Comic vices and comic virtues

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Abstract

In the face of some people's naive enthusiasm about the benefits of humor, Victor Raskin (1997) has explored the question "Is humor always good for you?" Rod Martin (2001) has shown how some kinds of humor foster unhealthy attitudes. Avner Ziv (1995) has warned that some claims about humor's value in education are exaggerated. Elliott Oring (2003: Ch. 4) has shown how humor can express ethnic hatred. All these caveats are useful in a culture where the prevailing attitude toward humor is positive. If we consider attitudes toward humor through most of history, however, they were mostly negative. In Western religion and philosophy, indeed, no other human trait has been associated with so many vices. This article helps explain the cultural shift from a generally negative to a generally positive evaluation of humor by examining the traditional moral objections to humor, and providing modern rebuttals to them. It then develops the idea that humor in which we transcend our personal perspectives can foster virtues such as openmindedness, patience, tolerance, graciousness, humility, perseverance, and courage.

Keywords: Comic attitudes; morality; personal perspectives; transcendence; virtues.

1. Traditional objections to humor

The psychologist Daniel Berlyne once said that anyone designing a human race without having seen the actual one might think that it could get along perfectly well without a sense of humor. And if such designers

Humor 23–1 (2010), 1–26
DOI 10.1515/HUMR.2010.001

0933–1719/10/0023–0001

surveyed traditional Western religious and philosophical literature, they would surely leave humor out of the design. In the Bible, laughter is usually an expression of either scorn or foolishness (Morreall 2002). In the Western monastic tradition, laughter is seldom mentioned except in association with vice, and there are dozens of condemnations of humor, beginning with the Essenes' penance of thirty days for anyone who "guffawed foolishly" (Vermes 1990: 71). Several early Christians were renowned for their lack of humor. St. Anthony of Egypt and St. Martin of Tours were reputed to have never laughed at all, though one biography of Anthony said that he did occasionally allow playfulness, and Martin was said to sometime make clever remarks in his sermons. The Church Fathers Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, Ephraim, and John Chrysostom often preached against laughter for its association with various vices.

A few medieval Christian thinkers inquired more carefully into the nature and ethics of humor, asking, for example, whether Jesus was capable of laughter. In the late medieval period and the Renaissance, some handbooks for preachers included funny stories to hold people's attention (Holcomb 2001). But as in earlier centuries, laughter was still widely associated with vice. This association became even stronger after the Protestant Reformation when the Puritans came to power in England and banned comedy for being morally perverse.

Humor fares little better in traditional philosophy than in religion. Plato wanted to outlaw comedy in the ideal state (1961: 1485–1486). Thomas Hobbes analyzed laughter as an expression of "sudden glory" caused in people either by "some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (1946: 36). Because laughter is based on feelings of superiority, Hobbes said, it is found most in those 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" (1946: 36). In the 19th century, Charles Baudelaire condemned laughter as "a damnable element born of satanic parentage … one of the most frequent symptoms of madness" (1956: 113, 115). In the 20th century, Anthony Ludovici (1932) analyzed laughter as the act of an inferior person trying to achieve or maintain some social status, but without expending much effort to do so. Humor, he said,

> is the lazier principle to adopt in approaching all questions … [b]ecause 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. (Ludovici 1932: 11–13)

If we assemble the dozens of charges made against humor over the centuries, they fall into nine main categories.

1.1. *Humor is insincere*

Good persons are sincere. Their communication and action are *bona fide*. When they say or do something, they mean it. But those who joke in their speech and actions do not mean it. They are playing, or, to use an expression linking humor with irrationality and stupidity, they are "fooling." So humor is morally suspect. The Bible warns that "a man who deceives another and then says, 'It was only a joke,' is like a madman shooting at random his deadly darts and arrows" (Proverbs 26:18–19). In medieval Europe, this criticism emerged in discussions of the "jest or earnest" issue about the morality of saying or doing something playfully, that is, without the usual commitments to telling the truth and without intending the normal consequences of one's actions.

1.2. *Humor is idle*

Linked to the idea that in humor we do not mean what we say and do, is the charge that as a form of play, humor does not accomplish anything. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa (1962: 310) said that laughter is our enemy because it is neither a word nor an action ordered to any possible goal. And Jesus had warned that "every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36).

Worse than not accomplishing anything, humor disengages us from important issues. Laughter can show cruelty, for example, when a person laughs about another's suffering instead of doing something to relieve it. For this reason, John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople and Doctor of the Church, condemned laughter as "a moment of indifference" (Hausherr 1944). In the seventh century John Climacus (1982: 192) said

that insensibility is the mother of laughter. Ludovici made a similar point, above, in calling humor indolent and cowardly.

1.3. *Humor diminishes self-control*

If there is one ideal which is universal in moral codes, it is self-control. But laughter overcomes us, and the stronger it is, the less we control our thoughts and even our bodies. In heavy laughter, our legs may buckle as we fall on the floor and "die laughing." Among the ancient Greeks, this loss of self-control provided a major objection to laughter. The moral code of Protagoras, for example, has the warning "Be not possessed by irrepressible mirth," and Epictetus the Stoic wrote in his *Enchiridion*, "Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or unrestrained" (Morreall 1989b: 255). Both these philosophers, their followers boasted, never laughed.

Plato saw laughter as an emotion which undermined our higher reasoning faculties, and so he was disturbed by the passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where Mount Olympus was said to "ring with the laughter of the gods." He protested that "if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it, much less if gods" (Plato 1961: 633).

The early Christian church inherited from the Greeks the emphasis on self-control, and so had many condemnations of laughter based on the loss of self-control. According to Basil the Great, "raucous laughter and uncontrollable shaking of the body are not indications of a well-regulated soul, or of personal dignity, or self-mastery" (1950: 271). The best place to find Christian attacks on laughter is in the institution where self-control is most important — the monastery. The oldest monastic rule — that of Pachom of Egypt in the fourth century — forbade joking (Adkin 1985: 151–152). The Rule of St. Benedict, the foundation of Western monastic codes, enjoined monks to "prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter." In Benedict's Ladder of Humility, Step Ten was a restraint against laughter, and Step Eleven a warning against joking (Gilhus 1997: 65). The monastery of Columban in Ireland assigned the following punishments: "He who smiles in the service ... six strokes; if he breaks out in the noise of laughter, a special fast unless it has happened pardonably" (Resnick 1987: 95). One of the strongest condemna-

tions of laughter came from the Syrian abbot Ephraem, who was made a doctor of the church in the 20th century:

> Laughter is the beginning of the destruction of the soul, o monk; when you notice something of that, know that you have arrived at the depth of the evil. Then do not cease to pray God, that he might rescue you from this death. (Frank 1964: 145)

Apart from the monastic tradition, perhaps the Christian group which most emphasized self-control was the Puritans, and so it is not surprising to read their tracts against laughter and comedy. One by William Prynne condemns laughter as incompatible with the sobriety of good Christians, who should not be "immoderately tickled with mere lascivious vanities, or ... lash out in excessive cachinnations in the public view of dissolute graceless persons" (1633).

1.4. *Humor is hedonistic*

Like other forms of play, humor is pursued for pleasure. When we are making each other laugh, we are acting not out of duty or obligation, but just for enjoyment. If we can imagine persons who were always joking and playing, they would never act out of duty or obligation. Such hedonists would be at least amoral, and probably immoral.

The tension here between morality and pleasure is greater in traditions such as Augustinian Christianity which teach soul/body dualism and associate pleasure with the body. In these traditions, the moral life requires curbing desires for pleasure rather than indulging them. In the twelfth century, for example, Peter the Venerable and Hildegard of Bingen distinguished between laughter, which was physical and thus bad, and joy, which was spiritual and thus good. Our ability to laugh, Hildegaard said, was one of the consequences of Adam's fall: if humans were still in a state of perfection, they would express their joy in less physical ways (Gilhus 1997: 79).

1.5. *Humor fosters sexual license*

Laughter has been associated with sexual license in many cultures, East and West, in part because women's laughter has been thought to be a

sexual stimulant to men. In East Asian countries even today, a woman who laughs with her mouth open is judged promiscuous. In Western culture, comedy has been linked with licentiousness from its origin in religious rituals to Dionysus, the god of wine, frenzy, and sexual abandon. On the Greek stage, comic characters wore large phalli. Many jokes in Greek comedy — and many jokes today — are based on sexual double entendres.

The Church Fathers Jerome, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom linked laughter to a lack of chastity. Laughter and sexual intercourse were seen as the bodily functions *par excellence*, and one could lead to the other. In the seventh century, John Climacus said that "Impurity is touching the body, laughing, and talking without restraint." People without temperance, he said, "have a shameless gaze and laugh immoderately" (in Ward 1981: 142, 893).

1.6. *Humor is irresponsible*

From the beginning of comedy in ancient Greece, the stock characters have been the liar, the lecher, the adulterer, the glutton, the drunk, and others with major vices. In order to be amused by them on stage, or by their counterparts in real life, we have to suspend moral concern. Patrons in a bar laughing at the antics of a drunk, for example, are not trying to help that person. People who laugh at drunks in film comedies, similarly, are inuring themselves to the problem of alcoholism in our culture. A morally responsible attitude toward vices includes the desire to reform them.

The pamphlet cited earlier by the Puritan William Prynne put the case this way: comedies evoke laughter at some "obscene, lascivious, sinful passage, gesture, speech or jest (the common object of men's hellish mirth) which should rather provoke the Actors, the Spectators to penitent sobs, than wanton smiles; to brinish tears than carnal solace" (1633).

1.7. *Humor is hostile*

The lack of self-control in laughter encourages not just sexual abandon, but also the release of violent urges. In his *Republic*, Plato said that the young Guardians of the ideal state should avoid laughter, "for ordinarily

when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction'' (1961: 633). John Chrysostom had this warning:

> 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. (Chrysostom 1889: 442)

Closely linked to the idea that laughter leads to violence is the ancient Superiority Theory of laughter. Plato, its first proponent, said that the object of laughter is someone's inferiority, specifically that person's self-ignorance. The feeling in laughter is pleasure mixed with pain, the pain being the malice toward the person laughed at. The classical version of the Superiority Theory is found in Hobbes, who, as mentioned earlier, analyzed laughter as an expression of ''sudden glory.''

In the Bible, there is a strong link between laughter, superiority, and hostility. God's laughter in Psalm 2 is a good example:

> The kings of the earth stand ready, and the rulers conspire together against the Lord and his anointed king.... The Lord who sits enthroned in heaven laughs them to scorn; then he rebukes them in anger, he threatens them in his wrath.

In the First Book of Kings 18:27, Elijah ridiculed the priests of Baal for their god's powerlessness compared with Yahweh, and after laughing at them, he had them slain.

If laughter is this hostile, then anyone who is laughed at would rightfully feel offended. And so in the Second Book of Kings 2:23, we read that when a group of children laughed at the prophet Elisha for his baldness, he cursed them in the name of the Lord, and immediately two bears emerged from the woods to maul them.

1.8. *Humor fosters anarchy*

Similar to the last five objections is the criticism that humor breaks down social order. A collection of irresponsible hedonists who indulge their sexual and violent urges would be not a society, but at best a mob.

The most obvious place to see how humor threatens social order is in comedy, which from the days of the ancient Greeks has poked fun at religious, intellectual, and political leaders and institutions. In the first fully developed comedy we have, Aristophanes' *The Acharnians*, the demigod Amphitheus, on a mission from the gods to arrange a truce between Athens and Sparta, finds that he has not brought enough cash, and so he has to borrow from humans. In Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, the demigod Dionysus, on a journey to Hades across the infernal lake, must pay for his passage like anybody else, and is even made to help row the boat, which makes his backside sore. When he reaches Pluto's gate, he is so frightened that he soils himself. Then his claim of divinity is questioned and so he is horsewhipped (real gods don't cry). Such stories, Plato complained, encourage disrespect for the gods and authority generally.

Comedy and tragedy originated in ancient Greece as religious rituals honoring Dionysus. While tragedy, along with epic, celebrated the heroic patriarchal tradition of warrior leaders, comedy did not. In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, for example, women from across Greece unite to challenge the rule of men, specifically the military and political system which had fostered war between the city-states. Through trickery, they seize the treasury on the Parthenon so that Athens cannot buy war materiel. Then they hold a sex strike until the men agree to peace.

The tendency of comedy to challenge the status quo is not limited to the ancient Greeks. Anyone who creates comedy is looking for discrepancies, especially between the way human beings should be and the ways they actually are. That is why, from comedy's earliest days, its stock characters have had major physical, mental, or moral shortcomings.

Satire, one of the oldest genres, gets laughs by presenting people's foibles in exaggerated form, concentrating on the shortcomings of religious and political leaders. Understandably, leaders feel threatened by such comedy and have often banned it.

To see the more general anarchical tendencies of laughter and humor, consider the ancient Roman Saturnalia festival, held during the winter solstice. Masters waited on servants, sexual rules were openly violated, and religious rituals were lampooned. Medieval Christianity saw similar anarchy during the Feast of Fools, a festival organized by minor clerics around Christmas time. At St. Omer, the clerics recited the divine office mockingly, with howls. They wore women's clothes with flowers in their hair. In the church of the Franciscans in Antibes, the lay brothers held their books upside-down, wore spectacles made from orange peels, and

burned soles of old shoes instead of incense in the censers. Understandably, the Feast of Fools was condemned several times by church authorities (Gilhus 1997: 80–88).

1.9. *Humor is foolish*

This last of the traditional objections incorporates many of the others we have been considering. To be foolish is to be irrational, irresponsible, or both. Calling laughing persons fools is charging them with being intellectually, emotionally, or morally defective. In Psalm 14 we read that "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds."

In the Bible, the opposite of the fool is the wise person. "The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness," says Ecclesiastes 2:14. While foolishness is expressed in laughter, wisdom is associated with sadness.

> Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.
>
> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
>
> It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.
>
> For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:3–6)

There is a venerable tradition in Christianity that recommends sadness to counteract foolishness and give one's life sober wisdom. The Epistle of James (4:9) encourages Christians to "Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection." John Climacus had similar advice: "In your heart, be like an emperor ... commanding laughter: 'Go,' and it goes; and sweet weeping: 'Come,' and it comes" (1982: 140). John Chrysostom contrasted foolish laughter with wise tears in this chilling advice:

> Therefore, when you see people laughing, reflect that those teeth, that grin now, will one day have to sustain that most dreadful wailing and gnashing, and they will remember this same laugh on that day when they are grinding and gnashing. Then you too shall remember this laugh! (Chrysostom 1889, Homily 20)

2. The minority opinion of Aristotle and Aquinas

Although the vast majority of Western religious and philosophical assessments of laughter have associated it with vice, some have linked it with positive states such as joy (an association rejected by Peter the Venerable and Hildegaard of Bingen, as we have seen). In Genesis, when Sarah hears that she will bear a child in her old age, for example, her initial laughter is deemed foolish, since it shows her disbelief in God's power. But then when she bears the child, Abraham names him "Isaac," Hebrew for "He laughed," and Sarah exclaims, "God has given me good reason to laugh, and everybody who hears will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:3–6). Here laughter seems to be an expression of joy. In the New Testament, Jesus also treats laughter this way when he says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21), although he immediately warns against laughter in this life: "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). Even the dour advice in James 4:9 — "Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection" — associates laughter with joy.

Another positive way of thinking about humor has been to associate it with play. According to Aristotle, "life includes rest as well as activity, and in this is included leisure and amusement" (1941: 1000–1001). Now some people carry amusement to excess — Aristotle calls them "vulgar buffoons" — but just as bad are "those who can neither make a joke themselves nor put up with those who do" — he calls them "boorish and unpolished." Between buffoonery and boorishness there is a happy medium — engaging in humor at the right time and place, and to the right degree. This *eutrapelia*, or ready-wittedness, he counts as a virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle's comments on *eutrapelia* went largely unnoticed until medieval times, when Thomas Aquinas adapted them to Christian scholastic philosophy. Aquinas's positive comments about humor were foreshadowed by Hildebertus of Lavardin and John of Salisbury, who authorized a discreet kind of joking. In his *Summa Theologiae* (1972: 210–227) Aquinas discusses humor and play in three articles: "Whether there can be virtue in actions done in play," "The sin of playing too much," and "The sin of playing too little." His view mirrors Aristotle's: humans need to rest occasionally from serious activity, and humor and other forms of play provide that rest.

> As bodily tiredness is eased by resting the body, so psychological tiredness is eased by resting the soul. As we have explained in discussing the feelings, pleasure is rest for the soul. And therefore the remedy for weariness of soul lies in slackening the tension of mental study and taking some pleasure.... Those words and deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul's pleasure are called playful or humorous, and it is necessary to make use of them at times for solace of soul. (Aquinas 1972: 217, 219)

The person who has the moral virtue associated with play and humor Aquinas calls "a *eutrapelos*, a pleasant person with a happy cast of mind who gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn" (1972: 219). Aquinas also judges the inability or unwillingness to engage in humor a vice. Aristotle had seen the humorless person as crude; Aquinas adds that such a person is acting "against reason":

> Anything conflicting with reason in human action is vicious. It is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by never showing himself agreeable to others or being a kill-joy or wet blanket on their enjoyment. And so Seneca says, "Bear yourself with wit, lest you be regarded as sour or despised as dull." Now those who lack playfulness are sinful, those who never say anything to make you smile, or are grumpy with those who do." (Aquinas 1972: 225–227)

3. Answering the traditional objections with the Incongruity Theory

Although Aristotle and Aquinas's appreciation of humor is a useful counterbalance to the many attacks on humor before and since, it does not answer those attacks directly. And while it hints at why humor is valuable, it is far from comprehensive. To make a strong case for the virtuousness of humor, we need to say more about the nature of humor.

Of the standard objections to humor, only the charge that it is hostile is based on a theory of humor, the Superiority Theory. From ancient Greece until the eighteenth century, that was virtually the only theory of humor, but it is easily refuted.

If the Superiority Theory is correct, then whenever we laugh, two things must be true. First, we must compare ourselves with someone else, and secondly, we must find ourselves superior. But there are counterexamples to both of these.

Sometimes we laugh without comparing ourselves to anyone. In an experiment by Deckers' (1993), for example, subjects are asked to pick up a

series of apparently identical metal bars. The first several bars are of the same weight, but then they pick up a bar which is much lighter or heavier than the previous ones. Most people laugh when they pick up the anomalous bar, not because they feel superior to anyone, but because they are surprised by the bar's weight. Similarly, we may laugh on experiencing an unexpected coincidence, such as running into a neighbor hundreds of miles from home, without comparing ourselves with the neighbor or with anyone at all.

Even when we laugh and we are comparing ourselves with others, we do not have to evaluate ourselves as superior, as the Superiority Theory requires. Old silent movies, for example, have many funny scenes in which heroes like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton get out of trouble with feats of physical dexterity that we in the audience know we lack.

What such cases show is that feelings of superiority are not essential to humor. Although the Superiority Theory was the only theory of humor for two millennia, then, its fundamental claim — of an essential connection between humor and feelings of superiority — is false. Such feelings are neither necessary nor sufficient for humor.

In the eighteenth century, Francis Hutcheson (1750), James Beattie (1779), and Immanuel Kant (1892: part 1, div. 1, 54) offered another account of humor, which was later extended by Soren Kierkegaard (1941: 459–468) and then theorists in psychology. It is now called the Incongruity Theory. According to this account, the object of amusement is some thing, event, or thought which does not fit our usual understanding of the world. There are several versions of this theory and here I will not grapple with their nuances. Instead, I will simply present a general version which captures the two essential features of humor.

First, the object of humorous amusement is incongruity. And second, amusement is a pleasant experience. Putting these together, we can say that humorous amusement is the enjoyment of incongruity.

The enjoyment of incongruity may occur by itself, as in most people's amusement at Steven Wright's line: "I saw a sign yesterday that said '24-hour banking.' Who's got time for that?" But often it is combined with other kinds of enjoyment, such as the pleasurable expression of repressed feelings, as Freud (1976) said. That extra enjoyment is not essential to humor, however, as the enjoyment of incongruity is. While humor *may* be associated with hostile, sexual, or other feelings, it need not be. And where there are *only* hostile, sexual, or other feelings, without the enjoyment of incongruity, those feelings are not humorous amusement. In

short, the enjoyment of incongruity — and nothing else — is necessary and sufficient for humor.

Once thinkers were no longer bound by the Superiority Theory, with its built-in assessment of humor as egoistic and anti-social, and once they started to associate humor with incongruity, they could begin to do two things. First, they could see the weakness of the nine traditional objections to humor. And secondly, they could see the ways in which humor, as the enjoyment of incongruity, could foster praiseworthy mental states such as the reduction of negative emotions.

The general pattern of the traditional objections was to associate humor with something morally objectionable such as violence or sexual promiscuity. This approach is faulty because it does not make a case against *all* humor, or even against humor *per se*. Some instances of *any* activity or state may be associated with something objectionable. A confidence man could join a choir, for example, in order to find people to cheat out of their life savings. But such a possibility does not provide a reasonable objection to joining a choir, because there is no essential connection between joining a choir and cheating people. Similarly, the nine traditional objections to humor fail because they do not show an essential connection between humor and something objectionable. We can see this point in the individual objections.

3.1. *Humor is insincere*

Some humor does involve pretending and insincerity, but much does not. When I spend five minutes looking for my glasses, only to find them atop my head, I may well laugh, but I am not being insincere. At the dinner table, when I tell about some funny event that happened that day, there need be no insincerity.

Even when humor involves pretending, moreover, there need be nothing objectionable about it. When actors pretend to be Romeo and Juliet on the stage, we do not complain that they are insincere. If we discovered that Robert Frost never in fact stopped by woods on a snowy evening, we would not complain that his poem was insincere. Drama, literature, and the arts generally are full of similar examples of pretending. Indeed, Kendall Walton (1993) has argued that make-believe is the foundation of all the representational arts. (It is interesting to note here that the Fathers of the Church and many medieval theologians rejected literature and drama for their make-believe quality, just as they rejected humor.)

3.2. *Humor is idle*

Said of all humor, this charge is false. In 1937 German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop visited England, where he had dinner with Winston Churchill. Boasting of the growing strength of Germany's armed forces, he added that "The next war will be different for we will have the Italians on our side." Churchill grinned and cracked: "That's only fair — we had 'em last time" (*Time*, July 25, 1945). With this quip, Churchill reduced his own anxiety, and as it was retold, it bolstered the courage of the British people. Medical research suggests that laughter not only reduces anxiety but also boosts the activity of the immune system, two reasons that hospitals now have comedy carts and humor rooms. Again, the humor here is not idle. But even when humor is not intended to achieve any further benefit, it need not be objectionable. Not everything is valuable instrumentally — many things are valuable in themselves. Listening to music, watching the sun set, making love — these idle activities can be fulfilling in themselves, and so can humor.

3.3. *Humor diminishes self-control*

As with the previous objections, this one does not apply to all humor. Churchill's wisecrack to von Ribbentrop about the Italians *increased* his own and his fellow Britons' self-control by reducing their negative emotions. Similarly, people in dangerous occupations such as police work often use stress-reducing humor in order to maintain self-control.

Even raucous laughter which does reduce our self-control need not be objectionable, as long as we are not in danger of doing anything objectionable or failing to do something we are supposed to do. Enjoying a good laugh can be an innocent and welcome release from stress, sadness, and other negative emotions.

3.4. *Humor is hedonistic*

This objection, unlike the others, is based on an essential feature of humor — that it is a kind of enjoyment — but it does not establish an essential connection between enjoyment and anything objectionable. Any pleasure may whet our appetite for more, but it is a slippery slope argu-

ment to charge that any enjoyment will push us into hedonism. If this were a valid objection to humor, it would apply as well to a good meal, a Bach cantata, and anything else we enjoy. Only if it were wrong in general to have enjoyable experiences could this charge be credible. But clearly it is not. Indeed, religious people think of heaven itself as a kind of enjoyment.

3.5. *Humor fosters sexual license*

Some humor is about objectionable sexual behavior, but much is not, and so there is no general objection to humor here. And even when humor is *about* objectionable sexual behavior, it need not *promote* such behavior. Amusement and laughter tend to diminish or block many emotions, and sexual passion is one of them. Consider, for example, what happens in sexual foreplay if one of the partners laughs at something done by the other.

3.6. *Humor is irresponsible*

Sometimes people laugh about a situation when they should be concerned about it instead. Laughing about a person's drunkenness, as the objection said, could be blameworthy because the person laughing should be doing something about the problem. But many situations in which we laugh do not call for concern or action. If I see a cloud that resembles George W. Bush's profile and find that funny, there is nothing which I should be doing about that coincidence instead; my amusement is not displacing some more responsible attitude or action. Here it is useful to think of humor as a kind of aesthetic experience, on a par with enjoying music or art (Morreall 1983b). Engaging in aesthetic experience is inappropriate when action is called for, but at other times it may well be permissible.

Even in practical situations which do call for action, moreover, humor can be a psychologically healthy way to handle mistakes and failure. If in trying to meet a deadline, I spend five minutes looking for a letter, only to find it in the wastebasket, laughing and getting on with the project is more productive than getting upset and stewing in self-blame. In life-and-death professions like medicine, the most professional people engage in humor precisely to keep emotionally cool and so in command of their skills.

Humor can also be virtuous and responsible when it focuses attention on something that should be fixed. Since the days of Ben Jonson, satirists have justified their trade by saying that satire corrects the shortcomings being laughed at. While satire does not always do that, and while direct moral censure might sometimes be more effective, certainly some satirists have gotten their audiences to pay attention to incompetence, hypocrisy, and deception. That is why political cartoonists have often been imprisoned or executed under dictatorships.

3.7. *Humor is hostile*

Some kinds of humor may provoke arguments and violence, but many do not. Indeed, in the next section we will see how humor serves as a social lubricant to reduce conflict and promote cooperation.

3.8. *Humor fosters anarchy*

Humor sometimes challenges the status quo. But sometimes it does not. And even when it does, that can be a good thing. In ancient Athens, comedy and democracy grew up side by side, and the critical spirit of comedy seems an important part of modern democracies. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* called attention to the absurdity of war and to feminist values neglected by centuries of patriarchy. Cabaret comics in Germany were among the first public figures to question the rise of Hitler. Godfrey Cambridge, Lili Tomlin, and other comedians raised Americans' consciousness about racial and gender discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s.

3.9. *Humor is foolish*

This objection, as mentioned earlier, is an amalgamation of the other objections. Since they fail, it fails.

4. A broader understanding of *eutrapelia*

Having seen that none of the traditional objections to humor links humor in general to any vice, we can now extend Aristotle and Aquinas's sugges-

tions that humor can be virtuous. Both thinkers understood a virtue to be a kind of excellence in a person, and they distinguished between intellectual virtues and moral virtues. What I will show is that humor can foster both kinds of virtues. The kind of humor which is most important here is that in which we laugh at our own real experiences. I will not say much about our laughter at fictional jokes, which is a more sophisticated phenomenon but one derived from the ability to laugh at our own experiences.

Humans are the only species who laugh in amusement. Expressed in terms of the Incongruity Theory, we are the only animals who enjoy incongruity. When dogs and cats have their expectations violated, they tend to feel negative emotions rather than amusement. If a cat usually gets her dinner in the kitchen at 6 PM, it will not be funny to her if tonight at 6 there is a bowling ball in place of her dish. But human beings can have an experience like this and laugh. Why is that?

The human ability to enjoy incongruity, I have argued elsewhere (Morreall 1983a, 1989a), is a function of our rationality, part of which is being able to process our perceptions, memories, and imagined ideas in a way that is free from our here, our now, and our individual perspective. In the lower animals, mental processing is limited to present experience and present needs, and so they react to incongruity with practical concern. That concern evokes negative emotions like fear, anger, and sadness, which motivate animals to do something about the incongruous situation, such as run away in fear, attack in anger, or withdraw from activity in sadness. Humans, by contrast, can think about their experiences abstractly and objectively, and so they can react to incongruities in nonpractical ways such as scientific curiosity, religious awe, artistic imagination, and humorous amusement.

To become rational, early humans needed a mental mode in which they could be surprised, especially by failure, without going into "fight or flight" emotions such as fear and anger, which inhibit abstract, objective thinking. Humorous amusement is just such a mode. In finding a situation funny, we can transcend practical concern and enjoy its incongruity. Instead of running away or fighting, we can think playfully and objectively about what we have experienced. So humor helps people cope with difficult situations, as a number of studies show (Lefcourt 2001; Lefcourt and Martin 1986; Martin 1996; Martin et al. 1993).

The contrast between amusement and negative emotions is found even in their physiology: emotions are centered in the brain's limbic system,

while humor is centered in the more rational cerebral cortex. Humorous laughter reduces heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and stress chemicals (epinephrine, cortisol, DOPAC) in the blood, which increase in fear and anger. And while negative emotions suppress the activity of the immune system, humorous laughter enhances it (Morreall 1997: 59–90).

By fostering rational ways of thinking, humor also fosters intellectual virtues such as openmindedness. People who are not open to new information and new ways of thinking not only perceive themselves as not humorous (Dixon et al. 1986: 421–427) but even need more time to recognize something as an instance of humor (Miller and Bacon 1971: 150–159). Humor is also correlated with creative thinking (Ziv 1983), which is why many who conduct "brainstorming" and problem-solving exercises start off with humor exercises. As Edward DeBono has commented, "Humor is by far the most significant behavior of the human brain.... Humor ... shows how perceptions set up in one way can suddenly be reconfigured in another way. This is the essence of creativity" (1993: 8). Humor is also valuable in education for its ability to promote critical thinking (Stopsky 1992).

Not only intellectual virtues but moral virtues are promoted by humor, and here again, the opposition between humor and negative emotions is at work. In almost any situation where we tend to respond with anger or fear, the morally virtuous thing to do will involve overcoming the negative emotion. When we are acting at the prompting of negative emotions, we are not fully rational. Overcome by anger, we can hurt or kill people; overcome by fear, we can protect ourselves at great cost to others. By reducing negative emotions, humorous amusement allows us to maintain our self-control and thus act more rationally and responsibly. When religious and philosophical moral systems emphasize "self-control," indeed, what they mean is largely the ability to override the motivation of emotions.

Responding to a negative situation with laughter instead of negative emotions is morally important in another way as well. When the incongruity we laugh at involves our own failures and shortcomings, we see ourselves more objectively than we do in negative emotions. While laughing at ourselves, as the old *Candid Camera* jingle put it, we "see ourselves as other people do," instead of from within a here/now/me perspective. That ability not only fosters several virtues, as we will see, but is essential to the development of any moral perspective. As Robert C. Roberts put

it, "A sense of humor about one's *own* foibles is a capacity of character-transcendence; but character-transcendence is basic to the very concept of a moral virtue" (1988: 127). A person who could think only of here/now/me would be either infantile or sociopathic, in either case amoral. Only if I can see myself as one human being in a world of others, and understand what it would be like to be others, am I capable of morality.

Seeing oneself objectively is also important in being honest with oneself, rather than rationalizing one's shortcomings, and so humor can contribute to self-knowledge and integrity.

Getting beyond our personal perspectives is essential not just to a moral point of view but to a religious point of view. While religions differ in their metaphysics and ethics, they agree that human beings should rise above their individual perspectives to see things "in the big picture," and they should act as part of that larger reality. The call for self-transcendence is found in religions as diverse as Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Humor has religious significance, Peter Berger (1997) has argued, precisely because, at its best, it involves self-transcendence. It is not surprising, then, that Zen, which puts such emphasis on getting beyond the self, refers so often to incongruity, and even creates it in such forms as koans for our edification (Hyers 1991).

It is because all moral codes want us to transcend our "here/now/me" perspective that they tell us to avoid anger, fear and other self-focused emotions. We can see how humor reduces those emotions if we consider the virtues which humor promotes.

We can start with patience. Looking at things "in the big picture" with a sense of humor, we do not expect events to happen at just the speed we prefer. On a vacation one summer, my family and I drove to a restaurant at the head of a beautiful lake for dinner. As we entered the restaurant, we noticed how crowded it was, but the platters of fish going by looked and smelled so good that we sat down and placed our order. Then we waited — fifteen minutes, seventeen minutes, eighteen minutes. I looked around for the waiter, to complain, but instead saw a sign on the wall:

WE PROMISE TO SERVE YOU IN FIVE MINUTES.
OR EIGHT OR NINE.
OR RELAX AND HAVE ANOTHER BEER —
IT CAN'T BE THAT MUCH LONGER.

I read the sign to my family, and we laughed. The management knew what they were doing, I realized, and they were moving as quickly as

they could. So who was I to complain on this lovely day with a gorgeous lake right outside the window? I stopped looking at my watch and we struck up a conversation with the people at the next table. When our fish arrived, it was hot, tasty, and well worth the wait. That funny sign had completely changed our experience by eliciting our patience.

Allied with patience is tolerance for other people, and here too, humor can help. Humor is correlated with openmindedness, as mentioned earlier, and in our social interactions, the willingness to see things in new ways makes us more understanding of other people, what they think, and how they act. In that way, humor can reduce social friction. Sammy Basu (1999) has examined how humor fosters religious tolerance. In a more mundane setting, when I find myself getting angry with other drivers on the highway, I repeat George Carlin's quip about driving: "Did you ever notice how everyone going slower than you is a *moron* and everyone going faster than you is a *maniac*?" Laughing at that line, I acknowledge and thus transcend my egocentrism and anger.

In social interactions, keeping our sense of humor makes us not only more tolerant of people's differences, but more willing to forgive and more gracious. As Aristotle commented, in comedy enemies often become friends, while in tragedy, which is based on negative emotions, they never do. An example of gracious humor is Barry Goldwater's becoming a member of the Phoenix Country Club. Because Goldwater's father was Jewish, the club initially rejected his application. Instead of getting angry or filing a lawsuit, Goldwater called the club president to ask a question. "Since I'm only *half*-Jewish, can I join if I just play *nine* holes?" The man laughed heartily and immediately let him in. Goldwater's humor opened the club president's eyes to the wrongness of the discriminatory policy and gave him an opportunity to change it.

Graciousness is kindness which allows the other person — even someone who is morally blameworthy — to relax and not feel threatened. A person who is corrected with graciousness is more likely to listen to the message and act on it. A practical application of this virtue is with debt collection letters. In their usual form — threatening the debtor with legal action or a bad credit rating — these letters make people get defensive, unreasonable, and even hostile. But consider this middle paragraph from a debt collection letter:

> We appreciate your business, but, please, give us a break. Your account is overdue ten months. That means we've carried you longer than your mother did.

This message shows respect for the reader, but uses playful humor to persuade them to be reasonable and pay the debt. Humor like this has even saved lives. The most famous was that of Abraham Lincoln. Some years before becoming President, Lincoln was challenged to a duel. He responded that he would fight if he could specify the weapons they would use and the distance at which they would stand. The other gentleman agreed. Lincoln said, "Cow shit at five paces." And that was the end of the argument.

Not only did Lincoln's humor reduce his own negative emotion, so that he could act rationally, but it did the same for the other man. His anti-bravado was also a clever way to admit that he was a poor shot and an even worse swordsman. It showed the virtue of humility. Looking for the humor in any situation is usually looking for the human shortcomings, and as Lincoln tacitly admitted, we can find plenty within ourselves.

The Most Rev. Robert Runcie (1983), former Archbishop of Canterbury, told of how he once boarded a train to discover that the rest of the passengers in his car were mental patients going on a field trip. An attendant from the hospital came into the car to make sure he had everybody. "One, two, three, four, five," he counted. When he got to Runcie, he asked, "Who are you?" "I'm the Archbishop of Canterbury," Runcie said. The attendant smiled, pointed at him, and continued, "Six, seven, eight ..." Runcie's ability to see himself the way the hospital attendant saw him, and take delight in that perspective, showed humility of the first order.

Even etiquette sometimes prescribes humorous humility. The politest way to accept praise is to poke fun at yourself. President John Kennedy met with a group of school children at the White House and one asked, "Mr. President, how did you become a war hero?" Kennedy answered, "It was completely involuntary — they sank my boat." In making a joke to distract attention from his courage, Kennedy showed a higher kind of virtue.

Humble people do not have to feel inept or unable to accomplish anything. They are just realistic about the human condition, especially their own foibles. When humility combines with patience, in fact, people can show considerable perseverance, another virtue fostered by humor. If we see our failures and mistakes with a comic eye, we are less likely to be overcome by feelings of frustration. In inventing the light bulb, Thomas Edison tried some 10,000 combinations of materials. When asked if he was upset by all his failed attempts, he said, "No, I just learned thousands

of ways not to make a light bulb.'' His storage battery took over 20,000 attempts. But with his sense of humor, he kept going. At his death, Edison had patented over a thousand inventions. In his desk were found slips of paper on which he had written notes to himself. One said: ''Remember Jonah. He came out all right.''

When perseverance operates in situations of danger, it becomes courage, and as we saw with Churchill's quip to von Ribbentrop, humor can promotes courage by reducing fear. Medicine is a field in which fear is common and humor just as common as an antidote. After writing *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise*, a poignant book about children fighting cancer, Erma Bombeck was herself diagnosed with breast cancer, and it required a mastectomy. She reacted this way:

> The humor that has been such an important part of my life kicked in automatically. I thought of the thousands of luncheons and dinners I had attended where they slapped a name tag on my left bosom. I always smiled and said, ''Now, what shall we name the other one?'' That would no longer be a problem. Nor did I give a thought to dying. I subscribe to George Burns' philosophy, ''I can't die yet. I'm booked.'' (Bombeck 1993: 97)

The ability of humor to bolster courage was often evident during the Holocaust. As Steve Lipman's *Laughter in Hell* (1991) recounts, humor strengthened the courage and resistance of those opposed to Hitler. In the ghettos, Hitler's masterpiece was known as *Mein Krampf* (My cramp). Long before the Nazis took full control of Germany in 1933, there were cabaret performers mocking Hitler and his storm troopers. Many of these comics were sent to prison camps, but even there, their critical spirit was not quenched. In Dachau, a play satirizing the Nazis was performed for six weeks in 1943. The most developed cabaret in the camps was at Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. As Rabbi Erich Weiner, spiritual leader of the prisoners, said, the cabaret ''strengthened their will to survive as well as infused their power to resist'' (in Migdal 1986: 24).

Having shown how self-transcending humor fosters many virtues, I would like to conclude by suggesting that a sense of humor gives virtuous people a special attitude toward their virtues which amounts to a meta-virtue. Though there is no exact word for it in English, *cheerfulness* comes close. It consists of developing and exercising one's talents, especially in the service of the group, only without taking oneself too seriously in the process. This meta-virtue is at least as important as any standard virtue, I

would argue, and those who lack it, such as the conventionally virtuous Puritans who outlawed comedy, are in danger of being mere prigs.

As an example here, consider Thomas More. The author of *Utopia* and dozens of other political and religious works, he was a towering intellect, but he made time to run a school for children in his house. With his political skill, he became Chancellor of England under Henry VIII, but he continued to live simply. According to Erasmus, More was "born for friendship," giving freely and gladly. When he was sent to the Tower of London, he welcomed prison life for its peace and quiet. When his death sentence was handed down, he wrote a beautiful prayer and some letters of farewell. On the day of execution, his arthritis made it hard for him to walk. So as he approached the scaffold, he politely asked the executioner to "see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself."

5. Vicious and/or virtuous?

Having praised humor for its association with a number of virtues, let me note that this linkage is not universal. In answering the traditional objections to humor, I said that there is no necessary connection between humor and vices, and the same is true of humor and virtues. Besides humor which embodies a self-transcending moral perspective, there are also cases of humor which involve selfishness, intolerance, and cruelty. Humor is not *essentially* either virtuous or vicious.

Nonetheless, I think that there has been a general trend toward virtuous humor over the last three centuries. Western culture has made moral progress since ancient and medieval times, when the superiority theory was the only systematic way to think about humor. Indeed, my argument about how humor can embody a morally praiseworthy self-transcendence would hardly have made sense before the Enlightenment.

In the 18th century, not only did thinkers like Francis Hutcheson (1750) show that laughter has no essential connection with scorn or vainglory, but moralists and political theorists did much to discourage scorn and vainglory. New ideas of human equality, human rights, and democracy were discussed. Slavery was questioned, and later patriarchy. Ethical theorists emphasized the role of feelings in morality, most importantly compassion. The effect of all these trends on popular humor was to make it more humane. Laughing at the deformed became less acceptable. No longer did aristocrats entertain themselves by visiting insane asylums

to taunt the inmates. The general principle which has emerged since the Enlightenment is that we should not laugh at people for what they cannot control. Racist and sexist jokes are no longer standard after-dinner entertainment, for example, and where they occur, they are often condemned morally, not just as bad manners.

At the same time, the value of self-focused humor has been emphasized, in such diverse areas as politics, advertising, psychotherapy, and religion. The general trend, accelerating in the last few decades, has been toward self-transcending, morally sensitive humor. While John Chrysostom's charge that laughter leads to murder may have rung true in the fourth century, it seems silly today, because we think of humor as opposed to hostile emotions rather than fostering them.

I wish that I had sociological data to back up these observations, but little research has been done in this area. The best I can say is that I hope I'm right, and that the trend continues.

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Note

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