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The Applied Philosophy of Humor

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the philosophy of humor can contribute to the explanation of the application (or applications) of humor in everyday life. In order to approach this subject, I will first begin with a general account of humor – a philosophy of humor, if you will. In that account, I will, among other things, assert that humor is the object of comic amusement, where comic amusement itself is regarded as a positive emotional state. The notion that comic amusement is an emotion is somewhat controversial. So, in the next section, I will defend that thesis, while simultaneously isolating certain features of comic-amusement-qua-emotion that enable humor to be applied successfully to various situations that arise in the course of everyday affairs. These applications then will be explored in subsequent sections under the not necessarily exclusive nor exhaustive categories of bonding, coping, and perspectival modification (or frame changing.)

The Philosophy of Humor

Humor is the object of the mental (or psychological) state of comic amusement. Amusement, of course, can come in many forms – such as the amusement that accompanies sports or sex. However, comic amusement has a different object than those derived from either sporting events or sexual intercourse.

The oldest theories of comic amusement, arguably suggested by Plato, proposed that comic amusement obtained when one perceived his or her superiority over others or over themselves at some earlier juncture. That is, we laugh when someone slips on a banana skin, recognizing that we are not so clumsy, or we chuckle at the unintentional

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malapropisms of others, applauding ourselves for being so much smarter. Sometimes, admittedly, we laugh at ourselves, but those are our past selves and their follies – like the time we searched for our eyeglasses only to discover that, in fact, they were perched upon our foreheads all the time; the object of our mirth here is our former selves who are conceived to be inferior to our present, "wiser" selves. The idea that our comparative superiority to others is the object of comic amusement is, for obvious reasons, called the *superiority theory*; Thomas Hobbes is the philosopher most frequently associated with it (Morreall 1987).

Although the superiority theory appears to cover a lot of territory, it has been criticized from many directions. The perception of our superiority to others cannot be a necessary condition for comic amusement, since we often laugh at things, like silly puns, where the issue of superiority does not appear to arise. For example: "What do you get when you dynamite the kitchen? Linoleum blown apart." At whom are you laughing at when you guffaw at this?

Similarly, consider satirists like Oscar Wilde. His comic inversions consistently elicit amusement, but it cannot be that we feel superior to Wilde, since few, if any of us, could coin sayings as witty as his. Superiority theorists sometimes attempt to save their theory by claiming that when laughing at Wilde's *bon mots*, we are congratulating ourselves for being keen enough to get the humor. Yet, at the same time, how can we avoid acknowledging that we are nowhere near as clever as Wilde? We are incontrovertibly his inferiors as wordsmiths.

Nor is superiority a sufficient condition for comic amusement. We are superior to many things, like clams, that are not remotely comically amusing. The list of further examples is obviously indeterminately large.

But if comparative superiority is not the object of comic amusement, what is? The candidate favored by most philosophers and psychologists nowadays is *incongruity* or something like it (Carroll 2014; Martin 2007; Morreall 1983, 2009). *Incongruity*, of course, is a comparative notion. Something is incongruous in comparison to something else; it does not match that something else or it does not fit it. It is not congruous. But with what is the object of comic amusement not congruous? For our purposes, broadly speaking, it is not congruous with how we suppose the world is or should be. That is, we are comically amused by what we perceive to be (although it need not really be) out of whack or at odds with the ways in which we presume the world is or should be. We navigate our lives by the light of all sorts of norms, concepts, heuristics, prototypes, and so forth. The incongruous objects of comic amusement comprise affronts, subversions, violations to and/or transgressions of those norms and concepts.

For example, "Why did the moron stay up all night? He was cramming for his blood test." Here the humor rests in a misapplication of the relevant concept of a "test." Moreover, we have norms governing virtually every aspect of human life – norms of language and logic, formal and informal, and norms of behavior ranging from moral rules to the standards of etiquette, cleanliness, intelligence, sexual decorum, and so on. Humor thrives upon problematizing our norms of how the world should be every which way, inventing situations that subvert or at least rattle those norms in every direction. Moses descends from Mount Sinai telling his people that he's gotten God down to 10 commandments, but adultery is still on the list, thereby slyly winking at the incongruous desire for hanky-panky among the allegedly faithful, while also suggesting God and Moses are a pair of wheeler-dealers or horse-traders rather than majestic figures.

Of course, even if incongruity, or, perhaps better, *perceived incongruity*, is a necessary condition for comic amusement, it is not sufficient. For, as Alexander Bain (1865: 282–283) pointed out, there are many things that are incongruous, but that are not comically amusing. Often the perception of incongruity raises fear in us, rather than comic amusement. The appearance of incongruity can function as an alarm to clear and present danger. Infants will giggle when a familiar caregiver presents her with a funny face but will wail when a stranger does so.

On the one hand, comic amusement is enjoyed; but, on the other hand, if we believe we are in danger, we will feel distress rather than pleasure. So, comic amusement requires not only the perception of incongruity but also an absence of anxiety with regard to ourselves and others, including the fictional denizens of jokes and further comic genres. Comic amusement, in other words, invites enjoyment rather than apprehension. Thus, something is an instance of comic amusement only if (by hypothesis) it is an emotion, whose object is perceived to be incongruous but which object is enjoyed rather than engendering anxiety.

And yet, we are *also* amused by puzzles – arithmetical brainteasers, word games, authentic scientific questions and the like – and we feel real satisfaction, indeed enjoyment, when we solve them. But working through mathematical theorems or even crossword puzzles seems to be a different enterprise than savoring a joke. What is the difference?

Perhaps this: when engaging in a puzzle – whether a serious logical conundrum or an entertaining pastime like Sudoku – we aim at genuinely solving the intellectual challenge before us – that is, we aim at the truth – whereas with respect to a joke, a comic riddle, or cartoons with captions, the punch lines are typically absurd, as absurd as the setups that motivate them, but we nevertheless are quite happy to leave them at that. We do not press on to find sense; we are fine with nonsense.

When it comes to serious puzzles, we are after *right* answers and are satisfied by nothing less, but with comic incongruities we are pleased by recognizing their putative "resolutions" to be ridiculous. With incongruities of all sorts, we respond with heightened alertness and preparedness, but in cases of comic amusement that initial tension relaxes when we realize the incongruity is neither a threat nor a call to muster our problem-solving intellectual resources, but a harmless absurdity to be enjoyed, resulting in a phenomenological sensation of levity (or release).

Summarizing these observations, then, we may hypothesize that something is an instance of comic amusement if and only if (1) it is an emotional state (2) whose object is a perceived incongruity (3) that is not anxiety producing, (4) that does not recruit a genuine problem-solving stance (5) but which is enjoyed, (6) resulting in a phenomenological sensation of levity (Carroll 2014). And humor is the object of comic amusement; it is that toward which comic amusement is directed.

Comic Amusement is an Emotion

Comic amusement is a mental (or psychological state), albeit with bodily correlates. Indeed, what else would it be? Moreover, it is an emotional state. Why suppose that? Consider the following analogies.

Emotions are directed. Fear is directed. Fear is directed at particular objects. I am afraid of the rhino charging at me at top speed. Comic amusement is also directed, directed at particulars, like the aforesaid moron joke. Moreover, the particular objects of emotional states are governed by certain criteria of appropriateness. For example, in order to be an appropriate object of fear, a particular object would have to be dangerous or threatening, or at least believed to be so, as is the previously mentioned rhino. We cannot genuinely be afraid of a noodle, unless we had some very curious beliefs about it (such as the belief that it is radioactive). Comic amusement is similarly governed by criteria of appropriateness; most notably, the object of comic amusement must be perceived as incongruous, as studying for a blood test would be.

Also once a paradigmatic emotional state grips us, it takes over cognitively, focusing or spotlighting features of the situation that are pertinent to the prevailing affective condition. When we are angry, we scan the context for every evidence of offense or injury. When we are frightened by a stalker, the presiding emotion of fear draws our attention to possible avenues of escape rather than to his Adidas running shoes. Likewise, when in a state of comic amusement, we are apt to find more and more absurdities in our circumstances; one pun elicits another compounding one; one joke calls forth another; and so forth.

Moreover, related to the preceding phenomenon is another: the emotions are contagious. At a funeral, grieving moves through the service. As friends and relatives weep, we do as well. But, of course, the parallel is equally observable in cases of comic amusement. We laugh harder at movies like *Bridesmaids* when we see it in a theater with a raucous audience than we do when we watch it at home on our own. Furthermore, emotional states can engender mood states – states, like free-floating anxiety, where everything that comes our way appears tainted by its pervasive coloration. But just as incessant shocks can put us in a bad mood – even a nasty mood – a barrage of episodes of comic amusement can leave us feeling buoyant. That is why we might watch a selection of Marx Brothers movies in order to lighten, so to speak, our affective load.

One reason to question the force of these analogies between comic amusement and various paradigmatic emotions is to recall a famous observation made by Henri Bergson in his treatise *Laughter* (Bergson 1911). There Bergson noted that laughter, a typical concomitant of comic amusement, was marked by what he called a certain "anesthesia of the heart." That is, when we watch some luckless pedestrian fall into an open manhole because he is too busy ogling some passing beauty rather than watching where he is going, we laugh instead of feeling his pain. Characters in jokes get eaten by cannibals, are burnt in hell, are knocked out, humiliated, and die, but we harden our hearts toward their plight. Comic amusement seems to mandate a certain comic distance or detachment. But if this is so, how can comic amusement be an emotion? Doesn't the anesthesia of the heart preclude emotion altogether?

However, the question arises at this point as to whether comic distance brackets *all* emotional responses or just *some*. Clearly certain emotions are not banished by comic amusement. To the extent that the superiority theory has purchase, contempt is consistent with laughter. So, my own suspicion is that the range of emotions that are suspended in response to humor is limited. First and foremost, our sympathetic responses are put on hold. When lawyers in lawyer jokes are served their sadistically

imagined, albeit just, deserts, we do not weep for them. Our sympathies are put on ice. But, on the other hand, our dislike of them is not. Indeed, it is exploited.

In fact, Bergson himself would seem to have to agree with this inasmuch as he regards laughter as a social corrective – a sort of communal shaming – and this suggests that he regards contempt, an emotional state, to be compatible with the anesthesia of the heart, as he construes it. Thus comic amusement is merely merciless rather than emotionless.

Many comic données are predicated upon blocking our sympathies for their objects. Often the objects of comic amusement are creatures, like clowns, that are not quite human. They survive their slapstick misadventures with barely a scratch. They have no need for our sympathy, since, for all their drubbings, they will never suffer genuine harm. Moreover, humor rarely dwells upon suffering. If it occurs in a joke or a sketch it is quickly rushed offstage, if it is even onstage for a moment. Out of sight, out of mind, in other words. And if it is manifest, its object is often a clownish figure who is typically marked as incapable of serious vulnerability, however his hyperbolic expostulating. Moreover, in many cases, the victims of comic mayhem are persons we are encouraged to despise and who thus reap their just deserts – as when the lawyer in *Jurassic Park* is stomped to death in an outhouse by the *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

Strategies like these either neutralize or block our sympathies, but they do not necessarily disengage other emotional responses, such as our disdain for lawyers. These strategies work by effacing the cause for sympathy or sometimes by emphasizing its opposite, antipathy.

Indeed, comic distance can be invoked in advance by various conventional formulas such as introducing a joke with the phrase, "Have you heard the one about …?" This sort of signaling can be quite subtle; it may involve no more than a wink, a twinkle in the eye, or a change in vocal intonation. When so alerted, the listener adopts a comic frame, one in which he or she is instructed to suspend their sympathies and to attend solely to the object of the discourse in terms of searching for absurdities. The humanity of the objects of comic amusement is thereby at least de-emphasized or demoted or even dissolved as their situation is reframed alternatively in terms of incongruities.

Another objection to the hypothesis that comic amusement is an emotion is that emotions involve bodily states and comic amusement need not. Of course, comic amusement typically engenders laughter, which is a bodily state that alters our chemical composition by releasing pain-relieving endorphins as well as connecting to our dopamine circuitry. But the point of this objection is that comic amusement is not necessarily associated with laughter, which is certainly accurate. Some comic amusement is quiet. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it involves the phenomenological state of pleasure which we labeled *levity* previously, even quiet comic amusement meets the requirement that anything worthy of being counted as an emotion have some feeling dimension.

Bonding

Having spent some time reviewing the nature of comic amusement, including its claim to the status of an emotional state, we can now turn to an examination and explanation of some of the ways in which humor, given its nature, can be applied to the recurring

circumstances and problems of everyday life. The first set of situations where comic amusement plays a role, we can gather under the title of *bonding*.

It has been noted that the leading contender for the mainspring of humor is incongruity, suitably qualified. Here the notion of incongruity signifies a mismatch with our conceptions of how the world is or should be. In this regard, the objects of comic amusement do not fit with our concepts and norms – concepts and norms of all sorts: moral, behavioral, linguistic, logical, and so on. But this entails that comic amusement is conditional (Cohen 1999). That is, in order for humor to succeed, certain conditions must be met – for example, the purveyors of humor and their comically amused audiences must share the concepts and/or norms being transgressed, jolted, violated, problematized, or just tweaked in the course of the mirth making. In this sense, the laughter that resounds after the punch line of a joke celebrates a sharing, if only momentarily, of certain norms or values, and if only in the breach. In a manner of speaking, all humor is "inside humor" – it occurs amid a community where certain values are shared; it presupposes an *us*.

This *us* need not be very enduring or deep. Comic amusement may function as a means for relieving tension, as a witty observation among strangers might when the line is moving too slowly at the checkout counter in the grocery store. Humor is a social lubricant (Morreall 1997). We use it as a way of "breaking the ice" when making new acquaintances, including potential romantic ones. Public speakers practice this tactic on a large scale when they initiate their talks with a joke or a comic anecdote. In all these cases, the appeal is to commonly held norms as a means of reassuring others that we are all members of a common *us* constituted by shared values.

Often, as Bergson argued, the laughter mobilized by comic amusement is a social corrective, a means of chastising violators of certain norms. The butts of the humor in question are ridiculed for violating *our* norms by their lack of intelligence, prudence, ethics, cleanliness, sobriety, sexual behavior, and so forth. This often is the motivation behind racist, ethnic, sexist, homophobic, classist, ablest jokes, and stereotypes. In this respect, comic humor may reinforce the existence of an *us*, including a pernicious *us*, at the same time as it defines a group outside the *us* as a *them*. Needless to say, the *us*-versus-*them* dynamic can be either diabolic or angelic. What is important for our purposes is that the connection between humor and norms makes comic amusement a frequently deployed mechanism for social bonding – for creating and sustaining social cohesiveness – both in face-to-face relations and between and across larger social units, including national, cultural, religious, political, and racial ones.

In addition to its recruitment of common norms, comic amusement also abets bonding inasmuch as it is, as previously noted, infectious. Most of us have probably experienced moments of infectious laughter, moments where we avoided the glance of our fellow students or workers for fear that if we saw them attempting to suppress a snicker or even just smile, we would burst out into laughter which, in turn, would provoke gales of merriment from them. Imagine the president of the United States offering a solemn oration with his fly open – the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and the Secretary of State would undoubtedly avoid looking at each other, lest they stoke each other's laughter.

And, of course, this sort of infectiousness can be ignited on a much larger scale. Comedies presented to large audiences in theaters and cinemas seem to gain in hilarity

as viewers "catch" the giddiness of their neighbors. Undoubtedly, this is connected to the fact that the humor is aimed at striking some common chord in the audience, yet when that common chord is plucked its effect is amplified for occurring in a group context.

In short, comic amusement is a social glue in virtue of its activation of recognition of shared norms and concepts and in virtue of its infectiousness, factors that are obviously interconnected but also worth noticing for their own individual contributions to bonding.

As is well known, humor is a notable feature of occupations involved in dealing with desperate, often life-and-death situations such as the military, the police, firefighters, emergency personnel, especially medical workers, and so forth. They have their own brands of humor, often laughing at things that would make "civilians" cringe.

For example, during a staff conference on a psychiatric unit, one psychiatrist reported that a recently admitted manic-depressive tried to commit suicide by breaking a thermometer and swallowing the mercury. Upon hearing this, his colleague responded: "He's a walking thermometer! When you examined him, what was his temperature?" (Sayre 2001).

This sort of humor performs a number of functions, some of which will be further discussed in subsequent sections. Nevertheless, some of those functions obviously have to do with bonding. They elicit a sense of *esprit de corps* among the group, extending support to fellow workers facing troubling circumstances by offering them a dose of joy via tickling their dopamine circuitry. Insofar as their humor is insider humor, they create an *us* distinct both from their patients and unafflicted civilians. Their humor celebrates shared experience, shared knowledge, shared concepts and norms, including the shared virtue of fortitude in the face of the harsh realities their occupations must confront on a daily basis. Sometimes they create concepts pertinent to their duties, as when soldiers in wartime concoct comically derisive labels for their enemies, not to mention the robustly amusing, off-color names applied to new recruits in the military during basic training.

When I was in college, I earned extra money doing "removals" – that is, transferring in a hearse the recently deceased from their homes to the undertaker's funeral parlor. We called the vehicle that we used to do this "the meat wagon," which we thought was an immensely funny way of referring to it, since it divested the situation of every vestige of sanctimoniousness at the same time as the undertaker was struggling by way of every euphemism imaginable to maintain the utmost solemnity. Afterwards, over drinks, we would recall every awkward moment in the operation – when so-and-so almost dropped the body or when we had to negotiate an impossibly awkward, sharp turn decorously with the family looking on. Laughter was the order of the day. We would be celebrating our insider experience, knowledge (we knew what was really going on), and our concepts (we knew they were "stiffs" because they were hard to get around corners), and our observations were all the more intense for being shared; indeed, the story of one near mishap drew forth more tales of past accidents, sometimes undoubtedly embellished for comic effect.

Of course, it is not only the case that those involved in desperate or unseemly occupations use comic amusement in order to bond. People in all walks of life develop humor keyed to their endeavors. Workplace slang, which frequently takes a humorous turn,

is one type of evidence for this, as is the playfully combative banter often customary between professionals (which is often advanced to project an aura of anti-sentimentality, although, paradoxically, in the service of cementing the sentiment of fellow feeling).

In short, in virtue of its tendencies to promote shared values and to reinforce this with infectious, positive feeling, comic amusement is capable of functioning as an agent of social cohesiveness in everyday life, something evident in the realm of micro-behavior where it can ease tensions and instill amity among strangers while also facilitating bonding among larger societal units including the members of various occupations and roles, nationalities, ethnicities, political factions, religious sects, and so on. In the latter situations, comic amusement contributes to reinforcing a shared sense of identity by celebrating the concepts, norms, and values of the group by treating infractions thereof as absurdities. Indeed, because of its efficacy in fostering group cohesion, many businesses nowadays conduct humor seminars with their employees (Morreall 2008).

Coping

Perhaps bonding seems to be the most obvious function of comic amusement since it would appear that humor flourishes most gloriously in groups or communicative contexts that at least typically assume senders and receivers (like sitcoms). Nevertheless, an even more frequently cited function of humor in everyday affairs is its use as a coping device – as a way of getting through trying events and overcoming negative emotions like fear, anger, anxiety, grief, and myriad other sources of stress. Needless to say, the coping function of humor is not completely unconnected to its bonding function, since humor can contribute to social cohesion by providing a means of coping to a group, a phenomenon we shall return to after reviewing some of the ways in which comic amusement allows individuals to get through the hard patches that life keeps serving up.

Humor helps us get through difficult events such as bereavement and grief. Wakes, especially Irish wakes, are often times when laughter abounds. People rehash amusing anecdotes from the life of the deceased. At the wake of one of my grandfathers, we joked that they had to install seatbelts in his casket so that he wouldn't run away when his much-despised brother-in-law arrived.

Humor can also ease social distress: soon after the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle, this joke circulated: "How many astronauts can you fit into a Volkswagen Beetle? Eleven: two in the front, two in the back, and seven in the ashtray."

Sickness may also be palliated by humor. For example, a four-year-old, hospitalized for a bone marrow transplant, dealt with his pain by using nearby syringes as water guns, shooting his nurses when they entered the room and then chortling (Bellert 1989). Patients may ease not only their own pains with humor but also those of visitors, as when the cancer victim quips, "It's a helluva way to lose weight." And the caregivers of those with dementia can console each other with jokes like, "The good thing about Alzheimer's is that when you have it, you're always meeting new people." As Mark Twain wrote: "The secret of humor is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven" (Twain 1897). Or, as the old Jewish saying puts it even more succinctly: "When you're hurt, laugh" (Christie and Moore 2004).

Part of the story about the way in which humor can ameliorate situations like these has to do with the bodily changes that typically accompany comic amusement. Laughter, as previously noted, releases endorphins which, as pain resisters, have an analgesic effect, and dopamine, which is associated with joy. These chemicals relieve suffering, on the one hand, and counter it with feelings of wellbeing, on the other hand. Laughter oxygenates the blood, massages vital organs, and stimulates circulation, which makes one feel more energetic, thereby altering one's mood favorably (Morreall 1997). Comic amusement is overall a positive emotional or affective state and, for that reason, can be deployed as an antidote to all sorts of negative emotions – not only grief, but fear, anger, disgust, and other forms of stress.

Earlier we discussed the use of humor by people in dangerous occupations – like soldiers, the police, and firefighters – as a means of bonding. But it is also a way in which individual soldiers, cops, and firefighters deal with the fearful situations that their work places them in. They joke in order to stave off terror (Metcalf and Felible 1992). They muster the positive emotion of comic amusement to displace the anxiety that might otherwise overwhelm them. These workers, like doctors, paramedics, and other emergency medical personnel, also often face situations that would evoke disgust in most of us. But humor enables them to manage their reactions, transforming the sorts of incongruities (missing body parts, for instance) that would ordinarily elicit a gag response into objects of comic amusement.

As Bergson noted, comic amusement engenders a certain anesthesia of the heart (Bergson 1911). For that reason, medical workers, like surgeons, often employ humor for, inasmuch as it inoculates them from occurrent feelings of sympathy for their patients, it helps them to size up the situation more objectively in terms of what needs to be done. Comic amusement, that is, facilitates seeing the person on the operating table as an object rather than a suffering human being, thereby breaking the narrow lock on perception that feelings of sympathy would enforce, permitting the doctor to take in and to assess the case at hand from a broader perspective.

Individuals trapped in horrific circumstances recruit humor to lessen their load. In concentration camps during the Holocaust, humor allowed the prisoners some respite from their traumatic experiences. They would, for example, tell jokes to each other at the expense of the guards. One of them went like this: "A camp commander looks at one Jewish prisoner and barks 'You look almost Aryan, so I will give you a chance. I wear one glass eye, but it is not easy to tell which eye it is. Guess correctly and I will free you.' The prisoner guesses that it is the left eye. The commander says, 'That's right, but how did you know?' The prisoner replies, 'That one looks *almost* human'" (adapted from Osborne 2011).

Richard Pryor had one of the most traumatic upbringings imaginable and he incorporated it in his comic routines, undoubtedly as a means of coping with it. In the film *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (1979), he recounts the time when his grandmother whipped him. He recalls being told to get a switch from a nearby tree, comically imitating the sounds of its terrifying whistle striking home and then stamping across the stage and screaming in a high-pitched, voice pleading childlike contrition, as each blow lands imaginarily. The act is funny for its comedic exaggeration of high-pitched, hyper-craven repentance while only barely repressing the trauma underneath.

Society at large can also enlist humor to manage horrific experiences. After the death of the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, he was autopsied in Madison, Wisconsin. Within hours of the arrival of his body at the University Hospital, the following riddle made the rounds: "What did they find when they cut Dahmer open? Jimmy Hoffa."

Anger and aggressiveness are other negative emotions that can be dissipated by humor. Time and again one learns from the biographies of comedians that they were subjected to bullying as children, until they learned to deflect the wrath of the in-crowd by making them laugh. Time and again, the ire the bullies felt toward their victims was displaced by the incredible lightness of comic amusement. Humor provides an avenue of escape from tense situations, since, as we saw in our account of comic amusement, levity or a sense of tension relief is an essential component of the relevant mental state.

Anger in our own breasts can also be dispersed by humor. It is difficult to be angry with someone when you are laughing along with them (Morreall 1997). A mutual recognition of the absurdity of the intense situation that a couple has gotten themselves into is the surest remedy for a lovers' quarrel.

As John Morreall, currently the leading philosopher of humor, notes, stress, typically a function of fear or anger or a compound of both, is the body's arousal response to threat; however, the levels of the chemicals associated with it – including epinephrine, plasma cortisol, and DOPAC – decrease with laughter (Morreall 1997). For, in the course of being comically amused, incongruities initially potentially challenging are, as Kant would put it, transformed "into nothing" (Kant 1987).

Life presents us with a wide variety of misfortunes including sickness, death, loss, oppressions of all sorts, inevitable setbacks, and so on that are blatant incongruities or absurdities from the human point of view of the way things should be. Humor gives us a means of combating this darkness with lightness and even of sustaining a sense that we have *some* control over our circumstances. With comic amusement, that is, we rebel against our inevitable, natural vulnerabilities. As Nietzsche proposes: "Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter" (quoted in Weems 2014).

From constant comic complaining or *kvetching* to the adoption of a cosmic comic mood – a tendency to see the absurd or incongruous side of everything – and the gamut of humor in between, comic amusement is a coping mechanism, a mode of warding off or, at least, minimizing stresses of every size and dimension.

Perspective Modification

We have been emphasizing humor as a coping mechanism in terms of its capacity to mobilize positive affects against a variety of negative affects, including negative emotions and stress. In passing it was remarked that this transformation of affect could be engineered by reconceptualizing dangerous, distressful, or, at least, discomforting situations. When my co-workers and I relabeled the hearse we used for moving dead bodies to the funeral parlor as "the meat wagon," our somewhat disrespectful mockery of the solemnity of the occasion made it easier for us to manage the existential scariness of our occupation. Rather than brooding on the absurdity of human mortality, we were able to turn our angst into a minor travesty by recategorizing the remains of a human life as a mere object, as just meat. By literally objectifying the dead person we were able

to trigger the anesthetization of the heart that Bergson theorized and thereby get a necessary but distasteful piece of work done.

Here, it seems that we may have been actively applying the anesthesia to ourselves, reframing circumstances comically in order to neutralize the interference of negative or distracting emotions in an effort to render the situation manageable.

In general, what happens in cases like these, we may conjecture, is that certain ominous but inescapable incongruities – things that should not be, from the human point of view, such as sickness, death, misfortune, and so forth – are reconstrued playfully and imaginatively in terms of nonsensical and non-threatening incongruities so as to displace negative affect with positive affect, while also imparting the impression that we have "tamed" these forces and, thereby, appearing to control them to that extent.

Of course, the frame-changing potential of humor not only makes comic amusement an effective agency for warding off the darkness; it also can play a role in education (Morreall 2008). A humorous example is more likely to carry a point than a prosaic one, since it is accompanied by a burst of joy. Comic amusement is the original form of positive reinforcement. I find, when teaching philosophical aesthetics, that Arthur Danto's witty inventory of nine identical-looking red canvasses gets across better the theoretical point that whatever makes something a work of art is non-manifest than any amount of abstract argumentation could.

After having described the first of the uniformly red paintings in the series as the Israelites having crossed the Red Sea (leaving Pharaoh's army submerged!) and the second as an evocation of "Kierkegaard's mood," Danto continues: "Besides these two, and resembling each other as much as they resemble each other (exactly), we shall place "Red Square," a clever bit of Moscow landscape. Our next work is a minimalist exemplar of geometrical art which, as it happens, has the same title, "Red Square" (Danto 1981). And so on. This cascade of verbal and visual puns awakens the students' attention with pleasure and engages their minds as they work their way through the layers of wordplay, making Danto's point indelibly memorable – namely, that visually indiscernible things can be essentially distinct, as is the case between artworks and real things.

As this example may illustrate, humor can function in the service of education by broadening students' perspectives, by getting them to see beyond the narrow constraints of their prevailing cognitive routines, and even by putting them in a position to scrutinize those routines critically. An appreciation of humor rewards and thereby exercises our capacities for cognitive flexibility and reconceptualization, nudging us toward thinking outside of the box.

Moreover, humor is also an effective way to convey hard truths due to its disarming indirection (Gordon 2014).

Summary

Humor is the object of the emotion of comic amusement which is directed toward perceived incongruities of a non-threatening, non-cognitively engaging sort which are enjoyed and accompanied by a phenomenological sensation of levity, a sense of relaxation or release. This emotion is conducive to social cohesion in everyday life due to the fact that (1) comic amusement is infectious, while (2) also requiring shared norms and

values throughout the circle of the amused. In addition, comic amusement may also function as a coping device. Chemically, laughter is connected to the stimulation of endorphins, which resist pain, and the release of dopamine, which engenders joy. Thus, laughter both counters distress and replaces negative emotions – like grief, fear, anger, and other varieties of stress – with positive affect. In addition, comic amusement enforces a level of comic distance which anaesthetizes sympathy in ways that enable those in life-and-death occupations to carry on what needs to be done in a controlled and clear-headed manner. Indeed, the cultivation of a comic mood toward life in general may armor one against mortality's unavoidable misfortunes – sickness, death, loss, and so forth. Humor is able to do this in part insofar as it can be deployed to reframe one's perspective on life's incongruities as absurdities. In sum, bonding, coping, and perspective modification are three non-exclusive and non-exhaustive ways in which humor may be applied to the exigencies of daily living.

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