SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR IN RELATION TO LAUGHTER

by

Donald Hanks
University of New Orleans

Prelude

I am proud to say that I possess a superego, a refined inner sense of moral obligation. It is that aspect of my personality that is soluble in alcohol.¹

Laughter is among our most highly valued human achievements. It is a topic which has over the centuries attracted a modicum of philosophical attention, but a generalized theory which would account for every instance in which we laugh remains elusive. Philosophers have on occasion succeeded in grasping features of the phenomenon, but not the whole. Historically, three tentative efforts at stating a unified theory have been formulated, but each of these concentrates too narrowly on the correlation between laughter and humor.

The first hypothesis, initiated by Aristotle and reformulated by Hobbes, argues that humor is simply a ploy we use to gain a sudden superiority over someone who is thereby demeaned. Aristotle asserted that to jest at the expense of another is "a sort of abuse" that perhaps ought not to be allowed.² In Hobbes' view, the laughter
that stems from humor invariably reflects a "sudden glory" which arises from the misfortune of another and which enhances one's own sense of worth.³

The second theory, originated by Kant and later advanced by Schopenhauer, maintains that laughter spontaneously results from the perception of incongruity.

The third, articulated by Herbert Spencer and also by Freud, holds that laughter is in every case the physiological release of pent up tension.

These proposals all have merit, each possessing a measure of explanatory power. But they suffer from a common defect. The effort to associate laughter and humor has proved too formidable a task. The physiological features (the grimaces, muscular contortions, sharp exhalations, and sounds) are always or for the most part the same, but the causes vary widely. In many situations humor is the catalyst, but in others it is not.⁴

Gorgias, for instance, is remembered as having dispensed the following sophistical advice: "In contending against adversaries, destroy their seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness."⁵ He evidently viewed laughter as a polemical tool, recommending that it be calculated, that is to say, divorced deliberately from humor in order to win a debater's trick.

Other counterexamples come to mind. The laugh of a baby being
tickled does not suggest that the infant is amused, nor does the socially conditioned titter of the geisha, giggling behind her fan.

Moreover, our laugh of delight when the magician pulls a rabbit from his hat does not arise from anything comical, any more than the laugh of victory when our favorite team wins, or our chuckle of surprise when we unexpectedly encounter an old friend, since the friend does not strike us as funny. Inappropriate or hysterical laughter at funerals, or on the part of hebephrenics, is not motivated by humor. In all the above cases, the physiology of laughter is present as an effect, but humor is not the cause.

It is not my intent in this essay to evolve a comprehensive theory, nor to offer a critique of these counterexamples. I wish instead to confine my scope to the incongruity hypothesis, but to a version which Kant and Schopenhauer did not examine, specifically that type in which one belittles oneself for the sake of a laugh. Laughter of this sort, unlike the exceptions, is in every case a byproduct of humor.

**Interlude**

I begin each fresh new day with a healthy, nourishing, wholesome breakfast, consisting of the finest cereal grains, malt, hops, yeast and water.

Cicero once suggested that intrinsically humorous elements subsist as external structures in the world. But I prefer to assume that humor is not built into the nature of things. It occurs within
limits imposed by boundary conditions relative to a human way of thinking. A subjectivist view of humor is therefore indicated. Our jokes do not mirror the real. They occur within the phenomenology of human experience, as appearances only, having no one to one correspondence with a true world beyond. In Kantian terms, instances of humor fall under rules which we ourselves have furnished. The humorous structures we discover in our worlds were originally lodged there by us, and the joke that causes one person to laugh may not be amusing to another.

In our organization of experience we form gestalts, patterns of meaning, each guided by the ideal of inner coherence. Reason is the governing faculty, since every such pattern is a limited domain which we conceive in its integral totality, with the proviso that the divisions within the manifold be consistent one with another. Coherence implies conjunctive harmony among the component parts. But reason also upholds the disjunctive principle of contradiction, which prohibits binary opposites from having the same truth value. So the fact of an incongruity within a gestalt guarantees that it is internally flawed, and two contrary gestalts cannot both be true.

Gestalts are analogous to games, each conforming to its own set of rules, and the games are not always in touch with each other. When one system of meaning, with its regulative principles, collides with another having different rules, a sudden surprise can occur.
But prior to such a surprise, each coherent matrix in its isolation must be clearly cognized. Otherwise we could not see the collision when it took place and the humorous moment would be lost. Moreover, if the gestalts grow too large they become unwieldy and will not lead to laughter, since we are unable to keep up with the original set of expectations and simply become confused.  

Furthermore, it is the tendency of every gestalt to foster within us a mood of flowing complacency, or habitual expectation. When such an expectation is contradicted, the process is suddenly interrupted, and the incongruity with which we are then confronted arouses the faculty of emotion. Reason appreciates the conflict, but our feelings operate at a slower speed. The excess of emotion then finds kinesthetic expression, and the laughter of incongruity results because an unexpected development has arisen and we lack the emotional elasticity to adapt in time.  

The moment the laugh erupts, reason retires from the scene. The laugh contains an element of spontaneity, inasmuch as the faculty of volition is bypassed. We react involuntarily, since the laugh that is willed is not precipitated by humor, but is a contrived gesture of compliance to be invoked when we have an ulterior motive, or when we feel obligated to be polite within a social context. At the annual company banquet, for example, I might find myself seated beside a woman festooned in imitation jewelry
and saturated with a cheap perfume that causes the eyes of everyone at the table to water. Since she is the wife of the boss, it just might be politic to appear as though her unspeakably coarse jokes were actually funny.

**Interlude**

Golden memories linger from my undergraduate days. Throughout the entirety of my sophomore year I lived on a diet of gin and antacid tabs. But I didn't neglect my health! Each morning I popped a one-a-day vitamin pill.

Herbert Spencer identified a characteristic which is common to instances of humorous incongruity. The laughter is "descending" and occurs only when the noble is trashed in favor of the base. A higher datum is thrust into contrast with a lower datum and becomes trivialized in the process. The reverse is not ludicrous, however. In descending incongruity, tension is built up which finds muscular expression. In ascending incongruity, by contrast, when a lofty datum emanates from something mundane, awe is felt and muscles relax instead of tensing.\(^\text{11}\)

Descending humor, termed "degradation" by Santayana, always demeans some person or principle.\(^\text{12}\) This is why humor and pathos are often indistinguishable. Despite the fun and fellowship laughter brings, we pay a price. Degradation brings enjoyment. "But the qualm remains, and the pleasure is never perfect."\(^\text{13}\)
In descending humor the exalted is brought low, which can be painful to the vanity of those who are, or who identify with, the exalted. So within the laugh there is an admixture of pleasure and pain. As in a game, there is a loser, and losing brings discomfort. This discomfort is perhaps what Plato had in mind in Philebus when he proposed that in laughing at what is ridiculous in our friends, the laugh is pleasurable but stems from malice, and so is painful as well. The pleasure is asymmetrical, since the person laughing would not care to be laughed at.

In self-deprecating humor, however, the self is designated as the loser, but in the process is transformed into a winner. The self triumphs over the self, but with the curious result that both the self and the observer enjoy the pleasure associated with winning rather than the pain that goes with losing. When the malice that bothered Plato is directed at the self, it becomes symmetrical and is robbed of its pain.

Hobbes shared the view that when we laugh at incongruity, it is invariably at the expense of someone else. "For when a jest is broken upon ourselves," he wrote, "we never laugh thereat." To become the object of our own ridicule would allow another person to triumph over us, and the essential purpose of humor would be subverted.

But, Hobbes notwithstanding, the humor can descend upon
oneself. One has only to consider the classics of comedy, to recall Jack Benny portraying himself as a miser, or Jimmy Durante mocking his nose. These entertainers crafted comic personas within which they systematically belittled themselves, to the enormous enjoyment of audiences.

Humor of a self-deprecating kind occurs as a special case of incongruity, which is itself a special case of humor in general. A dialectical interplay of sorts is apparent, consisting of a persona and its foibles taken as thesis, culminating in the synthesis of the laugh. The antithetical moment, however, in which the persona is demeaned, serves to affirm rather than negate the comedian.

Descending humor presupposes that the relatively sacred is profaned. But when the profane is profaned, and the object of ridicule is oneself, the polarity is reversed from subject/object to subject/subject. The listener identifies with the comedian, who is no longer an object but an aspect within the subjectivity of the listener. The sentiment which is aroused in the audience is compassionate instead of competitive, convivial rather than malicious, and the laugh is shared rather than aimed at a target. Disjunctive diversity gives way to conjunctive unity and, as with humorous incongruity in general, the smooth flowing process that was temporarily interrupted resumes. At such a moment the audience typically breaks into spontaneous laughter.
Interlude

The sacrament of the Eucharist is the essence of Catholic ritual, for within the sacred depths of this transsubstantial moment the bread is broken and the wine consumed. And so at Mass I find myself, though a Protestant, kneeling at the altar—again, and again, and again.

In self-deprecating humor the size of a laugh can be measured by the degree of annihilation of a gestalt, or, more accurately, in the reinforcement of one that has already been annihilated and is known to be an aspect of the entertainer's persona. Gestalts have aspects that are essential and others that are peripheral. The larger the laugh a comedian evokes, the closer the joke is to the essence.\textsuperscript{16}

Humorists as a group behave like philosophers up to a point,\textsuperscript{17} probing for an elusive essential nature, and those who succeed in poking fun at themselves are clear headed in distinguishing the essential from the accidental. Otherwise they fail to attract an audience. Success is conditioned by the following characteristics which must be presupposed before humor of the self-effacing type can be crowned with laughter.

In the first place, the gestalts that are essential to the persona must be archetypally timeless, like the image of the miser. Gestalts dealing with current events are accidental and tend to fade rather quickly. The comedian dealing with timely topics must
constantly update the act, since yesterday's headlines are already obsolete. The individual might enjoy a very successful career, but not one which maximizes the humor of self-deprecation.

Second, the entertainer's stage image must contain gestalts that are well developed in the minds of the audience. When the curtain rises, an habitual expectation is already in place, ready to be confronted with incongruity. This implies that the comedian probably had a second job for a number of years before the persona became sufficiently well known to the public.

Third, the performer must possess technical competence in any artistic areas that are lampooned. Classic examples would include Jack Benny torturing his violin, being a good enough musician to sound bad for comic effect, and Jimmy Durante and Victor Borge, both of whom could tickle the ivories, as the saying goes.

Fourth, the successful comedian is not emotionally vulnerable and, with feelings under control, will not be wounded when the persona is maligned.¹⁸

Finally, the self-deprecating humorist is enhanced rather than demeaned in the eyes of an audience, provided the persona is perceived as innocent and good hearted, possessing integrity, a Sir Galahad of sorts, who knows no harm will come his way because his heart is pure. His ethical choices are free from sin. The required image is that of a naïf, like the Fool in the major arcana of the
tarot, lacking in cynicism and impervious to hazards in the environment. Such a figure is by no means pathetic. "In the comic art," as Michael Gelven explains, "the exposure as a fool does not shame."19

When these conditions are fulfilled, the origin of the humor is seen to lie in the security and strength of the humorist rather than weakness. This is a call to action, for within the listener a vicarious identification is awakened, namely the desire to achieve a comparable level of security. When the comedian pokes fun at the self, the audience does not feel contempt, but develops a fuller positive appreciation of the performer. All of us feel inadequate at times, and when the comic dares to become the butt of the joke, a self-confidence is revealed which wins our approval and deepens our sense of self-worth.

The characteristics cited above, which pertain to the laughter associated with self-deprecating humor, would not be compatible with a theory of laughter confined to humor in general, which comes in many flavors. We laugh for instance at jokes and puns (wherein riddles must be solved), as well as at farce (in which the characters are preposterously mono-dimensional figures in ribald settings), and at wit (with its intellectual twists and subtleties of language), at satire (spoofing social virtues and vices), at slapstick (featuring physical antics), and at parody (debasing to
Each of these modes is amusing in its own way. A common thread running through them is our yearning for novelty. Humor constantly self-surpasses, as generalizations from experience are transcended. We laugh in part because, in catching up, we realize the horizon has once again receded. The soul of humor burgeons upward, ever protean and expanding, and a joke retold is stale.

**Interlude**

An inner vision of justice serves, in a double sense, to bring order into my life. Standing recently at a bar of justice, perhaps on 52nd Street, I ordered and was served a martini, a margarita, a mai tai, and a manhattan—one of each for single vision, and two taxis home for double.

Philosophy, as a pursuit and practice, inclines us toward a general theory of laughter, one that would explain every instance. But self-deprecating humor is based on the subject/subject logic of conjunction, as opposed to other varieties that are grounded in the subject/object logic of disjunction. The ideal of stating a unified theory restricted to humor alone is thereby complicated, since the laughter generated by the former is mutually enjoyed within the subjectivity of the humorist and the audience interacting, whereas the laughter of the latter finds an external object to deride and therefore remains unshared. An even more foreboding task would be that of formulating a theory of laughter which would range not only
over instances generated by humor, but also over those that have other causes. Humor wells like a kaleidoscope from unseen depths, forever bursting into novel instantiations, and will therefore resist the formulation of any general theory that seeks to integrate it with the other causes of laughter by isolating a single unifying thread.

In summary let me say, so far as self-deprecating humor is concerned, that the gestalts within a comic persona are dimensions of phenomenal experience, not objects in the world. The person in the audience is not an object but a subject in disguise, and the competing gestalts in which the incongruities arise are subjective appreciations, inner sympathies, not entities in an external world. They are shared patterns of organization which we, comedian and listener in concert, impose upon the inner flow of experience.

In the meanwhile, the three traditional theories of laughter retain their power. For when laughter occurs, it just may be associated with humor, and it just may have resulted from a sense of sudden superiority over another, or from the perception of an incongruity, or as a release of tension. But if the laugh results from self-deprecation, then its source is a common center wherein comedian and audience are engaged in a mutual search for mirth.

**Postlude**

True belief ranks among our sacred trusts. Will our anchor
hold? Everyone needs something to believe in. Right now, I believe I'll have another beer--.

NOTES

1. This gag, adapted from Arthur Koestler's *The Act of Creation* (p. 65), probably has a much longer history. It illustrates his contention that successful jokes contain riddles which the listener is able to solve. The person laughing at this one must have a prior knowledge of Freudian theory, chemistry, and the capacity of alcohol to dissolve our inhibitions.


4. Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," p. 458. Spencer, more clearly than the others, realized that laughter has a number of causes, including humor, but his preoccupation was with the physiology of the act itself, the kinesiology of laughter.


10. Rational clarity must be established before a potentially humorous inconsistency can inspire laughter. The cognitive dissonance leads to the emotional catharsis of humor, and culminates in the physiology of laughter. It may be argued that, along with reason and emotion, laughter can in certain contexts engage yet another faculty, namely divination, whereby appearances of the holy are rendered possible. Self-deprecating humor may therefore function as a vehicle of spiritual significance. The relation between the comical and the religious is acknowledged in Buddhism. Devotees of Zen, for example, frequently poke fun at themselves.


18. Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 15-19. John Morreall, arguably the foremost philosophical authority on humor and laughter, has seen this clearly. The comic protagonist, an antihero, stands (p.33) in sharp contrast with the tragic hero; and the setting must be social, where (in the incongruity) the antihero laughs at himself against the backdrop of a socially accepted norm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


