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### CONTENTS

List of figures
Notes on contributors
Preface

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>History of aesthetics</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Medieval aesthetics</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Empiricism: Hutcheson and Hume</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hegel</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Nietzsche</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Formalism</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pragmatism: Dewey</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ix) List of figures
(x) Notes on contributors
(xvi) Preface
Humor is a marvelous subject for philosophers of art. The breadth of the subject is enormous. Humor is to be found in canonical works of art: plays, movies, stories, novels, paintings, operas and so forth. And it is found in contexts not typically associated with art: jokes, wit in ordinary conversation and even in events to be witnessed in the world, like umbrellas blowing inside-out, dogs chasing their tail or a baby grabbing the nose of an intrusive adult.

Thus humor is found both in and outside art, in both fictional and real contexts. This suggests, what is almost certainly true, that there can be no general overarching theory of humor, unless the theory is so general and probably vague as to be utterly uninformative. There have been such theories, and they can be found described in the excellent encyclopedia entries listed in this essay’s bibliography, but they will be discussed only briefly in this essay. Instead, this essay will suggest a more general theory, but also say why neither this theory nor any other is likely to be definitive.

Eighteenth-century philosophers were accustomed to thinking of some human capacity as a ‘sense of beauty,’ by which they meant a capacity to be affected by beauty. Although that way of thinking has lapsed, along with thoughts of a ‘sense of morality’ or ‘sense of virtue,’ it is still common to speak of a ‘sense of humor,’ presumably meaning by that a capacity to be affected by humorous things; and this is not a bad way to begin thinking about humor. For instance, one might start with an innocuous formulation like this:

\[
H \text{ is humorous if and only if } \Phi \text{ finds it funny.}
\]

This formulation is reminiscent of eighteenth-century ethics and aesthetics, where we find propositions like these:

\[
B \text{ is beautiful if and only if } \Phi \text{ is pleased by it.}
\]

\[
V \text{ is virtuous if and only if } \Phi \text{ is pleased by (or approves of) it.}
\]

175
The immediate problem with these formulations, all of which say that something is beautiful or virtuous or whatever if and only if the thing is reacted to in some way by people, is that not all such things have the relevant effect upon all people. Thus the formulation must be refined. Unseen, it will not do. For instance, one might establish that something is beautiful by showing that it gratifies people's taste, and one might establish that someone has true beauty by showing that he is gratified by things of beauty. But one cannot do both, because one could not get staggered. There will have to be an independent specification, either of beauty or of taste. No one understood this more clearly than Hume, who undertook first to say what makes one a competent judge, and then went on to say how true beauty in its effect upon such judges.

This problem is present acutely when we try to understand humor. It may well be true—"how could it not?—that something is humorous if and only if it is found funny by someone with a sense of humor, but it seems plain that there is no chance of saying either what humorous things are, or what sense of humor is, independently. The reason why is twofold. First, the range of humorous things is enormous, encompassing things both inside and outside art, including plays by Aristophanes and Shakespeare, Marx Brothers movies, pratfalls, cartoons, riddles and drawings, to name only a few. This bewildering array is in even more intimate interaction when we consider the observation of Aristotle's, namely that some things which give no pleasure have 'mutations' that do give pleasure. This distinction, if anything, is even more conspicuous in the case of humor. In movies, literature, and elsewhere we find depictions of objects and events, which depictions are humorous, while the objects and events would not be humorous if encountered in real life.

The second reason why such formulations are unlikely to succeed is that virtually no one's sense of humor reaches to every humorous thing. Someone with a nicely humorous sense of wordplay and wit, likely a fan of Oscar Wilde, will well enough the movies of the Three Stooges.

If the formula were to be acceptable, it would have to be in some refined version, on the order of the something like this:

H is humorous if and only if P finds it funny under certain appropriate conditions and P is the right kind of person.

Such a proposition may be true once the relevant conditions and kind of person are specified, but only if the most important questions are begged. But however the proposition fares, it leads to the question of what, as a matter of fact, it is about humor, and what it is about of which P finds H funny. That is, what are the properties of H that make H funny? It is in answer to this question that theories of humor are offered.

It is generally agreed that there have been three major general 'theories of humor' and it should be agreed that none of them can succeed as a theory of all humor. The three theories might be called the incongruity theory, the superiority theory, and the relief-from-tension theory.

The idea that humorous things are incongruous is present in the works of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Hazlett and Kant, among others. Kant puts this by saying that "laughter is an affection arising from a discord between expectation and the sudden reduction to nothing" (Kant 1928: 199). In order to say this theory to have even an initial plausibility, the idea of 'incongruity' must be understood broadly, so that things count as incongruous if they are logically impossible (or paradoxical), wholly odd or somehow out of place or simply very unusual. And, of course, it may be the thing itself that is incongruous, or it may be that the incongruity is due to the thing in its context. Thus a bear riding a bicycle, a poor, badly-dressed man at a Society ball and a popcorn salesman at an opera all count as incongruous, and their humor is written off to their incongruity.

Even if some version of the incongruity theory is taken, it is not clear that finding some things right, to find them humorous, and right to laugh at their humor in their incongruous display, the relish of the theory is hardly apparent as soon as we notice how many, many incongruities are not found humorous, and how humorous it is to display no evident incongruity, however broadly the idea of incongruity is construed. The idea that humor appears when one finds oneself feeling superior to someone is present in at least some works of Plato, Aristotle and Bergson (1956), but it is probably best known in the works of Hobbes, who declared that "laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency, by comparison with the inferiority of others, or with our own former" (Hobbes 1928: 9.13).

Surely this is an apt description of the humor arising when fun is made of someone, when someone is presented as clumsy, neat, incompetent or unfortunate. And it is worth noting that this fact superiority can arise on either side either on the side of those who truly are in superior position, or on the side of those whose positions are inferiors. In either case, the other side—the oppressors or the oppressed— are represented as inferior to the one who laughs. It makes considerable difference whether the one who laughs in expression of his own superiority is in fact truly in a superior position, as, for instance, when the members of one race make fun of the race they have enslaved or dominated, or whether it is the downtrodden who find humor in pretending that their superiors are actually inferior to, for instance, in jokes made about Nazis and Soviet Communists by those being brutalized by those people, exactly because the Nazis and Communists were in superior positions. It is a typical lack in
supersitious theories that they do not attend to the fact that the jokes, cartoons of skits in question are, after all, fictions, but fictions that are sometimes taken to represent genuine truths and sometimes not. What, after all, is the difference between chancing upon a stupid person doing something that strikes one as humorous, and encountering a joke or cartoon in which a stupid person is portrayed as doing something that strikes one as humorous? Our engagement with fictions is not at all well understood, not how we engage fictional characters, how we feel for them or about them, and to the extent that this is not understood, it is difficult to see how to make sense of the supersitious theory as a general theory.

Even if the supersitious theory could make good on its need to deal with fictional elements, the theory would still founder on the simple facts that not all cases of felt supersitious are humorous, and that not all examples of humor do they explain? What do they predict? What are they to be tested? This seems especially problematic in aesthetics, perhaps most acutely when one is considering humor. It is a commonplace that the effects of works of art cannot, in general, be realized by substances for the works. That is, no extended example of orang-utans is shown making its way through the jungle. All but one of the family are young and relatively small, and they make their way by swinging from vine to vine. The oldest male, however, has grown too heavy to swing from vines, and although he tries from time to time, he always comes crashing down as his weight pulls the vine loose. He is reduced to running as fast as he can along the jungle floor trying to keep up with his airborne relatives. Why is this funny? Do I feel superior to the overweight beast? I don't think so. I just find it funny. Is it somehow incongruous that he should be running and puffing while others are swinging and gliding? I don't think so.

The best known element of the idea that humor comes with relief or the release of tension surely in Freud (1976), although Spencer (1931) had such a theory at about the same time. The idea, roughly, is that social and psychologcal constraints make it impossible for us to express certain thoughts and feelings, and so those mental phenomena, as it were, build up in us and finally are given expression in the laughter promoted by jokes about the very things we have been forbidden to express ourselves about ingenuously: for instance, our sexual impulses, and our instincts for aggression. This is an extremely useful idea, probably with even wider application than Freud gives it. There are any number of things we find ourselves constrained not to speak of, or give active voice to, because of political, social, moral or other strictures that seemingly declare these things out of bounds. And yet we think about them, wish to declare our interest in them, and have a need to express ourselves about them. So we do this with jokes, perhaps partly for the reason Freud suggests, that these things are just bursting out of us anyway, but also because we take advantage of a presumption to the effect that humor is light, good-natured, benign and therefore virtually universally acceptable.

Again, however, it is undeniable that there are myriad examples of humor that have nothing to do with this kind of release of tension. Each theory has indeed identified a feature characteristic of some examples of humor. But it is almost immediately apparent that none of these characteristics is either necessary or sufficient for humor. That is, not every incongruity is funny, nor is everything funny incongruous, and so on for the other two theories. Indeed, there are no necessary or sufficient conditions for humor, at least as far as this essay's author can see.

An oddity of theories in aesthetics — and for that matter elsewhere in philosophy — is that it is not always clear in what sense they are theories. What do they explain? What do they predict? How are they to be tested? This seems especially problematic in aesthetics, perhaps most acutely when one is considering humor. It is a commonplace that the effects of works of art cannot, in general, be realized by substances for the works. That is, no extended example of a musical work, or a novel, or a painting can do what the music, writing, and painting do. With regard to humor, the point virtually is enshrined in the saying 'you had to be there.'

Consider: a music, a movement from the leading tone to the tonic sound satisfying. Is that true? The answer, surely, is sometimes, but not always. And similarly with humor: Is incongruity or absurdity funny? The answer is: sometimes; it depends. How about a dog wearing sunglasses? A panning of some dogs playing poker? A small child firing aeshorn? A man giving birth? Anyone faced with these questions, if prudent, will say that it is necessary to experience the thing oneself. The descriptions alone are insufficient.

The theories are still worth considering, however, if only as partial descriptions of some humor, especially if it is possible to regard them as three parts of a single theme. It may be possible to do this if we judge a little and take them to be relatively narrow descriptions of what, in general, are kinds of anomaly.

Now just as none of the three theories is comprehensive, neither is the idea of anomaly wide enough to capture the three. But it may be an interesting idea to the extent that it captures something yet more general that is suggested by each of the three common theories. Still, just as with the three theories, neither is anomalousness either a necessary or a sufficient condition for humor. Yet it may be worth looking into the fact of anomalousness to ask just why, when it is, it is humorous.

An anomalous thing is irregular, unusual, unaccountable and often unsettling. We may ask, when an anomaly is funny, why is it funny? What is the humor in anomaly?
A provisional answer to this question discovers a striking oddity, namely that there seem to be two reasons why anomaly is (sometimes) funny and these reasons are virtually opposites of one another. The first is that anomalies can suggest that we have power over the structures that usually constrain us, while the second is that an anomaly can exhibit our powerlessness to comprehend and subdue the world in which those structures exist.

It has been noted that humor often arises when one feels superior. Hobbes seems to have thought laughter is almost always associated with something like the conquest of one's enemy. But the idea of power, power over something or someone, extends into more subtle areas. The humor of wordplay and related forms of wit, for instance, may fairly be thought of as incorporating a sense of power, the power to free oneself from the normal structures of language. More generally, the humor of anomaly regularly involves the placement and action of things— including people—in circumstances not regularly permitted by society or by nature. This is, perhaps, the humor of freedom. It is in our freedom, at least in imagination, from the linguistic, social, cultural, and natural constraints that are the inhibitions of our normal lives.

Although it has been less commonly noted, the humor of anomaly sometimes bespeaks not power but powerlessness. When an anomaly has the form of extreme incongruity, so exaggerated that the situation is truly absurd, then the joke (or cartoon or other form) presents something genuinely incomprehensible. In such a case one does not imagine oneself with power over anything, and yet one may find humor. One is not in a mood of exultation or triumph, but of something quite different. It is not the opposite mood. It is not merely a mood of resignation, if one were submitting to a greater power. It is a mood of acceptance of willing acknowledgment of those aspects of life that can be neither swallowed nor fully comprehended.

It is a wonderful thing about humor that it is the province of the powerful and of the powerless, that it is a response to weakness and to strength. Small wonder that no theory is able to say just what makes a humorous thing humorous. It would be a shame if it could, because then the pervasive possibility that we humans cannot tell when and where we might laugh would disappear, and human life would be so different as not to be recognizably human.

See also Taste, Fiction.

References


Further Reading


