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The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought

Author(s): John Morreall

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I began studying humor in a scholarly way a decade ago because I thought it was an important part of human life which had been neglected in the academic world. But as I worked through the writings of Western thinkers on humor, I came to a more troubling conclusion: that they have not simply neglected humor, but in most cases rejected it. I shall examine the main forms which this rejection has taken, and then try to show the values of humor lost in this rejection. At the end I shall contrast the rejection of humor in Western thought with the embracing of humor in an Eastern tradition—Zen Buddhism.

Most Western thinkers have not written much about humor, and their comments on it are often found in writings on other topics.<sup>1</sup> But despite their often sketchy statements, two main lines of thought about the nature of humor have emerged. Both of them treat the experience of humorous amusement as a kind of enjoyment or pleasure. The earlier view, often called the Superiority Theory, is that amusement is our enjoyment of feeling superior to other people. This view, which began in ancient times and received its classic expression in Hobbes, gives rise to the ethical objection that humor is hostile. The second line of thought, usually called the Incongruity Theory, locates the essence of amusement in our enjoyment of experiencing something which clashes with our conceptual systems, our understanding of “how things are supposed to be.” While this theory was hinted at in an offhand remark of Aristotle’s, it was not presented in any detail until Kant and Schopenhauer. It is more comprehensive than the Superiority Theory, as I intend to show, but its portrayal of humor as the enjoyment of incongruity opens humor to a new objection: that it is irrational.

I shall proceed by examining three basic criticisms of humor in Western thought, which I call the Hostility Objection, the Irrationality Objection, and the Irresponsibility Objection. The first springs directly from the Superiority Theory, and the second from the Incongruity Theory coupled with Western rationalism. The third, the Irresponsibility Objection, is not tied to either of the main theories of humor.

#### I. THE HOSTILITY OBJECTION

The oldest objection to humor is that it is hostile, and thus antisocial or even cruel. This is an obvious criticism to make for anyone who holds the Superiority Theory, according to which humorous amusement is our feeling better than other people. The Superiority Theory and the Hostility Objection are not carefully articulated until Hobbes, but they go back as far as Plato

*John Morreall is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the College of Liberal Arts at the Rochester Institute of Technology.*

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and Aristotle. Plato, like others in this tradition, conflates what we now call humor with laughter, and treats the laugh of ridicule as the only kind of laughter. The proper object of laughter for Plato is a kind of vice in other people, namely, their ignorance about themselves.<sup>2</sup> We laugh at those who think of themselves as wealthier, better-looking, more virtuous, or wiser than we know them to be. This enjoyment of others' self-ignorance involves a kind of malice toward them, Plato says, a "pain in the soul," which is a harmful thing. Laughter is also potentially harmful because it is concerned with vice, and if we are frequently given to humor, that vice might rub off on us.

While Aristotle did not focus only on self-ignorance as the object of laughter, he did agree that all laughter is derision. Laughing is always *at* someone; all jokes have a butt. Even wit, he says in the *Rhetoric*, is really "educated insolence," and part of insolence is thinking of oneself as superior.<sup>3</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle allows that humor is part of a full human life, but warns that most people go too far with it, saying anything for a joke and not being considerate of those at whom the joke is aimed. A joke "is a kind of mockery, and lawgivers forbid some kinds of mockery—perhaps they should have forbidden some kinds of jokes."<sup>4</sup>

The classic version of the Superiority Theory was written two millennia after Aristotle by Hobbes, who saw humans as being in constant struggle with one another, and so constantly comparing their relative positions. In the struggle, we laugh when we see ourselves winning. Our laughter expresses "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."<sup>5</sup> Laughter "is caused either by some act of their own [those laughing] that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."<sup>6</sup>

Philosophers since Hobbes have developed more complex versions of the Superiority Theory. The most famous is that of Bergson, who is unusual among philosophers in writing a whole book on *Laughter*.<sup>7</sup> Bergson, like his predecessors, is not careful to distinguish laughter from humor or from comedy. He treats laughter as a form of scorn and humiliation, and agrees with Plato that "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself."<sup>8</sup> What he adds to the Superiority Theory is the idea that laughter is a social gesture whose purpose is to correct someone who is acting mechanically rather than flexibly. Laughable people are those acting more like machines than well-adapted living beings, and we laugh to humiliate them out of their "mechanical inelasticity."

The most recent exponent of the Superiority Theory is Roger Scruton, who analyzes amusement as an enjoyable kind of "attentive demolition." What is demolished is someone or something connected with a person. "If people dislike being laughed at," Scruton says, "it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject's eyes."<sup>9</sup>

This idea that humor is hostile is found not just in the works of philosophers, but in much popular writing. Al Capp, the creator of the “L’il Abner” comic strip, for example, once said that “all comedy is based on man’s delight in man’s inhumanity to man. . . and this has been the basis of all the comedy I have created.”<sup>10</sup>

Many Western religious texts, too, suggest that laughter is essentially hostile. The Bible seldom mentions laughter, but when it does, laughter is almost always the laugh of scorn. In the First Book of Kings (18:27), for example, Elijah taunts the priests of Baal, ridiculing their gods as powerless compared with Yahweh. After laughing at them, he has them slain. In the Second Book of Kings (2:23), the prophet Elisha meets a group of children, who laugh at him for his baldness. This derision is so great an offense to the prophet that he curses the children in the name of the Lord, and immediately two bears come out of the woods to maul them. St. John Chrysostom, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, had the following advice about laughter:

To laugh, to speak jocosely, does not seem an acknowledged sin, but it leads to acknowledged sin. Thus, laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul. Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult; and from railing and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows and wounds, slaughter and murder. If, then, you would take good counsel for yourself, avoid not merely foul words and foul deeds, or blows and wounds and murders, but unseasonable laughter itself.<sup>11</sup>

If the Superiority Theory gives a correct account of all humor, then the Hostility Objection seems perfectly reasonable. We can put the objection like this. Hostility between people is a *prima facie* evil to be avoided when no greater evil will result. To get into fist fights just for the pleasure of breaking people’s bones and drawing their blood, for example, is clearly abhorrent. Similarly, to ridicule and humiliate another person just because doing so makes you feel better about yourself, is antisocial at best and cruel at worst. Hobbes himself claims that laughter is enjoyed most by people who “are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men.” Virtuous people would not engage in laughter. “For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.”<sup>12</sup> The poet Shelley wrote something similar in a letter to a friend: “I am convinced that there can be no entire regeneration of mankind until laughter is put down.”<sup>13</sup> If the Superiority Theory is correct, then the ethics of humor seem as simple as the ethics of bearbaiting and gladiatorial matches: humor is a source of enjoyment, but it is a vicious kind of enjoyment, and so we should forgo it.

There have been a number of responses to the Hostility Objection, most of them claiming that the Superiority Theory does not capture the essence of humor. A century after Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Francis Hutcheson presented a

critique of Hobbes in “Reflections Upon Laughter.”<sup>14</sup> Hutcheson offers several counterexamples to the claim that there is an essential link between laughter and sudden glory. If Hobbes were right, Hutcheson argues, then two conclusions would follow: there could be no laughter where we do not compare ourselves with others or with some former state of ourselves; and whenever we feel sudden glory, we would laugh. But neither conclusion is true. First, there are many cases where we laugh without engaging in self-evaluation; here Hutcheson offers literary examples of witty phrases which amuse us without making us feel superior to anyone. What is funny in these cases is the writer’s cleverness with words and not any inferiority in the writer or in anyone else. We often laugh at someone else’s ingenuity in other areas too; indeed, we laugh even at animals when they do something that makes them seem smarter than they usually seem. The second conclusion above is also false, Hutcheson shows. “If we observe an object in pain while we are at ease, we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing; and yet here is occasion for Hobbes’s sudden joy.”<sup>15</sup> When we meet a poor beggar on the street, for example, why do we not double over in laughter when we realize how much better off we are than the beggar? And why do healthy people not visit hospitals “to get an afternoon of laughter” from seeing all the sick people? The main error in the Superiority Theory, according to Hutcheson, is that its advocates “have never distinguished between the words ‘laughter’ and ‘ridicule’: this last is but one particular species of the former.”<sup>16</sup>

I would like to extend Hutcheson’s argument here to show in more detail what is wrong with the Superiority Theory and so with the Hostility Objection. My basic argument is that the Superiority Theory gives a false characterization of the formal object of amusement. The concept of the formal object of an action or mental state had its beginnings in medieval metaphysics, was resurrected in contemporary philosophy by Anthony Kenny,<sup>17</sup> and has been discussed at length in relation to humor by Michael Clark.<sup>18</sup> Clark shows that Kenny’s simple presentation of the idea of a formal object needs refinement, but here we need not go into all the intricacies of the notion of a formal object. For our purposes the following will suffice as a characterization of a formal object:

The formal object of an action or mental state  $\phi$  is the most specific description which an object must satisfy in order for it to be  $\phi$ ’d.

The formal object of envy, for example, is “something desirable belonging to someone else.” The kind of thing we envy is a possession or characteristic of another which we want to have ourselves.

We can apply this notion of a formal object to the various versions of the Superiority Theory, all of which hold that the formal object of amusement is some kind of personal inferiority. Plato says that inferiority is the vice of self-ignorance. For Bergson it is mechanical inelasticity. Hobbes leaves his

concept of inferiority open and says that the person seen as inferior could even be oneself in a former state. But for all these philosophers the formal object of amusement is someone seen as lacking something that the amused person has.

What is wrong with this characterization of amusement is that it presents as a necessary feature of an object of amusement something which is found only in some objects of amusement, and it gets the essence of what amuses us wrong even in the cases which do involve inferiority.

We are sometimes amused when someone displays inferiority, as by making a mistake. But sometimes, too, the person we find funny shows no inferiority at all, and indeed, may show superiority to us. If we go to a children's gymnastics show expecting to see only somersaults, we may be greatly amused when we see eight-year-olds doing back flips and other difficult feats. Silent comedies are full of humorous scenes in which characters get themselves out of trouble by showing physical dexterity and strength which we undoubtedly lack.

Moreover, not only are some objects of amusement people who are not inferior to us; there are many objects of amusement which are not people at all. In one psychological experiment, subjects were presented with a series of apparently identical metal bars and were asked to pick them up. The first several bars were of the same weight, but then, as the subjects got used to that weight, they picked up a bar which was much heavier or lighter than the previous bars. And that made them laugh. What was funny here was the unexpected weight of the bar—no person and no inferiority were involved.<sup>19</sup>

All these cases show that perceived superiority could not be the formal object of amusement or laughter. But even in those cases where we are laughing at a person and that person shows some kind of inferiority, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of laughter: the laugh of scorn or superiority, and the laugh of humorous amusement. If all that is going on in a particular instance of laughter is that I am feeling superior to someone, then no humor at all is involved. If you and I are competing in a tennis match, say, and on winning I laugh in triumph, that is nonhumorous laughter; just as laughter at meeting an old friend on the street, the baby's laughter at peekaboo and tickling, and many other cases of laughter are nonhumorous. Now, of course, what often triggers our laughter at a competitor is not simply the failure of that person, but what we regard as a *stupid* failure, an *awkward* error, or some other shortcoming which is *funny*. And then our laughter may be a mix of the enjoyment of humor and the enjoyment of our competitor's downfall.

Here we need to ask what makes someone's blunder, or any other state of affairs *funny*? If the formal object of amusement is not a person seen as inferior, and is not even a person, then what is it? The answer here must be very general if it is to cover all cases of amusement, including laughter at people's

vices, at the metal bar of an unexpected weight, at puns, and at the countless other kinds of things and events we find funny. The only characterization comprehensive enough, I think, is provided by our second traditional theory of humor, the Incongruity Theory, according to which the formal object of amusement is incongruity in something we experience, remember, or imagine. The incongruous experience or thought is one which violates our conceptual patterns, which clashes with the mental framework into which it is received. If I see a man walking jauntily down the street, for example, I expect to see him continue walking. If he suddenly falls, that is incongruous. If I hear a sound that I take to be a baby's crying, but then as I look for the baby I find a cat in heat, that discovery is incongruous.

In saying that the formal object of amusement is incongruity, I am not saying that we react to all incongruity with amusement, of course: something striking us as incongruous is not a sufficient condition, but only a necessary condition for our being amused. We can react to incongruous events with puzzlement, or with fear, anger, and other negative emotions, rather than with amusement.<sup>20</sup> What distinguishes amusement from these other responses to incongruity is that in amusement we *enjoy* the incongruity.

Now blunders, accidents, and failures are all potentially incongruous, and many kinds of inferiority are also kinds of incongruity. So under the Incongruity Theory many of the same things will be humorous as under the Superiority Theory. The difference between the two is that the Incongruity Theory claims that what makes someone's slipping on a banana peel, say, *funny* is its clashing with our idea of someone walking, while the Superiority Theory claims that what makes it funny is our feeling superior to the person who slipped.

The Incongruity Theory, I think, gives us a more accurate description of the nature of humor than the Superiority Theory. The enjoyment of incongruity is a necessary and sufficient condition for humorous amusement, while the enjoyment of feeling superior to someone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for amusement.

Some philosophers seem to have seen a connection between incongruity and humor before the eighteenth century. In the *Rhetoric* (3.2), for example, Aristotle described a technique for getting a laugh from an audience: set up a certain expectation in them and then jolt them with something they did not expect. As an example he cites a line from a no longer extant comedy, "And as he walked, beneath his feet were—chilblains." But the Incongruity Theory of humor was not worked out until Kant and Schopenhauer.

Kant does not use the word "incongruity," but it is clearly what he had in mind in his theory of laughter:

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained*

*expectation into nothing.* This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind.<sup>21</sup>

The enjoyment of humor, according to Kant, is primarily a physical pleasure arising from the “changing free play of sensations” that accompanies the mental experience of a deluded expectation. Kant discusses two other examples of this “free play of sensations”—music, which is based on the play of tones, and games of chance, which are based on the play of fortune.<sup>22</sup>

In Schopenhauer’s version of the Incongruity Theory, the cause of amusement is a lack of fit between our abstract concepts and our sensory experience of the things which are supposed to come under those concepts. In organizing our sense experience, we ignore many differences between things—as when we call both a Chihuahua and a St. Bernard “dogs.” Amusement arises when we are struck by the mismatch between a concept and a perception of the same thing, and we enjoy that conceptual shock. What we enjoy in humor is an “incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge. . . . 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.”<sup>23</sup>

There were other versions of the Incongruity Theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most notably those of Kierkegaard and James Beattie.<sup>24</sup> And a few philosophers have recently refined the Incongruity Theory, analyzing the concept of amusement more carefully to distinguish it from laughter and other kinds of enjoyment.<sup>25</sup> But here we need not go into all the various versions of the Incongruity Theory. What they all share is the view that amusement is an enjoyable experiencing of something out of place, something which clashes with our conceptual schemata.

## II. THE IRRATIONALITY OBJECTION

Although the Incongruity Theory gives a better account of humor than the Superiority Theory, it has not improved philosophers’ opinions of humor much in the last two hundred years. What bothers Western thinkers about the idea of enjoying incongruity, I think, is that such enjoyment seems perverse, given the supreme value they place on rational understanding. Amusement conceived as the enjoyment of incongruity faces what we can call the Irrationality Objection.

Before considering the modern objection that amusement is irrational, we might take a look at an older, related objection of Plato. He criticized laughter simply because he thought of it as an emotion, and thought of emotions as irrational. The person overcome by emotion, in this view, is no longer guided by reason, and so acts in a less than human way. When in the *Republic* Plato ruled out most poetry in the ideal state, it was because poetry “waters” the



emotions rather than drying them up. Under his ban came comedy of all kinds. The gods and noble men, he insisted, are not even to be represented in literature as overcome by laughter, for that would set a bad model for the young to follow.<sup>26</sup>

Many contemporary philosophers have challenged the idea that emotions in general are irrational,<sup>27</sup> but there is not space here to discuss those challenges. What I would like to show is that, even if we accept the idea that emotions in general are irrational in some way, Plato's classification of amusement as an emotion overpowering us and taking away our rational control is still highly questionable. I have argued elsewhere that it is misleading to classify amusement as an emotion at all, because of the strong functional dissimilarities between it and standard cases of emotions.<sup>28</sup> But even if we want to count amusement as an emotion, we should notice that we are not overpowered by amusement as we are overpowered by such standard emotions as anger, fear, and love.

One of the features of amusement which sets it apart from such emotions is that it does not involve practical motivation as those states do. In anger we are motivated to eliminate the person or thing frustrating us; in fear we are motivated to protect ourselves and if possible escape the situation; in love we are motivated to possess the beloved. Now all of these emotions can overpower us just because they involve strong motivations to do something about the situation which elicited them—to strike the person who angered us, to run away from the object of our fear, to guard jealously the person we love. These motivations, which are found even in the physiological changes of emotions, can be so strong that we may be unable rationally to consider reasons against doing these actions. In this way we can be slaves to our passions. But no such enslavement is possible with amusement, because amusement does not involve practical motivation. No one ever killed or ran away out of humorous amusement; no thief, murderer, or military deserter ever asked for clemency on the grounds of being overcome by laughter. Indeed, laughter is physiologically incapacitating. Breathing is interfered with and there is a loss of muscle tone and coordination; in heavy laughter we may wet our pants and collapse on the floor.

The only motivation involved in amusement might be to prolong and perhaps repeat the pleasurable experience of amusement itself. This kind of motivation is very different from practical motivation, of course, and is found in any pleasurable experience, including the paradigmatically nonpractical aesthetic experience.

But even when we see that our rationality is not overcome by amusement in the simple way Plato thought, there is another sense in which humor does seem irrational, at least for someone who accepts the Incongruity Theory. Indeed, even in presenting his version of that theory, Kant came close to spelling it out. What happens in amusement is that something frustrates our

reason. The punchline of a joke, Kant said, causes pleasure, but this is not gratification, for it cannot be gratifying to have our expectations proved delusive and our desire to understand frustrated. The pleasure of humor is *in spite of* its frustrating our reason, and is based on the healthful effect that laughter has on our bodies.

The jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation. . . . If we admit that with all our thoughts is harmonically combined a movement in the organs of the body, we will easily comprehend how to this sudden transposition of the mind, now to one now to another standpoint in order to contemplate its object, may correspond an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines which communicates itself to the diaphragm.<sup>29</sup>

Now while Kant found the massage of the inner organs in laughter healthy, other philosophers have questioned the physiological benefits of laughter. George Vasey, for example, claimed that laughter is a bad habit like masturbation, which does serious medical damage.<sup>30</sup> And any putative physical benefits of humor aside, many philosophers have seen something perverse about human beings, the rational animals, engaging in an activity the whole point of which is to violate their conceptual patterns and frustrate their understanding. People who enjoy incongruity would be like travelers who discover that they are heading in the wrong direction—and enjoy the discovery.

Some philosophers like Santayana have gone beyond the claim that enjoying incongruity is perverse, to the claim that it is impossible. The pleasure we take in humor, according to Santayana, must be in its physiological effects and in the “stimulation and shaking up of our wits,” not in any enjoyment of incongruity *per se*.

We have a prosaic background of common sense and everyday reality; upon this background an unexpected idea suddenly impinges. But the thing is a futility. The comic accident falsifies the nature before us, starts a wrong analogy in the mind, a suggestion that cannot be carried out. In a word, we are in the presence of an absurdity, and man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold.<sup>31</sup>

This view that as rational animals we always act to overcome incongruity has many parallels throughout Western thought. Consider, for example, the ancient principle called by eighteenth-century rationalists the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Held by some to be “almost a part of reason itself,”<sup>32</sup> it can be stated as follows: for the existence of any being or the truth of any positive statement, there is something, known or unknown, which makes that thing exist or that statement true. Everything, in short, is theoretically explainable. A corollary of this principle is that to an omniscient mind, everything would fit into rational patterns, so that nothing is more than *apparently* anomalous. There is nothing objectively incongruous or comic about the universe or the

human condition, then, and our amusement is possible only because we are ignorant or confused.

Even when Western philosophers have denied the Principle of Sufficient Reason, they have usually maintained the value of things, facts, and actions having explanations. Twentieth-century existentialists like Sartre are the best example here. Though they hold that the world is absurd—that is, without epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical foundations—they are still rationalistic enough to wish it did have such foundations. Indeed, Sartre claims that it is part of the human condition to want foundations, to want a determinate nature which makes us understandable and provides a guide for our actions. We are “being *pour soi*” craving “being *en soi*.”<sup>33</sup> So even though our existence is absurd, in Sartre’s view, we have an inherent desire that it not be so. We are all, existentialists included, at least closet rationalists.

It is because of these rationalistic cravings in existentialism that the absurdity of life is treated as tragic rather than comic. If Western thinkers had no presumption that the world *should be* completely rational, then finding their lives full of incongruities and absurdities would not automatically be cause for disillusionment or despair. Indeed, without rationalistic assumptions we might come to view the universe as one gigantic comedy.<sup>34</sup> But in Western culture we have been led to think that all things can be brought under the dominion of reason, and so absurdity can only be disturbing.

In Western science, of course, it is an axiom that the world is rationally understandable. And so it is not surprising to find among scientists a strong commitment to the rationalistic view that incongruity *could not* be enjoyable to human beings. “Anomaly is inherently disturbing,” writes Barry Barnes, “and automatically generates pressure for its reduction.”<sup>35</sup> In his influential book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Leon Festinger uses the term “cognitive dissonance” for “nonfitting relations among cognitions,” that is, for incongruity, and claims that cognitive dissonance, like hunger, automatically motivates us to reduce it and to “avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.”<sup>36</sup> Many psychologists who have theorized about humor have claimed that only young children enjoy incongruity by itself. According to Thomas Schultz, for instance, after the age of seven we require not just incongruity in order to be amused, but the resolution of that incongruity. Mature humor requires the fitting of the *apparently* anomalous element into some conceptual schema. Indeed, Schultz is unwilling to call unresolvable incongruity “humorous”—instead he calls it “nonsense.”<sup>37</sup> The pleasure of humor in a mature person, according to this view, is not the enjoyment of incongruity, but the enjoyment of a kind of puzzle-solving.

The Western rationalist tradition, to sum up, holds that a rational adult should or even can face incongruity in only one way, by trying to eliminate it. To appreciate incongruity would be immature, irrational, masochistic, or all three.

My reply to the Irrationality Objection is that it has too narrow a view of rational thought and too high an estimation of the importance of rational thought in human life. Western philosophers since Aristotle have thought of reasoning as coming in two varieties: theoretical thinking, whose object is some truth for its own sake, and practical thinking, whose object is something to be made or done. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle held that theoretical thinking is the highest human activity, though he admitted that moral virtue, with its practical thinking, also brings a measure of happiness. Both these kinds of thinking, we should note, are serious activities. Aristotle did briefly discuss nonserious activities, in his examination of happiness at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*,<sup>38</sup> but he did not even consider the possibility that they might involve rational thinking. All amusements were simply lumped together with the grosser forms of bodily enjoyment, and dismissed as possible sources of happiness. When he began his treatment of amusements, in fact, debauchery seemed to be his paradigm: “Amusements are thought to be of this nature [desirable in themselves]: we choose them not for the sake of something else; for we are injured rather than benefitted by them, since we are led to neglect our health and our property.” As an example of someone who thinks amusements desirable in themselves, Aristotle offered tyrants. It is irrelevant, he suggested, “if these people, who have never tasted pure and generous pleasure, take refuge in the bodily pleasures.” They are no judge of happiness; after all, “anybody at all—even a slave—can enjoy bodily pleasures no less than the best man; but no one supposes that a slave can have a share in happiness.”

Against this Aristotelian tradition, I want to insist that there is a third kind of thinking which involves rationality just as much as theoretical or practical thinking do, but which does not have truth or correct action as a goal. We might call it thinking for enjoyment, aesthetic thinking, or even playful thinking. Under whatever name, it is widespread, and it includes the kind of thinking found in humor, in which we suspend our ordinary concerns with reaching the truth and with doing the correct action.

One place to find a discussion of this kind of thinking is Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, where he discusses humor along with two other activities involving thinking with no theoretical or practical goal, namely, games of chance and music.<sup>39</sup> Games can involve a great deal of rational thought, of course—consider a well-played game of chess or go. And to listen appreciatively to sophisticated music, we must know something about the kind of music it is, and be able to follow the various passages knowledgeably. That an appreciation of sophisticated humor also involves rational thinking should be obvious. Most animals have no sense of humor because they do not engage in rational thinking; those apes that have shared our rationality to some degree, such as the gorillas and chimps who have been taught languages, have also shown the beginnings of humor.<sup>40</sup> The connection between humor and rationality can be

seen, too, in children, where the development of humor parallels the development of rational thinking, with different kinds of humor appreciated as different cognitive skills appear.<sup>41</sup>

In humor, of course, there is not only the play of ideas, but often the reversal and even the squashing of ideas and expectations. But that does not make humor irrational unless we assume that rational play must always proceed smoothly; and we have lots of examples, from exciting chess games to our enjoyment of murder mysteries, to show that assumption false. Indeed, it seems to be the rule rather than the exception that when exercising our rationality for enjoyment, rather than to achieve a goal, we like trains of thought more when they have jolts, reversals, and even “wild-goose chases,” than when they proceed in a smooth progression to a conclusion.

So even if we agree with Aristotle that reason is our highest faculty, it is clear that we do more with this faculty than understand the world and guide our behavior. We sometimes think without serious purpose.

The dominant Western tradition has viewed seriousness as the highest stance, and play, including humor, as merely refreshing us for more seriousness.<sup>42</sup> But the idea that play has merely an instrumental value is belied by the traditional value Western thinkers place on fine art and aesthetic experience generally, in which we need not be searching for truth or for a guide to action. There is not space here for a discussion of aesthetic experience, play, and their relation to rationality, but elsewhere I have argued that humor is itself often a kind of aesthetic experience,<sup>43</sup> and has the values associated with aesthetic experience.

There is no general case that can be made against humor as an irrational activity, I conclude. Nor should we make the second assumption usually made by Western philosophers—that rationality has some ultimate value. Suppose for the sake of argument that humor were irrational, even essentially irrational. So what? Why could not an irrational activity be beneficial under certain circumstances? When we are not pressed by practical or theoretical demands, what is wrong with nonrational or even irrational activities—an exhausting swim, watching a stage magician, or a bout of drunken singing? We are rational animals, of course, but animals for all that. Schopenhauer hinted at the value of nonrational activities in his account of humor as a mismatch between concepts and perceptual experience:

This victory of knowledge of perception over thought affords us pleasure. For perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself. It is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and gaiety; moreover it is attended with no exertion. With thinking the opposite is the case; it is the second power of knowledge, the exercise of which always demands some, and often considerable, exertion. Besides, it is the conceptions of thought that often oppose the gratification of our immediate desires, for, as the medium of the past, the future, and of seriousness, they are the vehicle of our fears, our repentance,

and all our cares. It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency. On this account then the mien or appearance of laughter is very closely related to that of joy.<sup>44</sup>

### III. THE IRRESPONSIBILITY OBJECTION

Closely allied with the Irrationality Objection in Western thought is the last objection to humor I want to consider, the Irresponsibility Objection. Unlike the other two, this objection does not arise directly out of either of the two main theories of humor, but is based simply on the fact that humor is a non-serious activity. Aristotle, as we saw, did not count any nonserious activities as rational or properly human. That is why he held that “serious things are intrinsically better than humorous things or those connected with amusement, and the activity of the better of two things—whether two men or two parts or faculties of a man—is the more serious.”<sup>45</sup> By itself, this low estimation of nonserious activities does not condemn humor, but if we think of nonserious people as overlooking or even rejecting their responsibilities, we have the Irresponsibility Objection to humor. And this is the way nonserious attitudes have usually been treated in Western thought, as silly and foolish and accomplishing nothing.

Before Aristotle, Protagoras, in devising an ethical code for his followers, had the rule “Be not possessed by irrepressible mirth.” Epictetus the Stoic later gave similar advice: “Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or unrestrained.”<sup>46</sup> The Bible also has passages suggesting that humor is irresponsible. In Ecclesiastes we read “The fool lifts up his voice with laughter, but the wise man scarcely smiles a little.”

One theme stressed by proponents of the Irresponsibility Objection is the incompatibility between being amused by something and feeling practical concern about it. As it is often put, having a sense of humor about a situation gives a person “distance” from it, that is, disengages the person from the situation. Suppose, for example, that my car gets stuck in a ditch and my rear wheels are spinning futilely in the mud. If I am laughing about this situation, I have for the moment stopped trying to get out of the ditch. If I single-mindedly maintain my concern about getting the car back on the road, then I will not be able to enjoy the incongruity of its being stuck in the ditch. Similarly, if a friend of mine needs help in overcoming his drinking problem, then to the extent that I find his drunken antics funny, I do not help eliminate his drinking. The person who laughed about all incongruous events would be someone who never felt concern about things not being what they should be, and so never remedied any problems. Such a nonserious person would certainly be open to ethical criticism on many occasions.

A common target of those who hold the Irresponsibility Objection is the portrayal of vice in comedy. An ethically responsible attitude toward drunkenness, lying, thievery, and adultery involves the desire to change these kinds

of behavior. But on the comic stage the drunk, the liar, the thief, and the unfaithful spouse are all presented as something to laugh about, something to enjoy. The deeds and attitudes of these stock comic characters are not seen as disturbing or calling for reform; the comic attitude is to countenance them with a wink and a chuckle.

Playwrights themselves have understood this feature of comedy, and at least some have tried to defend themselves. In Elizabethan times Ben Jonson argued that comedy had a corrective function: it prompted us to avoid the vices portrayed on the stage. Although many since Jonson have made the same claim, it is hardly convincing. Comedy presents the drunk, for example, as a jovial fellow, someone who gets into minor troubles, to be sure, but not someone who urgently needs reforming. And the same goes for the antics of the liar and the thief, who are usually represented as doing remarkably well for themselves *because of* their vices. Think of Shakespeare's Falstaff in *Henry IV*. We do not leave the theater saying to ourselves, "I must be careful never to act like Falstaff!" If we evaluate attitudes in the play for our own possible adoption at all, most of us, I think, find more to emulate in Falstaff than in, say, Prince Hal, Hotspur, or the other "responsible" characters. The Puritans certainly did not accept the idea that comedy is corrective, and they eventually had the English theaters closed.

A twentieth-century form of the Irresponsibility Objection also criticizes the practical disengagement found in humor. Anthony Ludovici, in *The Secret of Laughter*, writes:

Humor is, therefore, the lazier principle to adopt in approaching all questions, and that is why the muddle is increasing everywhere. Because the humorous mind shirks the heavy task of solving thorny problems and prefers to make people laugh about them. . . . Truth to tell, there is in every inspired and passionate innovator a haughty energy which is incompatible with the cowardice and indolence of humor.<sup>47</sup>

In reply to the Irresponsibility Objection, I will agree that humor does involve a disengagement from what we are laughing about, and it is irresponsible to disengage ourselves from certain kinds of incongruity. But those cases do not establish a *general* objection to humor, any more than the cases in which it is irresponsible to engage in, say, artistic activities provide a general objection to art.

When there is a problem requiring immediate attention, then laughing about it is an inappropriate, even an immoral, response. And so is any other nonpractical response. If my children are starving, then it would be wrong to laugh at how bloated their stomachs look. It would also be wrong to sit around sketching their gaunt faces for oil portraits.

But not all objects of laughter are problems. If I see a cloud which looks like President Millard Fillmore, how could it be irresponsible to find that coincidence funny?

And even where the object of laughter is some problem, it may be one that is not urgent. If the clock at our summer cottage runs slow, so that every morning we have been advancing it ten minutes, then we might want to bring it to a repair shop. But we might simply not care about this problem and laugh about our little ritual of resetting the clock. To see the humor here we do not have to be indolent, as Ludovici suggests—we may be hardworking people who simply save our energies for important problems, and “don’t sweat the small stuff.”

There can also be a value to humor in making light of a problem to relieve people of unnecessary and useless concern. If I am scheduled to undergo some minor surgery, for instance, and my family and friends are terribly worried, then making a joke about it might well give everyone an appropriate measure of distance and objectivity about what is not a dangerous situation.

Humor can even be valuable with major problems, as in the psychiatric technique called “paradoxical therapy.” Here the psychiatrist exaggerates the patient’s problem until the patient becomes able to laugh at it, thus seeing it from the outside.<sup>48</sup> Here the practical disengagement of humor is not only not irresponsible—it is the beginning of a cure. With problems over which we have little or no control too, such as the weather, aging, and the inevitability of death, seeing the humor in them may be an appropriate, indeed, psychologically healthy response.

While many incongruities in life call for action, then, many do not, and enjoying the latter rather than fretting over them is often a good way to approach them. There is nothing *essentially* irresponsible about creating and enjoying humor, to conclude, and in some cases it is just what the situation calls for.

#### IV. THE OVERLOOKED VALUE OF HUMOR

Having seen the weakness of the general objections that Western philosophers have brought against humor, I would like to complete my defense of humor by exploring some of its values which they have overlooked. Ironically, many of these values are similar to values found in philosophy itself.<sup>49</sup>

One similarity here is that both humor and philosophy foster imagination and mental flexibility. The best humor gets us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways, and so does the best philosophy. Consider the following bits of humor:

Even paranoids have enemies.

Everything tastes more or less like chicken.

You can get *anywhere* in ten minutes if you go fast enough.

Eat a live toad first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day.



Those who know George Carlin's comedy might also think here of his routine "A house is just a place to keep your stuff," or his disquisition on the difference between the militarism of football and the pastoralism of baseball. All of these examples amuse us by getting us to change the way we look at things and situations. Much philosophy is built on similar shifts in perspective. As William James said, philosophy "sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar."<sup>50</sup> Philosophical questions, indeed, often sound like opening lines of stand-up comedy routines: Can I be sure I'm not dreaming now? Might I be a brain in a vat? Could two people trade bodies? Was Duchamp's urinal really a work of art?

The mental gymnastics we go through in creating or appreciating a good joke are often close to the mental gymnastics philosophizing puts us through. Even the experience of understanding a philosophical argument or position—the moment of Aha!—is often similar to getting a joke—the moment of Haha! The first time I heard the Ontological Argument, for example, I laughed heartily, and I do not think that I am atypical here. Indeed, I would guess that the reason many Western philosophers are in the business in the first place is that they savor the experience of escaping ordinary mental ruts, of thinking about bizarre possible worlds, and of having their wits jostled. And that is also what people like about the best humor.

The perspective shifts and mental gymnastics in philosophy and humor are gratifying in themselves, but they are also valuable for the open, critical attitude they promote. At their best the philosopher and the humorist are undogmatic and willing to challenge well-established beliefs. Good humor, like good philosophy, is conceptually liberating.

Both are also practically liberating. The humorous attitude is a disengaged, distanced attitude, one in which we look at the world from at least one step back. In this frame of mind practical motivation is suppressed, and for the moment we look at situations not as challenges or problems, but just to enjoy their incongruity. The philosophical attitude is similarly distanced: philosophers are supposed to see the world from a perspective not dominated by the practical concerns of life.<sup>51</sup>

A good way to appreciate the values of humor overlooked by Western thought, especially its liberating power, is to consider the Eastern tradition that uses humor in its pursuit of liberation—Zen Buddhism, especially the tradition of Rinzai.<sup>52</sup> Zen, of course, is very different from most Western philosophies, which are systems of explanation built on arguments and governed by rationalistic assumptions. Zen is not a system of explanations and arguments, makes no assumptions like the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and is generally anti-intellectual. The *kōans* and *mondōs* for which it is famous, indeed, are often directed against the very kinds of questions Western philosophy takes seriously. In the widest sense of philosophy, however, in which a philosophy is a way of looking at the world and living in it, Zen is a

philosophy. And in its making a place for humor, Zen has much to show other philosophies, Western and Eastern.

Let me make the contrast between Zen and Western attitudes toward humor as striking as I can with a quote from an eighteenth-century German philosopher, followed by three well-known examples of Zen humor.

There are things so great and important in themselves, as never to be thought of and mentioned but with much sedateness and solemnity. Laughter on such occasions is criminal and indecent. . . . For instance, all jests on religion, philosophy, and the like important subjects.<sup>53</sup>

Rinzai (Lin-chi), the ninth-century Zen master, would often reply, no matter what the question, by shouting “Kwatz,” a meaningless exclamation.

When a monk asked the Zen master Ummon (Yün-men) “What is Buddha?” he answered, “A wiping stick of dried dung!”

If you meet the Buddha, kill him.

For someone raised on Western thought, these Zen examples may sound shocking. Not only do they mix humor into religious and philosophical inquiry, but they seem to countenance a disrespect for the very institutions of religion and philosophy. How could someone claiming to be a Zen master, the Westerner might ask, carry on like that?

The tradition of humor in Buddhism predates Zen, and goes back at least to Chuang Tzu, whose approach to Buddhism helped change it from the highly speculative metaphysics it had been in India into the more practical kind of Buddhism that took hold in China and Japan. In Indian Buddhism, humor had been looked down upon much as it is in Western thought. In good scholastic style, Indian Buddhists had distinguished six kinds of laughter, with only the mildest forms of smiling acceptable for monks, and only the barely perceptible smile (with no teeth showing) attributable to the Buddha.<sup>54</sup> But that attitude changed radically with Chuang Tzu and later with the Zen masters. Their use of humor was not a mere stylistic device in their teaching; it sprang from their realization of an essential connection between humor, with its liberating power, and the central goal of Buddhism—to eliminate attachment, to free people from all forms of mental bondage.

Before we are enlightened, according to Zen, we try to get control over things and people, but our attachment to them gives them power over us. To reach *satori*, enlightenment, is to liberate ourselves from attachment. Now many Western philosophers, especially in the Stoic and Christian traditions, have also preached a liberation from attachment, and so they would presumably have no trouble appreciating Zen humor like this poem by Masahide:

Since my house burned down  
I now have a better view  
Of the rising moon.<sup>55</sup>

But Zen masters also teach a more radical kind of nonattachment. They teach, for example, that one's attitude toward Buddhism itself can be a form of attachment, if Buddhism is thought of as a creed to which one subscribes or a set of rituals one follows. Because the point of Zen is nonattachment, there are no rituals, scriptures, doctrines, or religious figures—not even the Buddha himself—to whom the follower of Zen should become attached. Even the idea of nonattachment is not something to become attached to! This importance of nonattachment explains the irreverence and even iconoclasm that pervades Zen, as seen above in the examples about the Buddha.

In Zen there is another kind of nonattachment which usually sounds strange to Western philosophers—nonattachment to words, concepts, and rational thinking in general. We are attached, according to Zen, when we treat rational thinking as a form of power and control over the world, when through our words and concepts we try to “capture” or “master” the world. This attitude, of course, has been the dominant one in the West, as seen in its most obvious form in the relation between science and technology. “Knowledge is power,” as Westerners so often say.

Understanding the world through concepts, furthermore, is seen in Zen as knowledge which is inferior in at least three ways. First, it is a mediated kind of knowledge, while Zen seeks a direct experience of reality. Secondly, concepts distort reality because they are static, while reality is in constant flux. And thirdly, conceptual thinking works by making distinctions, especially between opposites—mind/matter, subject/object, good/bad—while reality is essentially a unity. Our rational mind, to be sure, will always form concepts and through them attempt to freeze and divide up the world. But we must remind ourselves that any conceptual system, however useful in any particular situation, is at best a tool and not a direct contact with reality. We must constantly challenge our conceptual systems, according to Zen, and “break up” our concepts, to prevent ourselves from thinking that they give us an objective grasp of things.

This nonattachment to concepts and conceptual systems is related to an even more important kind of liberation, indeed the central liberation in Zen: from the mind itself treated as a metaphysical substance. The most basic attachment we must break is to the “I,” the empirical self, thought of as an enduring subject distinct from the rest of reality. In Zen the empirical ego is not the person and is not an independent substance, and the enlightenment sought is an intuitive awareness of reality in which we realize the nothingness of the separate “mind” we usually think of as ourselves. In being liberated from that mistaken attachment to the self, we overcome the core of the problem of all attachment.

It is in helping to break our attachments to doctrines, to conceptual understanding, and to the delusory self, that humor is so valuable in Zen, for, as we

have seen, humor involves the clash of perception and conception, the reversal of perspectives, and the frustration of reason. And like enlightenment, of which it is sometimes a form, humor hits us abruptly and unexpectedly, in a flash. The sudden Aha! of enlightenment is close to the Ha-ha! of getting a joke. The fifteenth-century master Kukoku (K'ung-ku) observed that enlightenment is a "grand overturning of the whole system of consciousness,"<sup>56</sup> a comment that also applies to much of the best humor.

As long as rational thinking is going smoothly, we tend not to question the nature of thought and of the self, just as when our car is running smoothly, we tend not to look under the hood. But humor throws a monkey wrench into the cognitive processing of the rational mind, and thus prompts us to question its nature. That is why incongruity of all kinds is so useful in Zen. Interchanges between students and masters, for example, often involve illogical changes of thought, as when Tozan (Tung-shan) was asked, "What is the Buddha?" and answered, "Three pounds of flax." Contradictions are used in the same way, to frustrate the rational mind, and thus call attention to it. And answers to a student's question need not have any meaning at all, as in Rinzai's indiscriminately replying to questions with the syllable "Kwatz!" or the common practice of responding by striking students with sticks, slapping them, and twisting their noses. The purpose of all of this nonsense and slapstick is to derail the rational mind, so that the student sees at a more basic level of awareness the illusion of the individual substantial self and the true nature of reality.

The contrast here with Western philosophy, in which there is so little room for humor, is sharp. The individual, substantial, self-aware ego, which in Zen is the fundamental illusion and the target of humor, is the foundation stone of Descartes' rationalism and the philosophies which it spawned. For this tradition, the existence of the self-conscious "I" as a special kind of substance utterly distinct from the rest of the world, is the one certitude with which I can begin to think, and on which I can base all other knowledge. Needless to say, this "I" is taken absolutely seriously in rationalism, much as God is taken absolutely seriously in, say, Christianity.

Judged from a Zen perspective, the Cartesian *cogito* looks like trouble from the start, for it produces both the illusory idea of the individual substantial mind and the exaggerated trust in reason (if my essence is to think, after all, then things had better be thinkable). Reliance on the *cogito* as a starting point is also, I think, largely responsible for the personal humorlessness of so many Western philosophers. They take everything too seriously because they take themselves too seriously, and they take themselves too seriously because they take their *selves* too seriously.

Working under rationalistic assumptions, Western philosophers usually react with distress when major unresolvable incongruities appear in life, as we saw earlier. When they contemplate the extent of their own ignorance, for

example, or when their substantial egos seem threatened by the thought that their death might be the end of their egos, they react with evasion, despair, or defiance.

Zen thinkers, by contrast, have none of the problems Western thinkers have with absurdity, especially with incongruities between what seems to be and what is, and between what we desire and what is actually achievable, just because the basic stance in Zen is already an ironic one. The Zen view *expects* things to not be what they seem; after all, the mind itself is not what it seems. And because Zen has set up no expectation that the world be a rational system tailored to the requirements of my rational understanding, it is ready when things cannot be explained and actions cannot be guided by principles. Someone who can contemplate the nonreality of the individual substantial mind, who, indeed, seeks that realization as the highest enlightenment, is, unlike the Western rationalist, ready for anything.

The discrepancy between our desires and what is possible is likewise no problem for Zen, because Zen sees the elimination of desires as valuable. The person who is nonattached about material possessions can experience their loss with a smile, as in the poem above about seeing the rising moon better after the house has burned down. Nonattachment to the self, similarly, allows laughter at oneself. As Thomas Merton says of the Zen student reaching illumination in the study of *koans*, “his own total acceptance of his own nothingness, far from constituting a problem, is in fact the source and center of inexpressible joy.”<sup>57</sup>

Not only can humor be used to *produce* enlightenment, then, but the experience of enlightenment, with its sudden realization of the illusory nature of the self, can itself be a profound kind of amusement. The biggest joke I shall ever experience is me. And once I am liberated from attachment to my ego and can see myself with a sense of humor, the humor in all of experience comes easily.

In this examination of Zen’s attitude toward humor, I have, of course, been adopting a Zen perspective. But what we have found here holds important lessons for thinkers in other traditions as well. Zen nicely calls our attention to the neglected values of humor mentioned at the beginning of this section, especially its fostering of conceptual and practical liberation. The irreverent attitude in Zen would be healthy in any system of thought, for it keeps the critical spirit alive, preventing blind discipleship and other kinds of intellectual conformism. Also important is Zen’s insistence that rational thought is only part of our lives, even of our mental lives, and that it has no absolute value.

But the most important aspect of Zen’s attitude toward humor is the most important aspect of Zen itself, its emphasis on nonattachment. Any comprehensive philosophy will have ways of responding to the little absurdities of everyday life, and to the big absurdities built into the human condition. Now

most philosophers will admit that stepping back in amusement is an acceptable response to the little absurdities. That view has been common since Aristotle described comedy as laughter at *minor* flaws and misfortunes. But when it comes to the big absurdities of life, most Western philosophers think that only a serious response is appropriate—they reject a disengaged response like amusement. What the nonattached stance in Zen shows is the possibility of a disengaged response to *any* absurdity.

Thomas Nagel argues that this possibility should have been clear in Western philosophy all along.<sup>58</sup> Our noticing absurdity in the first place, after all, is based on our ability to see any situation in a larger context, from a distance. We are listening to a politician's speech in favor of X, for example, but suddenly remember the speech against X she gave a year ago. Nagel shows that our capacity for stepping back and looking at things from a distance has no bounds—just as we can watch in a disengaged way an ant struggle with a grain of sand, we can look at our lives or the history of the universe *sub specie aeternitatis*.

But if it is permissible to take one step back and notice the incongruity in our lives, why should it somehow be inauthentic to take a second step back and laugh at that incongruity, especially if it is some permanent feature of the human condition about which nothing can be done. Surely, we have to take our children's hunger seriously; finding it amusing would be reprehensible. But what about the inevitability of death and what Stephen Leacock calls "the incongruous contrast between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness"?<sup>59</sup> Do we have to take that seriously?

Imagine, if you will, that in the morning paper we learn about a giant maverick meteor on a collision course with Earth, which will end all life on this planet by the weekend. Would there be anything wrong with finding that situation funny? Is there some more engaged attitude we should adopt instead?

As things stand, of course, most of us have more than a few days left, but in some finite number of days our planet is still going to come to an end, and so is each of our lives. In cosmic terms neither event is so important as to transcend the possibility of humor. Indeed, if seen from enough distance, either might be quite funny, just as disasters in old silent films often are.

If, as is often claimed, philosophers have the most cosmic view of things, then they should also have the greatest appreciation of humor, for the comic view of the world may well be the most cosmic view of all.

#### NOTES

1. For the most important writings of Western philosophers on humor, see my anthology *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
2. Plato, *Philebus*, 48–50. Cf. *Republic* 5.452.

3. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.12.
4. *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.8.
5. Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, in Molesworth edition of *Works* (London: Bohn, 1840), vol. 4, chap. 9. Cf. *Leviathan*, chap. 6. Both texts are in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, chap. 4.
6. *Leviathan*, chap. 6.
7. In *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1956).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
9. Roger Scruton, "Laughter," in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 168.
10. Quoted in Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), p. 30. See also Albert Rapp, *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1951), p. 21, where the origin of all humor is traced to "the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel"; and Stephen Leacock, *Humor and Humanity* (New York: Holt, 1938), chap. 1. Konrad Lorenz, the theoretician of animal behavior, suggests that the essence of laughter is the baring of the teeth as a threat display. See his *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York: Bantam, 1966), pp. 171–172, 269.
11. St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues*, vol. 9 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1889), p. 442.
12. *Leviathan*, chap. 6.
13. H. L. Mencken, *A New Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles from Ancient and Modern Sources* (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 653.
14. In my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, chap. 6.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
17. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).
18. Michael Clark, "Humor and Incongruity," in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 139–155.
19. Wayne Gerber and Donald Routh, "Humor Response as Related to Violation of Expectancies and to Stimulus Intensity in a Weight Judgement Task," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 41: 673–674.
20. See my "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity," in *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 188–207.
21. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard, in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 47.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
23. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 51–52.
24. See my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, chap. 11, and James Beattie, "An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," in *Essays*, 3d ed. (London, 1779).
25. See Michael Clark, "Humor and Incongruity," in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, chap. 17; and "Humour, Laughter and the Structure of Thought," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (1987): 238–246; Mike W. Martin, "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities," in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, chap. 19; and my *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), chaps. 5–6.
26. *Republic* 3.388.
27. See, e.g., Ronald deSousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bradford Books, 1987).
28. "Humor and Emotion," in *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, chap. 22.
29. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 48–49.
30. George Vasey, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*, 2d ed. (London: J. Burns, 1877).
31. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, in my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 92–93.
32. Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 91.

33. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), part 4.
34. See B. A. G. Fuller, "Is Reality Really Comic?" *Philosophy* 43 (1946): 589–598.
35. Barry Barnes, "The Comparison of Belief Systems: Anomaly Versus Falsehood," in *Modes of Thought*, ed. Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 190.
36. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 3.
37. Thomas Schultz, "A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humor," in *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, ed. Tony Chapman and Hugh Foot (New York: Wiley, 1976), pp. 12–13. See also Jerry Suls, "A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis," in *The Psychology of Humor*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee (New York: Academic Press, 1972), pp. 81–99; and "Cognitive Processes in Humor Appreciation," in *Handbook of Humor Research*, ed. Paul McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983), pp. 39–58.
38. *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6.
39. In my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 46–47.
40. See Paul McGhee, *Humor: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1979), chap. 3.
41. *Ibid.*, chaps. 2, 4, 5.
42. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6, and *Politics* 8.1337b34–1338a1.
43. "Humor and Aesthetic Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 15 (1981): 55–70; *Taking Laughter Seriously*, chap. 7; and "Humor and Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 15 (1984): 308–311.
44. In my *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 60.
45. *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6.
46. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 33.
47. Anthony Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (New York: Viking, 1933), pp. 11–13.
48. See Allen Fay, *Making Things Better by Making Them Worse* (New York: Hawthorn, 1978).
49. See my "Humor and Philosophy," pp. 305–317.
50. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, in *William James: the Essential Writings*, ed. Bruce Wilshire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 2.
51. I explore the similarity of both the humorous and philosophical attitudes to a third kind of distanced attitude, the aesthetic attitude, in "Humor and Philosophy," pp. 307–317.
52. A useful introduction to humor in Zen is Conrad Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).
53. George Friedrich Meier, *Thoughts on Jest*, ed. Joseph Jones (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1947), pp. 55–56.
54. Hyers, *Comic Spirit*, p. 34.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
56. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider, 1949–1953), vol. 2, p. 97.
57. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta Books, 1967), p. 228.
58. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 716–727.
59. Stephen Leacock, *Humor and Humanity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), pp. 219–220.