

BEYOND AESTHETICS

Philosophical Essays



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PART V: ALTERNATIVE TOPICS



ON JOKES

Traditional comic theory has attempted to encompass a wide assortment of phenomena. Often it is presented as a theory of laughter. But even where its ambit is restricted to amusement or comic amusement, it typically attempts to cover quite a large territory, ranging, for instance: from small misfortunes and unintentional pratfalls; to informal badinage, tall stories, and insults; to jokes, both verbal and practical, cartoons, and sight gags; through satires, caricatures, and parodies; and onto something called a cosmic comic perspective. Thus, predictably enough, the extreme variety of the subject matter – reaching from puns to the comedy of character – customarily results in theories that are overly vague.

For example, the most popular contemporary type of comic theory – the incongruity theory¹ – is generally very loose about what constituted its domain (objects, events, categories, concepts, propositions, maxims, characters, etc.) and, as well, it is exceedingly generous about the relations that may obtain between whatever composes the domain (contrast, difference, contrariness, contradiction, inappropriate subsumption, unexpected juxtaposition, transgression, and so on). Consequently, such theories run the danger of becoming vacuous; they seem capable of assimilating anything, including much that is not, pretheoretically, comic.

Moreover, attempts to regiment such theories by making them more precise tend to result in incongruity theories that are too narrow and, therefore, susceptible to easy counterexample. Schopenhauer, perhaps the most rigorous of incongruity theorists, hypothesizes, for instance, that the relevant sense of incongruity always involves the incorrect subsumption of a particular under a concept – an operation he believed could be uniformly diagnosed in terms of a syllogism in the first figure whose conjunction of a major premise with a sophistical minor premise invariably yields a false conclusion.² But, as illuminating as this theory is with respect to certain cases, it is hard to mobilize to account for what we find humorous in a funny gesture, like Steve Martin's silly victory dance at the baseball game in the movie *Parenthood*. Again the problem seems to be that the field of inquiry is so large that any relatively precise theory is likely to exclude part of it, while, at the same time, adjusting for counterexamples appears to send us back in the direction of vacuity.

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Starting with the intuition that the objects of comic theory are too unwieldly, I want to propose that the task of comic research might be better served if we proceed in a piecemeal fashion, circumscribing the targets of our investigations in such a way that we will be better able to manage them. This does not imply that we should ignore the rich heritage of comic theory, but only that we exploit it selectively where this or that observation seems best to fit the data at hand.

In the spirit of the preceding proposal, I will restrict my subject to the joke, which, though it may bear family relations to other forms of comedy, such as the sight gag, I will, nevertheless, treat as a distinctive genre. The purpose of this essay is to offer an account of jokes and, then, to go on to consider certain quandaries that my theory may provoke, especially in terms of ethical issues that pertain to such things as ethnic, racist, and sexist jokes. However, before advancing my own view of the nature of jokes, the leading, rival theory in the field, namely, Freud's, deserves some critical attention.

FREUD'S THEORY OF JOKES

Freud's theory of jokes is certainly the most widely known as well as one of the most developed theories of jokes in our culture. Thus, if we want to field an alternative theory, we must show why this illustrious predecessor is inadequate, along with indicating the ways in which our own view avoids similar pitfalls.

Freud's theory of jokes is part – albeit the largest part – of his general theory of what we might call amusement.³ He divides this genus into three subordinate species: jokes (or wit), the comic, and humor. Membership in the genus seems to be a matter of economizing psychic energy; the subordinate species are differentiated with respect to the *kind* of psychic energy that each saves. Jokes represent a saving of the energy required for mobilizing and sustaining psychic inhibitions. The comic releases the energy that is saved by forgoing some process of thought. And, lastly, humor is defined in terms of the saving of energy that would otherwise be expended in the exercise of the emotions.

Put schematically: jokes are an economy of inhibition; the comic is an economy of thought; and humor is an economy of emotion. Freud's theory is often characterized as a release or relief theory of comedy⁴ for the obvious reason that the energy that would have been spent inhibiting, thinking, and emoting in certain contexts is freed or released by the devices of jokes, the comic, and humor, respectively.

A notable feature of Freud's way of carving up this field of inquiry is that he does it by reference to the types of psychic energy conserved rather than by reference to the structural features of distinctive comedic strategies. Thus, we might anticipate that Freud's way of mapping the territory may diverge from our standard ways of, for example, distinguishing jokes from other comedic genres. But more on this in a moment.

Joking for Freud releases the energy saved by forgoing some inhibition. That is, the joke frees the energy that would have gone into mounting and maintaining some form of repression. What is involved here is readily exemplified by what

Freud calls tendentious jokes – jokes involved in manifesting sexual or aggressive tendencies. Such jokes, so to speak, breach our defenses and liberate the psychic energy we might have otherwise deployed against the sexual or aggressive content articulated by the joke.

Though the gist of Freud's theory is initially easy to see when the jokes in question involve transgressive content, it is also the case, as Freud himself freely concedes, that there are what to all intents and purposes appear to be innocent jokes – jests, nonsense, and ostensibly harmless wordplay. These do not seem predicated on articulating transgressive content. But Freud's general hypothesis is that jokes involve a saving in terms of psychic inhibition. So the question then arises as to what relevant inhibitions are lifted when one hears an innocent joke – one that evinces no sexual or aggressive purposes?

The second problem that Freud's theory of jokes needs to address is the question of *how* – even if inhibitions are lifted when we hear sexual and aggressive jokes – this liberation from repression occurs. That is, supposing that we agree with Freud that our inhibitions are put out of gear by tendentious jokes, we will still want to know exactly how this happens.

Freud's answers to these questions are interconnected. First, Freud establishes that jokes employ certain techniques, notably: condensation, absurdity, indirect representation, representation by opposites, and so on.⁵ These techniques – call them the jokework – are the very stuff of innocent jokes, while at the same time they parallel the techniques that Freud refers to as the dreamwork in his studies of the symbolism of sleep.⁶ With dreaming, these structures, such as condensation, are employed to elude censorship – to protect the dream from repressive criticism. *And*, at the same time, eluding censorship itself is pleasurable.

So, when tendentious jokes employ the techniques of the jokework, they avail themselves of the kind of pleasure that beguiles our psychic censor and that lifts our initial inhibitions in the first instance in such a way that the sexual or aggressive content in the joke is free to deliver even more uninhibited pleasures in the second instance. With tendentious jokes, inhibitions are thrown out of gear by the jokework, which protects the transgressive content in the manner of the dreamwork, while also facilitating the relaxation of censorship by means of its own beguiling pleasurableness.

This account, of course, still leaves our first question unanswered, namely, what fundamental inhibitions are relieved in the case of innocent jokes? Freud tackles this in two stages in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. The first stage (which is developed in chapter 4) might be thought of as a nonspecialized approximation of his considered view, while the second stage (developed in chapter 6) is his specialized (i.e., technical/psychoanalytic) refinement of his first approximation.

The first approximation correlates the jokework – which is also the essence of innocent wit – with childlike wordplay and thought play: the “pleasure in nonsense” of the child learning the language of her culture. Indulging in this childlike pleasure represents a rebellion against the compulsion of logic and a relief from the inhibitions of critical reason. The saving in psychical expenditure of energy

that occasions the jokework, then, involves “re-establishing old liberties and getting rid of the burden of intellectual upbringing.”⁷

This pleasure in reverting to childlike modes of thought can be further specified psychoanalytically in light of the analogy between the dreamwork and the jokework. Jokes, even innocent jokes, employ infantile (not merely childlike) modes of thought; they manifest the structures of thinking of the unconscious, structures repressed by critical reason. When critical reason is put in abeyance, regressive pleasure is released. “For the infantile source of the unconscious and the unconscious thought-processes are none other than those – the one and only ones – produced in early childhood. The thought which, with the intention of constructing a joke, plunges into the unconscious is merely seeking for the ancient dwelling place of its former play with words. Thought is put back for a moment to the stage of childhood so as once more to gain childhood pleasure.”⁸

The inhibitions lifted by innocent jokes (and by the jokework across the board) are those of critical reason against infantile modes of thought and the regressive pleasures they afford. But, as in the case of tendentious jokes, here again we must ask: what makes the lifting of the inhibitions of critical reason possible? That is, what protects the innocent joke in particular and the jokework in general from the censorship of logic and reason? Freud’s hypothesis is that for the word and thought play to be protected from criticism, it must have meaning or, at least, the appearance of meaning. The childlike pleasure in alliteration, for example, can elude criticism in expressions like “see you later, alligator,” where the saying has some sense, though, admittedly, not of a resounding sort.

Summarizing this theory, then: all jokes involve a saving in inhibition. Tendentious jokes lift inhibitions against sexual and aggressive content. Innocent jokes and the jokework in general oppose the inhibitions of critical reason and allow pleasure in nonsense and the manifestation of infantile and unconscious modes of thought. What protects the tendentious joke from criticism is the jokework, which, like the dreamwork, beguiles the psychic censor. What protects the innocent joke and the jokework, in all its operations, from criticism is the appearance of sense or meaning in the joke.

Clearly, Freud’s theory of jokes is intimately connected to his general theory of psychoanalysis. Consequently, it may be challenged wherever it presupposes psychoanalytic premises of dubious merit. For example, if one finds the hydraulic model of psychic energies unpalatable (as I do), then the very foundation of the theory of jokes is questionable. Likewise, if one is methodologically distrustful of homuncular censorship, the theory is apt to appear unpersuasive. However, for the purposes of this essay, I think that Freud’s theory of jokes can be rejected without embarking on the awesome task of contesting psychoanalytic theory as a whole. That is, we can eliminate Freud’s theory of jokes as a viable rival and, thereby, pave the way for the formulation of an alternative theory without confronting the entire psychoanalytic enterprise.

For there is a genuine question about whether Freud’s theory of jokes is coherent, a question that can be framed independently of the relation of the

account of jokes to the rest of the psychoanalytic architectonic. To zero in on this potential incoherence, recall: (1) there are innocent jokes (the operation of the jokework pure and simple); what protects them from censorship is their sense; this implies that there is an inhibition against the jokework that needs lifting; (2) there are tendentious jokes; what protects them from censorship is the jokework (the stuff of innocent jokes).

But, given this, we want to know why the tendentious joke does not auto-destruct. For the meaning or sense that the tendentious joke supplies to lift the inhibitions against the jokework involves the articulation of meanings that are prohibited or forbidden. How can prohibited meanings protect the jokework? Why doesn't the specific sense available through the tendentious purpose of the joke cancel the operation of the jokework?

Moreover, if the jokework cannot be protected by tendentious sense, then the jokework cannot, in turn, serve to neutralize inhibitions against the tendentious purposes of the joke. That is, if the jokework itself is a potential target of inhibition and the tendentious sense of the joke is ill suited to deflect censorship, then how can the jokework, in sexual and aggressive jokes, begin to function in the service of lifting any inhibitions?

One might attempt to remove this functional incoherence in the system by saying that the jokework (and, therefore, innocent jokes) do not require protection – that they are not inhibited. But this yields the concession that not all jokes – specifically innocent jokes – involve an economy of inhibition. And, this concession, of course, would spell the defeat of Freud's general characterization of jokes. Admittedly, there may be other ways to attempt to negotiate the aforesaid functional incoherence; but I suspect that they will be somewhat *ad hoc*. So one rather damning point about Freud's theory of jokes is that it is either functionally incoherent with regard to its account of tendentious jokes, or its generalizations about economizing inhibition are false, or it is probably headed toward *ad hocery*.

Furthermore, the theory of jokes is too inclusive. One might anticipate that given Freud's analogy between the jokework and the dreamwork that the problem here would be that dreams, especially dreams with sexual or aggressive purposes, will turn out to be jokes. However, Freud is careful to distinguish dreams and jokes along other dimensions, particularly with reference to the publicity of jokes and the privacy of dreams. But I think that Freud still has problems of overinclusiveness on other fronts.

Given Freud's theory of symbolism and his views about art, he would appear committed to agreeing that artworks deploy the symbolic structures of the dreamwork and that artworks also may traffic in sexual and aggressive meanings. Perhaps the winged lions of ancient Assyria – a condensation with aggressive purposes – would be a case in point. Why wouldn't these count as tendentious jokes on Freud's view?⁹ Obviously, they are not jokes in our ordinary sense, for jokes are identified in common speech by means of certain discursive structures (to be explored below). But Freud's theory of jokes is so divorced from structural differentiae – preferring the somewhat dubious idiom of psychic energies and inhibi-

tions, and a theory of lawlike relations between certain types of symbolism and psychic states – that it is not surprising that Freud’s theory will violate pretheoretical intuitions that are grounded in ordinary language.¹⁰

Freud’s theory also seems to me to suffer from being too exclusive. And, again, the problem is traceable to the fact that Freud tries to map the field of comedy not with respect to the structural features of comedic genres but by putative differences in psychic energies. Jokes are distinguished from the comic and the humorous as economies of inhibition are distinguished from economies of thought and emotion. But, structurally speaking, much of the material that Freud slots as comic or as humorous could be rearticulated in what we ordinarily take to be jokes.

For example, Freud’s category of the comic, in opposition to his category of the joke, involves a saving in thought when we compare the way a naïf or a comic but does something with the more efficient way in which we might do the same thing. Accepting Freud’s account, without questioning whether the talk of psychic savings makes real sense with respect to the putative mental processing, it would appear that many “moron” riddles – Why did the moron stay up all night? He was studying for his blood test¹¹ – would be comic (in Freud’s sense), but, pretheoretically, I believe that we think they should count straightforwardly as jokes. For whether or not something is a joke is a matter of its discursive structure, not a matter of the kind of psychic energy it saves (if, indeed, there is any psychic energy, salvageable or otherwise).¹²

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF THE NATURE OF JOKES

Freud’s theory of jokes is perhaps the most comprehensive and authoritative in our tradition. However, as we have seen, it is problematic in a number of respects – not only in some of its more controversial psychoanalytic commitments, but also in terms of its potential functional incoherence at crucial junctures and its failure to track what we ordinarily think of as jokes. As indicated previously, the latter failure appears due to its attempted isolation of jokes in terms of inhibition rather than in respect to what is structurally distinctive about jokes as a comedic genre. Thus, one place to initiate an alternative theory of jokes is to try to pinpoint the underlying structural principles that are operative in the composition of jokes.

Jokes are structures of verbal discourse – generally riddles or narratives – ending in punch lines. In contrast to informal verbal humor – such as bantering, riffing, or associative punning – a joke is an integral unit of discourse with a marked beginning and an end. If it is a riddle, it begins with a question and ends with a punch line; if it is a narrative, it has a beginning, which establishes characters and context, and it proceeds to a delimited complication, and then it culminates, again in the form of a punch line. In order to analyze the joke genre, I propose to consider it in the way that Aristotle considered the genre of tragedy – as a structure predicated on bringing about a certain effect in audiences. (And, perhaps needless to say, the effect that I have in mind is not that of lifting psychoanalytically construed inhibitions.)

The feature that distinguishes a joke from other riddles and narratives is a punch line. Where tragedies conclude with that state that modern literary theorists call closure, the last part of a joke is a punch line. Closure in tragedies is secured when all the questions that have been put in motion by the plot have been answered – when, for example, we know whether Hamlet will avenge his father and what will become of our cast of characters. But, ideally, a punch line is not simply a matter of neatly answering the question posed by a riddle nor of drawing all the story lines of a narrative to a summation. Rather, the punch line concludes the joke with an unexpected puzzle whose solution is left to the listener to resolve. That is, the end point of telling a joke – the punch line – leaves the listener with one last question which the listener must answer, instead of concluding by answering all the listener's questions.

Question: "What do you get when you cross a chicken with a hawk?" Answer: "A Quail." At first the answer seems to be mysterious, until one realizes that it should be spelt with a "y," that it refers to a vice-president, and that the "chicken" and "hawk" in the question are meant to be taken metaphorically. In order to "get the joke," the listener must interpret the punch line. In fact, the point of the punch line is to elicit an interpretation from the listener. Indeed, this joke is designed to elicit pretty much the interpretation that I have offered.

Or, for an example of a narrative joke, consider this story: "A young priest runs into his abbot's office shouting 'Come quickly, Jesus Christ is in the chapel.' The abbot and novice hurry into the church and see Christ kneeling at the altar. The young man asks 'What should we do?,' to which the wise old abbot replies, whispering, 'Look busy.'" ¹³

Initially, the abbot's remark seems puzzling and inappropriate; one would expect the two holy men to walk forward and to fall on their knees in adoration of their Lord and Savior. But very quickly one realizes that the abbot does not view Christ as his Savior, but rather as his boss, indeed a boss very much like a stereotypical earthly boss who is always on the lookout for shirkers. Getting the point of the joke, again, depends on interpreting the confounding punch line.

What the listener must do at the end of a joke is to provide an interpretation, that is, make sense of the last line of the text in light of the salient elements of the preceding narrative or riddle. This may involve reconstruing or reconstructing earlier information, which initially seemed irrelevant, as now salient under the pressure of coming up with an interpretation. For example, in the joke about the two priests, the narrative "field" is reorganized in such a way that it becomes very significant that the abbot is "old" and "wise" (cagey) and that he is "whispering" (a signal of furtiveness), given our interpretation that he believes the boss (rather than the Savior) has arrived on the scene for a surprise inspection. ¹⁴

The punch line of a joke requires an interpretation because, in Annette Barnes's sense, ¹⁵ its point is not obvious, or not immediately obvious to the listener. The punch line comes as a surprise, or, at least, it is supposed to come as a surprise in the well-made joke. It is perhaps this moment in a joke that Kant had

in mind when he wrote that “Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.”¹⁶

However, if this is what Kant had in mind, he has only partially described the interaction, while also misplacing the point where the laughter arises. For after an initial, however brief, interlude of blank puzzlement (Kant’s “nothing”), an interpretation dawns on the listener, enabling her to reframe the preceding riddle or narrative in such a way that the punch line can be connected to the rest of the joke. It is at this point that there is laughter – when there is laughter, rather than a smile or a mere feeling of cheerfulness. Nor is our mind blank at this juncture. It has mental content, namely, the relevant interpretation.¹⁷

Of course, if the listener cannot produce an interpretation, the net result of the joke will be bewilderment. This may transpire either because of some problem with the listener – perhaps he lacks access to the allusions upon which the joke depends (e.g., in our Quayle joke, he might not know that a “hawk” can mean a militarist); or because of some problem with the joke – for example, there really is no compelling interpretation available. Jokes may also fail if they are too obvious, especially if the listener can anticipate the punch line and its attending interpretation. This is one reason that what is called comic timing is important to jokes; if the punch line is likely to be obvious, the teller must get through the joke – often using speed to downplay or obscure salient details – before the listener is likely to guess it.¹⁸ (Moreover, the preceding account of the ways in which jokes can go wrong should provide indirect evidence for the puzzlement/interpretation model that I am advocating.)

Ideally, a joke must be filled-in or completed by an audience. It is intentionally designed to provoke an interpretation – “to be gotten.” This, of course, does not happen in a vacuum; jokes are surrounded by conventions. And, once alerted – by formulas like “Did you hear the one about...” or by changes in the speaker’s tone of voice – the audience knows that it is about to hear a joke, which means that its aim is to produce an interpretation, or, more colloquially, “to get it.” That is, the aims of the teller and the listener are coordinated; both aim at converging on the production of an interpretation. Indeed, the interpretation that the joke is contrived to produce is generally quite determinate, or, at least, falls into a very determinate range of interpretations. For example, the interpretation I offered of the priest joke is *the* interpretation of the joke, give or take a wrinkle.

Of course, even with a well-made joke there is no necessity that the listener enjoy it. Along with the possible failures noted above, the listener may refuse to accept the “social contract” that has been signaled by conventions like changes in voice. That is, the listener may refuse the invitation to interpret and thereby stonewall the joke. This is a technique employed by school teachers – I seem to recall – in order to chasten unruly students.

A joke, on my view, is a two-stage structure, involving a puzzle and its solution.¹⁹ One advantage of the two-stage model is that it can dissolve the apparent debate between what are called surprise theorists (Hobbes, Hartley, Gerard, Kant) – who maintain that laughter is a function of suddenness or unexpectedness – and

configurational theorists (Quintilian, Hegel, Maier) – who see humor as a function of things “falling into place.”²⁰ On the two-stage account, each camp has identified an essential ingredient of the joke: sudden puzzlement, on the one hand, versus a reconfiguring interpretation, on the other. The mistake each camp makes is to regard its ingredient as *the* (one and only) essential feature. The two-stage model incorporates both of their insights into a more encompassing theory. Another way to make this point might be to say that the two-stage model appreciates that a joke is a temporal structure, a feature that many previous theories fail to take into account.

So far this approach to jokes may seem very apparent. However, it does already indicate a striking difference between jokes and what many might be tempted to think of as their visual correlates – sight gags. For sight gags, typically, have nothing that corresponds to punch lines and, therefore, they do not call for interpretations to be produced by their audiences. A comic, say Buster Keaton (in the film *The General*) sitting on the connecting rod of the wheel of a locomotive, is so forlorn a rejected lover that he fails to notice that the train has started up. Our laughter rises as we await his moment of recognition and it erupts when we see that he realizes his plight. Similarly, when a comic heads unawares toward the proverbial banana peel, our levity builds as his fall becomes inevitable. Though the characters in gags like these may be puzzled by the dislocation of their expectations, the audience is not puzzled, no matter how amused it may be. We anticipate the prat-fall; there is nothing surprising about it for us. The character may be perplexed, but we are not, and so there is no need for us to interpret anything. What has happened is obvious and predicted.²¹

If the punch line/interpretation structure – what we can call the cognitive address of jokes – serves generally to differentiate jokes from sight gags, more perhaps needs to be said about why it differentiates them from noncomic riddles and ordinary narratives, not to mention puzzles of the sort Martin Gardener concocts or difficult mathematical problems. In order to draw these distinctions, it is important to take note of the *kinds* of interpretations that jokes are designed to elicit from audiences.

Broadly speaking, joke discourse falls into the category of fantasy discourse. In telling a joke-narrative or posing a joke-riddle, one is not constrained to abide by the rules of everyday, serious discourse. We need not avoid equivocation, category errors, inconsistency, contradiction, irrelevance, paradox, or any other sort of incoherence with our standing body of knowledge, whether physical or behavioral, moral or prudential, and so on. Likewise, neither the punch line nor the ensuing interpretation need make sense in terms of consistency, noncontradiction, or compossibility with our standing body of knowledge. In fact, it is the mark of a joke interpretation that it will generally require the attribution of an error – often of the sort itemized in various ways by incongruity theorists of humor – either to a character in a joke or to the implied teller of the joke, or it will require the assumption of such an error by the listener, or it will involve some combination thereof – in order for the interpretation to “work.”

For instance, consider this narrative joke: “An obese man sits down in a pizza parlor and orders a large pie. The waiter asks: ‘Do you want it cut into four pieces or eight?’ The diner replies ‘Four, I’m on a diet.’” To get this joke, we must infer that the diner has ignored the rule for the conservation of quantity that entails that the pie is the same size whether it is cut into four pieces or eight and that, alternatively and mistakenly, the diner is employing the heuristic rule that increases in number frequently result in increases in quantity.²²

Or, in the riddle – “What do you get when you cross an elephant with a fish? Swimming trunks” – we attribute to the implied speaker not only the belief that elephants and fish can mate, but that the result – obtained by fancifully associating certain of their identifying characteristics by means of the pun “swimming trunks” – could count as an answer, thereby violating the principle of charity twice, both in terms of the implied speaker’s beliefs and his reasoning. However, this nevertheless succeeds in connecting the anomalous punch line with the fantastical question. The answer is a mistake, but a mistake we can interpret by attributing outlandish errors – at variance with our standing principles of interpretive charity – to the implied speaker.

Likewise, many ethnic and racist jokes involve not only errors on the part of Polish or Irish characters, but also call upon an interpretation from listeners that embrace exaggerated stereotypes of ignorance wildly at odds with the interpretive principles of charity that we find plausible to mobilize in interpreting ordinary behavior.

In contrast, then, to nonhumorous riddles, mathematical puzzles, and the like, jokes end in punch lines that may in some sense be mistaken themselves and that call for interpretations that require the attribution to or assumption of some kind of error by the implied speaker, and/or characters, and/or the listener, implied or actual. The solutions to nonhumorous riddles and mathematical puzzles, if they are solutions, are error free.

So, on the one hand, to put it vaguely, the interpretation elicited by a joke is implicated in at least one error. For, in a well-made joke, the interpretation elicited by the punch line works; indeed, it works better than any other interpretation that could pop into one’s head at that moment would. What does *working* mean here? That the interpretation connects the punch line to salient details of the narrative or riddle in such a way that the initially puzzling nature of the punch line is resolved. The interpretation fits the punch line and the rest of the joke after the fashion of an hypothesis to the best explanation, *except that* the explanation is not constrained to be coherent with the body of our standing beliefs and knowledge – it need not avoid category errors, contradictions, inconsistency, paradox, equivocation, irrelevance, the gamut of informal logical fallacies, or uncharitable attributions of inappropriate, outlandish, stereotypically exaggerated, normatively unexpected or wildly unlikely behavior, or even full-blown irrationality to human characters or their anthropomorphized stand-ins, and/or to implied authors, and/or to implied listeners.

The interpretations elicited by punch lines are in one sense *optimal*. They get the job done – where the job at hand is interpreting the joke. In this regard, the

joke appeals to the optimizer in the human animal – our willingness to mobilize any heuristic, no matter how suspect, to solve a problem, so long as the heuristic delivers an “answer” efficiently. The interpretations we produce in confronting jokes render the punch line intelligible – that is, understandable rather than believable – in a way that, in short order, fits the prominent, though often hitherto apparently unmotivated, elements of the rest of the joke.

It is this feature of jokes that I think that theorists have in mind when they (ill-advisedly) speak of jokes as rendering the incongruous congruous. Moreover, these interpretations are compelling because they do provide a framework, ready-to-hand, to dispel our perplexities. However, it is not quite right to say that the incongruous has been rendered congruous, because there is always something wrong somewhere in the interpretation, no matter how optimal it is in resolving the puzzle of the joke.²³

Incongruity theorists of humor have supplied us with many of the recurring errors that must be imputed or assumed in order for our joke interpretations to work. As noted earlier, Schopenhauer believed that it was a matter of the fallacious subsumption of a particular under a category by means of a mediating sophistry. On this view, the error embodied in jokes is always a category error. This works nicely with many jokes, such as our earlier example of the moron and the blood test (the relevant category error); but the theory is too imprecise – how are we to understand the range of “concept” (in contrast, say, to maxim) and to know when an incident in a joke counts as introducing a concept rather than a particular? Moreover, the theory is just too narrow; jokes mobilize errors above and beyond category mistakes.

Other incongruity theorists have further limned the kinds of errors that can be brought into play in jokes. Hazlitt speaks of a disjunction between what is and what ought to be; Kierkegaard of contradiction.²⁴ Raskin introduces the notion of opposed scripts.²⁵ Each of these suggests slightly different sources of error. Arthur Koestler emphasizes the bisociation or mixing of inappropriate frames.²⁶ Marie Swabey’s inventory of incongruities includes: irrelevance, the mistaking of contraries for contradictories, and the straining of concepts to the limit case (in addition to category errors).²⁷ Monroe talks of the linking of disparate, the importation of ideas from one realm which belong to another or the collision of different mental spheres, and of attitude mixing.²⁸ And majority opinion agrees that transgressions of norms of appropriate behavior – moral, prudential, polite, and “what everyone knows” – can serve as the locus of error in the mandated interpretation.

These are very useful suggestions; and further incongruities can be isolated: for example, Bergson’s concept of the encrustation of the mechanical in the living,²⁹ which might be extended somewhat, *pace* Bergson, to include the continuation of routinized or ordinary modes of thought into the fantastical circumstances of the joke.

Given the success of previous incongruity theorists of humor at identifying so many of the errors that we find operative in jokes, it is natural to entertain the

possibility that we should build incongruity into the theory of jokes as a necessary constituent – conjecturing that jokes must contain errors that are ultimately traceable to one or another form of incongruity. However, there is no reason, in my view, to suppose that the range of possibilities so far isolated by incongruity theories exhausts the range of error in which a joke-interpretation may be implicated, and, more importantly, there is no reason to believe that all the errors in that range that are yet to be identified will turn out to involve incongruities.

In order to add some substance to these reservations, let me introduce a brief counterexample from Poggio Bracciolini's *Facetiae*, which was first published in 1470.³⁰ “A very virtuous woman of my acquaintance was asked by a postal runner if she didn't want to give him a letter for her husband, who had been absent for a long time as an ambassador for Florence. She replied: ‘How can I write, when my husband has taken his pen away with him, and left my inkwell empty?’ A witty and virtuous reply.”

On the account of jokes offered so far, this joke has a punch line that is puzzling until we reconceive the wife's apparently nonsensical answer as a set of sexual innuendoes. We need also to attribute an error to the wife; her response is literally a *non sequitur*. Moreover, to my mind, such a non sequitur is not really an example of incongruity.

For incongruity has as its root some form of *contrast* such that a relatively specifiable normative alternative – whether cognitive, or moral, or prudential – stands as the background against which the incongruous behavior, or saying, or whatever, is compared (generally in terms of some form of structured opposition). But with a genuine non sequitur it is difficult to identify the norm that is in play with any specificity. One might say that a *non sequitur* is just nonsense, but stretching the concept of incongruity to encompass nonsense (a rather amorphous catchall, it seems to me) robs the notion of incongruity of definition.

That is, for something to be incongruous requires that we be able to point in the direction of something else to which it stands in some relation of structured contrast or conflict (above and beyond mere difference or lack of connection). But with the wife's answer in the preceding joke, it is hard to identify a foil with which it contrasts in terms of any structurally determinate relation.³¹

So, though incongruity is very often (most often?) an extremely helpful umbrella concept for isolating what is wrong with the interpretation elicited by the punch line of a joke, I prefer to use the even more commodious hypothesis that the listener's interpretation of a joke simply involves an error somewhere, leaving open the possibility that it may issue from incongruity or elsewhere and, thereby, acknowledging the fact that we humans are eternally inventive when it comes to “discovering” new ways to make mistakes.

A joke is designed to produce a transition in the cognitive state of the listener. We are moved from a standing state (*M 1*) of assimilating stimuli by means of our conventional conceptual/normative schemes – what I think theorists often misleadingly call our “expectations”³² – into the state (*M 2*) of producing an interpretation that does not cohere with or, at least, is not constrained by the principles

of our standing assumptions nor assimilatable, without remainder, into our body of knowledge.³³ However, if these interpretations oppose rationality in this broad sense, they are nevertheless optimal. For even if they cannot be linked readily and reasonably with our standing body of beliefs, they expeditiously serve the short-term purpose of resolving the puzzle posed by the punch line and of comprehensively reframing the details of the body of the joke.

The joke-situation is one in which the listener is prompted to produce an interpretation which is optimal, while in the broad sense, it is, in some way, not rational. The tension between optimality and rationality is recognized by the listener, and provides the locus of her amusement. This sort of conflict, ordinarily, might be a source of consternation; but within the joke-situation it is advanced for the purpose of enjoyment. The compelling nature or optimality of the interpretation is entertained, despite its implication in absurdity. In the joke-situation, we are allowed to be vulnerable to the attraction of an interpretation that in other contexts would have to be immediately rejected. Speaking only partially metaphorically, in entertaining the interpretation, cum absurdities, while recognizing the rational unacceptability of such an interpretation, we allow ourselves the luxury of being cognitively helpless – appreciating the cognitive force of the interpretation (for example, its comprehensiveness and its simplicity) without feeling the immediate pressure to reject it because of all those liabilities – such as its unassimilability to our body of beliefs – of which we are aware.

Characterizing our cognitive state with respect to joke interpretations as a variety of helplessness is at least suggestive. Laughter, the frequent concomitant of jokes, is also associated with tickling and slight nervousness. If the focus of our mental state with respect to jokes is an interpretation, in which optimality, with an edge, vies openly with rationality, then it seems plausible to speculate that we are in a state that would standardly evoke nervousness. We are vulnerable, but, as with friendly tickling, that vulnerability does not, given the joking frame, constitute clear and present danger. Moreover, if Ted Cohen is right in saying that the joke-situation is one of community,³⁴ we might amplify his observations by noting that part of that sense of community is constituted by the willingness of the joke-audience to render themselves vulnerable in a public group.

Summarizing our thesis so far: x is a joke if and only if (1) x is integrally structured, verbal discourse, generally of the form of a riddle or a narrative (often a fantastical narrative), (2) concluding with a punch line, whose *abruptly* puzzling nature, (3) elicits, usually quite quickly, a determinate interpretation (or determinate range of interpretations) from listeners, (4) which interpretation solves the puzzle and fits the prominent features of the riddle or narrative, but (5) involves the attribution of at least one gross error, but possibly more, to the characters and/or implied tellers of the riddle or narrative, and/or involves the assumption of at least one such error by the implied or actual listener, (6) which error is supposed to be recognized by the listener as an error.

This is an account of what constitutes the joke. “Getting the joke” involves the listener’s production of the interpretation, the recognition of the conflict or con-

flicts staged between what I have called its optimality versus rationality, and, typically, enjoyment of said tension. Often it is maintained that in order to “get a joke,” one must find it funny, which, I suppose, means that one must enjoy it. But by characterizing enjoyment as only a “typical” feature of “getting a joke,” I intend to leave open the possibility that one can “get a joke” without finding it funny or without enjoying it. Speaking personally, I believe that I have heard certain racist jokes which I “got,” but which I did not enjoy.

One counterexample to this account that has been proposed is the trick exam question. And surely graders are familiar with coming across answers to quiz questions that strike them as very funny, as if, indeed, they were a joke. However, such examples, even where the question is designed to prompt a wrong answer, are not jokes, for surely the test takers who advance such questionable answers neither do nor are they supposed to recognize the errors in which their answers are implicated.

Another problem case is the sort of jest beloved by children that goes like this: “Why did they bury Washington on a hill? Because he was dead.” Chickens crossing roadways and firemen’s red suspenders also come to mind here. Such jokes violate my preceding characterization because they are not implicated in errors. Chickens presumably do cross roads to get to the other side and firemen, when they wear red suspenders, indeed do so to hold their pants up.

What I want to say about such examples is that they are meta-jokes. They are jokes about jokes; specifically, they subvert the basic underlying conventions of jokes – that jokes will elicit interpretations that negotiate puzzling punch lines – in such a way that these presuppositions are exposed. These jokes introduce certain questions in the manner of riddles, while their “answers” reveal both that they were not riddles at all and that what is involved in the listener’s conventional stance in regard to a riddle is the anticipation of a puzzle.

Of course, the immediate aim of these meta-jokes is less exalted; it is to trick the listener into adopting the role of a problem solver where no solution is necessary. As an empirical conjecture, I hazard that children come to enjoy this kind of play soon after they acquire initial mastery of the joke form; in a way, such meta-jokes provide a means of celebrating their recently won command of this mode of discourse. Moreover, I do not think that postulating meta-jokes compromises my theory of jokes. For somewhere along the line, every theory will have to come to terms with meta-jokes, like the shaggy-dog story.

Also, since my analysis of jokes relies so heavily on the notion of the joke being filled in by interpretive activity, it may tempt one to indulge the longstanding commonplace that jokes are strong analogs to artworks. I think that we should resist this temptation. Jokes, like at least a great many artworks, do encourage interpretation. However, the interpretation relevant to solving a joke is not only very determinate, but, in general, has been primed by a very economical structuring of information such that it calls forth the pertinent interpretation almost immediately, and, therefore, abets very little interpretive play. The organization of the joke is, in fact, generally so parsimonious that any

attempt to reflect upon the text and its interpretation for any period of time is likely to be very unrewarding. Jokes are not designed for contemplation – one cannot standardly review them in search of subtle nuances that inflect, enrich, or expand our interpretations.

The interpretation of a joke, so to speak, generally exhausts its organization, virtually in one shot, or, alternatively, the organization of the joke calls forth a determinate interpretation that is barely susceptible to the accretion of further nuance. This is not said to deny the fact that we may retell a joke in order to discern the way in which, structurally, its solution was “hidden” from listeners. But, again, even such structural interests are quickly satisfied. Thus, the kind of interpretation elicited by jokes is at odds with at least our ideals concerning the protracted interpretive play that artworks are supposed to educe.

Earlier I rejected the Freudian theory of jokes, but one might wonder whether our successor theory is really so different. Of course, one difference between our theory and Freud’s is that we do not support the hypothesis that the structures of jokes reflect the modes of primitive thought that Freud discovered in the dreamwork.³⁵ However, Freud’s less specialized account – that jokes lift the inhibitions of critical reason – may not seem so very different from our claim that the joke-situation allows us to entertain a puzzle-solution that we know is not rational.

Nevertheless, there is a subtle difference between the two views. Freud’s theory implies that with the joke rationality is banished, if only momentarily. But on my theory, the crux of amusement is the tension between optimality and rationality. Rationality is not banished; it remains as a countervailing force to the “absurd” solution; the mental state we find ourselves in is one in which we are, so to speak, trapped between the rational and optimal. If jokes have a general moral, it is that we humans are irredeemable optimizers. Perhaps, that is why we say we “fall” for jokes. But part of our appreciation of the joke is that we recognize our “fall,” which would be impossible if Freud were right in thinking that jokes send rationality on a holiday.

One outstanding anomaly, however, still plagues our theory. I claim that it is an essential feature of a joke that the listener recognize that the interpretation the joke elicits be in error. But, on the other hand, we are all familiar with racist, ethnic, sexist, and classist jokes that give every appearance of being told to reinforce the darkest convictions of racists, sexists, and so on. It is a fact that such jokes are often told for evil purposes, but my theory makes it difficult to understand how these jokes could serve such purposes. If my theory is correct, then when a racist hears a joke whose interpretation mobilizes a demeaning view of Asian intelligence, if the racist is to respond to it as a joke, it seems that he should realize that the degrading, stereotypically exaggerated view of Asians proffered by the joke is false.

But if the stereotypically degrading view of the racial target of the joke is false, it is hard to see how such jokes could reinforce the racist’s view. How can racism be served by racist jokes, if my theory is accurate? And surely we have more faith

in our belief that racist jokes can serve racism than we can have in a philosophical theory of the sort advanced so far. In order to deal with this challenge, I must say something about the relation of jokes to ethics.

ETHICS AND JOKES

Initially, it may be thought that one advantage of portraying jokes as devices for eliciting interpretations from listeners is that it explains why people are so deeply troubled about the moral status of jokes – or, at least, some jokes. If what we have said is correct, then jokes involve listeners in producing errors that they may momentarily embrace. The listener fills in the elliptical joke structure, and, in order to complete it, the listener must supply an optimal interpretation that is implicated in error. Now in the case of many jokes – such as ethnic, racist, or sexist jokes, for example – those errors often involve morally disturbing stereotypes of the mental, physical, or behavioral attributes of the comic butt who stands for an entire social group. Thus, the moralist is worried not only about the moral statement the joke implies, but also about the effect of encouraging the listener to produce and embrace the erroneous and morally suspect thoughts that the interpretation of the joke requires. That is, the moralist may be concerned that, among other things, the very form of cognitive address employed in jokes involving ethnic, sexist, and racist material is ethically problematic.

In this regard, Aristotle contended that the most effective rhetorical strategy was the enthymeme; for by means of this device the orator can draw her conclusions from the audience in such a way that we take them to be our own.³⁶ Having come upon the conclusion on our own, it strikes us as all the more convincing. That is, in this way, the rhetorical structure reinforces the idea. Jokes, it may be thought, work in this way as well; the audience fills in the interpretation on its own, even though the interpretation is predetermined. Thus, the danger is that where the interpretation requires us to operationalize suspect moral thoughts, such as sexist stereotypes, the very process itself may reinforce the viability of those thoughts. So what is troubling about a sexist joke is not just its content, but its form of cognitive address.

However, as noted previously, my theory of jokes obstructs this conclusion. For a joke-interpretation to “work” requires that the listener not only produce the interpretation but also recognize, at the same time, that it is somehow in error. This recognition is the crux of the humored response. Moreover, racist, ethnic, and sexist jokes seem to presuppose the wrongness of certain stereotypes in order to be gotten.

But, in rejecting the moralist’s worry, we seem driven to the conclusion that even a bigot recognizes the error or absurdity of the exaggerated stereotypes presumed in the interpretations propped by an ethnic joke. If he did not, his response to the punch line would not be laughter, but the matter-of-fact acknowledgment that “yes, that’s just how Irishmen or Poles or Italians or Jews or African-Americans really are.” But this, in turn, seems to make too many racists appear too enlightened.

However, we need not be forced to this conclusion. Consider: “How do you know that an Irishman has been using your personal computer? There’s white-out on the screen.” Here the mandated interpretation is something like: any Irishman is so dumb that he can’t use a computer properly, *and* he even makes corrections in a way that is ultimately self-defeating. In order to appreciate this as a joke, the listener has to realize that this is literally false. However, the punch line can also be construed figuratively.

Much humor rides on figurative language, employing tropes like litotes or meiosis, and irony. In ethnic and racist jokes involving, for example, stereotypes of exaggerated stupidity, the presupposed interpretation may function as hyperbole. This will be the case when the joke is passed for vicious purposes among those committed to the degradation of persons of another race, sex, class, and so on. Within such circles, the presupposed interpretation will be understood as exaggerated – and, therefore, literally trafficking in error – but the exaggeration will be understood as on the side of truth. The racist speaker will be understood by the racist listener as saying something stronger than the literal truth warrants, but also as saying something with the intention that it be corrected so that, though it will not be taken in its strongest formulation, it will still be taken as a strong statement that preserves the same initial polarity (say “major league” stupidity) that the hyperbole did.³⁷ One might imagine the anti-Irish appreciator of the preceding computer joke saying, after an initial burst of laughter: “Well, the Irish aren’t *that* dumb; but they’re really pretty dumb nonetheless.”

Ethnic, racist, and sexist jokes are very often used as insults, and insults customarily may take the form of hyperbole. Perhaps few mothers wore combat boots, but many could not afford Guccis either. Though they are literally and even intentionally false, hyperboles can figuratively point in the direction of an assertion.³⁸ And when racist jokes are told with racist intent to racist audiences, tellers and listeners may regard their presuppositions as strictly and literally false – thereby appreciating them as *merely* jokes – while at the same time correcting the tropological figuration so that it accords with their prejudices.

Thus, if it is agreed that a racist can recognize that the implied interpretation of a racist joke is literally false – thereby “getting the joke” – but also take it figuratively as an instance of hyperbole, then the theory of jokes advanced in the preceding section need not be taken to be incompatible with the view that racist jokes can reinforce racist ideology.

It should be noted that I have claimed that racist, ethnic, and sexist jokes are “very often used as insults.” Here I am allowing what may seem troublesome to many, namely, that there may be cases where they are not insults. This seems borne out by the fact that there are many groups, including Jews, the Irish, and African Americans, who tell jokes about themselves that employ the same exaggerated stereotypes that outsiders use.³⁹ It seems reasonable to suppose that even if some of this joking reflects intragroup rivalry and, in some cases, possibly self-hatred, some of it, at the same time, is indulged without the intention of insulting one’s own ethnic group. Whether a racist joke is morally charged, then, depends on the

intentions of the teller and the context of reception. Pragmatic considerations of particular jokes in context determine whether the joke is an insult – whether its literal absurdity is to be taken as an indication of a morally obnoxious assertion by means, for example, of hyperbole.⁴⁰

In emphasizing the relevance of use and context here, I mean to deny the simple moralistic view, sketched above, that jokes, even ethnic jokes, are evil simply in virtue of being some sort of rhetorical machine whose form of cognitive address automatically reinforces wicked ideas. Whether a joke is evil depends on the intentions of its teller and the uses its listeners make of it.

Quite clearly, ethnic jokes do not instill beliefs in listeners simply by being told. When I originally heard the preceding computer joke, it was told about Newfoundlanders, not about Irishmen. I laughed; I “got the joke.” But it neither instilled nor reinforced any beliefs I have about that group, for I have no well-formed beliefs about people from Newfoundland, except, perhaps, that they live in Canada and people tell jokes about them.

Likewise, I have heard the joke told by people as ignorant as I am about the inhabitants of Newfoundland to the equally ignorant with successful results. This prompts me to suspect that it is possible to derive an almost formal pleasure from ethnic jokes and their ilk that is apart from their derisory potential. The focus of this formal appreciation may be the way in which the joke, particularly the punch line, is so perfectly structured to bring about what I earlier referred to as our change in mental state.

However, the conjecture that ethnic jokes and the like may be formally appreciated does not amount to a license to tell or to laugh at them in any context so long as one’s intention in telling or laughing is not, in one’s own judgment, connected to derisory hyperbole and the like. Since such jokes can be used to encourage racism, sexism, classism, and so on, one should be morally concerned enough to refrain from telling them in contexts in which they might stoke these sentiments; this probably applies to most of the social situations in which we find ourselves. Of course, it is not just the case that we may not know how our audience may respond to or use such jokes. In matters like sexism and racism, we may not know all there is to know about our own hearts as well. Though we may think that our Irish jokes or Polish jokes do not reflect our beliefs about the Poles or the Irish, the tides of racism and sexism probably run deeper. It is very likely that our own intentions and their background conditions are generally obscure in these matters, in part because what is involved in racism, classism, and sexism is not yet completely understood. Thus, our own judgment about our intentions in telling and laughing at racist and sexist jokes may not be reliable. And this supplies us with further moral reasons against indulging in this type of humor.

I have rejected the simple moralist worry that certain types of jokes may be evil as a function of rhetorically bringing listeners to entertain certain immoral ideas in our process of what I call filling-in the joke. This hypothesis conflicts with my view of what it is to “get a joke”; for I maintain that this requires that the listener know that the interpretation one uses to solve the joke puzzle be implicated

in error. On the other hand, I do not want to deny that immoral pleasures may be derived from jokes where, despite the recognition of the literal absurdities or errors that the joke mandates, the joke can be used – figuratively, for example – as a serviceable means to insult or to dominate another social group. Jokes, that is, can be immoral in terms of the motives they serve rather than in terms of their particular structure of cognitive address.⁴¹



THE PARADOX OF JUNK FICTION

Perhaps on your way to some academic conference, if you had no papers to grade, you stopped in the airport gift shop for something to read on the plane. You saw racks of novels authored by the likes of Mary Higgins Clark, Michael Crichton, John Grisham, Danielle Steel, Sidney Sheldon, Stephen King, Sue Grafton, Elmore Leonard, Sara Paretsky, Tom Clancy, and so on. These are the kinds of novels that, when you lend them to friends, you don't care, unless you live in Bowling Green, Ohio, whether you ever get them back. They are mass, popular fictions. In another era, they would have been called pulp fictions. Following Thomas Roberts,¹ I will call them junk fictions, under which rubric I will also include things like Harlequin romances; sci-fi, horror, and mystery magazines; comic books; and broadcast narratives on either the radio or TV, as well as commercial movies.

There are a number of interesting philosophical questions that we may ask about junk fiction. We could, for example, attempt to characterize its essential features. However, for the present, I will assume that the preceding examples are enough to provide you with a rough-and-ready notion of what I am calling junk fiction, and I will attempt to explore another feature of the phenomenon, namely, what I call the paradox of junk fiction.

The junk fictions that I have in mind are all narratives. Indeed, their story dimension is the most important thing about them. Stephen King, for instance, makes this point by saying that he is primarily a storyteller rather than a writer. Junk fictions aspire to be page-turners – the blurb on the cover of *Stillwatch* by Mary Higgins Clark says that it is “designed to be read at breathtaking speed” – and what motivates turning the page so quickly is our interest in what happens next. We do not dawdle over Clark's diction as we might over Updike's nor do we savor the complexity of her sentence structure, as we do with Virginia Woolf's. Rather, we read for story.

Moreover, junk fictions are the sort of narratives that commentators are wont to call formulaic. That is, junk fictions generally belong to well-entrenched genres, which themselves are typified by their possession of an extremely limited repertoire