5. Incongruity Theory

5.1 Frances Hutcheson and James Beattie

As suggested, Aristotle and Cicero both make statements that are compatible with Incongruity Theory, but it was Frances Hutcheson (1694–1746) who developed it more fully in the eighteenth century. In *Reflections Upon Laughter* (1750) he took issue with Hobbes's Superiority Theory on a number of points. He challenged Hobbes's notion that laughter always requires a comparison of ourselves to others on the grounds that we sometimes laugh when other human beings don't appear to be involved at all. For instance, when we laugh at the written words of an author (Hutcheson cites Homer), we might be inclined to ask: to whom are we comparing ourselves, and to whom do we feel superior? Also, if it were true that all sudden experiences of superiority create laughter, then wouldn't we be laughing more often? Not only that, but if Hobbes is correct then surely the more superior we feel towards someone or something, the greater the potential for humour; but this is not our experience. Hutcheson illustrates this by reminding us that in the animal kingdom the funniest animals are not necessarily the ones to which we feel more superior; animals that remind us of ourselves are the funniest: so, for instance, a dog is funnier than an oyster; a monkey is funnier than an amoeba. After dismissing Hobbes he begins to develop his own philosophy of humour, and signs of an incipient Incongruity Theory can be seen here:

> That then which seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be

the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest are founded upon it.[23]

Notice how he explains humour with reference to a coming together of things that are incompatible, particularly the contrast between high and low ('sanctity' and 'profanity,' etc.). Hutcheson expands on this by discussing the type of humour created when serious people lose their dignity:

> any little accident to which we have joined the idea of meanness, befalling a person of great gravity, ability, dignity, is a matter of laughter […] thus the strange contortions of the body in the fall, the dirtying of a decent dress, the natural functions which we study to conceal from sight, are matters of laughter when they occur to observation in persons of whom we have high ideas (Frances Hutcheson 'From *Reflections*,' 33).

The focus is on the contrast between notions of reserve, solemnity, and dignity, on the one hand, and with awkwardness on the other: it is a juxtaposition of conflicting images—an incongruity—that creates the laughter.

Creative Writing Exercise

Create a character for whom dignity is important and come up with some situations in which this could be undermined to comic effect. Once you have dignity or gravity as defining character traits you will find it is easy to generate humour by placing the character in contexts where these are compromised. Situations of this kind can be used to create bathos: a shift from the exalted to the commonplace. Hutcheson would argue that it is not the hierarchy that creates the humour but our perception of the contrast between high and low.

Pause and Reflect

It is certainly true that many jokes and humorous situations involve contrasts and incongruities of various kinds. Think about some of the

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23 Frances Hutcheson 'From *Reflections Upon Laughter*,' in John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) 32.

jokes and humour you are familiar with and try to identify incongruity. Look for something that is incompatible with something else. What clashes with what? Are all incongruities funny?

One of the first philosophers to actually use the term 'incongruity' when discussing laughter is the Scottish philosopher, James Beattie (1735–1803). In an essay called 'On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition' (1776), he writes:

> Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.[24]

This implies that laughter is created by two incompatible concepts which—within the frame of a joke or humorous situation—are momentarily perceived as being in some way compatible (having 'mutual relation'). Interestingly it suggests that incongruity alone is not enough to create laughter; the incongruous elements must be seen to fit together on one level, as a result of 'the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.' You only have to think about incongruity for a little while to realise that not all incongruities are funny.

5.2 Immanuel Kant: Transformations into Nothing

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) developed an Incongruity Theory of humour in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). His discussion of humour focuses on jokes, emphasising the physical pleasure we enjoy when we perceive an incongruity. Typically a joke sets up an expectation in the form of a narrative build–up, and then undermines this with a punch line. In Kant's words, 'laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.' For Kant the joke process constitutes a form of 'play with aesthetic ideas' which animate the body via the mind; it

24 Quoted in Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007) 63.

creates laughter and a 'feeling of health produced by a motion of the intestines.' When we hear a joke, he says:

> The play begins with the thoughts which together occupy the body, so far as they admit of sensible expression; and as the understanding stops suddenly short at this presentment, in which it does not find what it expected, we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by oscillations of the organs, which promotes the restoration of equilibrium and has a favourable influence on health. [25]

Consider the following joke, which in a 2001 survey conducted by Professor Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire, was voted the world's funniest:

> A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn't seem to be breathing; his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps to the operator: 'My friend is dead! What can I do?' The operator, in a calm soothing voice says: 'Just take it easy. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead.'
>
> There is a silence, and then a shot is heard. The guy's voice comes back on the line. He says: 'OK, now what?'[26]

We can see how the expectation is established in the first paragraph, specifically in its final line, 'let's make sure he's dead;' our expectation—namely that the hunter is going to check his friend's pulse—is abruptly undermined in the punch line. The joke suddenly resolves the tension established in the narrative by negating it; in other words, it turns the 'strained expectation into nothing,' by transforming it into a joke. As suggested, there is a sense of physical release or relief associated with humour for Kant, and here he has something in common with thinkers who feel that humour is associated with letting off steam, and who will be discussed more fully later.

25 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans., James Creed Meredith (New York: Cosimo Inc, 2007) 133.
26 For details of Richard Wiseman's research see the bibliography under online material.

Creative Writing Exercise

Try to write a comic scene which has a build-up/transformation structure like the New Jersey Hunter joke: set up an expectation and then undermine it. Try experimenting with the length of the narrative build-up compared to the punch line. You'll probably find that while you have some latitude to increase the extent of the build-up, there will be a limit to this before the tension begins to wane: you can only strain expectation so far, and there is a balance to be struck between holding a listener/reader in suspense, and boring them. You will also probably find that the punch line needs to be succinct and abrupt rather than protracted. As with Superiority Theory, suddenness is important. Obviously this is what humourists are referring to when they talk about timing.

Comic incongruities are often at odds with logic and rationality, of course: clearly in the case of the New Jersey hunter, his action defies reason. However, for Kant there was no pleasure to be found in this aspect of joking. The enjoyment of humour is derived solely from the physical pleasure that it creates in the individual, and not from the disruption reason. Kant was an Enlightenment figure, strongly devoted to reason, and as such did not feel that it was possible to equate intellectual gratification with irrationality. In this sense his differs from another important Incongruity Theorist, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860).

5.3 Arthur Schopenhauer: Pleasure in the Defeat of Reason

Arthur Schopenhauer mentions humour in his most important book, *The World as Will and Idea* (1818). For Schopenhauer humour is born of a clash between what he calls the 'sensuous', on the one hand, and 'abstract knowledge' on the other. Basically he thinks that the version of the world that we are able to hold in our heads never truly matches what our senses tell us; the former 'merely approximate' to the latter, 'as a mosaic approximates to painting'. The incongruity between the two is the cause of laughter:

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.[27]

Where Kant felt that jokes disappear into nothing, they become a corrective to perception for Schopenhauer: humour is created when our view of the world is qualified; when we are forced to readjust our assumptions about it. For Schopenhauer, the punch line doesn't negate, it contributes to the import of the joke and the shift in understanding that gives it its force. So when it comes to the New Jersey hunter joke cited above, the concept might relate to the ideas we have about people and our ideal view of how they should behave—in other words not like idiots—but this concept is qualified in the punch line where we are presented with the reality that idiocy exists. Notice too that Schopenhauer talks about 'perception' and 'thought' in his discussion of incongruity; these are words which allow for a degree subjectivity in our responses to humour: after all, our experience tells us that the success of humour often depends a great deal on cultural factors and a shared understanding of the world.

An important distinction between Schopenhauer and Kant has to do with the latter's attitude to reason. As suggested, Kant feels that humour can only be enjoyed for its physical effects, and not for its own sake; in other words not simply for the cognitive thrill of having logic and reason usurped by incongruity; Kant felt that human reason is always going to conflict with the absurdity of humour. By contrast Schopenhauer was not a child of the Enlightenment and was less enamoured with reason. He has more in common with thinkers associated with Romanticism, for whom a strict adherence to reason felt limiting. Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer has no problem with incongruity offering an affront to reason: for him humour is created when concepts held in the mind are qualified by concrete reality; in other words, when humour reveals the inadequacy of reason, and we experience a pleasurable release from its misleading complexities. Unlike Kant he feels that there is pleasure to be gained from the defeat of reason.

Schopenhauer also makes an interesting distinction between folly

27 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*,' Book I, 13, trans. R.B. Haldane and John Kemp (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1907) 76.

and wit that is worth mentioning. With folly he suggests that: 'The concept is first present in knowledge, and we pass from it to reality, and to operation upon it, to action' (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 77). In other words we have assumptions about the world, and when we act on these only to have them undermined by reality, we are guilty of folly. The example of the New Jersey hunter might constitute an example of folly in this sense: the hunter has a limited understanding (concept) of what the phrase, 'make sure he is dead' might mean, but he acts on this, passing from the concept to reality, and thus his folly creates humour. Schopenhauer contrasts this with what he calls wit. Wit is occasioned when 'we have previously known two or more very different real objects, ideas or sense perceptions and have identified them through the unity of a concept which comprehends them both.' For an example consider the following joke:

> A woman gets on a bus with her baby.
>
> The bus driver says: 'That's the ugliest baby that I've ever seen. Ugh!'
>
> The woman goes to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming. She says to a man next to her: 'The driver just insulted me!'
>
> The man says: 'You go right up there and tell him off: go ahead, I'll hold your monkey for you.'[28]

In Schopenhauer's terms we might say that two real objects—a baby and a monkey—are being deliberately identified through the unity of one concept—a monkey baby—which 'comprehends them both'. Of course we are working on the assumption that the man is aware that the baby is not a real monkey! Note that in the case of both folly and wit, incongruity is central to the humour: in the first instance it is a mismatch between assumption and reality, in the second it takes the form of two incongruous objects united in a single concept.

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28 This joke was voted the funniest UK joke in Richard Wiseman's study.

Creative Writing Exercise

Create an example of folly and an example of wit that you think
would satisfy Schopenhauer's criteria.

5.4 Søren Kierkegaard

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) also devel-
oped a version of Incongruity Theory. It was his belief that comedy
is fundamental to life because, like life, it is born of contradictions.
Kierkegaard thought that tragedy is also about contradictions, but
comedy and tragedy differ because while 'tragedy is the suffering
contradiction,' comedy is a 'painless contradiction.'[29] While tragedy
cannot see a way of resolving contradictions, comedy can. There
is always a degree of inevitability about a tragic hero's fate: they
are on a trajectory that will end in death and there is no escaping
this. Comedy, by contrast, is born of a *resolvable* contradiction: 'the
comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by
having in mind the way out, which is why the contradiction is pain-
less.' (Kierkegaard, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript,' 83–4). So
while, say, satire involves a contradiction between errant behaviour,
on the one hand, and correct or ideal behaviour on the other, it also
implies a 'way out' of this contradiction: namely that the object of
the satire adjusts their behaviour. With this in mind, consider the fol-
lowing joke:

> Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip. After a
> good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and
> go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges
> his faithful friend. 'Watson, look up at the sky and tell me
> what you see.'
>
> 'I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes' replies Watson.
>
> 'And what do you deduce from that?'

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29 Søren Kierkegaard, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript,' in John Morreall ed.,
The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor (New York: State University of New York
Press, 1987) 83–89 (83).

> Watson ponders for a minute. 'Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe. What does it tell you, Holmes?'

> Holmes is silent for a moment. 'Watson, you idiot!' he says, 'Someone has stolen our tent!'[30]

At the heart of the humour here is a contradiction between our assumption that Watson is making pertinent observations of a kind that will appeal to Holmes, and the fact that Holmes is more interested in their missing tent. It is a painless contradiction in that it is resolvable if Watson makes a simple adjustment to his priorities.

Importantly, however, contradiction is not the only thing responsible for humour in this Holmes and Watson joke; amusement is created also as a result of the language Watson uses: it is the language we associate with Holmes, and it is fitting that Watson should use such language as he mimics his friend's method of logical deduction. In fact part of the humour depends on the fact that the language is indeed fitting in this sense; in other words, the humour is also partly dependent on an element of *congruity*. This brings us to one of several important problems with Incongruity Theory.

5.5 Problems with Incongruity Theory

Roger Scruton, whose essay 'Laughter' has been discussed above, takes issue with Incongruity Theory precisely because humour often depends on a certain fit between the joke and reality: in other words the humour actually depends on a kind of congruity. Scruton illustrates his objection with reference to caricature, pointing out that the latter is amusing not because there is a mismatch between a caricature and its object, but because there is a fit: 'If one wishes to describe

30 In Richard Wiseman's study, this joke was voted the second funniest of all time.

the humour of a caricature in terms of incongruity it must be added that it is an incongruity which illustrates a deeper congruity between an object and itself' (Roger Scruton, 'Laughter,' 161). So this is one problem with Incongruity Theory, but there are others.

Incongruity Theories of humour tend to privilege the structure of humour over the content, suggesting that the structural dissonance itself is funny. It is true that there are recurring joke structures: knock knock jokes, Doctor Doctor jokes, and so on, where the positioning of the concepts seems to be a factor in their status as humorous. However, the fact that some of these jokes are funnier than others, clearly implies that something other than structural incongruity is at work. Another problem with Incongruity Theory has to do with the obvious fact that, as suggested above, not all incongruities are funny. Some are sad, some are sickening, and some are terrifying. If my legs suddenly turned to liquorish and I fell down the stairs and put my head through the television, I doubt if I would find it particularly amusing, despite my ability to identify a variety of surprising incongruities in the event.

Another problem with Incongruity Theory has to do with the fact that incongruities disrupt logic and reason. Some philosophers argue that it is not possible for human beings to take pleasure in such disruptions: we are psychologically incapable of enjoying the irrationality that accompanies discrepancies of logic and reason. As suggested earlier, Kant felt that humorous pleasure can only ever be physical, and many philosophers have picked up on this notion and taken it further. The Spanish–American philosopher George Satayana (1863–1952) was one of the first to discuss this objection to Incongruity Theory in depth, arguing that 'man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold;' and incongruity as such is always undesirable:

> Things amuse us in the mouth of a fool that would not amuse us in that of a gentleman; a fact which shows how little incongruity and degradation have to do with our pleasure in the comic. In fact, there is a kind of congruity and method even in fooling. The incongruous and the degraded displease us even there, as by their nature they must at all times […] incongruity

and degradation, as such, always remain unpleasant.[31]

Objections of this kind are given more weight by theories of 'cognitive dissonance' like that argued by Leon Festinger (1919–1989): such theories suggest that human beings are driven to avoid the discomfort created by holding together two conflicting concepts (contagions) simultaneously; we find them upsetting, and so are invariably compelled to make adjustments to our thinking in order to achieve consonance. In short, our psychological need for consonance and reason are fundamentally at odds with Incongruity Theory.

5.6 So Where Does that Leave Us?

Pause and Reflect

Having identified incongruity in some of the jokes and humour that you are familiar with, try to detect ways in which the incongruity might be considered apt: why does that *particular* incongruity work while others may not? So, for instance, take this joke: '"Diner: Waiter there's a fly in my chicken soup." Waiter: "That's not a fly, that's the chicken."' The incongruity rests with the comparison between a fly and a chicken, but if you change fly to flea it would be just as incongruous yet not as funny. This is because the fly reference alludes to a well–known joke–form that begins 'Waiter there's a fly in my soup.' So fly is apposite where flea is not. Try to find similar evidence for appropriateness in other examples.

Some theorists have noted that while incongruity may be present in many instances of humour, incongruity is not in itself the source of amusement: rather, it is the resolution of the conflict that creates the humour and the pleasure. Incongruities that are not somehow resolved provide no pleasure. Neil Schaeffer, for instance, has written that:

> With incongruity we see two things which do not belong together, yet which we accept at least in this case as belonging together in some way. That is, when we notice something as incongruous, we also simultaneously understand it to be in

31 George Satayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Scribner's, 1896) 249.

some minor way congruous.[32]

This brings to mind Søren Kierkegaard's notion of the 'painless contradiction' and the idea of humorous incongruities offering a way out. The fact that comic incongruity is in some sense also 'congruous' circumvents the possibility of 'cognitive dissonance': it suggests a degree of resolution that renders it benign, and the irrationality of the incongruity does not disturb us the way it otherwise might.

Neil Schaeffer also stresses the importance of context in enabling the resolution of incongruities:

> I offer this definition: laughter results from an incongruity presented in a ludicrous context. That is, an incongruity, if it is to cause laughter, must be accompanied or preceded by a sufficient number of cues that indicate to an audience the risible intention of the incongruity and prepare them for the appropriate response of laughter (Neil Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter,* 17).

The 'cues' signal that what we are about to be presented with is meant to be seen as humorous, and this makes us more willing to suspend our insistence on reason and logic, thus creating a context in which incongruities are more readily resolvable. So, in the case of the New Jersey hunter joke, because the hunter's stupidity is presented within the frame of a joke (either by a comedian or in a joke book) we are willing to suspend our disbelief about the possibility of someone being so stupid.

The significance of incongruity–resolution in humour is discussed by Jerry Palmer in his book *Taking Humour Seriously* (1994). He cites the research of J. Suls who tested variations of the following joke on children:

1. 'Doctor, come at once! Our baby has swallowed a fountain pen!' 'I'll be right over. What are you doing in the meantime?' 'Using a pencil.'

2. 'Doctor, come at once! Our baby has swallowed a rubber band!' 'I'll be right over. What are you doing in

32 Neil Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 9.

the meantime?' 'Using a pencil.'

3. 'Doctor, come at once! Our baby has swallowed a fountain pen!' 'I'll be right over. What are you doing in the meantime?' 'We don't know what to do.'[33]

Not surprisingly the children found the first version funnier than two and three. The third version has no incongruity: the parents' response, 'we don't know what to do,' is completely compatible with the idea of their child swallowing a fountain pen; there *is* an incongruity in the second, but this is not funny because there is no obvious relationship between swallowing a rubber band and using a pencil. The first version is the funny one, according the Suls, because here the incongruity is resolvable on one level: rather like the New Jersey hunter who shoots his friend to make sure he's dead, it is possible to imagine a scenario in which an idiot parent might mistake the doctor's medical question for a question about their stationary needs. Suls's incongruity–resolution theory suggests that amusement is created when we encounter an incongruity and then are compelled to resolve it with reference either to information provided in the joke, or our own knowledge of the world. Humour is absent until the incongruity is resolved, or until it is made to make sense in some way. Jerry Palmer himself calls this phenomenon 'the logic of the absurd,' in his own semiotic theory of humour. For Palmer jokes have a structure that involves two processes: firstly, 'The sudden creation of a discrepancy, or incongruity, in the joke narrative;' secondly, 'a bifurcated logical process, which leads the listener to judge that the state of affairs portrayed is simultaneously highly implausible and just a little bit plausible' (Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, 96); the phrase 'just a little bit plausible' is crucial.

Theories claiming that humour depends on the resolution of incongruities are sometimes called Configurational Theories because of their focus on how incompatible concepts are configured in order to create amusement. Arguably, however, not all incongruities need to be resolved in order to have comic potential. By definition, examples

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33 Cited in Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London: Routledge, 1994) 95–96.

of comic nonsense and absurdity cannot be resolved and yet remain a source of humour. Indeed, strictly speaking we could say that there is no such thing as 'logic of the absurd.' Consider this well–known nonsense piece by Christopher Isherwood:

> 'The Common Cormorant'
> The common cormorant or shag
> Lays eggs inside a paper bag.
> The reason you will see, no doubt,
> It is to keep the lightning out.
> But what these unobservant birds
> Have never noticed is that herds
> Of wandering bears may come with buns
> And steal the bags to hold the crumbs.[34]

Unlike some nonsense verse all the words here are real words strung together grammatically in a poem with a fairly predictable measure and rhyme scheme. The events it describes are incompatible with our experience of the world, however, and this incompatibility is a source of humour. There might be a sense in which such incongruities could be resolved at the level of metaphor by a literary critic, but the humour certainly does not depend on this. Some theorists would argue that this poem—and indeed nonsense in general—simply doesn't count as humour, at least for adults. The psychologist Thomas Schultz, for instance, claims that, 'after the age of seven, we require not just incongruity to be amused, but the resolution of that incongruity' (John Morreall, *A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, 15). From my own perspective as a fifty one year old I think he is mistaken, and the fact that nonsense remains funny should make us want to think twice about accepting incongruity-resolution as applicable to all instances of humour.

Creative Writing Exercise

Have a go at writing a piece of nonsense verse: it's a good idea to begin with a poetic form such as a limerick. Here is an example from the famous exponent of nonsense verse, Edward Lear (1812–1888):

34 Christopher Isherwood in *Poems Past and Present* (J. M. Dent and Sons, 1959).

There was an Old Man of the coast,
Who placidly sat on a post;
But when it was cold
He relinquished his hold
And called for some hot buttered toast.

Try to keep to the rhyme scheme and the rhythm, but introduce your own character, location and activity. Don't worry about it making sense, just attempt to make it funny. Is it possible to write an amusing limerick that is just pure nonsense?