,' insofar as this is a legitimate category, 'could involve a motivation of identification but an aim of alienation.' I have already established the difference between laughing with and laughing at, and insofar as laughing at comes from a disinterested attitude, it should come closer to

*accepting* reality as it is, not denying it. One way humans do this, for better or for worse, is by generalizing and categorizing aspects of reality in order to make sense and use of them. Whether or not this process is used for good or for evil depends on the intention of an individual, independent from any arbitrary group identity such as with race, gender, orientation, etc. There seems to be no obvious reason that humor, which like any other form of mental expression must make use of generalizations in order for it to make sense, has the unique quality of always reflecting an intentional disregard for the good-will of others or for reality as it is. Such a pessimistic attitude makes me skeptical of *de Sousa's* intentions in putting forth such a radical proposition. I will discuss more on this after showing the affinity that Boskin shares with de Sousa on this issue.

The other contemporary version of the ST that I will discuss comes from Joseph Boskin's article entitled 'The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo.' The following quotation provides what I think is an accurate foundation of Boskin's theory.

> Humor is clearly ubiquitous. All humans possess a latent sense of humor, meaning a structured way of laughing, and all groups utilize and often institutionalize humor within their social groups. Experimental studies have consistently shown that hostile humor reflects the psychological underpinnings of the verbalizer. Hostile persons prefer caustic forms of humor.[71]

Boskin attempts to establish a Superiority/Relief hybrid theory in which the liberating element of humor, as per Freud, is that which 'is often utilized as an acceptable social outlet for frustrations and tensions.' (p. 255) Exercising this outlet 'forms a bond' but 'simultaneously draws a line,' producing 'a strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders.' (p. 254) Expressing humor and thus endorsing stereotypes has a tribal effect, pitting the laughing group against the object group in a struggle for power. Boskin uses the example of the Sambo stereotype of Afro-Americans – the only ethnic group 'intimately linked to the broad field of humor' – to illustrate what is one of his primary underlying premises: 'In the history of race relations in the United States, stereotypes have been particularly pernicious.' (p. 252) He notes that Irish and Polish immigrants have experienced being on the butt end of systemic humor for short periods, but that 'the Afro-American has had the unique distinction among American minorities of being on both ends

[71] Joseph Boskin, 'The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 250-263 (p. 253). Further references to 'The Complicity of Humor...' are given after quotations in the text.

of the humor continuum for over three centuries.' (p. 253) Sambo is portrayed as a 'machine-person,' as per Bergson – i.e. 'Something mechanical encrusted on something living' – in order to further the end of systemically enforcing and maintaining 'social distance' of the blacks from the whites (p. 258). Boskin's thesis is harmonious with de Sousa's but is much more simple: The machine-person stereotype of Sambo is used by whites to:

> ...attempt to preserve a social distance between themselves and blacks, to maintain a sense of racial superiority, and to prolong class structure. The stereotyping of the black as one of the major comics in the popular culture of the United States is an example of psychological and cultural reduction. Sambo, then, illustrates the unique historical relationship between stereotyping and humoring. (pp.261-262)

The first criticism that I have of Boskin is about his claim: 'Experimental studies have consistently shown... Hostile persons prefer caustic forms of humor.' I do think as Wittgenstein did that good philosophy should be met with the appropriate empirical evidence, and the evidence I have found shows that hostile humor does very strongly reflect the psychological underpinnings of the participants, but it does so with the opposite result that Boskin claims. He provides no sources in support of this claim, nor does he explain how he would otherwise justify the truth of it, other than Freud's thought that humor can be used as an outlet for aggressive tendencies. As support for the quotation above, however, this seems to be a misinterpretation of Freud. Freud was aware that all people have aggressive tendencies, and that the reason they exercise certain outlets is in order to release the tension causing that aggression, not to simply express the fact that they are aggressive. Therefore, those who do use those outlets become *less* aggressive, and those who do not use them retain their aggression. What's more, a 2017 study of 180 participants ranging in age from 18 to 90 by the University of Vienna on 'black humor' – which is defined as that 'which treats sinister subjects such as death, disease, deformity, handicap, or warfare with bitter amusement and presents such tragic, distressing, or morbid topics in humorous terms' – indisputably concluded:

> ...the subjects who show the highest values with respect to black humor preference and comprehension show the highest values with respect to intelligence, have higher education levels and show the lowest values regarding mood disturbance and aggression. On the other hand, subjects who show average and below-average verbal

> and nonverbal intelligence scores as well as *high mood disturbance and high aggressiveness show the lowest values with respect to comprehension and preference of black humor…* aggressiveness and bad mood apparently led to decreased levels of pleasure when dealing with black humor.[72]

As I stated in previous chapters regarding Plato and Hobbes' strong versions of ST, the assumption that there must be something evil or malicious in laughter implies that there is something evil or malicious intrinsic to the human beings who enjoy it. Although this is in part true, as we are naturally social creatures who can become tribal when we succumb to our more primal instincts, the above study strongly indicates that laughter is an antidote to that aggressive part of our temperament rather than an expression of the degree of it. Suppressing or lacking a sense of humor may indicate that one is *more* aggressive, not less. This may be the nail in the coffin for the ST, and it is certainly something to keep in mind as I continue to challenge the (rather aggressive) views put forth by my two opponents in this chapter.

The second initial problem I have with Boskin's theory is that he never technically explains how exactly the story of Sambo illustrates the historical relationship between black stereotyping and humor.[73] There is not a single example of the story in his essay, nor does he even refer to the story by its proper name – i.e. *Little Black Sambo.*[74] On an alternative reading that story is an innocent children's hero myth much like any other. A young boy's father buys him a nice jacket, pair of pants, pair of shoes, and umbrella, and after Sambo gives each of these items away one by one to four different tigers in exchange for his not being eaten by them, he tricks them into greedily chasing each other around a tree for each others possessions at such a velocity that they turn into butter which he and his father take home to enjoy over pancakes with his mother. There isn't an explicitly racist detail in the entirety of the story. It is as simple, yet just as profound, as any other children's story. How it has any relevance to racial stereotypes in America is a mystery, for the story of Sambo is set in India, a place from which very few black American's ancestors have historically migrated, and it was written by a woman from Scotland by the name of Helen Bannerman in 1899 who

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72 (my emphasis relevant to this work) Ulrike Willinger, Andreas Herglovich, Michaela Schmoeger, 'Cognitive and emotional demands of black humour processing: the role of aggressiveness, intelligence and mood', *Springer*, 18 January 2017, pp. 159-167. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10339-016-0789-y> [accessed 26 August 2018]

73 Every reference to 'black people' in Boskin's piece is to black Americans. Therefore, every reference I give to black people will also be specific to black Americans. This is in contrast to 'black humor' which I describe later in this section as being synonymous with 'dark' or 'morbid humor.'

74 Helen Bannerman, *Little Black Sambo* (Chicago: Saalfield Publishing Company, 1899).

had no ties to America apart from the publishing of her book. What's more, the story, though a bit silly in detail, is not even a comedy and shows no evidence of intending to be. Let's assume, however, that this story did attempt to represent or set an example for the stereotypical black American in a comedic way. It would show him, in my interpretation, to be generous as Sambo's father was in giving him such nice things, non-materialistic and brave as Sambo was to give up his possessions, and witty and selfless as Sambo also was to trick the tigers into destroying each other for the benefit of his family. If Boskin had provided a single example from this story, from popular culture in the twentieth century, or even just a reason, to illustrate his point that the Sambo stereotype, whatever is meant by that, is intentionally used to perpetuate racism against blacks in America, then it would be possible to engage with him on that. But instead, Boskin takes for granted the interpretation of Sambo that it spouts a victim narrative of the oppression of American minorities, labeling it as racist and thus unworthy of other interpretations in order to serve that larger narrative.

Despite this, I completely agree with Boskin that there is a 'relationship between stereotyping and humoring,' but is there a dependency? Given that the ST simply cannot account for all examples of humor, the clear answer seems to be no. Perhaps there is stereotyping and generalizing in many examples of what Cicero calls 'funny things,' but there is none of that in 'funny language.' Even in the case of a funny thing's being generalized, that does not imply negative moral consequences. As mentioned earlier, human beings need stereotypes and generalizations to provide a framework for understanding and making use of most objects in the world, humorous or not, independent of moral concerns.

### 3.3 Humor vs The Art of Taking Offense

The two perspectives of de Sousa and Boskin fit perfectly well under the premises that Stephen Hicks characterizes as postmodern, so with regards to humor, they are similar in at least two key and mistaken ways: 1) they generally discuss humor within the terms of its definition as a verb I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis – i.e. to comply with the wishes of someone in order to keep them content no matter how unreasonable those wishes might be – rather than as the quality or state of being amusing, comic, etc., and 2) they hold that the position of the comedian or audience within a social hierarchy, relative to that of the object of the joke, determines whether the subject matter of that joke and the audience's reaction to it is morally permissible. In short, to laugh *with* is acceptable, and to laugh *at* is not. Only in the case that one identifies with the object being laughed at can that laughter be

acceptable, at which point the behavior circles back to laughing with. I have found, however, that laughing with is not genuine laughter. Only laughter at can constitute amusement in its genuine aesthetic form. Amusement itself is not an emotion, and to be amused at something is to be disinterested in sharing sympathy with the object. It is not clear why this should have negative moral implications, however. The combination of premises (1) and (2) above illustrate that the topic of amusement – insofar as I should grant them the benefit of being able to account for amusement – is inescapable from moral concerns. As humor is a uniquely human activity, that seems fair enough for a start. But, we often think aesthetic and moral judgments to be quite distinct and that aesthetic objects are often not open to moral scrutiny unless, as Kant would say, both aesthetic and moral judgment are *disinterested* and conform to reason aimed toward the good.[75] De Sousa and Boskin seem to mistake aesthetic disinterest – i.e. interest in the absence of sympathy – for 'interest in the expense of a group's existential validity.' They consider both aesthetic and moral judgment to be *interested* activities, contra Kant. Sambo is framed by Boskin as a Bergsonian machine-person in an attempt to prove that all non-blacks will laugh at the stereotypes Sambo represents in order to dehumanize all who are victimized by those stereotypes. If this were true, then surely stereotyping would be wrong. Shouldn't humor, then, be used to correct this? How might it do so? This does not seem to me to serve the purpose, aesthetic or otherwise, of humor. We may be able to salvage something from this, I think, if we consider that morality is interested while humor can be interested *sometimes* – i.e. in the cases that it aims toward the good. This will depend on human values cultivated from a combination of one's nature and nurture – i.e. what one holds to be 'sacred,' as Jonathan Haidt argues in his book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. The choices in the most general sense boil down to the communal group and the autonomous individual.[76] With regards to humor, as I will argue, the individual should prevail if it is to be considered an aesthetic activity as I have been describing. I think this is the more reasonable route since humor, as with any system, cannot intrinsically possess the trait of being evil or good. Those are human traits which depend upon the individual decision of an individual person in an individual case. If we are to attribute moral implications to humor, then, it should be done case to case, based on intention, reason, and justification.

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[75] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 351-354.

[76] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) pp. 150-179.

### 3.4 Collectivism vs Individual Sovereignty

As Stephen Hicks pointed out, one of the premises of the postmodernists is a collectivist account of human nature. If humor were to serve as a social corrective, as Bergson states and both de Sousa and Boskin agree, would that not at least depend on the stereotype of a victimized collective's being true, and humor's being disinterested in all but that truth's being expressed in a comic way? De Sousa and Boskin express their distaste for generalizations and stereotypes without regard to whether they point to truth. They take it for granted that they are malicious and wrong, even if they are true and expressed comically. There is no solution before the acknowledgment of a problem, however. Doing so via humor would seem no different than simply raising an opinion to express the same thing, although that would happen with no intention to entertain. Certainly, one should be allowed to raise an opinion and to let others decide whether that opinion is worth attending to, in a free society at least.[77] This is not acceptable for de Sousa or Boskin, however, because truth is overshadowed by the need for the audience to affirm their position within the social hierarchy and make a precise estimate of their group-based rights, regardless of their individual de Sousian 'attitudes,' before they laugh. Additionally, humorous attitudes as John Morreall described them seem not to be something determined by a group aimed toward rights to begin with.[78] Also, it is by no means obvious – indeed it may be dangerous to assume – that all non-blacks laugh at Sambo *in order to* dehumanize blacks in general. I would argue only a very small minority would in fact use humor to dehumanize a group. That small minority are those who we would unanimously consider to be racists because of what they do and say on their own behalf, regardless of their group affiliation. How else would we identify a real racist? Are all non-blacks racist against blacks when they laugh at a joke about black people? If so, wouldn't the same go for blacks laughing at white jokes? Not if one's privilege were based on objective criteria, but my opponents have assumed those criteria to be purely relative. Surely, there are white stereotypes, many of which are funny to the extent, we should admit, that they are true, independent from whether it victimizes whites. The following exemplifies this, at least within contemporary American culture:

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77 See e.g. John Stuart Mill, 'Chapter 2: Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion', *On Liberty* (Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 2001), pp. 18-52.

78 John Morreall, 'Humor and Emotion', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 214.

A white father walks out of a Sizzler bathroom after a meal with his family while shaking his hands dry and says "Alright, y'all ready to rock'n'roll?"

The ability to understand and find humor in this image does not, as my opponents might argue, depend on one's subjective experience of 'whiteness' nor 'dadness,' nor on one's 'straightness' nor 'maleness,' and nor on one's 'middle-classness' nor 'culinary tastelessness,' nor on any of the other infinite categories one could attribute to the hypothetical character being joked about. The humor rather comes from the understanding of how the stereotypical white father is, and from the audience's ability to recall such an image from memory or imagine a hypothetical such one based on their knowledge of that stereotype. The truth that lies at the bottom of this joke – i.e. that white, middle class dads who take their families to tasteless casual dining often have a bit of a nerdy side to their personality – clearly acknowledges a stereotype, but it is not in order to victimize anyone who identifies with the stereotype, for black people in America are just as aware of this stereotype as whites, despite the many exceptions that exist. It is funny without consequence and need spark no moral discussion.

Does humor serve as corrective here, as Bergson would suggest? It is clearly not intended that way – I know because I made this joke up – but perhaps it might do so as a minor side-effect by, for example, alerting white fathers to the kind of embarrassment they might cause their children. But, what if I reorganized the joke to involve a black stereotype? What if I had told a joke that played, as many existing jokes do, on the high rate of absentee fathers amongst black Americans? The humor in such a joke would come from a stereotype founded on truth. It is common knowledge among Americans of all racial backgrounds, not merely some special knowledge from the subjective black experience, that almost 60% of black children grow up in complete absence of their father.[79] Is to laugh at such a joke racially insensitive? Is it to have malicious intent toward blacks? Why could laughter not be a step toward acknowledgment in this case, as a prerequisite to correcting one of the biggest social problems in America today? I think that such a joke would exemplify how one can be disinterested in the sympathies of others – who might be offended by it and therefore more likely possess, as the aforementioned University of Vienna study indicates, some underlying aggression of their own – for the sake of accepting the truth of its underlying message.

It still remains unclear, however, why a joke involving racial stereotype, by design,

79 Jonathan Vespa, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider, *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012*. United States Census Bureau, 1 August 2013. p. 3. <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf> [accessed 28 August 2018]

serves the primary purpose of stereotyping. It may come *from* stereotyping, of course. Why can its primary purpose not simply be to be funny? For this, de Sousa and Boskin give no answer. They merely assume that stereotypes against minorities are invariably bad and that such against a majority group cannot be bad. This is a double standard. There are obviously stereotypes of both minority and majority groups that are founded on some degree of truth which they often share between or within those groups. Otherwise, there would be nothing but race itself to separate one group from another. There would be no uniqueness of culture anywhere. Nor would there be any mechanism for correcting those few stereotypes which are surely founded on something that needs correcting in order to benefit the individuals in that group as well as the larger culture in which it is contained. Therefore, I see no way, consistent with de Sousa and Boskin's view, that humor actually could serve as a corrective.

Regarding the sovereignty of the individual, who would be overshadowed by group thought in a postmodern reality, intentions matter. Valuing intentions over the 'correctness' of group identity may be the key to humor's role as a proper social corrective. Again, it is by no means obvious, and perhaps dangerous to assume that all non-blacks laugh at Sambo in order to dehumanize blacks in general. As Sambo does not portray a stereotype of black Americans to begin with, a conscious redirecting of the story's meaning to do so is required. It is likely that only a blatant racist would as much as see such a connection. This is not to say that one cannot express or take a black joke unwittingly and that one should not be held morally accountable for that in any case. This is why the comedian's and audience's intentions – not to be confused with what de Sousa vaguely defines as an 'attitude' – matter. To take offense from a joke is not to imply that offense was intended. In fact, intending offense is counterproductive to the art of joke-telling to begin with. When a joke is intended to be blatantly offensive, it ceases to satisfy the most basic condition a joke must meet in order to have aesthetic value in the first place – i.e. that it should be disinterested in anything but to spark amusement in the audience.

To intend offense alone is, as most would agree, a display of malice and is therefore immoral. To laugh at a joke that one knows is intentionally offensive may also be immoral, for that is the act of a buffoon whose sense of humor has not been properly cultivated. However, to take offense, especially if it is not intended, is often an indication, as the Vienna study showed, that one lacks the temperamental patience to tolerate the joke. To attribute immorality to the joke that is tactfully expressed by a comedian whose intentions are not clearly ill, regardless of the subject matter, is to embody the boor who is no more or less virtuous than the buffoon by default. The buffoon plays the game and often fails; the boor

rejects the game of humor entirely, ridding himself of being able to contribute to his own or others' well being in at least that way.

A confusion that is often at the bottom of one's taking offense, however, as the Vienna study also indicated, often is a result of merely failing to comprehend the joke. Temperamental causes aside, this is often the result of the technique used to tell it. Some comedians have an offensive technique in that they joke about race, sex, religion, and death, but it is by no means clear that they have offensive intentions – i.e. that they are or have any inclination to be a racist, sexist, anti-semitic, and murderous. Consider this joke by Anthony Jeselnik:

> I walked into a bar and saw this beautiful woman. I asked her "hey, what do you do?" She said "Oh, me? I'm a brain surgeon." Now, I don't know if this makes me sexist, but I was fully impressed. Most women can't pull off sarcasm.[80]

If the intention here is not to offend, then what is going on? This is an example of offensive technique which can be executed without offensive intention. Offensive technique deals with taking a 'black' subject – e.g. sexism in the joke above – that may trigger a sensitive audience, and making a joke about some aspect of it or about the subject in itself, in a manner that is disinterested about the sympathies of anyone who may have been personally affected by it. Jeselnik's form, often using incongruous diversion, transcends the subject itself through the disinterested art of comedic writing. Jeselnik cannot control, however, how an audience member might be affected by it nor what they might do with it. Can this joke be used to perpetuate sexism? Yes, for there is always that risk in ridicule. Is that it's purpose? No. The joke does not victimize any one particular woman, nor does it endorse the idea that women aren't funny (although that is the punchline), but rather, the incongruity between the surgeon and sarcasm remarks with a naughty twist that dares you to laugh by playing on a stereotype. Regardless, a lack of comprehension of the witty diversion employed by this joke may very well cause someone offense. It is the intention and form, not the subject alone, that one should take seriously in the art of comedy.

De Sousa counters this point when he attempts to debunk 'Three Arguments Against Taking the Subject Seriously.'[81] First, against the claim that laughter (as opposed to the inclination to laugh) is involuntary, he simply states that people often say 'you ought to

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80 *Thoughts and Prayers*, dir. by Anthony Jeselnik (Netflix, 2015).

81 de Sousa, pp. 228-230.

know better' than to find a racist or sexist joke funny, and that we should consciously restrain ourselves. To this I first reply that what is meant by 'you ought to know better' is that you shouldn't '*be* racist, sexist, etc.,' not that 'you shouldn't laugh,' for only to laugh from a racist or sexist attitude would be wrong, and one can clearly laugh without such an attitude. Also, his conception of emotional attitudes, in which he believes moral virtue is founded, depends on inclination, so I see no way he can leave inclination out of the discussion by separating it from the actions that follow. Inclinations and attitudes are consequences of temperament – i.e. how one involuntarily is – from which one's character can be built either toward or away from the good.

Against the second argument against taking the subject seriously – that laughter is trivial – de Sousa claims that restraint of laughter is a matter of etiquette rather than of ethics and is therefore a subject for anthropological rather than philosophical research, so he hands that intellectual responsibility to the anthropologist and says nothing more. I agree that restraint from laughter, as a father would teach his young child, is more a matter of etiquette than ethics on the surface. But, what seems to be more fundamental in laughter – i.e. aesthetic amusement – is generally a non-ethical matter, unless it is used as a mechanism for correction, which it can be. Why does de Sousa grant anthropology such holy power, especially when, as he indicates, one's moral character can be determined by whether or not one restrains one's laughter? If restraint does have ethical implications, I would be hesitant to take seriously any view from a potentially race/sex-baiting anthropologist who is also likely to be of the postmodern persuasion. Etiquette – i.e. the art of behaving properly – can be practiced for the sake of itself, without any interest to ethics and morals. Ethics is a deeply philosophical issue, however, and the primary purpose of etiquette as I see it should be to serve ethics, so simply changing restraint's category from ethical to etiquette does not license him to ignore the issue.

Third, against the idea that 'the Funny' is merely aesthetic, de Sousa simply states 'aesthetic questions can cut very deep, and still not be held to be moral.'[82] While I certainly agree with this, he does not account for the point I hope to have already shown that it is amusement, not laughter, that has the quality of being aesthetic, while laughter is merely the behavioral expression of amusement. De Sousa's definition of 'the Funny' is not at all clear, and it cannot clearly be equated with amusement any more than it can be equated with mere laughter as he spends the rest of the article defending the immorality of laughter and the emotional attitudes which accompany it. Amusement may exist somewhere in the middle

[82] de Sousa, p. 230.

ground between those two concepts, but he lacks a connection between laughter and emotion which I have already shown to a great extent cannot be made.

### 3.5 It's Just a Joke... *Usually*

Boskin's view has at least one advantage over that of de Sousa: he attempts to frame his theory around humor in general rather than laughter, and if he were successful in doing so, that should satisfy us since a theory of humor could also serve as a theory of amusement. He attempts to do so, however, in a way which seems to me to be counter to everything I have attempted to established regarding humor in this thesis. He, like de Sousa, regards the social responsibility to 'check one's privilege' as paramount in deciding whether laughter in any case is moral or immoral, assuming it should be, for to find something humorous is to endorse a stereotype about the object. Laughing with is to identify with the object and is morally permissible. Laughing at is to victimize.

For de Sousa and Boskin, identifying whether the subject of a joke perpetuates group bias, and sympathizing with the object of humor in a way that is socially justified, is more important than laughing at a joke simply because it is funny. This is peculiar given that one of the best ways to overcome bias is to make humor of it, as Milo rightly says: 'Be twice as funny as you are outrageous, because no one can resist the truth wrapped in a good joke.'[83] This view also leaves no room for comedy's being aesthetic, but rather deems it a tool for social justice that oppressed groups can use to gain moral high ground over their oppressors. This art of taking offense seems hard-pressed to produce individuals who are virtuous rather than virtue-signaling. It should be viewed with reasonable skepticism.

The points on which de Sousa and Boskin converge indicate that humor could not serve as a social corrective as they would like to think under the influence of Bergson. They, in a uniquely Marxist sort of way, seem less concerned with the sovereignty of individuals within social groups than they are with that of those groups on the whole. They abandon all concern for the essence of humor and revert to playing political games of rhetoric from the postmodern premises identified by Stephen Hicks. They believe, as I have understood them, that the subject matter of a joke and the arbitrary aspects of one's identity – e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. – are of paramount importance regarding the nature of humor. I disagree. Humorous amusement on the whole is to some extent aesthetic and thus disinterested in such a program, and in any program other than that of its own enjoyment. In

[83] Milo Yiannopoulos, *Dangerous* (New York: Dangerous Books, 2017). p. 286.

the rare cases in which it can serve as a corrective, it should do so truthfully and with the benefit of the doubt for the comedian's intentions in mind. Humor can indeed play political games risking political division, or it can serve the good for all in expressing truths and correcting falsities at the cost of a few boors' getting offended. de Sousa and Boskin, as I have shown, have decided that humor serves the former purpose – i.e. the art of taking offense. This indicates that some negative attitude or disposition precedes and influences the perception of the joke. I strongly prefer humor to serve the latter purpose – i.e. art in itself and occasionally truth, from a disposition of emotional neutrality. I now charge my opponents, unless there is clear evidence to the contrary in an individual case, to assume that a joke is *just a joke.* Is that not the premise from which comedy is best enjoyed?

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have covered a lot of ground regarding the nature of humor. I first distinguished between comedy and humor – i.e. that comedy is the artful expression of one's sense of humor which, like any other art, can be cultivated toward the good or for its own sake. As one of my goals has been to show the aesthetic nature of humor, discussing laughter alone was not enough. This was the mistake that virtually all of the traditional theorists made. Laughter *per se* is a physical expression of something deeper – i.e. one's being stimulated or amused. Only laughter founded on amusement can be genuine. It is involuntary and intentional in the sense that Franz Brentano was concerned with – i.e. as a mental phenomenon which has an object within itself. So, of the traditional theories, perhaps Schopenhauer's Incongruity Theory came the closest to accounting for amusement and therefore may have done so for humor and comedy. Regardless, the traditional approach of searching for necessary and sufficient conditions of amusement was insufficient. Perhaps it would be better to think of the nature of amusement within the terms of some familial relation – a genus under which all cases of amusement are species. Although incongruity seems necessary for every case of amusement, it seems unlikely to be that genus, for some degree of incongruity is necessary for any case of rational perception, and, of course, the incongruity of an event does not always account for why something amuses us. Rather, in an open suggestion originally put forth by Sir Roger Scruton, perhaps 'the human in its widest significance' might be that genus. Even enjoyment of the slapstick styles of Chris Farley, Jim Carrey, or Eric Andre, toward which uncontrolled chaos is certainly the aim, could reflect the curious part of human nature which seeks to disrupt order.

The ridiculous styles of Farley, Carrey, and the like may not provide a clear path via which to understand all of humor, but they do also serve as counterexamples to one view that I have found cannot – i.e. the contemporary, postmodern versions of the Superiority Theory that state that all humor as ridicule must be morally wrong. Ridicule, as it turns out, can be hurtful and perhaps immoral, but it is not necessarily so. In its more genuine cases, it can and should, albeit with some level of risk, serve the good: 'For that which we deride teaches us more quickly and delightfully than what we approve and revere does.'[84] For aesthetic humor

[84] Horace, *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry* tans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

to serve the good, laughing at, and thus genuine amusement, must be present. The offensive technique may be employed for humor to serve this role, but not by just anyone. 'Ridicule, like other edged tools, may do good in a wise man's hands, though fools may cut their fingers with it, or be injurous to an unwary bystander.'[85] No one, as far as I can tell, argues that it is a bad thing to minimize damage whilst expressing a sense of humor – neither a buffoon nor a boor would do well by that – but it is often the damage itself which is necessary for one to overcome some evil founded in ignorance or weakness. This is an insight which only a rational being could conceive of, and comedy is only one of many tools that can serve that higher purpose. This purpose must be understood by the content-oriented comedian, but its contents need not be believed since much of what we joke about is fiction. A proper comedian and comic audience are ones educated in the art of comedy, and as Aristotle said: 'It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.' This notion applies to comedy and philosophy alike.

University Press, 1926), p. 419.

85 Francis Hutcheson, 'Reflections Upon Laughter', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 39.

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