

# Why So Serious?: A Study in Perspective, Perfection, and Plausibility

Laura Truman

University of New Hampshire, Durham '10

---

---

Ask any arbitrary crowd of people what personality trait they value most highly in others, and before any Aristotelian virtue or any moral strength - before honesty, intelligence, or tolerance, the majority of people will inevitably say “a sense of humor.” Although it is currently the Holy Grail of personality and talent, humor has not always been so valued. Humor has historically been delegated to the lower classes and been labeled a lesser, unhealthy, or even immoral emotion. Plato insisted that no civilized man should enjoy comedy, and Shelley wrote that “there can be no entire regeneration of mankind until laughter is put down.”<sup>1</sup> Why this constant, unabashed rejection of the funny, totally incomprehensible to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerner?

The truth is, however, that the closer one looks at humor the more insidious it becomes. Firstly, every type of humor is the product of, or a reaction to, an imperfect world. Humor plays off of very specific scenarios of misfortune, intentional malice, and escapism that are only relevant in the context of imperfection or evil, and therefore humor itself is entirely impossible in a perfect world. Secondly, in order to find a situation funny, one must not be experiencing other emotions such as fear, pity, anger, or compassion that inhibit laughter. Finally, laughter is necessarily inactive, so to find humor in a situation is to be immobilized. So is humor, and therefore detachment and inaction, an appropriate response to a world in disarray? The answer, it seems, is that to see the humor in a situation requires a distinct perspective of the world and such a perspective requires that everything is funny... or nothing is.

No matter how incompatible conflicting theories of humor seem to be, they all share a common premise – that humor is only possible in an imperfect world. The two most prominent theories of humor – the superiority theory by Hobbes and the incongruity theory by Kant – while claiming to be in opposition to each other, both place the funny squarely in the center of imperfection or downright evil. Although Hobbes developed the first fully functioning superiority theory, its roots can be traced as far back as Plato. While never developing an all-encompassing theory of humor, Plato claimed that the “nature of the ridiculous” was pleasure in the misfortunes of those around us.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, Plato does not approve of laughter, beset as it is

with failures on both ends. In fact, in Plato's *Republic* he even says that "[Our rulers] must not be prone to laughter... and if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it".<sup>3</sup> According to Plato, we laugh at failure, and this laughter stems from moral failure in ourselves such as envy or pride. Hobbes expounds on his theory and names it the superiority theory. After a fairly brief discourse on laughter itself, Hobbes concludes that humor is always a result of our sudden realization that we are better than someone or something else. We laugh when we are superior, and our laughter confirms that we "think the infirmities of others a sufficient matter for [our] triumph."<sup>4</sup> There is nothing funny in life that is not a "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others".<sup>5</sup> We laugh when someone slips on a banana peel because we have *not* slipped – similarly, comic villains make us laugh because of their moral failings and the consequences of those failings. Of course, there are several very large holes in the superiority theory. One such is the common practice of mocking one's oppressors, as Ted Cohen points out in his book Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters. "In the 1930s and 1940s Jews made jokes about Germans," he says, and "all through the career of the Soviet Union, Russians made jokes about Russian communists, and Poles did and still do make jokes about Russians."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, we do not always laugh when we feel superior – often feelings of superiority come quite apart from any humor that we find in a situation. We don't laugh when someone in our class fails a test, despite a feeling of superiority that comes from it. However, it is clear that Plato and Hobbes' superiority theory is often accurate, and that there are times when we laugh because someone is in pain and we are not, or someone is a fool and we are not. And such laughter depends on the imperfection of the world.

Not everyone was pleased with this theory of humor, however. Immanuel Kant had no qualms about the morality of laughter, because he saw none of the "superiority" and envy that Plato and Hobbes claimed was present in all laughter. He spends a bare minimum of six pages on the subject in his work *The Critique of Judgment*, but within those pages his "incongruity theory" concedes that a comic has "originality of spirit" and is not condemned as morally degenerate.<sup>7</sup> The incongruity theory states simply that something is funny when the understanding "does not find what it expected."<sup>8</sup> We need not find something inferior to find it funny, we must simply have our expectation confounded. "In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)," Kant claims.

“Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”<sup>9</sup> When the man slips on the banana peel, we laugh because we expected him to keep walking, not because we are glad we’re still standing up. A joke plays off of the same idea – that we are expecting a certain conclusion and then are confounded by the reality. This theory, however, is also subject to disapproval in the philosophical community. In his essay, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought,” Morreall has the same problem with this as many do with the superiority theory. “Something striking us as incongruous is not a sufficient condition, but only a necessary condition for our being amused,” Morreall explains. “We can react to incongruous events with puzzlement, or with fear, anger, and other negative emotions, rather than with amusement.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say that even as a necessary condition, the incongruity theory is slightly off base, and that “that many philosophers have seen something perverse about human beings, the rational animals, engaging in an activity the whole point of which is to violate their conceptual patterns and frustrate their understanding. People who enjoy incongruity would be like travelers who discover that they are heading in the wrong direction – and enjoy the discovery.”<sup>11</sup>

However, despite the flaws in these two theories, it is important to notice a common stand that both take – humor is wrongness. Both theories are entirely incompatible in a world where things run as they are supposed to run. Incongruity occurs when something happens that ought not to happen. Similarly, the superiority theory rests not only on the failings of those around us but on our own feelings of inadequacy that must be assuaged by laughter. If there was no moral failing in the world, then both of these theories would fall apart. Interestingly, one of the most common critiques of both theories, that neither leaves room for word play, puns, or nonsense, is perfectly compatible with the theory of an imperfect world. Monro claims in Argument of Laughter that puns and plays on words are a revolt against the natural order things – namely, the way that the word ought to be spelled or what the word ought to mean. We laugh because the correct spelling or correct idea has been inverted, giving us an escape from the reality of good spelling and proper behavior.<sup>12</sup> Monro’s theory of humor eventually boils down to a “a shattering of formula, an escape from too rigid connections, whether social, moral, or artistic.”<sup>13</sup> Word play and puns give us an escape from the universe, from rules, and from convention. In the same way, when we find sheer nonsense funny, such as that in Lewis Carroll’s works, we are reveling in the escape that is provided us. The word “escape” implies either that

the place one is in is inadequate, or implies that you are inadequate for the place (a poor man could just as easily run away from a palace he felt uncomfortable in as a convict could escape from prison). There is no escape where there is perfect happiness. Either the world displeases us because *it* is wrong, or the world displeases us because *we* are wrong. Without wrongness, there is no need for escape.

In looking for a sufficient condition for what is funny, I would like to present the idea that the only sufficient condition for humor is that it be painful, immoral, or out of order from what ought to be. Conscience revolts at such an idea – the implications of it are immense. If such a conclusion is true, it would mean not only that everything that is funny is morally corrupt or wrong, but that everything that is wrong is necessarily funny. However, what really inhibits us from finding really horrific moral items unfunny, when, perhaps, they might be? If everything that is funny is wrong, is it possible that everything that is wrong has the potential to be funny?

In order to prove or disprove this strange concept, it is necessary to examine the central concepts of perspective and detachment. In order to find anything funny, one must necessarily be uninhibited by certain other emotions. For example, Monro states that “our laughter at the misfortunes of others may be inhibited by pity that we feel for the victims.”<sup>14</sup> Any situation that could potentially be funny – such as the comic villain, who is only funny as long as we do not feel pity for his abused wife; slapstick, which is only funny as long as no “serious” and lasting damage is done; and even jokes, which are always centered around some misfortune that is detached from the reality of suffering – is only ever inhibited by our sense of moral shame, outrage, or pity. Some have labeled this a kind of “irresponsibility theory,” saying that humor always arises out of a detachment of irresponsibility for the pain or wrongness that we are enjoying. There is, Morreall explains, an ultimate “incompatibility between being amused by something and feeling practical concern about it.”<sup>15</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, for that same reason, discourages laughter, saying that it is the “instrument of irresponsibility.”<sup>16</sup> The truth is, to find something funny, there must not be any other “serious” emotions inhibiting it. Is it true, then, that humor is simply what is left when all other emotions fade? Is that why movies such as Napoleon Dynamite, the cult classic, are funny? Is a movie in which absolutely nothing happens funny simply because there are no other emotions in the way?

If this is the case, than humor is simply what one sees when one is looking from a particular perspective. Detachment itself is a perspective, and to detach oneself from life is to see life as a disinterested observer, as if what happens does not affect you or those around you. The ancient Greeks famously saw tragedy as humanity's view of life and comedy as the gods' view. "Indifference," Bergeson says, "is [humor's] natural environment." He goes on to create for the reader a contrast between the dramatic and the humorous in life: "Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done, act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion... now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator; many a drama will turn into a comedy."<sup>17</sup> In short, humor is what happens when we are no longer invested in events around us. When we laugh, "we are conscious of seeing the whole human scene from a godlike level at which all men and women look pretty much alike."<sup>18</sup> Humor fosters a perspective totally devoid of virtue.

Secondly, humor is ultimately paralyzing. You cannot find a situation funny and still act on it. When we find wrongdoing funny, we incapacitate ourselves towards fixing it, because by laughing, we are taking the perspective that the situation itself is not relevant to either us or the people involved. "An ethically responsible attitude toward drunkenness, lying, thievery, and adultery involves the desire to change these kinds of behavior," says Morreall, "but on the comic stage the drunk, the liar, the thief, and the unfaithful spouse are all presented as something to laugh about, something to enjoy."<sup>19</sup> Conrad Hyers agrees that the essence of humor is to avoid action and responsibility, claiming that "it is possible to laugh at oneself as a way of excusing oneself, as a technique for not looking candidly at oneself, and of casually evading the deeper necessities of repentance, seeking forgiveness, and gaining restitution and change. Here humor, instead of being the servant of seriousness... becomes the screen of irresponsibility... Humor can become an easy path of escape from intellectual labor, moral accountability, and religious commitment."<sup>20</sup> How could one ever justify a reaction to the world that involves emotional separation and ultimate apathy and inaction? How can one ever look evil and face with no desire to reform, look suffering in the face with no attempt to save, and instead – laugh? Mark Twain famously said "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand." But is there anything that *ought* to stand? To laugh is to devalue, and can we justify devaluing human suffering?

But then, if laughter is the gods' reaction to life... why not be gods? We laugh when a person falls because it is ultimately irrelevant – their life will not be affected besides for a moment of physical pain that will pass – but we do not laugh at a war because it is “relevant” and important. The gods, the Greeks tell us, laughed at everything: “our endless and repetitive cycle of suffering, our horror of it, our inability to escape it. The big, drunk, flawed, horny Greek gods watched us for entertainment, like a dirty, funny, violent, repetitive cartoon.”<sup>21</sup> If perspective is all that prevents life from being funny, why should we all not take the perspective that “what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun”?<sup>22</sup> From the other direction, what makes one person's pride and one person's moral faults so irrelevant, anyway? Certainly it does not affect the entire world or change the course of history, but if the suffering of many is relevant, why is the suffering of one person irrelevant? Mass suffering is of the same quality as the pain of a single person – is it really only the idea that “one person doesn't matter” that allows us to laugh? Is one person's bad day, “comic vice,” really so unimportant to their soul, if in fact they have one? And if humans individually are irrelevant, how can any historical event be relevant in what we call “the grand scheme of things”? There were wars and rumors of wars six thousand years ago, one thousand years ago, and one hundred years ago. Is any vice or wrongdoing so small compared to larger problems, when, in reality, larger problems are just as small? Why not “become as gods, laughing at our own follies”?<sup>23</sup> What happened today will happen tomorrow, and no event, no matter how apparently important, will stand the test of time as something of actual relevance to the universe.

It seems that both of these conclusions seem intolerable to conscience or consumption – either one laughs at nothing or everything. Such a conclusion is not only unpleasant, but slightly ridiculous. In light of this, I argue that in matters of laughter, one ought to defer philosophical ventures in favor of scientific conclusions. Scientists uniformly agree that laughter promotes heart health, weight loss, and healthy stress levels.<sup>24 25</sup> Since scientists agree that food, sleep, wine, sex, and laughter are all necessary portions of a healthy lifestyle, perhaps the answer is simply to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will die. Even the very attempt to write a philosophical paper on the idea of humor seems ill-informed, and so I will defer to science with a glass of wine and a Woody Allen movie. *Que sera, sera.*

- 
- 1 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. H. L. Mencken, *A New Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles from Ancient and Modern Sources* (New York: Knopf, 1946) 653.
- 2 Plato. Philebus, trans. J.C.B. Gosling. (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1975) 75.
- 3 Plato. Republic. 388d. qtd. Cohen, Ted. *Jokes: philosophical thoughts on joking matters.* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1999) 57.
- 4 Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature.* (Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1994) 55.
- 5 Hobbes, 54
- 6 Cohen, Ted. *Jokes: philosophical thoughts on joking matters.* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1999) 44.
- 7 Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment.* (Indianapolis, Ind. : Hackett Pub. Co., 1987) 138.
- 8 Kant, 134
- 9 Kant, 135
- 10 Morreall, John. "The Rejection of Humor In Western Thought." *Philosophy East and West* 39 (01 July 1989): 243-265. *Philosopher's Index.* EBSCO. Dimond Library, Durham, NH. 17 Dec. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/loginspx?direct=true&dbl&AN=PHL1166326&site=ehost-live>> 6.
- 11 Morreall, 7
- 12 Monro, D.H. *Argument of Laughter.* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1951) 97.
- 13 Monro, 138.
- 14 Monro, 40.
- 15 Morreall, John. "The Rejection of Humor In Western Thought." *Philosophy East and West* 39 (01 July 1989): 243-265. *Philosopher's Index.* EBSCO. Dimond Library, Durham, NH. 17 Dec. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/loginspx?direct=true&dbl&AN=PHL1166326&site=ehost-live>> 14.
- 16 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humor and Faith," in Hyers (ed.), 1969 p. 141. qtd in Lippitt, John. "Is a Sense of Humour a Virtue?." *Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 88.1 (01 Jan. 2005): 72-92. *Philosopher's Index.* EBSCO. Dimond Library, Durham, NH. 17 Dec. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login-asp?direct=rue&db=phl&AN=HL2083594&site=ehost-live>>. 11.
- 17 Bergeson, Henri. *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic.* (London : Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1911) 5.
- 18 Monro, D.H. *Argument of Laughter.* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1951) 57
- 19 Morreall, John. "The Rejection of Humor In Western Thought." *Philosophy East and West* 39 (01 July 1989): 243-265. *Philosopher's Index.* EBSCO. Dimond Library, Durham, NH. 17 Dec. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/loginspx?direct=true&dbl&AN=PHL1166326&site=ehost-live>> 15.
- 20 M. Conrad Hyers, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred," in Hyers (ed.), 1969, 26. qtd in Lippitt, John. "Is a Sense of Humour a Virtue?." *Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 88.1 (01 Jan. 2005): 72-92. *Philosopher's Index.* EBSCO. Dimond Library, Durham, NH. 17 Dec. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login-asp?direct=rue&db=phl&AN=HL2083594&site=ehost-live>>. 12.
- 21 Gough, Julian. "Divine Comedy." *Prospect.* Issue 184, May 2007. <[http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=9276](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=9276)>
- 22 Holy Bible. *Today's New International Version.* (Colorado Springs, CO : International Bible Society, 2005) Ecclesiastes 1:9.
- 23 Gough, 1
- 24 "Is Laughter the Best Medicine?" CBS News. April 7, 2006. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories-/2006/04/07/health/webmd/main1481492.shtml>
- 25 Murray, Michael W. "Laughter is the "Best Medicine" for Your Heart." University of Maryland Medical Center. 3 November 2008. <<http://www.umm.edu/features/laughter.htm>>