

# Comic Relief

A Comprehensive Philosophy  
of Humor

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# Chapter 1

## No Laughing Matter

The Traditional Rejection of Humor  
and Traditional Theories of Humor

## Humor, Anarchy, and Aggression

Of all the things human beings do or experience, laughing may be the funniest – funny strange, that is, not funny ha-ha. Something happens or someone says a few words, and our eyebrows and cheeks go up, as the muscles around our eyes tighten. The corners of our mouths curl upward, baring our upper teeth. Our diaphragms move up and down in spasms, expelling air from our lungs and making staccato vocal sounds. If the laughter is intense, it takes over our whole bodies. We bend over and hold our stomachs. Our eyes tear. If we had been drinking something, it dribbles out our noses. We may wet our pants. Almost every part of our bodies is involved, but none with any apparent purpose. We are out of control in a way unmatched by any other state short of neurological disease. And – funniest of all – the whole experience is exquisitely pleasurable! As Woody Allen said of stand-up comedy, it's the most fun you can have with your clothes on.

Not only is laughter biologically odd, but the activities that elicit it are anomalous. When we're out for a laugh, we break social conventions right and left. We exaggerate wildly, express emotions we don't feel, and insult people we care about. In practical jokes, we lie to friends and cause them inconvenience, even pain. During the ancient Roman winter festival of Saturnalia, masters waited on servants, sexual rules were openly violated, and religious rituals were lampooned. Medieval Europe saw similar anarchy during the Feast of Fools and the Feast of Asses, which were organized by minor clerics after Christmas. The bishop was deposed, and replaced with a boy. At St. Omer, they wore women's clothes and recited the divine office mockingly, with howls. At the Franciscan church in Antibes, they held their prayer books upside-down, wore spectacles made from orange peels, and burned soles of old shoes, instead of incense, in the censers.<sup>1</sup> Today, during Mardi Gras and Carnival, people dress in outlandish costumes and do things forbidden during the rest of the year, sometimes leading to violence.

In everyday humor between friends, too, there is considerable breaking of social conventions. Consider five of the conversational rules formulated by Paul Grice:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Avoid obscurity of expression.
4. Avoid ambiguity.
5. Be brief.<sup>2</sup>

Rule 1 is broken to create humor when we exaggerate wildly, say the opposite of what we think, or “pull someone’s leg.” Its violation is a staple of comedians like George Carlin:

**Legal Murder Once a Month**

You can talk about capital punishment all you want, but I don’t think you can leave everything up to the government. Citizens should be willing to take personal responsibility. Every now and then you’ve got to do the right thing, and go out and kill someone on your own. I believe the killing of human beings is just one more function of government that needs to be privatized. I say this because I believe most people know at least one other person they wish were dead. One other person whose death would make their life a little easier . . . It’s a natural human instinct. . . . Don’t run from it.<sup>3</sup>

Grice’s second rule is violated for laughs when we present fantasies as if they were reasonable hypotheses. If there are rumors at work about two colleagues having an affair, we might say, “Remember on Monday when nobody could find either of them – I bet they were downstairs making hot monkey love in the boiler room.”

We can create humor by breaking Rule 3 when someone asks us an embarrassing question and we give an obviously vague or confusing answer. “You want to know why my report contradicts the Census Bureau? Well, we used a new database that is so secret I’m not at liberty to reveal its name.”

Violating Rule 4 is the mechanism of most jokes, as Victor Raskin showed in *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*.<sup>4</sup> A comment, a story, or a question-and-answer exchange starts off with an assumed interpretation for a phrase, but then at the punch line, switches to a second, usually opposite interpretation. A simple example is Mae West’s line, “Marriage is a great institution – but I’m not ready for an institution.”

Rule 5 is broken in comic harangues, such as those of Roseanne Barr and Lewis Black.

Not only does humor break rules of conversation, but it often expresses contempt or even hostility toward someone, appropriately called the “butt” of the joke. Starting in childhood, we learn to make fun of people by imitating their speech patterns, facial expressions, and gestures in ways that make them look awkward, stupid, pompous, etc. To be mocked and laughed at can be taken as seriously as a physical attack would be, as the 2006 worldwide controversy over the Danish cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad showed.

## The Superiority Theory: Humor as Anti-social

With all the ways in which laughter and humor involve the loss of self-control and the breaking of social rules, it's not surprising that most societies have been suspicious of them and have often rejected them. This rejection is clear in the two great sources of Western culture: Greek philosophy and the Bible.

The moral code of Protagoras had the warning, "Be not possessed by irrepressible mirth," and Epictetus's *Enchiridion* advises, "Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or unrestrained."<sup>5</sup> Both these philosophers, their followers said, never laughed at all.

Plato, the most influential ancient critic of laughter, saw it as an emotion that overrides rational self-control. In the *Republic*, he said that the Guardians of the state should avoid laughter, "for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction."<sup>6</sup> Plato was especially disturbed by the passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where Mount Olympus was said to "ring with the laughter of the gods." He protested that "if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it, much less if gods."<sup>7</sup>

The contempt or hostility in humor, which Ronald de Sousa has dubbed its *phthonic* dimension,<sup>8</sup> also bothered Plato. Laughter feels good, he admitted, but the pleasure is mixed with malice towards those being laughed at.<sup>9</sup>

In the Bible, too, laughter is usually represented as an expression of hostility.<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 26:18–19 warns that, "A man who deceives another and then says, 'It was only a joke,' is like a madman shooting at random his deadly darts and arrows."

The only way God is described as laughing in the Bible is scornfully: "The kings of the earth stand ready, and the rulers conspire together against the Lord and his anointed king. . . . The Lord who sits enthroned in heaven laughs them to scorn; then he rebukes them in anger, he threatens them in his wrath." (Psalms 2:2–5)

God's prophet Elijah also laughs as a warm-up to aggression. After he ridicules the priests of Baal for their god's powerlessness, he has them slain (1 Kings 18:27). In the Bible, ridicule is offensive enough to carry the death penalty, as when a group of children laugh at the prophet Elisha for being bald:

He went up from there to Bethel and, as he was on his way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Get along with you,

bald head, get along.” He turned round and looked at them and he cursed them in the name of the lord; and two she-bears came out of a wood and mauled forty-two of them. (2 Kings 2:23)

Early Christian thinkers brought together these negative assessments of laughter from both Greek and biblical sources. Like Plato and the Stoics, they were bothered by the loss of self-control in laughter. According to Basil the Great, “raucous laughter and uncontrollable shaking of the body are not indications of a well-regulated soul, or of personal dignity, or self-mastery.”<sup>11</sup> And, like Plato, they associated laughter with aggression. John Chrysostom warned that,

Laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul. Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult; and from railing and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows and wounds, slaughter and murder. If, then, you would take good counsel for yourself, avoid not merely foul words and foul deeds, or blows and wounds and murders, but unseasonable laughter itself.<sup>12</sup>

An ideal place to find Christian attacks on laughter is in the institution that most emphasized self-control and social harmony – the monastery. The oldest monastic rule – of Pachom of Egypt in the fourth century – forbade joking.<sup>13</sup> The Rule of St. Benedict, the foundation of Western monastic codes, enjoined monks to “prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter.” In Benedict’s Ladder of Humility, Step Ten was a restraint against laughter, and Step Eleven a warning against joking.<sup>14</sup> The monastery of Columban in Ireland assigned these punishments: “He who smiles in the service . . . six strokes; if he breaks out in the noise of laughter, a special fast unless it has happened pardonably.”<sup>15</sup> One of the strongest condemnations of laughter came from the Syrian abbot Ephraem: “Laughter is the beginning of the destruction of the soul, o monk; when you notice something of that, know that you have arrived at the depth of the evil. Then do not cease to pray God, that he might rescue you from this death.”<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the monastic tradition, perhaps the Christian group which most emphasized self-control and social harmony was the Puritans, and so it is not surprising that they wrote tracts against laughter and comedy. One by William Prynne condemned comedy as incompatible with the sobriety of good Christians, who should not be “immoderately tickled with mere lascivious vanities, or . . . lash out in excessive cachinnations in



## 6 *No Laughing Matter*

the public view of dissolute graceless persons.”<sup>17</sup> When the Puritans came to rule England under Cromwell, they outlawed comedy. Plato would have been pleased.

In the seventeenth century, too, Plato’s critique of laughter as expressing our delight in the shortcomings of other people was extended by Thomas Hobbes. For him, people are prone to this kind of delight because they are naturally individualistic and competitive. In the *Leviathan*, he says, “I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for Power after Power, that ceaseth only in Death.”<sup>18</sup> The original state of the human race, before government, he said, would have been a “war of all against all.”<sup>19</sup> In our competition with each other, we relish events that show ourselves to be winning, or others losing, and if our perception of our superiority comes over us quickly, we are likely to laugh.

Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and to compare themselves only with the most able.<sup>20</sup>

Before the Enlightenment, Plato and Hobbes’s idea that laughter is an expression of feelings of superiority was the only widely circulated understanding of laughter. Today it is called the “Superiority Theory.” Its modern adherents include Roger Scruton, who analyses amusement as an “attentive demolition” of a person or something connected with a person. “If people dislike being laughed at,” Scruton says, “it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject’s eyes.”<sup>21</sup>

In linking Plato, Hobbes, and Scruton with the term “Superiority Theory,” we should be careful not to attribute too much agreement to them. Like the “Incongruity Theory” and “Relief Theory,” which we’ll consider shortly, “Superiority Theory” is a term of art meant to capture one feature shared by accounts of laughter that differ in other respects. It is not, like “Sense Data Theory” or “Dialectical Materialism,” a name adopted by a group of thinkers consciously participating in a tradition. All it means is that these thinkers claimed that laughter expresses feelings of superiority.

Discussing a philosopher under the “Superiority Theory,” furthermore, does not rule out discussing them under “Incongruity Theory” or “Relief Theory.” As Victor Raskin notes, the three theories “characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other – rather they seem to supplement each other quite nicely.”<sup>22</sup> Jerrold Levinson explains how the accounts of laughter in Henri Bergson, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Herbert Spencer all had elements of both the Superiority and the Incongruity Theory, and how Immanuel Kant’s account, which is usually discussed under the Incongruity Theory, also has elements of the Relief Theory.<sup>23</sup>

We should also be careful in talking about theories of laughter and humor to distinguish different kinds of theories. Plato, Hobbes, and other philosophers before the twentieth century were mostly looking for the psychological causes of laughter and amusement. They asked what it is about certain things and situations that evokes laughter or amusement. Advocates of the Superiority Theory said that when something evokes laughter, it is by revealing someone’s inferiority to the person laughing.

Today, many philosophers are more concerned with conceptual analysis than with causal explanation. In studying laughter, amusement, and humor, they try to make clear the concepts of each, asking, for example, what has to be true of something in order for it to count as amusing. Seeking necessary and sufficient conditions, they try to formulate definitions that cover all examples of amusement but no examples that are not amusement. Of course, it may turn out that part of the concept of amusement is that it is a response to certain kinds of stimuli. And so conceptual analysis and psychological explanation may intertwine.

In this chapter I will discuss the three traditional theories mostly as psychological accounts, which is how they were originally presented. But we will also ask whether they could provide rigorous definitions of amusement and humor. Now back to the first of the three, the Superiority Theory.

If the Superiority Theory is right, laughter would seem to have no place in a well-ordered society, for it would undermine cooperation, tolerance, and self-control. That is why when Plato imagined the ideal state, he wanted to severely restrict the performance of comedy. “We shall enjoin that such representations be left to slaves or hired aliens, and that they receive no serious consideration whatsoever. No free person, whether woman or man, shall be found taking lessons in them.”<sup>24</sup> “No composer of comedy, iambic or lyric verse shall be permitted to hold any citizen up to laughter, by word or gesture, with passion or otherwise.”<sup>25</sup>

Those who have wanted to save humor from such censorship have followed two general strategies. One is to retain the claim that laughter expresses feelings of superiority, but to find something of value in that. The other is to reject the Superiority Theory in favor of one in which laughter and humor are based on something that is not anti-social.

The first approach has been taken by defenders of comedy since Ben Jonson and Sir Philip Sidney in Shakespeare's time. Against the charge that comedy is steeped in drunkenness, lechery, lying, cowardice, etc., they argued that in comedy these vices are held up for ridicule, not for emulation. The moral force of comedy is to correct mistakes and shortcomings, not to foster them. In Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*, the first work of literary criticism in English, he writes that, "Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he [the dramatist] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one."<sup>26</sup>

A modern proponent of the view that laughter, while based on superiority, serves as a social corrective, was Henri Bergson in *Laughter*. His ideas about laughter grew out of his opposition to the materialism and mechanism of his day. In his theory of "creative evolution," a non-material "vital force" (*élan vital*) drives biological and cultural evolution. We are aware of this force, Bergson says, in our own experience – not in our conceptual thinking but in our direct perception of things and events. There we realize that our life is a process of continuous becoming and not a succession of discrete states, as our rational intellect often represents it. Real duration, lived time, as opposed to static abstractions of time, is an irreversible flow of experience. Now Bergson admits that abstract knowledge is useful in science and engineering, but when we let it dominate our thinking, we handle our daily experience in a rigid, repetitive way, treating new events as mere instantiations of concepts. "What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves."<sup>27</sup>

It is here that laughter comes into play. For Bergson, the essence of the ridiculous is "mechanical inelasticity" – someone acting in a rigid, repetitive way instead of a flexible, context-sensitive way. When we laugh at persons who are acting like machines, we do feel superior to them, and we are humiliating them, but that humiliation spurs them to think and act more flexibly, less like a machine. So, while laughter stings, it brings the ridiculed person back to acting like a human being.

Another way to save humor from being banned for undermining social order, as I said, is to reject the Superiority Theory of laughter. In the

eighteenth century, this happened in two ways. First, Francis Hutcheson presented a systematic critique of the theory. Secondly, philosophers developed two alternative theories in which laughter was not anti-social: the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory.

In “Reflections Upon Laughter,” Hutcheson argued against Hobbes’s claim that the essential feature of laughter is expressing feelings of superiority.”<sup>28</sup> If Hobbes were right, he said, two conclusions would follow: (1) there can be no laughter where we do not compare ourselves with others or with some former state of ourselves; and (2) whenever we feel “sudden glory,” we laugh. But neither of these is true. We sometimes laugh at an odd metaphor or simile, for example, without comparing ourselves to anyone. Hutcheson cites these lines about a sunrise:

The sun, long since, had in the lap  
Of Thetis taken out his nap;  
And like a lobster boil’d, the morn  
From black to red began to turn.

Contemporary psychology offers support for Hutcheson’s claim that we do not need to compare ourselves with anyone in order to laugh. In an experiment by Lambert Deckers, subjects were asked to lift a series of weights that looked identical. The first several did weigh the same, but then the unsuspecting subjects picked up one that was much heavier or lighter, whereupon they laughed. In laughing, they did not seem to compare themselves with anyone.<sup>29</sup>

Not only are feelings of superiority not necessary for amusement, Hutcheson argued, but they are not sufficient, either. We have feelings of superiority toward people we pity, for example, without laughing at them. If a well-dressed gentleman riding through London in a coach sees ragged beggars, the realization that he is much better off than they are is not likely to amuse him – “we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing.”<sup>30</sup>

## **The Incongruity Theory: Humor as Irrational**

After the Superiority Theory was shown to be faulty, two other accounts arose to compete with it, the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory. As with “Superiority Theory,” these are terms of art and not names adopted by thinkers consciously participating in traditions. We’ll discuss these accounts one at a time.

While the Superiority Theory says that what causes laughter is feeling superior to someone, the Incongruity Theory says that it is a perception of something incongruous.<sup>31</sup> This approach was taken by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, and many later philosophers and psychologists. It is now the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology.

As Robert Latta and others have pointed out, the words “incongruous” and “incongruity” are used sloppily in many versions of the theory.<sup>32</sup> The dictionary says that incongruous things are “characterized by a lack of harmony, consistency, or compatibility with one another.” *Congruere* in Latin means “to come together, to agree.” In geometry, congruent triangles have the same shape and size; one fits exactly over the other. The prefix *in* means “not.” So *incongruous* things “do not go together, match, or fit in some way,” to use Latta’s words.<sup>33</sup> He offers an example from the Roman poet Horace:

If a painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse, and to spread feathers of many a hue over limbs picked up now here now there, so that what at the top is a lovely woman ends below in a black and ugly fish, could you, my friends, if favored with a private view, refrain from laughing?<sup>34</sup>

Applying the word “incongruity” to this painting fits the dictionary definition. But consider Paul McGhee’s explanation of “incongruity” in which he says that he uses the term “interchangeably with absurdity, ridiculousness, and the ludicrous.” These words, Latta points out, are *not* equivalent to “incongruity.” To make matters worse, McGhee offers a second definition: “something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, exaggerated, and so forth.”<sup>35</sup> As Latta says, these words *do not* mean, “having parts that don’t fit together.”

Latta attacks several more theorists’ uses of “incongruity” for straying from the dictionary. That can be justified, of course, if the extended meaning is determinate. And so I would like to present a core concept that is shared by most standard versions of the Incongruity Theory. Some of Latta’s criticisms of incongruity theories may still have force, but at least the theory will have specifiable content.

The core concept in incongruity theories is based on the fact that human experience works with learned patterns. What we have experienced prepares us to deal with what we will experience. When we reach out to touch snow, we expect it to be cold. If a chipmunk is running toward us, we expect it to avoid us, not leap up and bite our jugular vein. If

someone begins a story about George Washington, they may describe him as having faults, but we do not expect to hear that Washington plotted to murder all 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Most of the time, most experiences of most people follow such mental patterns. The future turns out like the past. But sometimes we perceive or imagine a thing whose parts or features violate our mental patterns, as in the painting of a woman/fish that Horace imagined. Events, too, may not fit our mental patterns. It begins to rain heavily, but suddenly the clouds blow away and the sun shines brightly. A state attorney general establishes a reputation for being tough on prostitution; then as governor he is found to be a regular client of a call-girl agency.

The core meaning of “incongruity” in standard incongruity theories is that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations. Once we have experienced something incongruous, of course, we no longer expect *it* to fit our normal mental patterns. Nonetheless, it still violates our normal mental patterns and our normal expectations. That is how we can be amused by the same thing more than once.

Without using the word “incongruity,” Aristotle hints at a connection between humor and this violation of mental patterns and expectations. In the *Rhetoric*, 3.2, he says that one way for a speaker to get a laugh is to set up an expectation in the audience and then violate it. He cites a line from a comedy: “And as he walked, beneath his feet were – chilblains [sores on the feet].” Similarly, Cicero, in *On the Orator*, says that, “The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh.”<sup>36</sup>

Immanuel Kant’s explanation of laughter is more complicated but also based on the violation of expectations:

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind.<sup>37</sup>

For Kant, humorous amusement is primarily a physical pleasure arising from the “changing free play of sensations” that accompanies the play of thought.

The first philosopher to use the word “incongruity” to analyze humor was James Beattie, a contemporary of Kant. He sticks closest to the original meaning of incongruity when he says that laughter “seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage.”<sup>38</sup> The object of laughter is “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage.”<sup>39</sup>

Schopenhauer has a more sophisticated version of the Incongruity Theory in which the cause of amusement is a discrepancy between our abstract concepts and our perceptions of things that are instantiations of those concepts. In organizing our sense experience, we ignore many differences between things that fall under one concept – as when we call both Chihuahuas and Great Danes “dogs.” Amusement is being struck by the mismatch between a concept and a perception of the same thing, and enjoying the mental jolt that gives us. “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.”<sup>40</sup> As an example, Schopenhauer tells of the prison guards who let a convict play cards with them, but when they catch him cheating, they kick him out. He comments, “They let themselves be led by the general conception, ‘Bad companions are turned out,’ and forget that he is also a prisoner, i.e., one whom they ought to hold fast.”<sup>41</sup>

Kierkegaard uses the word “contradiction” much as others use “incongruity,” for the violation of one’s expectations. He cites the story of the baker who said to a poor woman, “No, mother, I cannot give you anything. There was another here recently whom I had to send away without giving anything, too: we cannot give to everybody.”<sup>42</sup>

Except for Beattie, none of these thinkers wrote even an essay about laughter or humor: their comments arise in discussions of wider topics. Kierkegaard, for example, had a nuanced view in which humor is distinguished from irony, and both represent worldviews.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, these “Incongruity Theorists” disagreed on several details about incongruity, disappointed expectation, absurdity, discrepancy, or contradiction, such as how they are related to laughter. So we have to be careful in talking about *the* Incongruity Theory. Nonetheless, the name has stuck and today, as mentioned, the Incongruity Theory is the most widely accepted account of humor in philosophy and empirical psychology.

In the late twentieth century, one serious flaw in several older versions of the theory came to light: they said or implied that the mere perception of incongruity is sufficient for humor. That is clearly false, since negative emotions like fear, disgust, and anger are also reactions to what

violates our mental patterns and expectations. Coming home to find your family murdered, for example, is incongruous but not funny. Experiencing something incongruous can also evoke puzzlement or incredulity: we may go into a problem-solving mode to figure out how the stimulus might actually fit into our conceptual frameworks.

A recent attempt to carefully lay out necessary and sufficient conditions for humorous amusement is that of Michael Clarke. He sets out three defining features of humor:

1. A person perceives (thinks, imagines) an object as being incongruous.
2. The person enjoys perceiving (thinking, imagining) the object.
3. The person enjoys the perceived (thought, imagined) incongruity at least partly for itself, rather than solely for some ulterior reason.<sup>44</sup>

While this version of the Incongruity Theory is clearly an improvement on theories in which amusement consists simply in the perception of incongruity, it still seems not specific enough. As Mike Martin points out, we often enjoy incongruity in the arts without being amused.<sup>45</sup> In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, for example, Oedipus vows to do whatever it takes to bring the killer of King Laius to justice. Knowing that he is himself that killer, we in the audience may well enjoy the incongruity of such a self-threatening vow, but that isn't humor. Other aesthetic categories, too, involve a non-humorous enjoyment of some violation of our mental patterns and expectations: the grotesque, the macabre, the horrible, the bizarre, and the fantastic. In Chapter 4 we will discuss the enjoyment of incongruity in humor and contrast it with these other ways of enjoying incongruity.

Even assuming that the Incongruity Theory can be made specific enough concerning the enjoyment of incongruity, however, there is a more general problem with the very idea of enjoying incongruity. Put bluntly, how could anyone enjoy the violation of their conceptual patterns and expectations? Such enjoyment looks psychologically perverse or at least irrational. That is why, although the Incongruity Theory freed humor from the traditional stigma of being anti-social, it has not improved philosophers' assessments of humor much over the last three centuries. It answered some of the older objections to humor, but made way for a new one that may be more compelling for philosophers: the Irrationality Objection.

Kant came close to spelling out the Irrationality Objection in presenting his account of jokes. The punch line of a joke, he said, causes pleasure, but not gratification, for it cannot be gratifying to have one's expectations proved delusive and one's desire to understand frustrated.



The pleasure of humor is *in spite of* its frustrating our reason, and is based on the healthful effect that laughter has on our bodies:

The jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation. . . . If we admit that with all our thoughts is harmonically combined a movement in the organs of the body, we will easily comprehend how to this sudden transposition of the mind, now to one now to another standpoint in order to contemplate its object, may correspond an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines which communicates itself to the diaphragm.<sup>46</sup>

Now while Kant found the massage of the inner organs in laughter healthy, other philosophers have seen something perverse in human beings, the rational animals, engaging in joking, the whole point of which is to violate their conceptual patterns and frustrate their understanding. People who enjoy incongruity are like travelers who discover that they are headed in the wrong direction – and enjoy that discovery.

George Santayana, for example, went beyond the claim that enjoying incongruity is perverse, to say that it is impossible. The pleasure we take in humor, he said, must be in its physiological effects and in the “stimulation and shaking up of our wits,” not in any enjoyment of incongruity per se:

We have a prosaic background of common sense and everyday reality; upon this background an unexpected idea suddenly impinges. But the thing is a futility. The comic accident falsifies the nature before us, starts a wrong analogy in the mind, a suggestion that cannot be carried out. In a word, we are in the presence of an absurdity, and man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold.<sup>47</sup>

The view that as rational animals we always act to overcome incongruity has many parallels throughout Western thought. Consider, for example, the ancient principle called by eighteenth-century rationalists the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Held by Richard Taylor and others to be “almost a part of reason itself,”<sup>48</sup> it can be stated as follows: “For the existence of any being or the truth of any positive statement, there is something, known or unknown, which makes that thing exist or that statement true.”

Everything, in short, is theoretically explainable. What seems puzzling or mysterious is not inherently so – it’s just that the rational animals have not yet investigated it carefully enough. When they do, the mystery

will evaporate. To an omniscient mind, everything would fit into rational patterns, so that nothing is more than *apparently* anomalous. There is nothing objectively incongruous or comic about the universe or the human condition, then, and so amusement is possible only for those who are ignorant or confused.

In Western science since the Enlightenment, it is an axiom that the world is rationally understandable. And so it is not surprising to find among scientists a commitment to Santayana's view that incongruity could not be enjoyable to human beings. "Anomaly is inherently disturbing," writes Barry Barnes, "and automatically generates pressure for its reduction."<sup>49</sup> In his influential book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Leon Festinger uses the term "cognitive dissonance" for "nonfitting relations among cognitions," that is, for incongruity, and claims that cognitive dissonance, like hunger, automatically motivates us to reduce it and to "avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance."<sup>50</sup>

Many psychologists who have theorized about humor have claimed that only young children are irrational enough to enjoy incongruity by itself. According to Thomas Schultz, for instance, after the age of seven, we require not just incongruity to be amused, but the resolution of that incongruity. Mature humor requires the fitting of the *apparently* anomalous element into some conceptual schema. Indeed, Schultz is unwilling to call unresolvable incongruity "humorous" – he calls it "nonsense."<sup>51</sup> The pleasure of humor in a mature person, according to this view, is not the enjoyment of incongruity, but the enjoyment of a kind of puzzle solving similar to what scientists do.

In Western philosophy and science, then, the dominant view concerning incongruity is that a rational adult should, or even can, face it in only one way, by trying to eliminate it. To appreciate incongruity would be immature, irrational, masochistic, or all three.

If we are to going to explain the value of humor, then, as well as its nature, we need to say much more than that we enjoy incongruity. That's what I will be doing in the chapters that follow, as I connect humor with play, and explore the social significance of humor and play, and their benefits to the species. Before that, however, we should look at the third traditional theory of laughter, the Relief Theory.

## **The Relief Theory: Humor as a Pressure Valve**

In the eighteenth century, the Relief Theory arose alongside the Incongruity Theory to compete with the Superiority Theory. Its focus was on the physical phenomenon of laughter, especially its relation to the nervous

system, something left unexplained by the Superiority and Incongruity Theories. In the medical science of the eighteenth century, it was known that nerves connect the brain, sense organs, and muscles. Nerves were thought to carry not electro-chemical impulses, but gases and liquids called “animal spirits.” There was debate over their exact composition, but the animal spirits were thought to include blood and air. John Locke described them as “fluid and subtile Matter, passing through the Conduits of the Nerves.”<sup>52</sup> So in the first versions of the Relief Theory, the nervous system was represented as a network of tubes inside which the animal spirits sometimes build up pressure, as in emotional excitement, that calls for release. A good analogy is the way excess steam builds up in a steam boiler. These boilers are fitted with relief valves to vent excess pressure, and, according to the Relief Theory, laughter serves a similar function in the nervous system.

The first published work to use “humor” with its modern meaning of funniness, Lord Shaftesbury’s “The Freedom of Wit and Humour” (1711), was also the first sketch of the Relief Theory: “The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers.”<sup>53</sup> Over the next two centuries, thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud revised the biology behind this theory and added new elements of their own.

In his essay “On the Physiology of Laughter,” Spencer says that in our bodies emotions take the form of nervous energy. “Nervous energy always tends to beget muscular motion, and when it rises to a certain intensity, always does beget it.”<sup>54</sup> “Feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action.”<sup>55</sup> In fear we make small movements that are a preparation for running away, and if the fear gets strong enough, that is what we do. When we’re angry with someone, we make small aggressive movements such as moving closer to them and clenching our fists. If our nervous energy reaches a certain level, we do attack them. The larger movements of full-scale fear, anger, and other emotions vent the excess pressure much as the safety valve on the steam boiler vents excess steam pressure.

Laughter works in a similar way, only the muscular movements in laughter are not the early stages of any larger movements. Even if intense, laughter is not the beginning of fighting, fleeing, or any other action. Rather, laughter functions *only* as a release of excess nervous energy; other than that, Spencer says, the movements of laughter “have no object.”<sup>56</sup>

The excess nervous energy that is relieved by laughter, according to Spencer, is the energy of emotions that have been found to be inappropriate. This energy is vented first through the muscles “which feeling most habitually stimulates,” those connected with speech. If there is still more energy to be relieved, it spills over to the muscles connected with breathing, and perhaps finally to the arms, legs, and other muscle groups.<sup>57</sup>

To describe the mental side of this process, Spencer uses the language of the Incongruity Theory. “Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small – only when there is what we call a descending incongruity.”<sup>58</sup> Consider this poem by Harry Graham:

I had written to Aunt Maud  
Who was on a trip abroad  
When I heard she'd died of cramp,  
Just too late to save the stamp.

Up until the last word, our feelings tend toward pity for the bereaved nephew writing the poem. But his last word makes us reinterpret everything, shifting our thoughts from a grieving nephew to an insensitive cheapskate. The nervous energy of our emotions for a grieving nephew is now pointless and is vented in laughter.

As presented by Spencer, or in the simpler form sketched by Shaftesbury, the Relief Theory doesn't have the stigmata attached to the Superiority Theory and the Incongruity Theory. Laughter, and by implication humor, are not anti-social or irrational, but simply a way of discharging nervous energy found to be unnecessary. As John Dewey put the idea, laughter “marks the ending . . . of a period of suspense, or expectation.” It is a “sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of the breathing and vocal apparatus . . . The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief.”<sup>59</sup>

Reduced almost to the level of belching and farting in this way, laughter might be less interesting in the Relief Theory than it was in the other two, but at least it sounds innocuous. Few people who know about the Relief Theory, however, are familiar with Spencer's, Shaftesbury's, or Dewey's versions. By far the best-known version is that of Sigmund Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*,<sup>60</sup> and his description of the relief function of laughter in jokes is not so innocent. It links laughter and humor not only to aggression but also to lust.

In that book, Freud distinguishes three laughter situations: joking, “the comic,” and “humor.” In all three, laughter releases energy that was

summoned for a psychological task, but then became unnecessary when that task was abandoned. In joking that is the energy of repressing feelings; in the comic it is the energy of thinking; and in humor it is the energy of feeling emotions. We can say a word about each of these sources of laughter.

Freud's term for joking, *der Witz*, is not limited to "joke-telling," the recitation of prepared fictional narratives, but includes spontaneous witty comments, *bon mots*, and repartee as well. In all of these, he says, there is a release of psychic energy, not the energy of repressed feelings, but the energy that normally represses those feelings. Most summaries of Freud's theory overlook this point and simply describe laughter as a release of repressed energy.

According to Freud, most prepared jokes and witty remarks are about sex or hostility, because those are the big urges which society forces us to repress. In telling and listening to a sexual joke, or a joke that belittles an individual or group, we override our internal censor, expressing our repressed libido or hostility. The now superfluous energy summoned to repress those urges is then released in laughter.<sup>61</sup>

In those laughter situations which Freud calls "the comic," there is a similar release of energy that is summoned but then found unnecessary, only here it is the energy of thinking. As an example, he analyzes our laughter at a circus clown. In watching the clown stumble through actions that we would perform quickly and smoothly, there is a saving of the energy that we would expend to understand the clown's movements. According to Freud's theory of "mimetic representation," we expend a great amount of energy to understand something big and a small amount of energy to understand something small. So our mental representation of the clown's movements calls for more energy than the energy we would expend to understand our own movements in doing the same task. And that surplus energy is vented in laughter:

These two possibilities in my imagination amount to a comparison between the observed movement and my own. If the other person's movement is exaggerated and inexpedient, my increased expenditure in order to understand it is inhibited *in statu nascendi*, as it were in the act of being mobilized; it is declared superfluous and is free for use elsewhere or perhaps for discharge by laughter.<sup>62</sup>

Freud's account of the third laughter situation, which he calls "humor," receives just a few pages at the end of his book, and is similar to Spencer's theory. Humor occurs "if there is a situation in which, accord-

ing to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect *in statu nascendi*. . . . The pleasure of humor . . . comes about . . . at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: it arises from *an economy in the expenditure of affect*.”<sup>63</sup> Freud cites Mark Twain’s story about his brother’s working on building a road. One day the dynamite went off accidentally, blowing him high into the sky. When he came down far from the work site, he was docked half a day’s pay for being “absent from his place of employment.” Our laughter on hearing this story, Freud explains, is the release of energy that was summoned to feel sympathy for Twain’s brother, but was then seen to be unnecessary. When we hear the unbelievable ending, we realize that pity would be inappropriate. “As a result of this understanding, the expenditure on the pity, which was already prepared, becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off.”<sup>64</sup>

We have seen two versions of the Relief Theory, then, the simple one of Spencer, repeated in Freud’s account of “humor,” and the complex one in Freud’s account of joking and “the comic.” We’ll comment on them separately.

Clearly there is a connection between at least some laughter and the expenditure of energy. Hearty laughter involves several areas of the brain and nervous system, and many muscle groups. People often describe a bout of heavy laughter as having a cathartic effect, much as exercise does. Dr. William Fry estimates that 20 seconds of hearty laughter gives the heart and lungs a workout equivalent to three minutes on a rowing machine.<sup>65</sup>

But acknowledging all this does not imply that in all humor emotional energy builds up and is released. There is energy expended in the act of laughing, of course; one study showed that 15 minutes of laughter can burn 40 calories.<sup>66</sup> But why say that the energy in laughter is the energy of emotions or thinking that have built up and now call for release?

Some humor stimuli may evoke emotions, but many seem not to. Single-frame cartoons picturing absurd situations, for example, seem able to make us laugh without feeling any emotions first. Consider the cartoon about the lion at the beginning of Chapter 3. Assuming that Freud would count this cartoon as humor, there must be pent-up emotional energy released when we laugh at it. That energy either was aroused by the cartoon itself, or had built up before we saw the cartoon. But neither seems necessary. What emotion might this cartoon arouse in us and then show to be inappropriate? Shock at a talking lion? Sympathy for the zebra and wildebeest killed to make toppings for the pizza? If, on the other hand, Freud would say that the cartoon released emotions we had already built

up before seeing the cartoon, what emotions might those be? Fear of lions? Sympathy for their prey? Again, it seems possible to be amused by this cartoon without feeling any of these emotions before seeing it.

Lots of playing with words also seems to be humor without relieving any pent-up emotions. Consider P. G. Wodehouse's line, "If it's feasible, let's fease it" or Ogden Nash's poem "Fleas":

Fleas  
Adam  
Had'em.<sup>67</sup>

Not only is the simplest version of the Relief Theory problematic, but Spencer's version adds a detail, about what causes the energy to become superfluous, that is also problematic. He says that the humor stimulus must be a "descending incongruity," shifting us from thinking about something important to thinking about something unimportant. If the incongruity were to go the other way, we wouldn't laugh: "When after something very insignificant there arises without anticipation something very great, the emotion we call wonder results."<sup>68</sup> The problem with this claim is that sometimes we do laugh on shifting from the unimportant to the important. A friend of mine recently lost her mother. When she went to the office of the funeral director, she sat down and reached for her pack of cigarettes. "Mind if I smoke?" she asked. "Not at all," he said, "many of my clients smoked."

Robert Latta cites a similar example from a letter sent to the Dartmouth College Class of 1956 after their 25th Reunion:

**DEAR CLASSMATES:**

Our tremendously successful and never to be forgotten 25th Reunion marked another turning point for the Class of 1956. Having passed this memorable milestone, we are now eligible to participate in the Dartmouth Bequest and Estate Planning Program.<sup>69</sup>

Having commented on the simple version of the Relief Theory in Spencer's and in Freud's account of "humor," we can now turn to Freud's account of joking and "the comic." The basic problem here is that his hydraulic theory of emotions and thinking, as combined with his general psychoanalytic theory, does not seem plausible.

Freud says that the creation of jokes and witty comments is an unconscious process in which we let into our conscious minds thoughts and feelings that we normally repress. The trouble here is that many jokes

and witty comments in speeches are created by professional writers, who approach the task with conscious strategies for generating set-ups and punch lines. Also, the mechanics of Freud's explanation of how the nervous energy is released in joke telling is problematic. We normally use psychic energy to repress hostile and sexual thoughts and feelings, he says, but when we joke, we "elude the censor" and bring those thoughts and feelings into consciousness. There is a saving of psychic energy – that is, the energy we normally summon for inhibiting these thoughts and feelings becomes unnecessary – and we vent that energy in laughter.

Many descriptions of Freud's account of joking skip these details and just say that in joking we express repressed feelings. But Freud explains the release of emotional energy in joking as the venting, not of the hostile and sexual energy, but of the energy normally expended to repress hostile and sexual thoughts and feelings. The problem here is that his claims about packets of psychic energy being summoned to repress thoughts and feelings, but *in statu nascendi* (in the process of being borne) being rendered superfluous, seem unverifiable, and so of no use in building a theory of humor.

Where we can draw conclusions from Freud's theory of joking and test them, at least some of the results go against Freud. For example, if he is right that the energy released in laughter is the energy normally used to repress hostile and sexual feelings, then it seems that those who laugh hardest at aggressive and sexual humor will be people who normally repress those feelings. But experiments by Hans Jurgen Eysenck showed the opposite: it is people who usually give free rein to their hostile and sexual feelings, not those who repress them, who enjoy aggressive and sexual humor more.<sup>70</sup>

Freud's account of his last laughter situation, "the comic," faces problems, too. Here the saving of energy is supposed to be with energy normally used for thinking, that is, for understanding something we perceive or think about, such as the antics of a clown. We summon a large packet of psychic energy to understand the clown's extravagant movements in, say, riding a bicycle across the circus ring. But as we are summoning it, we compare it with the small packet of energy required to understand our own simpler movements in doing the same thing. The difference between the two packets is surplus energy that we discharge in laughter.

Freud's ideas here about the "mimetic representation" of motion are idiosyncratic and have strange implications, such as that thinking about running a marathon takes far more energy than thinking about threading a needle. If Freud is talking about real energy that burns up calories,



then dieters could quickly lose weight by thinking of running across the country, even thinking of someone else doing so.

The explanation of the venting of the “surplus psychic energy” in laughter is also problematic. Freud says that we use a large packet of energy to understand how the clown performs the task and a small packet of energy to think about how we would do the same thing. As the large packet is being summoned, it is compared with the small packet, and the difference is seen to be superfluous and so available for discharge in laughter. But if the energy here is energy used to think about the two movements, and we do in fact think about those movements, where is the *surplus* energy? The big packet was used to understand the clown’s movements and the small packet was used to understand our own movements. Nothing is left over. If Freud were to respond that we do not actually go through with the process of thinking about the clown’s movements, then how would we come to realize that those movements were too much for the task at hand, and how would we know what our own movements would be, to do the same thing?

Another problem for Freud here is accounting for the person who is comic because they reach their goals expending *less* energy than we would expend – Tom Sawyer getting the other boys to whitewash the fence, for example. Presented with such cases, Freud says that there is a difference here too, and the laughter depends on this difference “and not on which of the two the difference favors.”<sup>71</sup> But then Freud has changed the mechanics of laughter significantly, and he owes us an explanation.

He also faced the apparent counterexample of the comic character who is stuck in a difficult situation and struggles to get out in much the same way any normal person would. Here Freud changes his story again, saying that the comparison in such cases is between the character’s current difficult state and his former untroubled state.<sup>72</sup> Then he generalizes to what sounds like an incongruity theory:

It is a necessary condition for generating the comic that we should be obliged, *simultaneously or in rapid succession*, to apply to one and the same act of ideation two different ideational methods, between which the “comparison” is then made and the comic difference emerges. Differences in expenditure of this kind arise between what belongs to someone else and oneself, between what is usual and what has been changed, between what is expected and what happens.<sup>73</sup>

Pursuing such examples further is justified only if Freud’s ideas about “mimetic representation” and surplus psychic energy are reasonable, and,

as I said, they aren't. My overall assessment of the Relief Theory in its simple and complex forms is that it is based on an outdated hydraulic theory of the mind.

## The Minority Opinion of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas: Humor as Playful Relaxation

While the overwhelming number of Western thinkers who commented on humor before the twentieth century criticized it, there were a few who appreciated its value. The most important were Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, who treated humor as a virtue, under the right conditions. Aristotle discussed wittiness (*eutrapelia*, literally "turning well") in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 4, alongside truthfulness and friendliness:

Since life includes relaxation as well as activity, and in relaxation there is leisure and amusement, there seems to be here too the possibility of good taste in our social relations, and propriety in what we say and how we say it. And the same is true of listening. It will make a difference here what kind of people we are speaking or listening to. Clearly, here, too, it is possible to exceed or fall short of the mean. People who carry humor to excess are considered vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at all costs, and their aim is more to raise a laugh than to speak with propriety and to avoid giving pain to the butt of their jokes. But those who cannot say anything funny themselves, and are offended by those who do, are thought to be boorish and dour. Those who joke in a tactful way are called witty (*eutrapelos*), which implies a quick versatility in their wits. For such sallies are thought to be movements of one's character, and, like bodies, characters are judged by their movements. The ridiculous side of things is always close at hand, however, and most people take more fun than they should in amusement and joking.<sup>74</sup>

As examples of impropriety and propriety in humor, Aristotle contrasts the Old Comedy of writers like Aristophanes, in which "the ridiculous element was obscenity," with the more sophisticated New Comedy of writers like Menander, who "tend toward innuendo."

Aristotle's comments on humor were neglected until medieval times, when Thomas Aquinas expanded upon them. In Question 168 of his *Summa Theologiae*<sup>75</sup> he discusses humor as a kind of play, in three articles: "Whether there can be virtue in actions done in play," "The sin of playing too much," and "The sin of playing too little." His view mirrors Aristotle's: humans need to rest occasionally from serious activity, and humor and other forms of play provide that rest.

As bodily tiredness is eased by resting the body, so psychological tiredness is eased by resting the soul. As we have explained in discussing the feelings, pleasure is rest for the soul. And therefore the remedy for weariness of soul lies in slackening the tension of mental study and taking some pleasure. In Cassian's Conferences it is related of blessed John the Evangelist that when people were scandalized at finding him at play with his disciples, he requested one of his questioners who carried a bow to shoot an arrow. When this had been done several times, the man, on being asked whether he could keep on doing so continuously, replied that the bow would break. Whereupon the blessed John pointed the moral that so, too, would the human spirit snap were it never unbent. Those words and deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul's pleasure are called playful or humorous, and it is necessary to make use of them at times for solace of soul.<sup>76</sup>

The person with the moral virtue associated with play and humor Aquinas calls "a *eutrapelos*, a pleasant person with a happy cast of mind who gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn."<sup>77</sup> Aquinas also judges the unwillingness to engage in humor a vice. To Aristotle's comment that the humorless person is crude, Aquinas adds that such a person is acting "against reason":

Anything conflicting with reason in human action is vicious. It is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by never showing himself agreeable to others or being a kill-joy or wet blanket on their enjoyment. And so Seneca says, "Bear yourself with wit, lest you be regarded as sour or despised as dull." Now those who lack playfulness are sinful, those who never say anything to make you smile, or are grumpy with those who do.<sup>78</sup>

In the other articles in Question 168, Aquinas shows his awareness of the traditional rejection of humor, by warning that humor and other play must include nothing obscene, injurious, or insolent, and that it must not make us neglect our moral responsibilities. But with those caveats, he presents humor, and play generally, as a valuable part of life.

Now these few comments hardly provide even a sketch of a philosophy of humor. But in light of the overwhelmingly negative assessments of humor from other philosophers, they are at least a start.

## The Relaxation Theory of Robert Latta

One recent philosopher who has put relaxation at the center of his theory of humor is Robert Latta, whom we saw earlier as a critic of the Incongruity Theory.<sup>79</sup> Here is a condensed version of his Theory L:

The subject becomes unrelaxed . . . Then, in response to a stimulus event . . . he makes a rapid cognitive shift, as for instance in interpretation, orientation, expectation, or object of attention . . . which leaves initial-stage unrelaxation without object, point, ground, or function . . . Then he relaxes rapidly . . . through laughter . . . and experiences . . . the pleasure of humorous laughter, the fundamental pleasure of humor.<sup>80</sup>

Latta's idea of "initial-stage unrelaxation" is reminiscent of Spencer's and Freud's idea of built-up emotional energy. But Latta says that while unrelaxation may involve emotions, it doesn't have to. Small levels of "attentiveness, readiness, or effort" also involve unrelaxation – "even such comparatively relaxed behavior as taking part in everyday conversation just for the sake of talk, or doing easy reading, or idly surveying a familiar scene which promises nothing of unusual interest." In fact, Latta says, "Every normal person is at the initial stage most or all his waking hours."<sup>81</sup> While in this state of unrelaxation, according to Latta, the person experiences a cognitive shift which renders their attention, anticipation, or effort pointless, and they relax quickly through laughter.

Latta's book is a valuable contribution to humor theory, especially for the many ways it challenges incongruity theories. The idea of a *cognitive shift* captures something essential in the experience of amusement, and so in Chapter 3 I will incorporate that idea in my own theory. One kind of cognitive shift Latta mentions, furthermore, is "from engagement to detachment."<sup>82</sup> Here, too, there is overlap with my ideas about what I call "disengagement."

However, I don't think Latta has made a convincing case that relaxation is a defining feature of humor. While some humor involves relaxation, other humor does not. Many cultures have contests of humorous insults, for example. Ancient Germanic peoples called it *flyting*. In Elizabethan England, experts at comic insult were called "roarers"; Ben Jonson wrote a comedy, *The Roarer*. The ritual of comic insults in Trinidad is *picong*. Among African Americans, it is "the Dozens." In these rituals, there may be 40 or 50 funny lines spread over half an hour, with the audience laughing from the first to the last. But nobody relaxes. Their attention and anticipation increase, not decrease. As the participants come up with clever lines, the audience's appetite is whetted for even more clever lines. The funny insults are often based on exaggeration, such as "Yo' mama so fat, she have her own ZIP code." Such exaggerations produce cognitive shifts, as Latta says, but each cognitive shift does not render the audience's attention "without object, point, ground, or function." Instead it rewards and bolsters their attention, making them eager to hear greater and greater

degrees of exaggeration. As they continue to laugh, they don't relax, but get more energized by the repartee, psychologically and even physically.

Here Latta might respond that there is relaxation eventually, *after the ritual is over*. Once the humor and laughter *have stopped*, the audience relaxes as they realize that thinking further about the fantastic insults they have heard is "without object, point, ground, or function." But if the insults were inventive, they are likely to stick in the audience's mind and even spur them to think of their own clever insults after the ritual is over. They might also imagine alternative twists to the repartee: "What he *should have* said then was ' . . . !'" None of this is relaxation, as Latta understands that term.

While Latta's Theory L and the other theories we have looked at provide some insights into humor, then, none adequately explains the nature of humor, and the whole tradition of philosophy of humor hardly acknowledges, much less explains, the value of humor. In an attempt to do better, I have divided the rest of this book into separate chapters dealing with issues in psychology, aesthetics, and ethics. Then near the end I will return to the not-so-funny relationship between philosophers and humor.