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## Abstract

### 'Philosophical Perspectives on Humour and Laughter'

by John Lippitt

*Dissertation submitted for the degree of M.Litt. in Philosophy,  
University of Durham, 1991.*

This dissertation looks at some of the most important theories of humour and laughter, and aims to consider how successful or otherwise those theories have been in explaining these complex phenomena. After a general introduction in Chapter One, each of Chapters Two to Four offers an analysis of one of the three main theoretical traditions: what have been labelled the incongruity, superiority and release theories. Key figures in these traditions are Schopenhauer (incongruity), Hobbes (superiority) and Freud (release). My analyses are lengthy, constituting the bulk of the dissertation, because of the need to consider each theory in more detail than has been the case in previous, often very superficial, reviews. Each of them is ultimately rejected as an inadequate general theory, but the desirability of looking for what is of value in each theory; what light each does shed on humour and laughter, is stressed.

During the brief interim conclusion, Chapter Five, key reasons for the failure of previous theories are emphasised, and a suggestion is made as to why **any** general, supposedly all-encompassing theory is likely to fail. The common temptation to offer yet another general theory is therefore resisted: after all, there are other interesting aspects of this subject to be considered. One such issue is taken up in Chapter Six. This final chapter explores the important connection between laughter, the sense of humour and individual freedom, by comparing and contrasting two views of the **function** of laughter: Bergson's theory of laughter as a social corrective, and Nietzsche's view that laughter is the appropriate response to the ultimate liberation of an individual.

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# **Philosophical Perspectives on Humour and Laughter**

by

**John Andrew Lippitt**

**A dissertation submitted  
for the degree of  
Master of Letters**

**Department of Philosophy**

**University of Durham  
1991**



21 JUL 1992

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**No part of this material has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.**

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Much of the Chapter Six material appears, in an earlier form, in my 'Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter', in the January 1992 issue of the *British Journal of Aesthetics*.

# Chapter I

## Introduction

The philosophy of humour and laughter is a very rarely studied field. This seems surprising for at least two reasons. Firstly, the list of thinkers who have considered these subjects worthy of discussion, even if their discussions have often been brief, is an impressive one: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud are some of the names it includes. Secondly, if philosophy should concern itself with central aspects of human life, it certainly cannot afford to ignore humour and laughter. The possession of a sense of humour ranks very high on the list of desirable - even essential - personal attributes. Replies to questionnaires show it as one of the qualities regarded as most important in potential partners, and increasingly, phrases such as 'Must have a sense of humour!' are appearing in job advertisements. If you woke up one morning with an uncontrollable urge to make yourself very unpopular, and maybe make a few enemies for life, a good way of achieving this would be to accuse as many people as possible, whenever the opportunity arose, of having no sense of humour. This is often reacted to as the most grievous of insults. As one writer has commented, 'men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?'<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, it is not difficult to see why people have shied away from analysing humour and laughter. Humour is notoriously difficult to define or explain, and common sense tells us that the potential humour theorist is about to step into a minefield. This may indeed lead some to dismiss philosophising in this area as pointless. Yet such pessimism is unwarranted. It is reasonable to work on the assumption that the efforts of that impressive list of thinkers mentioned earlier were not all a complete waste of time. Before going any further, though, we should be clear on what value the philosophy of humour and laughter can have, and hence of exactly what this dissertation does and does not attempt to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Moore Colby, quoted in Edmund Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor* (New York: Intercontinental Medical Book Corporation, 1956), title page.

The views of the humour-theoretical pessimist are acceptable to the following extent. It is perfectly reasonable to doubt that one will ever find a simple formula to which all humour can be reduced, and which will allow us to give out a cry of 'Eureka!' and to claim that we now understand all there is to understand about it. In earlier work in this area, one finds comments such as the following: 'Laughter manifests itself in such varied and heterogeneous conditions...that the reduction of all these causes to a single one remains a very problematical undertaking. *After so much work spent on such a trivial phenomenon, the problem is still far from being completely explained.*'<sup>2</sup> The naiveté of such a remark lies in the implied assumption that a 'complete explanation' of laughter is attainable.

But even if it is not, this is a totally insufficient reason to dismiss unread and unconsidered the insights of our list of thinkers. A central claim of this dissertation is that, whilst being unable to give the whole answer, many of the major theories offered in the history of this subject shed important light on our understanding of the intrinsic workings of humour, the psychology of the laugher, or of what functions humour and laughter serve. A number of the theories can be made more plausible than they at first appear, and have often been given credit for being. (Wholesale dismissal of such theories is common. Colin Radford, for instance, comments of general theories of humour that: 'The few attempts to provide them strike most of us as quite hopeless'<sup>3</sup>.)

The main purpose of the dissertation, then, is to consider the adequacy or otherwise of some of the most important theories of humour and laughter, attempting to show both their weaknesses and their strengths: the respects in which they fail as satisfactory explanations of humour or laughter, but also how they shed light on the elusive phenomena with which they deal.

## 1.1 A preliminary point on terminology

At this stage, something should be said about terminology, to avoid a potentially major problem. In all but the most recent writing in this field, there is no general terminological consensus. Different writers use different terms to mean

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<sup>2</sup> T.A.Ribot, *La Psychologie des Sentiments* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1896), quoted in Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Dell, 1964), p.32, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Radford, 'Morality and humour', in *Cogito* Vol.3-2, p.133.

essentially the same thing, and worse still, different writers use the same term to mean different things. 'The comic', for instance, is used by some to mean what others mean by 'the ludicrous', whereas in other writings 'the comic' is treated as a subdivision of 'the ludicrous', along with such further subdivisions as wit and satire. This problem is exacerbated by problems of translation. Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* for example, the main subject of our Chapter Four, has been translated both as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* and *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Yet the English reader understands by 'jokes', something very different from what he understands by 'wit'. To avoid difficulties of this kind, then, we need to make clear from the outset our use of terminology.

This dissertation is predominantly concerned with what is perceived, thought of or experienced, as funny or amusing. Contemporary research in this field, across numerous academic disciplines, seems agreed upon using 'humour' as the relevant general term here. Indeed, the recently founded inter-disciplinary periodical for research in this area takes as its title *Humor: the International Journal of Humor Research*. (This journal is closely linked to an organisation called the 'International Society for Humor Studies'.) In the rest of this dissertation, then, I shall follow this currently accepted usage of terminology. Humour will not be a subdivision of some umbrella term such as 'the ludicrous', along with wit, the comic, satire, and so on, but will itself be that umbrella term. Anthropologist Mahadev Apte distinguishes between 'those who may be interested in concentrating on some specific aspect of the phenomenon of humor, such as joke, comedy, riddle, or pun, versus those who wish to explore the nature of humor on a grand scale, as the philosophers who examined humor in general did.'<sup>4</sup> These he refers to as 'micro-' and 'macro-humorologists' respectively. I belong to the second of these categories.

My reasons for concentrating upon humour in general - 'macro-humorology' - rather than worrying about its various subdivisions are well expressed by Stephen Leacock. Leacock complains of a writer who:

'has a whole book to elucidate what "nonsense" is and how to distinguish what is nonsensical from what is "ludicrous" or "ridiculous" or "absurd" or "funny"

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<sup>4</sup> Mahadev L. Apte, 'Disciplinary boundaries in humorology: an anthropologist's ruminations', in *Humor* Vol.1-1, p.20.

or “comical”. All these words run so closely together, with shades of meaning at once so obvious and so impalpable, like the blending colours of the rainbow, that it is as unprofitable as it is futile to try to reduce their meanings to a contrasted scheme of gradations.’<sup>5</sup>

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines humour as ‘that quality of action, speech or writing which excites amusement’<sup>6</sup>. We shall follow this general definition, and understand humour as that which excites, or aims to excite, amusement: another understanding widely accepted in contemporary humour research. We must therefore include within our definition not only that humour to be found in narrative jokes, novels, plays, films and television programmes, but also any chance occurrence in everyday life which may be perceived as amusing. Humour, then, on this understanding, can either be prepared, or naturally-occurring.

Laughter, of course, is not always caused by amusement at humour. There are certain kinds of non-humorous laughter which there will be no time to discuss here: laughter as a result of tickling, or of inhaling nitrous oxide, for instance. But the laughter with which we shall predominantly be concerned is that resulting from amusement at humour - though, as we shall see, such laughter often appears inextricably linked with other feelings, such as superiority, triumph or joy.

So, my general understanding of the relevant terms will be that something read, heard or seen is perceived as humorous; that the mental state appropriate to such a reaction to that stimulus is, or at least involves, amusement; and that this mental state may (although it will not necessarily) outwardly manifest itself in laughter.

## 1.2 The humourlessness of humour research

One further point should be made, before outlining the plan of the dissertation. The analysis of humour can often be a humourless - indeed sometimes painful - business. E.B.White remarked that: ‘Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Leacock, *Humour and Humanity* (London: Thronton Butterworth, 1937), p.15.

<sup>6</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Book Club Associates by arrangement with Oxford University Press, 1979), p.453.

scientific mind'<sup>7</sup>. There is an odd - but commonly held - assumption that a piece of work concerned with the theory of humour should itself be funny. Apart from the inclusion of examples of humour within this dissertation, the reader who expects this will be disappointed. I share the sentiments of Victor Raskin, editor of the above-mentioned *Humor* journal, as expressed in its first issue:

'One thing this journal should not be expected to be is funny. To quote a friend, a journal on schizophrenia or a journal on aggressive behavior does not typically publish schizophrenic or abusive prose. Neither should *we* be expected to be funny.'<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3 Dissertation outline

We can now return to the plan of the dissertation. Its format will be as follows. Each of Chapters Two, Three and Four will examine one of three main traditions in humour theory, which relates humour to the notions of incongruity, superiority and the release of energy respectively. That these three are the main theoretical divisions is a matter of fairly common agreement.<sup>9</sup> I make no apologies for considering views put forward within each of these traditions in considerable detail: many reviews thereof are too superficial to give a clear idea of exactly what is being claimed by a particular theory, or to enable a fair judgement to be passed upon it. Also, I should mention that in dealing with the subject of these three chapters, I shall refer to the incongruity, superiority and release **traditions** rather than the incongruity, superiority and release **theories**. There is not, in each of these traditions, a well-established existing theory on which subsequent writers in that tradition were consciously trying to improve. The history of humour theory is rather less neat than this: most of the thinkers considered in this dissertation

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<sup>7</sup> E.B.White, 'Some Remarks on Humor', in *The Second Tree from the Corner* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1954), p.173.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Raskin, 'From the Editor', in *Humor* Vol.1-1, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, John Morreall - one of very few contemporary philosophers to have devoted any prolonged period of time to researching, and publishing on, the theory of humour - uses this schema consistently (see bibliography for Morreall's publications), as do most brief historical reviews of humour-theoretical literature, examples of the latter being that found in Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), pp.30-41 and D.H.Monro, 'Humor' entry in Paul Edwards (ed. in chief), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol.3 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., and The Free Press, 1967), pp.90-93.

show little or no evidence of having read those other writers now considered to have offered the 'classic' readings in the field.

Each of the principal writers in the three theoretical traditions offers a theory which is intended to be comprehensive, and so each theory will be analysed in these terms. It will be concluded that though none of them succeeds in offering an adequate all-encompassing theory, each explains certain aspects of the phenomena of humour and laughter better than other theories. Certain important connections between different theories will be made along the way, not least of which is an observation as to **why** both incongruity- and superiority-based theories fail: that they both need, in order to give an adequate account in terms of the relevant concept, to 'stretch' the meaning of the key term. Reasons for rejecting the idea of a synthesis of the main theories are given in Chapter Five, along with a reason for assuming that any all-encompassing theory is doomed to failure. An area of enquiry more manageable than that of attempting to provide a successful comprehensive theory is therefore explored in Chapter Six. A number of questions arise from the consideration of the main theoretical traditions, one of the most interesting and important of which concerns the **functions** of humour and laughter. Chapter Six sheds further light on this by contrasting two diametrically opposed views of laughter's function. The first of these, that of Henri Bergson, is firmly established as one of the 'classic' theories; the second, that of Friedrich Nietzsche, has been all but completely overlooked<sup>10</sup>. For Bergson, the function of laughter is to act as a social corrective. The strengths and weaknesses of such a view are assessed, and compared with the view which emerges from considering the role laughter plays in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: that laughter is the appropriate response to an individual's ultimate liberation. This latter view raises the importance of laughter to altogether new heights, Nietzsche taking us far beyond the realms of categorising types of humour or analysing jokes, and showing the wider role laughter can play in human life, and the potential open to the person who is able to take what might genuinely be called a 'humorous attitude' to life.

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, neither Morreall nor Monro, the two philosophers whose work on humour and laughter has been of most use to me in my research, mentions Nietzsche's contribution to the subject.

## Chapter II

### The incongruity tradition

The tradition that relates humour to incongruity is the first of the three main theoretical traditions we will consider. By far the most commonly discussed comments in this tradition are those of Arthur Schopenhauer, and we will turn our attention to his views shortly. In this, as in most aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy, however, it is helpful if we first consider Immanuel Kant.

#### 2.1 Kant on laughter

As well as their connection with the Schopenhauerian incongruity theory, Kant's brief comments on laughter involve the additional factor of release or relief, and for this reason it may be said that in Kant we also get the origins of the kind of theory we shall consider in Chapter Four. However, it is the connection with the incongruity tradition in which we are interested here. We should start with Kant's central claim:

'Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. *Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing*'.<sup>11</sup>

In an attempt to illustrate his point, Kant offers an anecdote about an Indian, who is astonished to see the beer in a shaken-up bottle turn into froth and flow out when the bottle is opened. When asked what is so wonderful about this, the Indian's explanation is that what surprised him was not the froth's getting out, but how anyone had ever managed to get it in to begin with.<sup>12</sup>

Kant claims this is amusing not due to our feeling any sense of superiority over the Indian, but 'rather that the bubble of our expectation was extended to

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Meredith Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p.199.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, pp.199-200.

the full and suddenly went off into nothing'.<sup>13</sup> This also explains our amusement, Kant says, at the following story. The heir of a wealthy relative is lamenting the failure of his attempt to arrange the deceased's funeral on a massively imposing scale. The reason for this failure, he explains, is that 'the more money I give my mourners to look sad, the more pleased they look'.<sup>14</sup>

A preliminary point to be made here is that we cannot dispense as readily as does Kant with the notion of superiority or degradation in the Indian example. While a feeling of superiority over Indians is not essential to appreciating this joke, it remains true that particular races or social groups are often made the butts of jokes in order to increase the comedian's chances of getting a laugh, and that people are generally more likely to laugh at a joke towards the butt of which they feel some prejudice or antagonism. However, we can leave this point on one side for the time being, as the theoretical tradition which relates humour to feelings of superiority and degradation will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The main point is that despite his illustrations, it is still unclear exactly what Kant means by a 'reduction into nothing'. There are some jokes in which a 'reduction into nothing' does literally occur, as in Kevin McIntyre's 'I'm not saying my aunt's fat, but she's about the only woman I know'.<sup>15</sup> This kind of joke might legitimately be referred to as a 'non-joke'. It works because we expect a particular **kind** of joke (for instance, 'I'm not saying my wife's fat, but she's the only woman I know who ever got chosen to play Bethlehem in the school nativity play'.<sup>16</sup>) To the hearer's surprise, the kind of joke expected is never completed, however, and a new meaning in the phrase is discovered. As well as 'non-jokes', shaggy-dog stories would also seem to illustrate Kant's point fairly well.

However, 'reduction into nothing' in this literal sense is an adequate explanation of only a very small field of humour and, if we interpret him literally, it seems that Kant's formulation is not the best explanation of his own examples. In both

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<sup>13</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p.200.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> On a number of occasions in this dissertation, I will make reference to jokes for which it is not possible to cite a reference, as this material has never been published or recorded on vinyl. McIntyre's joke is one such instance.

<sup>16</sup> I have stolen this joke from comedian Jo Brand, who tells it about herself.

of these, what exactly is it that Kant expects us to be expecting? Is it simply that the hearer expects some sort of explanation: an explanation from the heir of why his plans were not succeeding, or from the Indian of why he was puzzled? If this is so, amusement is not caused by this expectation being reduced to nothing, because an explanation is indeed given. John Morreall discusses Kant's funeral joke, and agrees that we do expect that an explanation for the heir's lamentations will be given. But, he argues, if this expectation were indeed 'reduced to nothing'; if no such explanation were given, then there would be no joke. 'If the story, say, ended after telling us that the heir lamented his inability to arrange for an imposing funeral, we would have frustrated expectation but would be unlikely to laugh.'<sup>17</sup> The humour lies in the **nature** of the explanations, when they arrive: if these jokes are perceived as funny, it is because, as the first part of Kant's formulation acknowledges, the Indian's and heir's comments appear absurd or incongruous.

But we can interpret 'reduction to nothing' in a way less literal than Morreall's interpretation, and in a way more favourable to Kant. In many jokes or comic anecdotes, the beginning of the joke sets up the mind to follow a particular path. Now after the two examples we have already quoted, Kant remarks that: 'We must be careful to observe that the reduction is not one into the positive contrary of an expected object - for that is always something, and may frequently pain us - but must be a reduction to nothing.'<sup>18</sup> This suggests the point that what makes the joke work is often not getting the complete opposite of what we expected, but rather the outcome's suddenly making us realise that we have followed **completely the wrong path**: the one we have followed turns out to lead nowhere; or at least, not to the same place as the punchline of the joke. This is the sense in which our 'expectation' is 'reduced to nothing.'

For instance, consider the following two jokes. In one episode of the TV show *Cheers*, the bar slob Norm, after yet another evening's sitting around drinking, announces that he is leaving, since he has promised his much neglected wife that he will pick up some Chinese food. 'That's nice of you', someone comments, surprised. 'Yeah, well', says Norm, 'I spilled it on the carpet this morning.' Here

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<sup>17</sup> John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p.17.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p.200.

we have followed the wrong path; the one that leads from a mistaken assumption about the way the phrase 'pick up' is used in this sentence. A similar process is at work in Emo Phillips's account of being in trouble at school as a small boy, and being sent to the headmaster. Another boy, who had gone through this terrible ordeal the previous week, told Emo that, as a result of his experience, he still could not sit down. This terrified Emo, and he prayed: 'Please God, don't let the headmaster find **me** attractive too...'

It must be said that this understanding of Kant does not seem to be an adequate explanation of his own examples - it is difficult to see what is the particular path which the mind is set up to follow in these cases - and so it is questionable whether this was his own original intended meaning. Nevertheless, such an idea is valuable in shedding light on how certain humour works. D.H.Monro offers a formulation which is essentially the same as that outlined above: 'The mind is as it were wound up ready to proceed in a definite direction: it is suddenly wrenched off its path and turned in a different direction'.<sup>19</sup> If understood in this way, Kant's ideas may be seen as giving birth to the kind of incongruity theory outlined more explicitly by Schopenhauer. It is to this that we now turn.

## 2.2 Schopenhauer's formulation

Schopenhauer's central claim is as follows:

'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. It often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through one concept, and the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view. It occurs just as often, however, that the incongruity between a single real object and the concept under which, from one point of view, it has been rightly been subsumed, is suddenly felt. Now the more correct the subsumption of such objects under a concept may be from one point of view,

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<sup>19</sup> D.H.Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1951), p.147.

and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter, then, is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous'.<sup>20</sup>

In a supplementary chapter, Schopenhauer grudgingly offers some examples 'in order to come to the assistance of the mental inertness of those readers who always prefer to remain in a passive condition'.<sup>21</sup> These may be divided into two kinds, according to whether laughter is caused by passing from the real or perceptible to the thought or conception, or vice versa. These are witticisms and absurdities respectively. Examples of witticisms include 'the familiar anecdote of the Gascon at whom the king laughed when he saw him in light summer clothing in the depth of winter, and who thereupon said to the king: "If your majesty had put on what I have, you would find it very warm"; and on being asked what he had put on, replied: "My whole wardrobe!"'<sup>22</sup>

In this instance, under the usual conception of a 'whole wardrobe' is subsumed the object of the peasant's single summer coat, and the humour arises from the incongruity of this with the conception.

Puns are merely special instances of this idea, the ambiguous word again enabling an inappropriate percept to be subsumed under some general concept. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio says 'Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man', the percept of death emerging from the play on the word 'grave', is subsumed under the concept of gravity in the sense of seriousness. Similarly, parody employs the same method, when it 'substitutes for the incidents and words of a serious poem or drama insignificant low persons or trifling motives and actions.'<sup>23</sup> Here, 'commonplace realities'<sup>24</sup> are subsumed under 'the lofty con-

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.1, trans. R.B.Haldane and J.Kemp (London: Routledge, 1883), pp.76-77. (The German word which is here translated as 'ludicrous' is *lächerlich*, which comes from the verb *lachen* - 'to laugh' - and hence can also be translated as 'laughable'.) I shall refer to the above paragraph, an important one, as Schopenhauer's core paragraph.

<sup>21</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.271.

<sup>22</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.272.

<sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.276.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

cepts given in the theme'<sup>25</sup>. Trivialisation, a very common technique in humour, works in a similar fashion, subsuming the trivial under the serious and noble.

The second species of the ludicrous, the absurd, follows the opposite path from the abstract conception to the real object. For example, consider the invitation to a man who remarked how much he liked walking alone: 'So do I: therefore we can go together'. Here, we start from the general conception that a pleasure which two people enjoy, they can share. But the humour arises from the fact that we subsume under it the very case which excludes companionship. The conception does not necessarily have to be explicitly stated, as it is not, for instance, when we find certain animals ludicrous because something about them resembling man leads us to subsume them under the conception of the human form.

Schopenhauer uses the notion of incongruity to contrast laughing and joking with seriousness. Seriousness consists in the consciousness of the perfect agreement and congruity of the conception, or thought, with the perception, or reality: 'the serious man is convinced that he thinks the things as they are, and that they are as he thinks them'.<sup>26</sup>

The transition from profound seriousness to laughter is so easy because the more perfect the agreement that the serious man assumes, the easier this is to upset by even a slight incongruity. This explains our offence when others laugh at us: we are forced to recognise that there is a great incongruity between our conceptions and the objective realities. Schopenhauer also uses the idea of seriousness to explain two further subdivisions of the ludicrous: irony and humour<sup>27</sup>. Irony arises when the intentionally ludicrous is concealed behind seriousness. The irony of Socrates, for instance, often consists of acquiescing in and pretending to share others' opinions, until eventually the result perplexes the opponent both as to Socrates and his own opinions. Conversely, humour involves seriousness being concealed behind a joke. An example of this is Hamlet's reply to Polonius. When the latter says 'My honourable lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you',

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.280.

<sup>27</sup> Schopenhauer (or this translation of him) is clearly using the term 'humour' in a much more limited sense than it is used in contemporary humour research, the present dissertation included.

Hamlet replies: 'You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal, except my life, except my life, except my life'.

## 2.3 Critique

Schopenhauer's own claim for his theory is bold: 'here, after so many fruitless earlier attempts, the true theory of the ludicrous is given, and the problem which was proposed and also given up by Cicero is definitely solved'.<sup>28</sup>

This is too enthusiastic. Though I shall be defending Schopenhauer's central insight as a worthwhile one, there are important objections to an incongruity theory, which we need to consider now.

Perhaps the first, preliminary, point to make is that the use I shall make of Schopenhauer will not include a use of his taxonomy of species of the ludicrous. My concern in this dissertation is not with deciding whether a particular joke is best described as a witticism or an absurdity. For instance, consider the following, from a piece by Woody Allen:

'In the end Socrates' brave death gave his life authentic meaning; something my existence lacks totally, although it does possess a minimal relevance to the Internal Revenue Department'.<sup>29</sup>

If we are to make any sense of Schopenhauer's talk of percepts and concepts here, it would seem that in this case we are moving from the more abstract concept that one's life has no authentic meaning, to the particular reality that one is important to the tax authorities. By Schopenhauer's criteria, this makes the joke a case of the absurd. Yet if there is anything absurd about the statement that Allen is making, it is in a much weaker sense of the word than Schopenhauer's example of two people who like walking alone doing so together. Unlike in the latter example, there is no sense of logical impossibility in the Allen joke. And could not Allen's remark be more accurately described as a witticism? Furthermore, it is not clear to me that such categories as this need be mutually exclusive. Can we

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<sup>28</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.272. Two pages earlier, Schopenhauer has referred to Cicero's comments on the problem of the origin of laughter and his dismissal of the problem as insoluble.

<sup>29</sup> Woody Allen, 'My Apology', in *Side Effects* (Sevenoaks: New English Library, 1981), p.35.

not have witty absurdities, humorous ironies and so on? One could, I suppose, attempt independent definitions of each term, whilst accepting that they need not be mutually exclusive, but I shall make no such attempt here since, to reiterate the point made in the introduction, my concern in this thesis is with ‘macro-humorology’, and so I shall not be concerned with developing Schopenhauer’s, or constructing my own, taxonomy of humour.

### 2.3.1 Types of ‘incongruity’ and range of usage

An important challenge facing any incongruity theorist is the necessity of defining more clearly what is meant by the term ‘incongruity’. And in fact, though the term is littered throughout most contemporary discussions of humour, hardly ever does one find any clear explanation as to what is meant. In attempting to address this shortcoming, the *Oxford English Dictionary* seems a reasonable place to start. Here we find such definitions as:

‘disagreement in character or qualities: want of accordance or harmony; discrepancy, inconsistency...want of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting; unsuitableness, inappropriateness, absurdity...want of harmony of parts or elements; want of self-consistency; incoherence’.<sup>30</sup>

It is worth noting that there are thinkers, other than Kant and Schopenhauer, for whom incongruity is central to the laughable. Joseph Warton, for instance, refers to ‘those incongruities and absurdities of behaviour, on which ridicule is founded’<sup>31</sup>, whilst Alexander Gerard regarded the object of the sense of the ludicrous as being ‘in general incongruity, or a surprising and uncommon mixture of relation and contrariety in things. More explicitly; it is gratified by an inconsistency and dissonance of circumstances in the same object, or in objects nearly related in the main; or by a similitude or relation unexpected between things on the whole opposite and unlike’.<sup>32</sup> In one of the most detailed eighteenth-century essays on laughter, James Beattie claims that: ‘Laughter arises from the view of two or

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<sup>30</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol.1 (London: Book Club Associates, in association with Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Warton, in the *Adventurer* (12th Feb., 1754); quoted in J.Y.T.Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923), p.241.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (London, 1759), p.66.

more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them'.<sup>33</sup>

Later theorists too, talk of similar concepts: Monro of the inappropriate<sup>34</sup>, and Edith J. Hols of irregularity<sup>35</sup>.

A previous commentator in this area, Marie Collins Swabey, agrees that theorists in this tradition have meant something corresponding to just about all of the terms quoted above from the *O.E.D.*:

'sometimes the notion that things are incongruous emphasizes chiefly that they are markedly dissimilar or in contrast to one another; sometimes that they are inappropriate or unsuited to their situation; again that there is a lack of relevance between them; again that there is a clear-cut incompatibility or inconsistency between them (as indicating that they are mutually exclusive, without necessarily mutually exhausting all possibilities). And lastly, incongruity may plainly mean contradictory: that two propositions, properties, or states of affairs are opposites in the full sense, so that the denial, absence or falsity of one of them is equivalent to the affirmation, presence, or truth of the other, since between them they exhaust the range of possible alternatives'.<sup>36</sup>

Swabey, whose own view of humour is strongly rooted in the incongruity tradition, is very rare amongst theorists in that she considers the range of usage of the term, a procedure which includes considering numerous examples of humour. Let us consider her account next. To begin with, Swabey makes a distinction between two types of incongruity:

'Basically, perception of the comic requires the grasp of incongruities that are both logical (as regards the science of reasoning) and teleological (involving

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<sup>33</sup> James Beattie, 'An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', in his *Essays* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1776), p.320.

<sup>34</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, pp.235-256.

<sup>35</sup> Edith J.Hols, 'A Rhetoric of Humor: One-liners', in Robert L.Brown and Martin Steinmann Jr. (eds.), *Rhetoric 78: Proceedings of the Theory of Rhetoric: An Interdisciplinary Conference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Studies in Language, Style and Literary Theory, 1979), pp.191-199.

<sup>36</sup> Marie Collins Swabey, *Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), pp.110-111.

a fitness of the parts within the pattern of the whole)...comic incongruities may be divided into those which appeal strongly to our sense of rational form (*logical incongruities* proper) and those which appeal more obviously to our sense of incompatibilities in their matter (which may be called mainly *factual incongruities*).<sup>37</sup>

She gives as an example of a joke which involves a formal incongruity leading to self-contradiction the following schoolboy howler: 'Lincoln was a great Kentuckian. He was born in a log cabin, which he built with his own hands.'<sup>38</sup>

Other logical laws may be violated: as, for instance, in the story of the man who returned a borrowed kettle with a hole in it. He denied responsibility on three grounds: firstly, he had not borrowed the kettle, secondly it already had a hole in it when he borrowed it, and finally, he had returned it without a hole.

We can add that one might also be amused by the breaking of mathematical rules, particularly when this is done unintentionally, as in my junior school when a friend told me that for the first lesson of the afternoon, half of the class would be doing English, half of us Maths and half of us French.

Humour based upon 'factual incongruities' is far more common. Swabey discusses numerous examples here, which she divides into four main categories. We shall consider these in turn. To begin with, many jokes depend upon equivocation or ambiguity. This covers *double entendres*, Swabey giving as an example the following Marx Brothers' joke: 'I tried to pick up a little Hungarian, but she slapped my face'. Here, 'there is an equivocation both on the term "Hungarian" - as meaning either (1) a language or (2) a person native to Hungary, and the term "pick up" - as meaning either (1) to acquire knowledge in an unsystematic way or (2) to force one's acquaintance upon another without introductions. The revelation in the conclusion of the use of the term in the premise in this second, slangy sense is what gives the unexpected comic effect.'<sup>39</sup> One of the meanings in an ambiguity-dependent joke does not have to be sexual, of course; as in the story of the woman apprehended for stealing reams of paper and boxes full of pens from

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<sup>37</sup> Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p.115.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p.119.

a stationery store, whose excuse to the policeman who asked her to explain herself was that she was gathering material for her new novel.

Similar to the *double entendre* is another common kind of joke, where, instead of the joke hinging upon two possible meanings of one particular word, it is dependent upon two possible understandings of a whole phrase. Normally, the literal meaning is taken of a phrase meant as a figure of speech:

'I woke up one morning and my girlfriend asked me if I slept good. I said, "No, I made a few mistakes".'<sup>40</sup>

'Doctor: Mrs. O'Reilly, I don't like the look of your husband.  
Mrs. O: Neither do I, Doctor, but he's good to the children.'

Or, less commonly, the opposite may occur, where an intended literal meaning is interpreted as a figure of speech:

'I said to my wife, "All things considered, I'd like to die in bed", and she said, "What, again?"'<sup>41</sup>

Swabey also includes comic plots involving mistaken identity, or of women being dressed as men, under this heading. Examples of each would be the misunderstandings over the pairs of twins in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, and of Rosalind's assuming the name and dress of the countryman Ganymede in *As You Like It*. The idea here is that from persons wrongly judged to be the same, invalid inferences are drawn.

The second category after equivocation or ambiguity consists of the fallacies of irrelevance or *non sequitur*. In Mel Brooks's film *Young Frankenstein*, when the doctor is faced with a major problem, his servant Igor, played by Marty Feldman, offers a suggestion. "You know", he says, "It's at times like these that I remember what my old dad used to say to me". His hopes arisen, Frankenstein asks eagerly what that was. Igor gives a nostalgic smile, and then barks out his dad's words: "Hurry up and get out of that bathroom! You're in there all day and all night: get

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<sup>40</sup> From stand-up comedian Steven Wright's album *I Have a Pony* (Warner Bros. Records Inc., 1985).

<sup>41</sup> A Rodney Dangerfield gag, quoted in Melvin Helitzer, *Comedy Writing Secrets* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1987), p.77.

a move on, and give someone else a chance!” The total irrelevance of the content of this memory to the situation, together with its unexpectedness, is what makes this funny. Under the heading of irrelevance we can also include much of the humour of those Alan Bennett or Victoria Wood characters who assail their audience with monologues the ideas in which are only very loosely connected, if at all:

‘Good evening. My name’s Kitty. I’ve had a boob off and I can’t stomach wheelks so that’s me for you...There’s a rumour going round our block that I play golf. Let me scotch it. I do have what seems to be a golf-bag on my telephone table but it’s actually a pyjama-case made by a friend who has trouble with her nerves in Buckinghamshire...I’ve just had my TV mended. I say mended - a shifty young man in plimsolls waggled my aerial and wolfed my Gipsy Creams, but that’s the comprehensive system for you.’<sup>42</sup>

An irrelevant aside, too, can be amusing in virtue of its irrelevance. Take the following, from Bertie Wooster:

‘I marmaladed a slice of toast with something of a flourish, and I don’t suppose I have ever come much closer to saying “Tra-la-la” as I did the lathering, for I was feeling in mid-season form this morning. God, as I once heard Jeeves put it, was in His heaven and all was right with the world. (He added, I remember, some guff about larks and snails, but that is a side issue and need not detain us.)’<sup>43</sup>

Thirdly, humour can arise from what Swabey describes as ‘disparities in subject matter, modes of operation, and conventions of two different worlds’<sup>44</sup>. She gives as an example a cartoon of two cleaners dusting the lens of a huge telescope in an observatory, one of whom says: ‘And you should have heard him swear when I showed him it was only a fly speck.’ Here the high-flying world of astronomy is brought together with the more down-to-earth, everyday world of the cleaners.

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<sup>42</sup> Victoria Wood, *Up To You, Porky* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.69-70. Note that the categories of joke being discussed here are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The idea of making mistakes while asleep might lead one to include as an example of irrelevance the Steven Wright example mentioned under the previous heading.

<sup>43</sup> P.G.Wodehouse, *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.5.

<sup>44</sup> Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, pp.120-1.

This third category is a highly important one, and it is illuminating here to compare Swabey with two other theorists: Monro and Arthur Koestler, both of whom make very similar points. Monro notices that an explanation of humour constantly requires reference to ‘the linking of disparates, to the collision of different mental spheres, to the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another.’<sup>45</sup> By ‘the linking of disparates’, Monro understands jokes in which ‘two remote spheres of thought can be connected’<sup>46</sup>. As an example, he gives a cartoon of an insect exterminator explaining his technique to a client: ‘Their first reaction is one of fright and hysteria. Then a strange apathy seems to seize them and they lose all will to live.’<sup>47</sup> The disparates linked here are the insect-exterminator’s trade and the attitude of the psychologist. (We will see wider illustrations of the use of this technique shortly, when we discuss ‘configurational’ theories.) The ‘collision of different mental spheres’ and ‘the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another’ are so similar as to make it pointless to distinguish between them. Either could be illustrated by Swabey’s astronomy cartoon, Aristophanes’ description of a politician as having a voice like a pig on fire, or this memorable line from a Ring Lardner story:

“‘Shut up’, he explained.’<sup>48</sup>

We could also include here jokes where a general concept or a circumstance suggested by a certain phrase has, in Schopenhauer’s terminology, an inappropriate instantiation subsumed under it, such as Schopenhauer’s example of the two men who like walking alone doing so together, or Paul Merton’s confession that he has always wanted to ask Lee Harvey Oswald: ‘Can you remember what you were doing when President Kennedy was assassinated?’

‘The obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another’ seems a natural explanation of the following, from *Pickwick Papers*:

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<sup>45</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.235. I shall refer to these important factors, very common in humour, as Monro’s three factors.

<sup>46</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.248.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Ring Lardner, *The Young Immigrants*, quoted in Fred Metcalf (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.18.

“Married!”, exclaimed Pott, with frightful vehemence. He stopped, smiled darkly, and added, in a low, vindictive tone: “It serves him right!”<sup>49</sup>

But this might also be brought under the ‘linking of disparates’: many will find this funny because of the sense in which the sentiments are appropriate rather than inappropriate. This illustrates the important point that it makes more sense to **combine** factors such as Monro’s three, rather than treating them as separate categories. Monro himself does this, using ‘inappropriateness’ as a ‘convenient single word’<sup>50</sup> to link all three factors.

Koestler’s view is similar to those of Swabey and Monro. For Koestler, ‘the pattern underlying all varieties of humour is “bisociative” - perceiving a situation or event in two habitually incompatible associative contexts’<sup>51</sup>. (This is part of an attempt on Koestler’s part to compare the creation of laughter with science and art, all of which are dependent upon this central idea of ‘bisociation’: ‘When two independent matrices of perception or reasoning interact with each other the result...is either a *collision* ending in laughter, or their *fusion* in a new intellectual synthesis, or their *confrontation* in an aesthetic experience...the same pair of matrices can produce comic, tragic, or intellectually challenging effects’.<sup>52</sup>) Along the same lines, too, is Dr. Johnson’s definition of wit as ‘the unexpected copulation of ideas’<sup>53</sup>.

We move on to Swabey’s fourth category. What Swabey sees as the weakest sense in which the term ‘incongruity’ is used occurs when ‘incongruous’ is used to mean possessing ‘strikingly contrasting qualities at the farthest extremes of the scale from one another’.<sup>54</sup> She mentions laughter at the juxtaposition of the elephant and the mouse or the giraffe and the monkey, and insists that this results from the suggestion of logical contradiction which ‘appears in the conflict between thought and perception of which we are aware in facing the bizarre fertility of

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, quoted in T.G.A.Nelson, *Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.47.

<sup>50</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.235.

<sup>51</sup> Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p.95.

<sup>52</sup> Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p.45.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Richard Boston, *An Anatomy of Laughter* (London: Collins, 1974), p.63.

<sup>54</sup> Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p.111.

nature<sup>55</sup>: that animals as diverse as this could still be members of the genus animal. But awareness of a mere contrast between an elephant and a mouse, whilst recognising they are both animals, is surely not enough to amuse many people. Swabey's mention of the 'juxtaposition' of these very different examples is more important than she emphasises. Take the scenario, common in children's humour, of an enormous elephant being afraid of a tiny mouse. If this is funny, it is surely because of some such juxtaposition: to a common sense view, the mouse should be afraid of the elephant. This depends, then, upon more than the appearance of 'strikingly contrasting qualities at the farthest extremes of the scale from one another'.

Rather than dismiss Swabey out of hand, though, let us comment on how her mention of a 'striking contrast' does suggest another fairly common kind of humour. Consider this exchange, from Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, on school sports day:

"My boy has been injured in the foot", said Lady Circumference coldly.

"Dear me! Not badly, I hope? Did he twist his ankle in the jumping?"

"No", said Lady Circumference, "he was shot at by one of the assistant masters. But it is kind of you to enquire".<sup>56</sup>

Here, the humour lies in the contrast between the subject-matter under discussion and Lady Circumference's preservation of the niceties of polite speech, which are so inappropriate to the circumstances.

Woody Allen's early essays, too, often depend upon striking contrasts. For instance the following, from 'A Look at Organised Crime': 'Identifying criminals is up to each of us. Usually they can be recognised by their large cufflinks and their failure to stop eating when the man sitting next to them is hit by a falling anvil.'<sup>57</sup>

However, such humour is not a new, fourth, category, but an extension of the third: it involves the kind of factor which Monro brought under the heading of

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1937), p.73.

<sup>57</sup> Woody Allen, 'A Look at Organised Crime', in his *Getting Even* (London: Star Books, 1975), p.17.

inappropriateness. In trying to ascertain what is amusing in the Allen joke, for instance, the first point might appear to be the bizarre image which is conjured up. It is important to note, however, that we have here a case of 'obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another.' As a piece of practical advice intended to enable us to identify criminals is given a method of so doing which involves an incident which is so unlikely to happen that it renders itself totally useless as the piece of practical advice which it purports to be. There is also a 'linking of disparates'. The joke would be less funny if the reference to wearing cufflinks were removed. We would certainly be left with a bizarre image which could still amuse us. However, the joke is improved by the mention of the first, mundane supposed characteristic of criminals, which serves as a total contrast to the bizarre one which follows.

We have now completed our review of Swabey's categorisations, having illustrated them, predominantly with examples other than those she herself gives. The point of the above review was not to defend Swabey's categories as perfect. It might be argued, for instance, that further subdivisions could be made within the category of 'factual incongruities', and that *double entendres* and puns could be classed under a heading such as 'semantic incongruities'. We could use an alternative classificatory terminology, too: humour which involves the breaking of logical and mathematical rules could be called 'hard' incongruity, while factors such as ambiguity, irrelevance and inappropriateness would be 'soft' incongruity. However, the main point of considering Swabey's account was to give us a clearer idea as to the range over which the term 'incongruity' has been applied. Our survey has confirmed a suspicion which may have been present from the moment of our first encounter with the *O.E.D.* definitions: that the range of ideas which the term has been used to cover is a wide one. This is necessary, the incongruity theorist would argue, in order to account for the wide range of humour. But it raises serious doubts as to whether all these formulations may genuinely be said to be interchangeable with the term 'incongruity'. A recent writer on this topic has claimed that 'the systematic elucidation of the concept of incongruity is not the task in hand. The task in hand is to use our *intuitive* understanding of incongruity to elucidate what it is to be comical'.<sup>58</sup> The problem with this is that the concept

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<sup>58</sup> M.E.Orellana-Benado, 'A Philosophy of Humour' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1985), pp.32-33.

of ‘incongruity’ is in danger of being stretched so far that to claim that humour is based on incongruity ceases to be particularly informative. (This ‘stretching’ is most clearly illustrated in Swabey’s observation that it has been used to mean possessing ‘strikingly contrasting qualities at the farthest extremes of the scale from one another’.) If incongruity can mean so much, to tell us that humour results from incongruity is not as clear-cut a solution of Cicero’s problem of explaining laughter as Schopenhauer would have us believe.

However, such an objection does not render the insight of the incongruity tradition worthless: far from it. It is true that one might worry about embracing an ‘incongruity theory’, or whatever, due to the difficulty of trying to find an acceptable word that will cover all of the factors discussed in this section. But we should not let semantic problems obscure what is of value in a theoretical tradition. We can defend the notion of humour as incongruity to the following extent. There is a tradition, in which the above-discussed views of Schopenhauer are central, which observes in humour the kind of properties we have been talking about: the presence of factors such as ‘the linking of disparates...the collision of different mental spheres...the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another’. That humour often involves this kind of factor is a point worth making, and the incongruity tradition is the theoretical tradition which makes it.<sup>59</sup>

### 2.3.2 Inherent and perceived incongruities

Before we go any further, a preliminary point needs to be cleared up. We recall that one of Monro’s three factors is ‘the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another’. It should be pointed out in defending the incongruity tradition to the extent that I am, I do not need to claim that anything is **objectively** incongruous. Such a claim would be highly dubious. I am not arguing, for instance, for inherent incongruities which transcend cultural boundaries. La Fave *et al* make the point that ‘a large number of alleged “jokes” in our culture have as their apparent point a domineering woman attacking a submissive man. The point of that type of

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<sup>59</sup> In this respect, ‘inappropriateness’ may be considered a preferable term to ‘incongruity’. However, since the vast majority of theorists who discuss this aspect of humour use the term ‘incongruity’, I shall follow in this tradition, to avoid making the exposition of certain views discussed later in this chapter unnecessarily complicated and long-winded. To the extent that I agree with these views in what follows, the term should be understood as being, to quote Monro again, a ‘convenient single word’ to cover factors such as Monro’s three.

“joke” is the *incongruity* that men, not women, are supposed to be the aggressors. However, Margaret Mead...found a society (Tchambauli) in which the women were the aggressors. This type of “joke”, we predict, would be found unfunny in such a culture.’<sup>60</sup>

On the same point, Jerry Palmer<sup>61</sup> tells of Venezuelan Indians who have converted to Catholicism, yet continue to believe in their traditional gods. Noting from Catholicism that suicide prevents one from getting into heaven, they have devised a safeguard against getting to heaven and not liking it: wearing a cord around their necks, to show God that they committed suicide. As Palmer points out, this is liable to amuse the Westerner because of the twin incongruities of believing that it is possible to fool God, and believing that there could be anywhere preferable to heaven. Yet with the limited understanding of the Western conception of God that seems to have been available to them, such a belief obviously does not appear to that society as incongruous.

This point can be extended. Neil Schaeffer argues that ‘from the point of view of nature, there are no real incongruities. It is only from our human point of view that we imagine nature as comedian arranging incongruities for our pleasure’.<sup>62</sup> So a photograph of a seagull passing a flying fish in flight shows something which is not **inherently** incongruous, but may be regarded by some as a humorous incongruity because, to most of us, a fish which flies is a case of the obtrusion into one context of what we generally think of as belonging to another.

So what matters, as Schopenhauer saw, is that something should be **perceived** or **thought of** as incongruous. Hence, strictly speaking, we should really make the third of Monro’s three factors a great deal clumsier. When ‘incongruity’ is used in this sense, it will mean something like ‘the obtrusion into one context of what belongs, is **felt** or **held** to belong, or is recognised as being felt or held by

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<sup>60</sup> Laurence La Fave, Jay Haddad, and William A. Maesen, ‘Superiority, Enhanced Self-Esteem, and Perceived Incongruity Humour Theory’, in Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (eds.), *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), pp.84-5. The reference is to Margaret Mead’s *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Mentor Books, 1935).

<sup>61</sup> Jerry Palmer, ‘Theory of Comic Narrative: semantic and pragmatic elements’, in *Humor* Vol.1-2 (1988), pp.111-126. The illustration discussed here is given on p.115.

<sup>62</sup> Neil Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p.7.

certain people to belong, in another'. This avoids the problem of incongruities being dependent upon cultural factors, and might also explain certain cases of some people being amused by things which do not amuse others.

For instance, consider the following joke.

'A man and woman are making passionate love in the bedroom. Suddenly the apartment door opens and a man comes in: "Darling! I'm home, my love." He walks into the bedroom, looks at the naked couple and says, "What is she doing here?"'<sup>63</sup>

To find this joke funny, one needs to believe that homosexuality is abnormal, or to recognise that it is generally felt to be so by our society at large, or at least by a group of people of which the joke-teller is probably a part. If none of these beliefs are held, then it will not be possible for the hearer to perceive or understand the intended incongruity of the joke, and so he will be unable to find the joke amusing. Of course, to point out the importance of perceiving or understanding such intended incongruities is not to deny that there may well be vitally important additional factors which affect someone's being amused or otherwise by such a joke. If the hearer is gay, his reaction to it is likely to depend upon whether or not he regards the joke as ridiculing gays: this reaction will be heavily dependent upon his perception of the attitude of the joke-teller and the context in which the joke is told. Nevertheless, the point is that the perception or understanding of the intended incongruity is what is required for the hearer to **recognise it as a joke**: to recognise that it is supposed to be funny. On the imaginary planet Zog, where homosexuality is the norm, it would not be possible to perceive an incongruity in the punchline, and so it is difficult to see how this punchline could even be recognised as such. (If anything, it would be the first sentence of the joke that is funny to the Zogites.)

### 2.3.3 Humour and laughter

A further point concerns Schopenhauer's fault of equating the degree of funniness of a piece of humour with the amount of laughter which results from it. He asserts that 'the greater and more unexpected [an] incongruity is, the more

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Melvin Helitzer, *Comedy Writing Secrets*, p.100.

violent will be [the laugher's] laughter'<sup>64</sup>. This position is indefensible. We should point out two facts here. The first concerns Schopenhauer's claim, at the start of his core paragraph, that 'the cause of laughter is simply the sudden perception of...incongruity'. Here Schopenhauer is failing to distinguish between humour and laughter. Clearly, humour and laughter are very closely linked, and it would be a strange essay on one which did not mention the other. However, the physiological activity known as laughter can be brought about as a result of intense joy, a feeling of embarrassment, or exposure to nitrous oxide, as well as by humour. Accepting this, one way of dealing with this problem is to make a distinction between humorous and non-humorous laughter: in the former, the predominant cause of laughter is that something is perceived as funny or amusing, whereas in the latter this is not the cause. This is a fairly minor objection: Schopenhauer's fault is simply that he does not explicitly make clear that his is a theory of humorous laughter. But it is this failure which causes Schopenhauer to make the further, more serious, error of equating the amount of laughter with the degree of funniness. This is a sin which is also committed in certain psychological research. Howard R. Pollio, for instance, measures the reactions of two separate audiences to the same comic film according to three factors: length of time between punchline and audience laughter, length of laughter itself, and loudness or intensity of laughter.<sup>65</sup> He concludes that because 'jokes that produced guffaws at 8pm sometimes bombed out at 10pm, and vice versa'<sup>66</sup> this makes it 'clear that what was funny for one group of people was not as funny for another group of people'.<sup>67</sup>

But it is by no means this simple. Pollio is ignoring vital social factors involved in group laughter. The amusement of the individuals in a group cannot be ascertained by measuring the laughter of the group as a whole. Consider young Fred, a member of the film's audience. The people around Fred may have the effect either of making him laugh more heartily at something which individually he would find at most only moderately amusing, or alternatively of making him feel more inhibited about laughing at something which he finds genuinely funny.

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<sup>64</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.271.

<sup>65</sup> Howard R. Pollio, 'What's So Funny?'. in *New Scientist* Vol.79 No.1120 (14th Sept. 1978), pp.774-777.

<sup>66</sup> Pollio, 'What's So Funny?', p.776.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

This could be for conscious reasons of either forcing himself to laugh in order to fit in with those around him (maybe he is a naive youngster who does not want his friends to realise that he hasn't understood a particular risqué joke) or consciously restraining the urge to laugh (maybe he is not so naive and gets the joke, but has found himself sitting in between the parish priest and his most prudish teacher). Alternatively, it seems to be the case that there is something about simply being surrounded by other people also laughing that makes one tend to laugh more, for whatever unconscious reason. (This, surely, is a major reason for the dubbing of 'canned laughter' on to television comedy shows: this is the only means available to the programme-makers of attempting to extend the infectiousness of the laughter of a theatre or cinema audience into the sitting-room.) I suggest that Pollio's measures of the sum total of laughter would be considerably greater than the measures obtained by showing the film to each audience member individually, recording his laughter and adding these results together. This does not prove, however, that because I laugh less when watching films alone that I must therefore find them less funny under these circumstances. To be fair, Pollio shows elsewhere in his paper that he is aware that the social context within which humour is experienced is extremely important. He also comments that: 'Laughing and smiling are only indicators of what's funny; indicators which must be used with tact and delicacy if their implications are to be read unequivocally'.<sup>68</sup> However, this only makes it even odder that he should make the equation between amount of laughter and degree of funniness which we saw him making earlier.

An interesting study might result from the question as to whether and to what extent amusement is socially constituted, and indeed the notion of laughter as a social entity will be discussed in Chapter Six. The only point we need to make for the time being, however, is that it is not true that the funnier a piece of humour is perceived as being, the greater will be the laughter it induces. This is an obvious point, but one overlooked by Schopenhauer. Hence we may reject the Schopenhauerian assertion with which we opened this section.

#### 2.3.4 A further point on Schopenhauer

We should observe at this stage that although we are making use of his central

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

observation, we are no longer applying a straightforwardly Schopenhauerian view. We must question whether this is really capable of explaining all the examples of humour considered so far. We recall Schopenhauer's emphasis upon the subsumption of percepts under concepts. He asserts that 'in everything that excites laughter it must always be possible to show a conception and a particular, that is, a thing or event, which certainly can be subsumed under that conception, and therefore thought through it, yet in another and more predominating aspect does not belong to it at all, but is strikingly different from everything else that is thought through that conception'.<sup>69</sup> While this might work as an explanation of certain jokes (for instance, the example of the king, the peasant and his 'whole wardrobe') it fares less well with explaining the humour in, say, examples based upon 'striking contrasts', such as Woody Allen's advice on spotting criminals. What is the inappropriate particular here, and what is the conception under which it is subsumed? This is very difficult to see. Schopenhauer's explanation of humour seems too rigid - although, as stated above, his central observation is a useful one.

### 2.3.5 Incongruity, congruity and incongruity-resolution

But several writers are sceptical about the idea that incongruity is involved in humour at all. One such is Roger Scruton<sup>70</sup>. Scruton considers a caricature of Mrs. Thatcher, and is unconvinced that this contains any incongruity.

'The caricature amuses us, not because it does not fit Mrs. Thatcher, but because it does fit her, all too well. It is true that it must also contain an exaggeration: but the exaggeration is amusing because it draws attention to some feature of *her*.'<sup>71</sup>

Also, in the comedy of a character's acting 'true to himself', what amuses is 'the total **congruence** between the idea of the man and his action.'<sup>72</sup>

But this is not so much of a spanner in the works as Scruton appears to think. To be amused by the character who acts true to himself, we need a frame of

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<sup>69</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.271.

<sup>70</sup> Roger Scruton, 'Laughter' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol.56 (1982), pp.197-212.

<sup>71</sup> Scruton, 'Laughter', p.202. Scruton's italics.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* My emphasis.

reference outside that particular individual: to chuckle and say ‘just like old Ned’, there must be something rather idiosyncratic about a particular aspect of Ned’s character or behaviour. What amuses us is precisely the incongruous nature of Ned’s behaviour when compared with ‘normal’ people and how we expect them to behave in that respect. The same applies to caricatures. The art historian Baldinucci defines caricature thus: ‘the word signifies a method of making portraits aiming at the greatest possible resemblance of the whole of the person portrayed while yet, for the purpose of fun, and sometimes of mockery, disproportionately increasing and emphasizing the defects of the features, so that the portrait as a whole appears to be the sitter himself while its elements are all transformed’<sup>73</sup>. The mention of the ‘defects’ of the features imply, as with our judgement of old Ned, an outside standard against which such judgements must be made. The features of a person on which a caricaturist seizes are often those which are idiosyncratic to that individual: an obvious example from recent British political history being Denis Healey’s eyebrows. If these are funny, this is because of the difference between those of Healey and smaller, less bushy, ‘normal’ eyebrows.

Scruton does not succeed in showing that the idea of incongruity plays no part in humour. However, his point that ‘if one wishes to describe the humour of a caricature in terms of incongruity it must be added that it is an incongruity which illustrates a deeper congruity between an object and itself’<sup>74</sup> sheds light upon an area worth exploring. In fact, Soren Kierkegaard made a similar observation about caricatures: ‘A caricature is comical, and why? Because of the contradiction between likeness and unlikeness’<sup>75</sup>.

With Baldinucci’s definition in mind, we can agree that the best caricatures often exaggerate and distort features of their victim to such a degree that, in one sense, they do not much resemble the person’s actual physical likeness at all. (In fact, if the actual physical likeness is too strong, and the caricature is indistinguishable from a photograph of its victim, only in exceptional circumstances will

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Harold Osborne (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp.203-204.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p.461.

it amuse us.) And yet it is a feature of these best caricatures that they still somehow seem to 'fit' their subject. *The Oxford Companion to Art* echoes Kierkegaard in viewing the essential characteristic of caricature as being 'like in unlike'<sup>76</sup>.

This point about caricatures has been generalised to cover a wider field of humour, as in Monro's remark that 'there is an element of appropriateness in the inappropriate, when it is funny. It is not merely a question of something intruding where it does not belong, but of something which plainly does belong, but is not allowed for by our pre-existing attitude.'<sup>77</sup>

A similar point is made by theorists who subscribe to the view that it is not incongruity, but rather the resolution of incongruity, which makes something funny. In the case of jokes, resolution is 'a form of problem solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punchline follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts'.<sup>78</sup> In other words, resolution involves 'the fitting of the *apparently* anomalous element into some conceptual schema.'<sup>79</sup> We also recall Monro's 'linking of disparates' in this connection. Patricia Keith-Spiegel, in her impressive catalogue of humour theories, refers to such viewpoints, where 'humor is experienced when elements originally perceived as unrelated suddenly fall into place'<sup>80</sup>, as 'configurational theories'. She classes as incongruity theories those in which 'it is the perception of "disjointedness" that somehow amuses, [whereas in] configurational theories, it is the "falling into place" or sudden "insight" that leads

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<sup>76</sup> Osborne (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Art*, p.204.

<sup>77</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.255. The importance of congruity is also stressed by Schaefer, *The Art of Laughter*, p.9, and Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, quoted in Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*, pp.251-252.

<sup>78</sup> Jerry M. Suls, 'A two-stage model for the appreciation of jokes and cartoons: an information-processing analysis', in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p.82; quoted by David Navon, 'The Seemingly Appropriate but Virtually Inappropriate', in *Poetics* Vol.17-3 (1988), p.209.

<sup>79</sup> John Morreall, 'Funny Ha-ha, Funny Strange and Other Reactions to Incongruity' in John Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p.197. For a review of psychological research in the area of incongruity and incongruity-resolution, see Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function* (London: Academic Press, 1979), pp.37-40. Wilson concludes that whilst incongruity is an important factor in, and possibly a sufficient cause of, amusement, there is no reason to conclude that amusement must necessarily depend upon the resolution of incongruity.

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues', in Goldstein and McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor*, pp.4-39. This quote is from p.11.

to amusement.<sup>81</sup>

Some humour is clearly well-explained by configurational theories. A particularly good example is the anecdote of John Sparkes's character Siadwel, about his grandmother's fear of the floor ('Siadwel: is it still there?'). When asked by a bemused psychiatrist why she has such a strange phobia; why she isn't instead afraid of 'something sensible, like heights', she explains that 'it isn't heights that kill you: it's the floor'. Parodies, too, are often explicable in terms of seeing some congruity beneath the incongruity. To take an example from contemporary popular culture, there is the extraordinarily successful comic *Viz*, which parodies both children's comics and the tabloid press<sup>82</sup>. *Viz* contains a strip-cartoon, 'Billy the Fish', which is a parody of boys' football comics such as *Roy of the Rovers*. Its hero is a character with the head of a footballer attached to the tail of a fish, and the reader is constantly reminded that 'despite being born half-man, half-fish, young Billy Thomson had made the goalkeeper's jersey at Fulchester United his own...' Billy's heroics constantly overcome the most ridiculous odds, including winning a game single-handed when the rest of his team is left stranded at sea. On one level, this is sheer absurdity, and will certainly appear that way to the uninitiated. However, the person who compares it with boyhood memories of *Roy of the Rovers*, can perceive beneath it a 'hidden congruity': something which suddenly 'fits', or 'falls into place'. In *Roy of the Rovers*, too, the heroes always come up smelling of roses, to a ridiculous degree. Similarly, a staple of *Roy of the Rovers* was the speech-bubbles detailing comments made by fans or on the team-benches at crucial points in the match. In 'Billy the Fish', coaches and managers exchange dialogue like: 'That looked like a questionable last-minute penalty decision, Tommy', 'Yes, Syd; but its not for us to question the judgement of a league official', while fans pass comments like 'Tremendous reflexes from the cat-like man-fish<sup>bc</sup> wonder!' As any football fan will know, these are, to say the least, somewhat untypical comments. But again, the humour lies beneath the sheer absurdity: in the reader's awareness of the fondness of *Roy of the Rovers* writers, TV sports commentators,

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Viz's* concentration on genuine parody is perhaps clearer in earlier issues of the magazine. Since its national success, it has unfortunately moved increasingly in the direction of supplying 'lowest common denominator' humour, often involving considerable violence.

and footballers themselves, when interviewed, for this bizarre kind of cliché-ridden language.

But ‘configurational theories’; or ‘resolving incongruity’; or seeing a hidden congruity, cannot explain humour such as the following. Consider these famous lines:

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves,  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.’<sup>83</sup>

What is amusing here is precisely our failure to ‘resolve the incongruity’: try as we might, we cannot make any sense of this poem; there is no conceptual schema which will allow us to do so, despite the fact that the ingenuity of Carroll’s choice of words and rhythm is that they sound as if they **ought** to mean something. The same point can be illustrated by riddles such as:

‘What’s the difference between a duck?’  
‘One of its legs is both the same.’<sup>84</sup>

Neither what Keith-Spiegel calls incongruity theories or what she calls configurational theories can be claimed as all-encompassing. Moreover, in many jokes, some will find the incongruity itself amusing, while others will be amused at the deeper congruity. As regards making a contribution to my claim for the insight of the incongruity tradition, based upon factors such as Monro’s three, whether our attention is focussed upon the incongruity itself, or its resolution, is not the point. If the latter is the case, there must, after all, be something incongruous to resolve. Though interesting as a further way of categorising jokes, for our purposes, Keith-Spiegel’s distinction is unimportant. Monro recognises this by including both ‘the linking of disparates’ (which sounds similar to configurational theories)

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<sup>83</sup> The first, and also the last, verse of the poem *Jabberwocky*, from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (Maidenhead: McGraw Publishing, no date), pp.99-100.

<sup>84</sup> Morreall offers a version of this as a nonsense question without an answer: ‘What’s the difference between a duck with one of its legs both the same?’ (Morreall, ‘Funny Ha-ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity’, p.197.)

and ‘the collision of different mental spheres’ (which sounds like Keith-Spiegalian incongruity theories) under the same heading of ‘inappropriateness’.

### 2.3.6 Is incongruity the real root of funniness?

We now turn to a further, very important, question. This is: even if one accepted the extended understanding of incongruity outlined earlier, and if it were possible to identify an incongruity in all instances of humour, is it really that incongruity itself which is the sole or predominant reason for amusement? It will be argued that it is not. Interesting in this regard is part of a workshop recently conducted at Indiana University<sup>85</sup>. Observing that there are certain recurring types of joke, or ‘joke skeletons’, such as reversals, literal interpretations of figures of speech, and so on, researcher Douglas Hofstadter calls such a skeleton an ‘*ur-joke*’.<sup>86</sup> The perceived funniness of different individual jokes with the same ‘*ur-joke*’ can vary massively. Hofstadter explains this in terms of the difficulty of unmasking the *ur-joke*, arguing that one’s enjoyment of a joke is enhanced by there being an added difficulty in the unmasking. For instance, ‘I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate’ is found by some people, we are told, to be considerably less funny than ‘I’d give my right arm to be ambidexterous’, and ‘perhaps this discrepancy is due to the fact that it takes a moment longer to detect the self-undermining quality in the latter example.’<sup>87</sup> So ‘if two jokes sharing the same skeleton are not equally funny, the reason must be that the skeleton is buried to different amounts in the different jokes.’<sup>88</sup>

This is surely inadequate. It is true that if a joke is too ‘obvious’, it will often be regarded as a poor one. But if we need to put too great an amount of mental energy into ‘solving’ a joke, this can greatly detract from our ability to enjoy it as a joke. However, the main objection to Hofstadter’s claim is that to focus all our attention on the structure of the joke, which is what Hofstadter’s suggestion does, and what the incongruity tradition as a whole is in danger of

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<sup>85</sup> The ‘Workshop on Humor and Cognition’ at Indiana University’s ‘Center for Research on Concepts and Cognition’, February 18 and 19, 1989. This is detailed in Douglas Hofstadter and Liane Gabora, ‘Synopsis of the Workshop on Humor and Cognition’, in *Humor* Vol.2-4 (1989), pp.417-440.

<sup>86</sup> Hofstadter and Gabora, ‘Synopsis of the Workshop on Humor and Cognition’, p.431. The *ur* prefix, from German, means ‘original’ or ‘primordial’.

<sup>87</sup> Hofstadter and Gabora, ‘Synopsis of the Workshop on Humor and Cognition’, p.434.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

doing, is to overlook many vital factors in humour appreciation. Monro raises as a criticism of Schopenhauer's formulation that it stresses 'the formal side of a joke to the exclusion of its content'<sup>89</sup>. Essentially the same objection was made by some members of the Indiana group to Hofstadter's suggestion. It was argued that 'certain topics of discourse - sex, of course, but also death, religion, politics, ethnic groups, and so on - have inherent tension associated with them, and that much of the humor of a particular joke is due not so much to its ur-joke, but to its subject matter.'<sup>90</sup>

This led to attempts to offer non-sexual versions of the following sexual joke:

'A man in his fifties goes to the doctor and says, "Doc, I've got a problem. You see, when I was younger I always used to get erections that I couldn't bend with my hand. Now though, I can bend every erection I get. What I want to know is, am I getting stronger or weaker?"'<sup>91</sup>

Two non-sexual versions were proposed:

'A woman goes to the psychiatrist and says, "Doctor, I've got a problem. You see, when I was younger I loved making puzzles for myself and then trying to solve them. It used to be that the puzzles I invented were so difficult that I couldn't solve any of them. These days, however, I solve every puzzle I make up. The question is, am I getting smarter or stupider?"'

'God goes to the doctor and says, "Doc, I've got a problem. You see, I used to be able to make stones that were so heavy that I couldn't lift them. But now I *can't* make a stone that I *can't* lift. The question is, am I getting more or less omnipotent?"'<sup>92</sup>

The ur-joke is summarised as follows: 'Someone already confused by a double-edged message becomes even more stymied when confronted by its opposite, an equally double-edged message.'<sup>93</sup> What is certainly clear here is that these three

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<sup>89</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.155.

<sup>90</sup> Hofstadter and Gabora, 'Synopsis of the Workshop on Humor and Cognition', p.434.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Hofstadter and Gabora, 'Synopsis of the Workshop on Humor and Cognition', p.435.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

versions are all essentially the same joke. Yet, not surprisingly, members of the Indiana group did not rate all three versions as equally funny. This very clearly raises serious doubts about attempting to analyse jokes entirely in terms of their structures, and hence about focussing all our attention upon a factor such as incongruity.

### 2.3.7 Bain's criticism, context and attitude

We now turn to a connected point; with what is probably the most often quoted objection to the incongruity tradition. This is Alexander Bain's remark that:

‘There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. A decrepid man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything of the nature of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of vanities given by Solomon, - are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth.’<sup>94</sup>

Bain's point is echoed in the following observation by literary critic Robert Corrigan: that incongruity does not necessarily

‘evoke a comic response, nor is it unique to the comic form. Incongruity is a technique which has been used in all dramatic forms - serious and comic. It is capable of producing dire emotions as well as side-splitting laughter. The coming of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane, for instance, is unquestionably incongruous, but no one in the play or audience thinks it is funny...I believe a good case could be made for the idea that incongruity is the cause of horror in the

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<sup>94</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1865), pp.282-283. The same passage also appears in Bain's review of Leigh Hunt's *Wit and Humour, selected from the English Poets*, in the *Westminster Review* (October 1847), p.34.

theatre as well as laughter.<sup>95</sup>

As it stands, Bain's criticism is unwarranted. Schopenhauer is **not** claiming that all incongruity is humorous, which is the position Bain is attacking. The claim is rather the other way around: that all humour is based on incongruity. However, Bain's central point is an important one. Some incongruities are perceived as funny, while others are not. There are many different possible reactions to incongruity, amusement being but one, alongside puzzlement and the kinds of negative emotion mentioned by Bain<sup>96</sup>. And this raises the question: **why** do we find some incongruities funny, and not others?

We cannot adequately meet Bain's criticism by attempting to distinguish between intrinsically humorous and non-humorous incongruities, because of the non-universality of what people find amusing. And this fact focusses attention upon a closely related question: **why** are some people amused by a particular incongruity, whilst others are not?

These two questions highlight an important fact overlooked by Schopenhauer: that there are other factors which exert a considerable influence upon whether or not a person finds a particular incongruity amusing, other than the incongruity itself. The Indiana workshop raises the importance of taking into account the **content** or **subject matter** of humour, as well as its structure. Apparently, it is the third version of the Indiana joke which evoked the most laughter amongst the group there, one suggestion as to the reason for this being that the scenario of God's going to the doctor for advice is itself amusing. What is set up in this version of the joke is what Schaeffer refers to as a 'ludicrous context'<sup>97</sup>. But it also seems likely that many people would find the sexual version of the joke funniest.

There is a second factor of great importance. A reaction of amusement is also dependent to an enormous extent upon the **context** within which the humour is set, and the **attitude** of the person concerned. For instance, take Dorothy Parker's *Résumé*:

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<sup>95</sup> From the editor's introduction to Robert W. Corrigan (ed.), *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (Scranton, PA: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p.6.

<sup>96</sup> This is discussed at more length by Morreall in 'Funny Ha-ha, Funny Strange and Other Reactions to Incongruity'.

<sup>97</sup> This concept is referred to throughout Schaeffer's *The Art of Laughter*.

'Razors pain you;  
Rivers are damp;  
Acids stain you;  
And drugs cause cramp.  
Guns aren't lawful;  
Nooses give;  
Gas smells awful;  
You might as well live.'<sup>98</sup>

Whether a person finds this essentially amusing, essentially poignant or depressing, or experiences mixed feelings, will depend on a wide variety of factors, such as whether he is of a predominantly melancholy or jovial disposition, his mood at the time, and possibly the mode within which it is presented to him: as a witty poem, or as a despairing comment upon the tragedy of existence.

This point about the importance of context and attitude may be further illustrated by some of the examples from Bain's list. Bain claims that these all fail to produce 'mirth'. But this is not necessarily true. Whether one finds such things as 'gross disproportion' and 'parental cruelty' funny depends entirely upon the context within which they are presented, and one's attitude thereto. Laughter at 'gross disproportion' is common enough. There are numerous jokes about hunch-backs, such as Igor in *Young Frankenstein*, whom we mentioned earlier. When showing Dr. Frankenstein to his room, Igor requests the doctor to 'Walk this way'. Sure enough, the able-bodied Frankenstein does as he is told, apeing the way that Igor walks due to his deformity. 'Parental cruelty', too, though in most contexts far from a laughing matter, is also a common enough subject for humour. For instance, there is the father who, wanting to save himself money and time by not having to bother buying his children any Christmas presents, goes outside on Christmas Eve, fires a single shot into the air, and returns, saying: 'Bad news, kids, Santa Claus just committed suicide.' Other members of Bain's list have humorous potential, too: we could even go so far as to say that there is nothing on that list which cannot be perceived as humorous, given the appropriate attitude on behalf

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<sup>98</sup> Dorothy Parker, *Résumé*, in *The Collected Dorothy Parker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.99.

of the perceiver<sup>99</sup>.

## 2.4 Incongruity and the function of humour and laughter

Finally, we turn our attention to an important question which a theory such as Schopenhauer's, which concentrates upon the form or structure of humour, does not treat as central. This is: what are the **functions** of humour and laughter? What purposes do they serve? And why should the perception of an incongruity provoke amusement and be enjoyable, as laughter at humour usually is?

In fact, Schopenhauer does offer us an answer to these questions. We have seen that for him, laughter essentially results from an incongruity between what is thought and what is perceived: between a concept and a percept. Why, though, should this be a pleasurable experience? Schopenhauer's explanation is that we take pleasure in seeing our 'strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency.'<sup>100</sup> The function of humour and laughter, then, is to give us this pleasure.

If we spell this out in more detail, we see that Schopenhauer's reasons for holding such a view are rooted in his metaphysics. Reason is insufficient because 'in every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all, requires no confirmation from without, but answers for itself.'<sup>101</sup> But why should the revelation of the inadequacy of reason afford pleasure? This is because 'perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself.'<sup>102</sup> The ceaseless blind striving of the will that is central to Schopenhauer's metaphysics, then, is more easily satisfied by the knowledge that comes from perception than that which comes from thought, since the latter demands exertion. Since all one is, essentially, is embodied will, one takes pleasure in the apparent victory of perception over reason.

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<sup>99</sup> In Chapter Six, in considering Nietzsche, we shall consider a view which goes even further than this, claiming that there is nothing **at all** which cannot be perceived as funny, given the appropriate attitude.

<sup>100</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2., p.280.

<sup>101</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2., p.279.

<sup>102</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol.2, p.280.

An analysis of Schopenhauerian metaphysics lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. But can we develop anything from Schopenhauer's comments about the reason: is the thought of an escape or holiday from reason illuminating in any way?

It certainly has some plausibility. Examples of absurd or nonsense humour, for instance, may seem to be explicable in such terms. In the words of Harvey Mindess, 'by inviting us to contemplate incredible events, they spring us free from rationality, from the monotony of humdrum sensible thought.'<sup>103</sup> One way in which this can work is by our deriving pleasure from seeing at least superficially logical reasoning used in an absurd argument. A master of this is N.F.Simpson. In Simpson's play *One Way Pendulum*<sup>104</sup> the hero, Kirby Groomkirby, has devoted his life towards trying to teach five hundred 'speak your weight' machines to sing the *Hallelujah Chorus*. The reason for embarking on this difficult enterprise is that Kirby likes wearing black but, being a logical sort of person, needs some reason to do so. He thinks that his project may be able to help him here. His reasoning is as follows. Firstly, if speak-your-weight machines can speak, it seems reasonable to assume that they are capable of learning to sing too. Once they have been successfully trained, Kirby plans to have them transported to the North Pole, and once they are here, the attraction of these performing machines will attract enormous crowds to the Pole. If all members of the crowd thus assembled can be persuaded to jump at the same moment, the combined force of this will cause the earth's axis to tilt, leading to an Ice Age in Britain and hence many deaths and many funerals, thereby giving Kirby the ideal excuse to wear black.

It seems plausible to argue that the amusement derived from this is due to being temporarily freed from 'the monotony of sensible thought'. There is a great deal of truth in the following words from Mindess:

'As human beings we are capable of visualising things which cannot be, conjuring up both frightening and wonderous fantasies, dispensing with the boundaries of time and space, the law of cause and effect. There is a wealth of irrationality in us. It may be the source of much anguish, yet it also furnishes

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<sup>103</sup> Harvey Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), p.77.

<sup>104</sup> N.F.Simpson, *One Way Pendulum* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

the most ecstatic joys we know. As anyone recalling youthful dreams of glory can attest and as the state of romantic infatuation proves, an irrational distortion of reality is a potent formula for bliss. Our reasoning abilities, however, act to tone it all down: to modify, control and stabilize our moods and fantasies. While logic, therefore, may alleviate distress, it also curtails and inhibits joy. Much as we can profit from thinking things through, we must admit that reason is an agent of constriction over the free and glorious play of the mind.

Our delight in nonsense humor reflects the extent of our drive to break loose, to shake off the bonds of sensibleness and frolic in the novelty of free-associative thinking.<sup>105</sup>

This shows something of the anarchic side of humour, and of the important connection between humour and playfulness, a theme to which we will return at various points throughout our discussion. One of the true greats of nonsense humour, of course, is Lewis Carroll. It seems plausible to suggest that as a professional mathematician, Carroll would have been more bound than most by having to adhere to the dictates of reason and the rules of logic, and that his other career, as writer of nonsense humour, could have provided him with relief from these constraints.

But making these suggestions, that the irrational can have a great appeal, and that a 'holiday from reason' may appear desirable, is making a less bold claim than Schopenhauer's claim that reason has actually been convicted of 'insufficiency'. In fact, in absurd or nonsense humour, there remains a certain inner logic. Total gibberish is rarely funny. In the Simpsonian example, for instance, reason has not been shown to be insufficient: in fact, quite the opposite has occurred. Although superficially Kirby's line of reasoning has the appearance of a rational argument, it has many serious flaws and 'gaps' in reasoning. The path that we follow is a ridiculous one precisely **because** there are flaws in his argument: reason and logic have not been shown insufficient, they have triumphed. In such humour, we have only the **illusion** of escaping reason.

Moreover, there are many important areas of humour which the idea of an 'escape from reason' does not adequately explain. Overtly sexual humour, for

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<sup>105</sup> Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation*, p.80.

instance, or that in which aggression or hostility plays a large part, cannot be explained in this way. In such examples, the primary focus of our attention is not on the internal line of reasoning in the joke. This confirms our suspicion that more than incongruity; that more than the structure of pieces of humour, needs to be considered if we are to come to a greater understanding of humour, laughter and their functions.

## 2.5 Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, then, what can we say of the notion of humour as incongruity? I have argued that the central idea behind the incongruity tradition is one which sheds useful light on the phenomenon of humour. To note the fact that some jokes involve logical inconsistencies ('hard' incongruity) and that factors such as *Monro's* three, or 'inappropriateness' ('soft' incongruity) are very common in humour, is to make a worthwhile humour-theoretical observation. However, we have seen the very wide range over which the term 'incongruity' has been applied, and this wide range of application causes problems. We observed that attempts had been made to use the term as loosely as to mean 'strikingly contrasting qualities at the farthest end of the scale from one another'. We cannot explain all humour in terms of incongruity: to attempt to do so would involve stretching the concept of incongruity so wide it ceases to be informative. Furthermore, even if it were the case that incongruity were involved in all humour, we doubted that this was necessarily the factor in virtue of which this humour was funny, since the same joke-structure can produce different jokes, some of which are perceived as funnier than others. The incongruity tradition puts an excessive emphasis upon the structure of jokes and the cognitive side of humour, at the expense of other important factors, such as subject matter, and the attitude and feelings of the laugher. Finally, *Schopenhauer* explains the function of humour and laughter in terms of an 'escape from reason', an answer which cannot adequately explain many important kinds of humour.

We turn, then, to our second theoretical tradition, which relates humour, laughter and superiority.

## Chapter III

### The superiority tradition

It is popularly held that humour is, in the language of *1066 And All That*, a 'Good Thing'. (We remarked, for instance, in Chapter One, on the offence taken by people accused of having no sense of humour.) Theorists in the superiority tradition have tended to challenge this view, concentrating on humour's negative side.

This tradition dates back as far as Plato. In this chapter, we will briefly consider the views of Plato and Aristotle, and carefully analyse those of Thomas Hobbes. We will show something of the humour of which Hobbes's is a good explanation, before going on to consider some of the flaws in both Hobbes's theory and later developments in the superiority tradition.

Let us start with Plato's brief comments on laughter. In the *Republic*, he claims that the proper objects of laughter are 'what is foolish and wrong'<sup>106</sup>. However, since he seems to view amusement as an emotion, Plato is concerned that indulgence in laughter can lead to a lack of self-control. The ideal society's guardians, then, should not be 'too fond of laughter'<sup>107</sup> and so no literature portraying gods or other reputable characters as overcome with laughter can be permitted. In the *Philebus*, Plato discusses what he considers to be 'the true character of the comic'<sup>108</sup>: self-ignorance. Self-ignorance manifests itself in a man's imagining himself as better than he really is, either in terms of wealth, physical characteristics such as height or good looks, or virtue (especially wisdom). Such people are laughable. If they have the capacity to revenge themselves on those who scoff at them, they are dangerous; but those who lack this capacity, 'you may truly call *comic figures*'<sup>109</sup>. For Plato, then, comic figures; those at whom one may properly laugh,

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<sup>106</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), V 452.

<sup>107</sup> Plato, *Republic*, III 388.

<sup>108</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, trans. A.E.Taylor (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1956), p.169.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

are those who are **inferior** in this important respect of self-ignorance: they may presumably be said to be ‘foolish and wrong’.

### 3.1 Thomas Hobbes and ‘Sudden Glory’

Aristotle belongs to the superiority tradition too, as we shall shortly see. By far the most commonly quoted superiority theorist, however, is Thomas Hobbes. In fact, Hobbes is one of the most commonly quoted of all writers on laughter. His remarks are very brief, and it is worth quoting them in full. In the *Leviathan*, laughter is mentioned during his discussion of men’s passions, two possible causes of the phenomenon being given:

‘*Sudden Glory*, is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.’<sup>110</sup>

The first of these, unless taken to include pleasure at one’s ‘cleverness’ in actually making a joke or thinking up a witticism, does not appear to be concerned with laughter at humour, be it spoken, written, or that occurring in humorous situations; but rather that engendered by the triumph of winning a race or the satisfaction of successfully solving a puzzle. The second possible cause is reminiscent of Aristotle, who makes a connection between the laughable and the ugly. Comedy, for Aristotle, is ‘an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly.’<sup>111</sup> In a vein similar to Plato, he continues: ‘The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.’<sup>112</sup>

Seeing its causes as he does, Hobbes, like Plato, has strong reservations about laughter:

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.125.

<sup>111</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Ingram Bywater as *On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), p.33.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

'it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able.'<sup>113</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed elsewhere:

'Great persons, that have their minds employed on great designs, have not leisure enough to laugh, and are pleased with the contemplation of their own power and virtues, so as they need not the infirmities and vices of other men to recommend themselves to their own favour by comparison, as all men do when they laugh'.<sup>114</sup>

Hobbes's other main passage on laughter occurs in his *Human Nature*:

'There is a passion that hath no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance which we call laughter, which is always joy: but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any. That it consisteth in wit, or, as they call it, in the jest, experience confuteth: for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all. And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it groweth stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected. Men laugh often, especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well, at their own actions performed never so little beyond

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<sup>113</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p.125.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas Hobbes, 'The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir William Davenant's Preface before Gondibert' (Paris, Jan 10, 1650), in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Vol.4, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1840), pp.454-455. Hobbes and Plato are not alone in having a low view of laughter. Lord Chesterfield shared their sentiments, commenting, in a letter to his son, that: 'I am sure that since I had full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh' (Lord Chesterfield, *Lord Chesterfield: Letters to his Son* (London: Dunne, 1901), p.58), and in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* (London: J. Burns, 1877), George Vasey aims to show that laughter is objectionable both morally and aesthetically, and is also medically harmful. Arguments over the desirability or otherwise of laughter are at the centre of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (London: Pan, 1984), in which the monastery librarian Jorge is prepared to kill in order to suppress Aristotle's lost treatise on comedy, because he sees laughter as a threat to religious faith and man's dignity. For a review of further anti-laughter sentiments, see Richard Boston, *An Anatomy of Laughter* (London: Collins, 1974), pp.167-176.

their own expectations; as also at their own jests: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceedeth from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laugheth. Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another: and in this case also the passion of laughter proceedeth from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminency: for what is else the recommending of our selves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat. **I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly:** for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. Laughter without offence, must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and when all the company may laugh together: for laughing to one's-self putteth all the rest into jealousy and examination of themselves. Besides, it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmity of another, sufficient matter for his triumph.<sup>115</sup>

### 3.2 Critique of Hobbes

The first comment that should be made is that Hobbes's view of laughter is exactly what one would expect from someone with his overall view of man. As one commentator observes:

'Laughter is an emotion whose analysis typically reflects the general Hobbesian conception of man's nature as a social creature: the ceaseless competition for

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<sup>115</sup> Hobbes, *Human Nature*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Vol 4, pp.45-47. The emphasis is mine. This part of the passage is particularly important, and will be referred to in what follows as 'Hobbes's conclusion'.

positions of power, the unrelenting struggle for self-preservation, and the purely egoistic nature of man, who continuously strives for superiority over others.<sup>116</sup>

But how accurate a view of laughter is this? Let us consider the *Human Nature* passage in detail. Notice first that Hobbes affirms our suspicion that he is not concerned exclusively with laughter at humour. Of the four causes of laughter which he mentions here, the first parallels the first cause given in the *Leviathan* passage. Little need be said about this: it is the area in which the Hobbesian notion of 'self-glory' is most obviously evident, and there is no doubt that there are cases of people reacting to a personal achievement by laughing. But there is no reason to suppose that this is always the result of a conscious comparison of oneself with, and feeling of superiority to, others.

Regarding the second cause of laughter Hobbes outlines, the ability he claims that one perceives in oneself when laughing at one's own jests is presumably the ability to have thought up the jest. If I repeatedly find myself to be the only person who laughs at my jests, Hobbes can explain this: I am the only person who derives pleasure from my ability to make them. But while pleasure may indeed be derived from a sudden realisation of one's ability as a jest-maker, Hobbes is surely wrong to put all, or even the predominant, emphasis here. To do so is to overlook the obvious fact that an essential part of the pleasure of making a joke (or jest) comes precisely from the enjoyment of what one perceives as being the humour content of the joke itself: we can enjoy a joke for its own sake. Hobbes's explanation ignores the pleasure obtained from the humour of the joke regardless of who told it, and relegates the quality of the joke itself to a secondary status. His view is thereby like those theories of aesthetics which put all the emphasis on the audience's response to a work of art, completely ignoring the work of art itself. For Hobbes, presumably the only reason that one obtains greater pleasure from thinking of an excellent, rather than a mediocre, joke, is that one perceives in oneself a greater ability in doing the former than in doing the latter. Getting greater pleasure from an excellent joke rather than a mediocre one simply because the former is better than the latter seems to play no part in Hobbes's explanation, and this is wholly unacceptable.

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<sup>116</sup> David Heyd, 'The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of the Emotions', in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.43-2 (1982), p.286.

In this way, Hobbes fails to give an account of the object of amusement. We shall discuss this in more detail shortly, in our criticism of Hobbes. For the moment, however, we move on to Hobbes's third cause of laughter: that 'men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated'.

There is no shortage of evidence that people are amused by 'the infirmities of others'. As late as the eighteenth century, it was common for the wealthy to visit lunatic asylums to laugh at and taunt the inmates for fun. A particularly intriguing example of laughing at the 'infirmities of others', is in the 'drumming-contests' of the Greenland Eskimo, described by Johan Huizinga.<sup>117</sup> This is the judicial procedure by which the validity or otherwise of a complaint by one member of the community against another is decided. To the accompaniment of a drum, the two rivals take turns in singing songs attacking the other's character and behaviour. According to Huizinga,

'No distinction is made between well-founded accusations, satirical remarks calculated to tickle the audience, and pure slander...This offensive chanting is accompanied throughout by all kinds of physical indignities directed at your opponent, such as breathing and snorting into his face, bumping him with your forehead, prizing his jaws open, tying him to a tent-pole - all of which the 'accused' has to bear with equanimity and a mocking laugh. Most of the spectators join in the refrains of the song, applauding and egging the parties on...The sessions of such a contest may extend over a period of years, during which the parties think up new songs and new misdeeds to denounce. Finally the spectators decide who the winner is.'<sup>118</sup>

But we obviously do not have to change either centuries or cultures to find plenty of examples of this third of Hobbes's causes of laughter. There is, for instance, the malicious laughter of the playground, where for the unfortunate child who has a disadvantage such as a speech impediment or a need to wear thick spectacles, or who does not fit in for some other reason, the merciless ridicule

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<sup>117</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), pp.106-108. These contests are also briefly mentioned by Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.9.

<sup>118</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp.106-107.

which this can bring from other children must seem almost as bad as the physical bullying which often accompanies it. Further support for Hobbes comes from the fact that in stage comedy, one recalls the fool as the best known of all stock comic characters<sup>119</sup>, and that the very weedy, the very fat, the ugly old hag, and so on, are all comic stereotypes.

It is pointless treating this third of Hobbes's causes of laughter separately from the fourth: that of 'jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another'. Countless jokes involve as their butts a person with some genuine or supposed defect, be it physical (as in 'sick' jokes about the blind or deaf, for instance), or mental ('thick Irishman' jokes in England, or 'dumb Polack' gags in the United States).

Racist and sexist humour are two areas which provide support for a superiority thesis. Racist and sexist jokes essentially set up an 'us against them' situation, and the person to whom the joke is told, provided he is one of 'us', is invited to join with 'us' in laughing at 'them'. Such jokes often play upon some perceived defect or inferiority which 'they' have (the 'thickness' of Irishmen, or the meanness of Scots or Jews, for instance). Alternatively, one may be invited to rejoice in the superiority of 'us' over 'them' in terms of power-relations, as in obnoxious jokes such as the following: 'How do you stop a Paki from drowning?' 'Take your foot off his head.'<sup>120</sup> Racism is often fostered by people feeling threatened by, or resentful of, minority communities: for instance, inferior workers who, feeling their own job to be on the line, or having lost it already, object to what they perceive as 'immigrants coming over here taking all our jobs'. To such a person, the vision which jokes like the above conjure up can serve as a form of revenge. Such a joke sets up a scenario whereby one group is in a position of superiority over another, and the listener is invited to celebrate it by laughing.

This shows a way in which an objection to laughter along the lines of Hobbes's could make good sense. The core of the point Hobbes is making in the second and third passages quoted from him above, is that one only needs to laugh in order to

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<sup>119</sup> For a classic study of the fool, see Enid Welsford, *The Fool* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935).

<sup>120</sup> I grew up in an area with a high immigrant population, and considerable racism, and remember this joke being very popular with many white school-children.

bolster one's self-esteem: were one sufficiently convinced of one's genuine superiority, the 'sudden glory' afforded by laughter would be unnecessary. A plausible case could indeed be made for the claim that it is essentially insecurity, and a lack of self-esteem, that lie at the heart of sexist and racist humour.

However, we shall not concentrate on these forms of humour in any great detail. We have seen that there are areas of humour of which a credible explanation can be given in Hobbesian terms. However, we have also seen that there are flaws in his theory, and as we turn our attention to further criticisms of Hobbes, further flaws will become apparent.

### 3.3 Further criticisms of Hobbes

#### 3.3.1 Francis Hutcheson and parody

Francis Hutcheson's attack on Hobbes's view of laughter came about a century after the latter's comments were made.<sup>121</sup> Focussing upon Hobbes's conclusion, Hutcheson raises two objections:

'If Mr. Hobbes's notion be just, then, first, there can be no laughter on any occasion where we make no comparison of ourselves to others, or of our present state to a worse state, or where we do not observe some superiority to ourselves above some other thing: and again, it must follow, that every sudden appearance of superiority over another must excite laughter, when we attend to it.'<sup>122</sup>

We have already briefly touched upon the first criticism. Hobbes does seem to be claiming that comparisons, favourable to ourselves, are made before we laugh. Hutcheson offers as a counter-example parody, making the point that one might be amused by a parody despite being a great admirer of both the writer parodied and the wit of the parodist. This shows, claims Hutcheson, that we can be amused without imagining ourselves to be superior.

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<sup>121</sup> Francis Hutcheson, 'Reflections upon Laughter' (Glasgow, 1750), reprinted in Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp.26-40.

<sup>122</sup> Hutcheson, 'Reflections upon Laughter', p.27.

To assess this criticism, let us consider as an example the following parody of Oscar Wilde:

'Lord Sidewinder: Ah, Ronald, I hear you've been sent down. Disgraceful!

Ronald: Oxford is like the train to Didcot. One is never certain where one will alight, due to the state of the track.

(*Enter Celia.*)

(*Wearily*) Kissing one's sister is rather like looking at Duchamp's *Mona Lisa* - one wonders whether the moustache might not be dispensed with.

(*Celia weeps.*)

Hargreaves: Bear up, Miss, remember sisterly affection is like a butler watering the port, best kept within reasonable limits.

(*Gong sounds.*)

Lord Sidewinder: Good-oh, grub up.

(*They go in.*)

Hargreaves: When the Last Trump sounds for the Upper Class it will be sounded on a gong, as like as not.<sup>123</sup>

What is happening here? The three successive witty comparisons illustrate a Wildean stock-in-trade. As generally happens in parody, an idiosyncratic feature of a writer's style is highlighted - Wilde's scenes can appear, to the uncharitable reader, to consist of wall-to-wall witticisms at times - and the writer is thus made to look a little ridiculous. Hutcheson is right that a great admirer of Wilde is perfectly capable of being amused by this parody, while admiring the wit of the parodist. And he certainly need not feel superior to either Wilde or Dean: it is difficult to see in what way the fact that Oscar Wilde has a particular stylistic quirk makes our Wilde fan, a person who has never succeeded in writing a play in his life, superior to him. It is not, contrary to the Hobbes formula, his 'own odds and eminency', in comparison to Wilde, that he is convicted of here. We do not make conscious comparisons, favourable to ourselves, between our own writing abilities and those of the writer parodied in instances like this.

But there is a connection here between humour and 'sudden glory'. In parody there is at least an element of degradation. Part of the pleasure we take in parody

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<sup>123</sup> J.Dean, 'A Play of No Importance', in E.O.Parrott (ed.), *Imitations of Immortality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.154.

often involves perceiving a chink in the armour of the ‘great man’: from seeing a great writer, whom one had thought of as a kind of mortal god, appear more human, more like ourselves, through the pointing out of his fallibility or eccentricities. The pleasure taken here is not one of *Schadenfreude*. It is, however, a much weaker variation on the same theme. Having these little foibles and weaknesses pointed out, and the gulf between the writer and ourselves narrowed may not make us feel superior to him, but we can at least take pleasure in not feeling as inferior as we would previously have done, had we compared ourselves to him. So although Hutcheson is right that we do not laugh as a result of comparing ourselves with, and judging ourselves superior to, the writer parodied, a modified claim appropriate to the superiority tradition can be made: that parody involves an element of degradation, and that this may contribute to our amusement thereat.

### 3.3.2 Hutcheson’s second objection and the object of amusement

Hutcheson’s second objection is analagous to Bain’s criticism of the incongruity tradition. Like the latter criticism, it is, as it stands, an unfair attack: even if all laughter is caused by a feeling of superiority, it does not follow that all feelings of superiority must necessarily cause laughter. However, this criticism of Hutcheson’s draws attention to an important point. He highlights a similar fault in Hobbes to that Bain highlights in Schopenhauer: Hobbes offers no explanation as to what it is about those instances of superiority which **do** result in laughter, which makes them differ from those which do not have such a result. Why should the response to some feelings of sudden glory be laughter, while to others this is not the response?

This reveals an important deficiency in Hobbes. We saw earlier, when dealing with the second cause of laughter mentioned in the *Human Nature* passage, that Hobbes relegates to a secondary status the pleasure derived from a joke itself, and we claimed that he was thereby ignoring the object of amusement. The point here is a two-fold one. Firstly, whatever feelings of superiority may be involved in humour, it is not these feelings themselves which are the object of our amusement. And secondly, it is often the object of our amusement, rather than any feeling of superiority, which causes laughter.

We need to illustrate this in more detail. A constant feeling of superiority over everyone and everything around you will not leave you helpless with mirth for the

rest of your life. Hobbes realises this, and we have seen that he claims we must have a **sudden** realisation of superiority. But this is not enough. **Hobbes does not stress the fact that this sudden realisation must be sparked off by something.** After all, not all instances of feeling superior to one who has been degraded necessarily amuse us. We may feel, for instance, morally superior to the disgraced politician of whose gross corruption we suddenly learn, but our reaction is likely to be one of contempt or disgust, and not amusement. Once we accept this, the question arises as to what it is about those instances of feeling superior, or derisive, which **do** amuse us, that **make** us amused. While amusement may indeed involve feelings of derision or superiority, there must be some **other** factor present in that which one finds amusing, other than a sudden feeling of superiority, or this would not explain why **all** instances of sudden superiority do not amuse us. And Hobbes pays no heed to this additional factor, or to the role it plays in amusing us. We recall the fourth cause of laughter given in *Human Nature*, in which Hobbes talks of laughter at 'jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another'. Hobbes puts all the emphasis upon superiority over the other. However, this is to overlook the fact that the actual object of our laughter is the absurdity. And this in turn overlooks the fact that in many instances - even if there are indeed superior feelings present - the predominant cause of one's amusement is not these feelings - the fact that the absurdity is 'of another' - but **the absurdity itself.** Take, as a concrete example, the schoolboy howler given in the previous chapter, about Lincoln's being born in the cabin which he built with his own hands. One could offer a Hobbesian explanation of what amuses a person about this, by saying that this is a mistake which the amused person would not himself have made. But such an explanation is inadequate. It is more plausible to say that one is amused by the absurdity itself. One can accept the likely Hobbesian response that there is a definite sense in which one feels superior to the schoolboy **without accepting that this is why one is amused.**

The problem with coming to any definite conclusion about what causes amusement is the vitally important point that two people may be amused by the same joke for different reasons. For one, the predominant cause of amusement in the Lincoln howler will be the absurdity itself, as suggested, whereas with another, who has a strange grudge against schoolboys, what predominates could be the

pleasure of the feeling of superiority over schoolboys which the joke engenders. An additional problem is that we cannot be sure that a person is capable of isolating the precise reason or set of reasons why something amuses him: laughter at humour is so often a momentary phenomenon, and it is often difficult to analyse in retrospect what, exactly, made one laugh. It is perfectly reasonable to claim, however, that in laughter at many absurdities, the absurdity itself, without any feelings of superiority, is enough to amuse; that Hobbes's theory pays no heed to this possibility; and that this renders his account seriously deficient.

Monro seems to support this position. He asks why, by most adults, bare-faced insults are denied the status of wit, but a 'veiled' insult, one masquerading as a compliment, is regarded as a witticism. (An example would be 'You're the kind of person Rev. Spooner would have called a shining wit'.) Monro's claim is that the 'whole point [is] that a complimentary form of words has been twisted to convey an insult...The insult no doubt reinforces the joke by appealing to our malice, but the distinctively witty thing about it is precisely this twisting, this discrepancy between the concept and what is subsumed under it.'<sup>124</sup> And, furthermore, no feelings of malice need **necessarily** be involved: it is perfectly possible to be amused at 'put-downs' such as the above even if they are made against people towards whom one feels no particular antagonism. This is possible precisely because it is possible to be amused **at the wit itself, for its own sake.**

### 3.3.3 Hobbes's oversight as the opposite of Schopenhauer's

So the danger of an approach based upon Hobbes's remarks lies in his exclusive concentration upon the feelings of the laugher at the expense of any consideration of the details of the object of amusement itself, other than that it produces these feelings. It is worth pausing at this point to remember one of our conclusions about the incongruity tradition. We argued that concentrating entirely upon incongruity involved putting too much emphasis upon the structure of jokes and the cognitive side of humour - on the intrinsic details of the humour analysed - and ignoring such factors as the attitude and feelings of the laugher. We have now seen that Hobbes makes precisely the opposite mistake, which is just as important. In Hobbes, the emphasis is solely upon the feelings of superiority of the laugher: the fact

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<sup>124</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.152.

that some initial stimulus is required to spark off this laughter is ignored, and no consideration at all is given towards the nature of this initial stimulus. It is important that any theory with ambitions of comprehensiveness should take into consideration **both** aspects of the object of amusement, which Schopenhauer does but Hobbes does not, **and** aspects of the feelings of the laugher, which Hobbes does but Schopenhauer does not.

### 3.4 Superiority as inessential: puns, nonsense and absurdity

As this last claim makes clear, we are, by making the above criticism of Hobbes, in no way denying that a consideration of the the feelings of the laugher is important. But we will show here that, contrary to the views of Hobbes and his followers, these feelings are not always those of superiority.

This conclusion will seem obvious if we consider the superiority tradition to be claiming that all laughter is of an essentially scornful nature, which is how numerous critics have read it. However, it is essential to understand that what is being claimed by Hobbes's followers is more subtle than this. This will be illustrated here by a consideration of two defenders of Hobbes: Alexander Bain and Anthony Ludovici. In this section, we will give the claim that humour is dependent upon feelings of superiority a run for its money. Three important kinds of humour - puns, nonsense and absurdity - will be discussed, and the attempt to bring these under the umbrella of a superiority-based explanation considered. After all, if a superiority-based theory is to succeed, it must be able to explain kinds of humour such as this, which do not, at first glance at least, seem explicable in these terms. We will see that although a superiority theory can in fact account for a greater variety of humour than at first meets the eye, it is ultimately inadequate - and for an interesting reason, closely linked to one of the reasons for the failure of the incongruity-based theory of the previous chapter: the need to stretch terminology. Pushing a theory as far as it can go and seeing what one would need to say in order to explain certain kinds of humour via such a theory is a good way of illustrating its deficiencies - as we shall see.

An important observation should be made at the outset. In insisting on the centrality of superiority to humour, the superiority theorist is guilty of an important omission. This is to fail to consider the spirit of sheer **playfulness** which

is so often involved in the appreciation of humour. James Sully remarks that sometimes we laugh because of an event or entity's 'satisfying something within us akin to the child's delight in the gloriously new and extravagant...something of the laughing joy of the infant at the sudden invasion of his nursery wall by a dancing sunbeam.'<sup>125</sup> Something of this spirit remains with us into our adult lives: consider the pleasure the adult can still derive from re-reading classic children's stories such as *Winnie the Pooh*, and from such scenes as the one in which Pooh attempts to steal honey from a bees' nest at the top of a tree, by disguising himself as a small black cloud against a blue sky by covering himself in mud and holding on to a blue balloon. One is able to laugh at this to the extent that one has managed to retain a degree of this spirit of playfulness. But the importance of such a spirit can explain far more than just children's humour. It goes a long way towards explaining the adult's enjoyment of those categories under consideration in this section: puns, and absurd and nonsense humour. We claimed earlier that we sometimes take pleasure in absurdity for its own sake. The same claim can be made about nonsense, puns and word-play. Hobbes does not account for this: although in the *Human Nature* passage he observes that 'absurdities', together with 'infirmities abstracted from persons', are the cause of 'laughter without offence', he offers no discussion of this source of laughter; nor of nonsense or word-play. It is for this reason, then, that we look, in the following pages, at amusement at these three types of humour. We start by turning our attention to puns.

### 3.4.1 Puns

This sub-section will serve to illustrate two points. Firstly, we will see that there is a greater connection between amusement at puns and feelings of superiority than may at first meet the eye. However, secondly, we will also see that not all puns can adequately be explained in these terms, and that such an explanation is an example of the general objection made earlier, of overlooking the importance of the role of the object of amusement in causing laughter.

Before we can proceed, we need to reintroduce the first of our defenders of Hobbes. We came across Alexander Bain in the last chapter, as a critic of the notion of laughter as a response to incongruity. Bain belongs firmly in the superiority

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<sup>125</sup> James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), p.140.

tradition. He asserts that: 'The occasion of the Ludicrous is the Degradation of some person or interest, possessing dignity, in circumstances that excite no other strong emotion.'<sup>126</sup> Seeing some person degraded obviously makes us feel superior in comparison to him. Bain covers a wider field than Hobbes, since the objects of our laughter do not have to be, at least directly, people: 'laughter can be excited against classes, parties, systems, opinions, institutions, and even inanimate things that by personification have contracted associations of dignity'.<sup>127</sup> Bain regards Hobbes's definition as inadequate to explain 'Humour, which is counted something genial and loving, and as far removed as may be, from self-glorification and proud exultation at other men's discomfiture'.<sup>128</sup> But there is a sting to this: 'Not, however, that there is not even in the most genial humour, an element of degradation, but that the indignity is disguised, and, as it were, oiled, by some kindly infusion, such as would not consist with the unmitigated glee of triumphant superiority.'<sup>129</sup> Hobbes's view of laughter, we have seen, is expressed in the dramatic language of 'sudden glory'. Bain's view explicitly allows for a factor which Hobbes does not actually deny, but certainly does not make clear: that the element of superiority involved in humour may be 'disguised'; may not be obvious on a first analysis of what is funny about a particular piece of humour.

We should mention that our only interest here is in Bain's views on puns. It is not a problem, therefore, that, as is clear from the above, Bain uses the word 'humour' in a narrower sense than we have been doing: as a sub-category of what we, along with most contemporary humour research, have understood by the term. (Bain's general term is clearly 'the ludicrous'.) Since puns are included both amongst what we call humour, and amongst what Bain calls 'the ludicrous', this terminological difference is of no consequence.

To face our question: is amusement at puns adequately explicable in terms of feelings of superiority? Unlike Hobbes, Bain explicitly mentions puns. In a comment on Herbert Spencer's theory of laughter, which we shall consider in the next chapter, he criticises Spencer for 'rejecting the fact of Degradation as the

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<sup>126</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p.248.

<sup>127</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p.249.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

governing circumstance of the ludicrous.<sup>130</sup> To Spencer's claim that there are 'many good instances in which no one's dignity is implicated, as when we laugh at a good pun'<sup>131</sup>, Bain retorts: 'I very much wish he had produced such a pun, as I have never yet met one of the sort...I quite understand the laugh of pleasure and admiration at a felicitous stroke of mere wit; but no one confounds this with the genuinely ludicrous. Wit, with all its brilliancy and ingenuity, is sadly wanting in unction, if it takes no one down.'<sup>132</sup>

There is at least something in this. The pun is often regarded as a fairly low form of humour, more likely to elicit groans than laughs, and the compulsive punster may find his habit leads to his being regarded as tedious company. But if a pun ceases to be 'harmless', and an element of superiority or pleasure in the degradation of another enters into an audience's attitude towards the subject matter, this greatly increases its chances of a good reception. Let us illustrate this point with a concrete example. A joke from Woody Allen's nightclub act illustrates the point well. Asked to comment on a newspaper report that his ex-wife had, while walking home alone one night, been 'violated', Allen remarked that, knowing his ex-wife, it was 'probably not a moving violation'. In the available recording of Allen's act<sup>133</sup> one detects in the laughter of some of the men in the audience a malice which would support Bain's thesis. Maybe they identify with Allen, as a result of their own sexual experience, or perhaps they perceive it more generally as a male joke against women. What is certainly true is that an important part of the pleasure of the joke is at the expense of, and in Bain's terminology involves the degradation of, Allen's ex-wife.<sup>134</sup>

However, Bain is wrong to take someone's being 'taken down', or 'degraded', as being the only factor that can make a successful pun. The pleasure taken in an absurd image can be enough: we are again forced to point out that an absurdity can be amusing for its own sake. This point too is best illustrated by a concrete example. In an episode of *The Goon Show*, Eccles comes upon Seagoon sitting

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<sup>130</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p.253.

<sup>131</sup> Spencer, quoted in Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p.253.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Woody Allen: Standup Comic* (Casablanca Record and Filmworks, Inc., 1979).

<sup>134</sup> She certainly perceived it that way herself: she filed a lawsuit against him.

inside a piano. On being asked why he is there, Seagoon says 'I'm hidin'.' Eccles replies: 'But Haydn's been dead for years!' Can this be explained in terms of degradation? Who or what is degraded here; to whom are we supposed to feel superior? It is true that a name can be mistaken for a thing named, so that for the schoolboy who makes fun of a teacher with an unusual surname, ridiculing the name is seen as ridiculing the teacher himself. It is also true that the Haydn joke may conjure up a mental image of a 'great composer' sitting inside his piano. But this 'degradation', if such it be, is not the reason why this pun is funny. The humour resides rather in the pleasure taken in the absurd image itself, together with the additional absurdity that if the mistake was a genuine one; if Eccles really did think Seagoon was Haydn, this would still do nothing to explain why he was sitting **inside** a piano, rather than on its stool.

This example illustrates how Bain is guilty of the same fault as Hobbes: overlooking the fact that the object of amusement itself, regardless of feelings of superiority, can cause amusement and laughter. We see here the emergence of a problem similar to one that we found with the incongruity tradition; the fact that, even if an incongruity can be traced in a particular item of humour, this does not prove that this is necessarily what makes it funny. Similarly, the fact that 'degradation' is involved in a joke does not prove that this is what makes that joke funny.

Just as a pun can be amusing because of the absurd image it conjures up, so a writer's playing with words for its own sake can be enough to amuse. Many of the *Monty Python* sketches written by Eric Idle illustrate this point. They include an interview, on a chat-show called 'Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror', with a 'Man Who Talks Entirely in Anagrams'. He is currently working on an anagram version of Shakespeare ('Have you done *Hamlet*?', '*Thalme*. "Be ot or bot ne ot, taht is the nestquie"').<sup>135</sup> When the titles come up on this episode, the show is not called *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, but *Tony M. Nyphot's Flying Risccu*. A further example of word-play for its own sake is the following from P.G. Wodehouse, which shows how the unexpected appearance of an unusual word can be used for comic effect:

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<sup>135</sup> Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin, *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words*, Vol.2 (London: Guild Publishing, 1989), p.91.

'He spoke with a kind of what-is-it in his voice, and I could see that, if not actually disgruntled, he was far from being grunted.'<sup>136</sup>

So we have not shown any necessary link between amusement at puns or word-play and feelings of superiority. Let us see if our second disciple of Hobbes can fare any better in offering a superiority-based explanation of puns. Anthony M. Ludovici<sup>137</sup> offers puns as one of his thirty-six examples of what makes us laugh, all of which he attempts to explain by a version of Hobbes's theory. A brief exposition of Ludovici's overall position is necessary in order to understand both his comments on puns, and those on nonsense and absurdity, which we shall look at later. For Ludovici, Hobbes's comments are 'completely satisfactory and therefore comprehensive'<sup>138</sup>. Hobbes's is an 'exhaustive definition'<sup>139</sup> of laughter; the problem is merely that it is not 'a perfect verbal statement'<sup>140</sup> of that exhaustive definition. Ludovici borrows from one G.T.Wrench a phrase which he thinks better than Hobbes's, namely that 'laughter is the expression of **superior adaptation**'.<sup>141</sup> Ludovici illustrates the use he intends to make of this term with a couple of examples from fables, one of which comes from La Fontaine's *The Fox and the Stork*. Here the stork is invited to dine with the fox, only to find that dinner is served on flat platters, from which the stork, encumbered by his long beak, is unable to eat. Here, clearly, the fox is in a position of superior adaptation to the stork. However, the bird gets his revenge, himself attaining a position of superior adaptation to the fox, by reciprocating the latter's invitation, and serving the food in long thin vases, from which his former host cannot eat. 'A man who has only one glove in a company of people all of whom have their complement of gloves, a man who is left on the pavement in the rain to wait for the next omnibus while those in front of him fill the one that has just driven up, and a man who loses his hat in the wind while those about him do not - each of these men is in

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<sup>136</sup> P.G.Wodehouse, *The Code of the Woosters*, quoted in G.F.Lamb (ed.), *Harrap's Book of Humorous Quotations* (London: Harrap Books, 1990), p.333.

<sup>137</sup> Anthony M. Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (London: Constable and Co., 1932).

<sup>138</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.47.

<sup>139</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.49.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.62; my emphasis. According to Ludovici's footnote, Wrench uses this phrase in the discussion of laughter to be found in his *Grammar of Life* (London: Heinemann, 1908), pp.67-8. Apparently Wrench does not himself think all laughter is of this sort - unlike Ludovici.

a position of inferior adaptation, while those about him, or in front of him in the case of the omnibus, enjoy superior adaptation in the sense given to the term in this book.<sup>142</sup>

‘Superior adaptation’, for Ludovici, is the essence of all laughter. So how does it explain the pleasure derived from puns? Ludovici gives three explanations. The first, attributed to Bergson, is that ‘the repetition of similar sounding words in one sentence is...sometimes unintentional and a sign of absent-mindedness (that is to say, inferior adaptation).’<sup>143</sup>

The second and third explanations, Ludovici claims, owe to Bain: ‘In the grasping of a pun there is self-glory (superior adaptation) at having noticed the play on the words, and there is triumph (superior adaptation) over the degradation of a nobler word.’<sup>144</sup>

Let us deal with each of these explanations in turn. The first clearly will not do. What of the intentional pun? This exhibits not absent-mindedness but, in the good punster, precisely the opposite: a lively, fully alert mind, spotting new meanings and twisting phrases.

A problem with the second explanation is that Ludovici does not make it clear whether this is supposed to apply to amusement at puns made by oneself or by others.<sup>145</sup> Yet this is a vitally important distinction. Ludovici’s case is at its strongest if he is taken to be referring to one’s own ability to pun. I may indeed experience a kind of ‘self-glory’ at my ability to create plays-upon-words, seeing this as a manifestation of my command of language. However, we are again faced with the same problem we faced earlier in relation to Hobbes: the failure to distinguish between the cause and the object of laughter. What we accused Hobbes of doing in general, Ludovici is doing here in the case of puns: relegating the pleasure derived from the pun itself to a secondary status.

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<sup>142</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.18.

<sup>143</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.78.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, there is in fact no such claim made by Bain in the article to which the reader is referred in Ludovici’s footnote.

To turn to puns made by others. In the majority of such cases, there is no reason to assume that there is any great difficulty involved in merely **noticing** their plays-on-words, and so one cannot see why a feeling of self-glory would thus arise. There are exceptions to this, however, where Ludovici's case is more plausible. There are puns the understanding of which requires a particular piece of knowledge, such as awareness of an allusion which one understands, but recognises that many people would not. For instance, take the reference, in *Finnegan's Wake*, to 'we grisly old Sykos who have done our unsmiling bit on 'alices, when they were yung and easily freudened'<sup>146</sup>. Here, a certain 'self-glory' may arise in the educated person: unlike the man in the street, he understands this as a pun on psychoanalysis, and on Freud and Jung as probably the two most important figures therein. But Ludovici faces a problem even in cases such as this. In puns of this sort, where the pleasure comes from 'self-glory' in the above sense rather than from someone's degradation, there are still going to be good and bad puns. And what makes the difference between a good pun of this sort, and a merely tiresome one? A vitally important factor is the cleverness or ingenuity of the pun. So the problem which faces Ludovici in the case of sophisticated puns made by someone else is this. Even granted the possibility of a feeling of superior adaptation over those one could think of who would be unable to understand the pun, why do we not have to take into consideration one's relation to the punster? We are, on the Hobbesian view of man which Ludovici seems to share, constantly comparing ourselves with others. And in comparison to the punster, one's position is one of inferior adaptation. It is he, after all, who thought up the clever pun, so he is superiorly adapted to the hearer in this regard, and certainly cannot be counted amongst those to whom the hearer is in a position of superior adaptation due to their lesser understanding or sophistication. If one's self-esteem depends upon a constant comparison with, and the resultant finding oneself superior to, others, surely there are circumstances in which whatever superior adaptation one possesses is outweighed by one's inferior adaptation to the person who not only also understands the pun, but also had the wit to think it up in the first place.

Elsewhere, Ludovici talks about sharing the superior adaptation of others: 'We show teeth at a good ruse, a good trick, a good case of diamond cut diamond, and

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<sup>146</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (London: Faber, 1939), p.115.

also at a witticism, because we sympathise, or side with the stronger party - the witty or resourceful speaker or trickster - and share his superior adaptation<sup>147</sup> But explaining puns in terms of sharing the superior adaptation of the punster will not do. It is still not clear, from a theorist who declares himself a follower of Hobbes, **why** we should share this superior adaptation; why the cleverness of the wit or the punster does not lead to a feeling of inferior adaptation in comparison to him.

So to Ludovici's third explanation, that the pleasure derived from a pun involves triumph over 'the degradation of a nobler word'. Ludovici does not make clear exactly what he means by this phrase. Taken at face value, it seems a very odd claim. Why should we take pleasure in the degradation of a mere word? Max Eastman voices these sentiments: 'I am, like Mr Ludovici and others, quite hard-up for self-esteem, but I am not so hard-up that I can get a kick out of my superiority to a misused word, and I think few sane people are'<sup>148</sup>.

But more can be made of Ludovici's claim than this, if we interpret him as referring not to the degradation of words themselves, but of the person or subject to which they refer. This obviously includes 'taking someone down', along the lines already suggested by Bain. However, it also allows for puns in which, although no individual is taken down, the subject matter is 'degraded'; through a 'noble' topic, such as religion, or an intellectually respected one, being either trivialised or brought down to the level of the everyday. Secondly, there is the very common kind of *double entendre* in which, although the pivotal word does not itself have connotations of nobility, its second meaning nevertheless causes what might be regarded as a certain 'lowering of the tone'. One example of such a pun - either wholly unintentional or an ingenious attention-grabbing ploy - was of the Yorkshire carpet warehouse which proudly advertised the 'Cheapest Shag in Leeds'<sup>149</sup>.

So it is possible to read Ludovici in such a way as to make his claim appear more reasonable than Eastman allows, and thereby to go some way towards offering a superiority-based explanation of amusement at puns. But neither Bain nor Ludovici offers a fully satisfactory account. It still remains true that there are

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<sup>147</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.83.

<sup>148</sup> Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1937), p.147.

<sup>149</sup> An advert from the *Leeds Evening Post*, included in *The Third Book of Boobs from Private Eye* (London: Private Eye Productions and Andre Deutsch, 1985).

puns which are not adequately explicable in terms of superiority or degradation, and which owe their humour to other factors, such as those already mentioned: the enjoyment of an absurdity for its own sake, or of word-play for its own sake.

### 3.4.2 Nonsense and absurdity

We should now turn our attention to the two further types of humour we identified as potential problem areas for the superiority theorist. Consider first nonsense verse. Is it possible to explain such examples as our earlier illustration of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, or the poems of Edward Lear, in terms of superiority or degradation? It **could** be argued that the poetic art is being degraded by using it to express, in the case of the most famous lines of *Jabberwocky*, what is meaningless. But this explanation is inadequate. As one critic has observed: 'Nonsense poetry, at its best, at its least contaminated, leaves parody, leaves satire, leaves the literature against which it is set, for its own freedom'.<sup>150</sup> In fact, one might even claim that a person's admiration for poetry could be **enhanced** by *Jabberwocky*, in so far as there is a certain beauty to the way in which nonsense is expressed. Furthermore, those who hate poetry will not be the greatest appreciators of nonsense verse. Rather, just as parodies of a particular author will be best appreciated by those who know and admire the author's work, so nonsense verse will be best appreciated and admired by those having a knowledge and appreciation of poetry. The pleasure taken in nonsense verse is not an enjoyment of the degradation of, but rather an enjoyable momentary relief from the seriousness of, poetry. As such it also involves as an important element 'an inconsequent, sophisticated and good humoured playing'<sup>151</sup>: the theme of playfulness has emerged again.

We move on to absurd humour. We have already mentioned laughter at absurdities in section 3.3.2., observing that an absurdity itself can be enough to amuse, without any feelings of superiority. In much humour of this variety, it is difficult to see where feelings of superiority enter the picture at all. Take the absurd scenario presented in a chariot-race scene from the Buster Keaton movie *The Three Ages*. When one of the dogs pulling his chariot collapses, Keaton solves the problem by

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<sup>150</sup> Geoffrey Grigson, in the introduction to his collection *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p.13.

<sup>151</sup> Grigson, *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse*, p.13.

getting a spare dog out of the boot. Where is the element of superiority here? It is precisely the absurdity of the scenario that is amusing. Likewise, amusement at sheer absurdity for its own sake will be a familiar experience for any fan of *Monty Python* type humour.

### 3.4.3 Ludovici's explanation of nonsense, absurdity and incongruity

Despite this point, Ludovici attempts to offer a superiority-based explanation of nonsense and absurdity. We will see that his explanation is inadequate - but that it fails for an interesting reason. In attempting to account for this kind of humour, Ludovici is forced to show himself to be less of a Hobbesian than we saw him claim to be earlier. By focussing on the question of exactly what role superiority can be said to play in Ludovici's explanation, we shall see that the key fault with this explanation is essentially the same as one of the important reservations we expressed against the incongruity tradition: the stretching of terminology.

Ludovici attempts to explain amusement at nonsense, absurdity and incongruity in terms of 'superior adaptation'. When setting out his examples of what makes us laugh, each of the above warrants a mention as one of his thirty-six causes of laughter. We are told that we laugh at 'a mere absurdity, as, for instance, when we are told that two lions, kept in adjoining cages, broke through the partition separating them, and in their fury mauled each other until only the tips of their tails were left.'<sup>152</sup> But this same example, borrowed from Schopenhauer, is also given under the heading of incongruity.<sup>153</sup> We are also told that 'we laugh at a good nonsense picture by Lear or Bateman'<sup>154</sup>. But nonsense, too, is included under the heading of 'mere absurdity' in Ludovici's explanation of laughter at the latter. So nonsense, absurdity and incongruity are all closely linked.

How is such laughter to be explained? We laugh at absurdity, Ludovici tells us, because of our 'liberation from the customary constraints, or rigid laws of reason and logic...All nonsense comes under this head, and leads to the order of laughter which Hobbes, in his explanation, says arises from "absurdities" and

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<sup>152</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.20, example k.

<sup>153</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.23, example x.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, example y.

“infirmities abstracted from persons.”<sup>155</sup> An almost identical explanation is given for incongruity, at which we laugh ‘because it is the characteristic of a mad world, freed from the mental and physical bondage of logic, reason and scientific method; and, in such a world, even if only imagined, we taste once more of the euphoria of irrational infancy or merely the joys of emancipation from reason’<sup>156</sup>. Similarly, our enjoyment of the nonsense picture is that such a picture ‘is possible only in a world that has abolished the constraints of reason.’<sup>157</sup> Essentially the same explanation, then, will cover nonsense, absurdity and incongruity (the last two, it seems, meaning the same thing for Ludovici.)

We have discussed, in the previous chapter, the idea of humour’s involving a holiday from the constraints of reason and logic, and need say no more about this here. The key point to all this, as far as the present discussion is concerned, is that if we do momentarily escape from reason and logic, this puts us in a position of superior adaptation.

The problem is this: what is the status of ‘superior’ in ‘superior adaptation’ here? Ludovici claims that superior adaptation is merely Hobbes’s definition under a ‘new wording’<sup>158</sup>. But in fact he is using the term to cover a much wider range of sensations than Hobbesian ‘sudden glory’. This is evident if we consider Hobbes’s conclusion: ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly’. If the ‘eminency’ we conceive in ourselves is merely that of being able to enjoy, say, the absurdity about the lions mauling each other until only the tips of their tails were left, whereas someone else might not; or of comparing our current selves, momentarily released from the constraints of reason and logic, with the selves that we were before hearing this joke, then Hobbes is making a much weaker claim than most writers have interpreted him as making. Hobbes’s view of human nature suggests that he is talking about some eminency conducive to superiority in a much more explicit sense than that engendered by the understanding of a particular joke. Fairly conclusive

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<sup>155</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.77, my italics.

<sup>156</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.81.

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.88.

contextual support for this claim comes from the fact that immediately after his conclusion he goes on to add his remark about laughter 'without offence' being at 'absurdities', showing that laughter thereat is not included in what has been discussed immediately beforehand.

Indeed, Ludovici is forced to admit himself that he is no longer an orthodox Hobbesian, in dispensing with this conscious element of comparison and allowing that in 'laughter over mere surprises, incongruities or absurdities...no conscious superiority enters into the matter at all'<sup>159</sup>.

Having established this, we are faced with the question: if Ludovici intends 'superior adaptation' not in the sense of Hobbesian 'sudden glory' but in the much weaker sense outlined above, is superior adaptation enlightening as an explanation of laughter? Ludovici's other examples of superior adaptation show further the wide use he makes of this term. Some of these examples show that he considers any feeling of pleasure worthy of the term. A child being chased who reaches the safety of his mother is said to laugh because he finds superior adaptation<sup>160</sup>, and in discussing why laughing gas has the effects it does, Ludovici is quite happy to report that many of those who have breathed it speak of a quite strongly pleasant sensation, and 'pleasure has from the beginning of time been rooted in feelings of superior adaptation'<sup>161</sup>.

By using his superior adaptation formula over so wide a range as he does, Ludovici is able to account for considerably more than Hobbes. But there is the major problem that in stretching his term to cover as much as he does, 'superior adaptation' does **not** remain very enlightening as an explanation of laughter. In using the same term to cover experiences so diverse as both amusement at jokes, puns and howlers, and the physical pleasure of inhaling nitrous oxide, Ludovici has not succeeded in explaining these experiences by anything other than what Monro calls 'an ambiguous verbal formula'.<sup>162</sup> The reservations we expressed in the previous chapter concerning the range over which the term 'incongruity' was

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<sup>159</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.63.

<sup>160</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.74.

<sup>161</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, pp.76-77.

<sup>162</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p.106.

used apply all the more strongly to the vast range of diverse experiences Ludovici is attempting to subsume under this 'ambiguous verbal formula'.

The above is the most important objection to Ludovici. However, one further point should be made. This is that once Ludovici has admitted that we do not always consciously compare ourselves with others, he is compelled to maintain laughter in such circumstances as being an instinctive or unconscious sign of superior adaptation. For instance, he discusses the laughter of embarrassment of a person in a situation of inferior adaptation, the example he gives being a man whose hat is blown off and who is forced to grope around for it on the ground. The crowd of onlookers laugh, due to their position of superior adaptation. The victim laughs, too, because: 'knowing instinctively that it is the signal of superior adaptation, he tries out of vanity to bluff you into thinking his adaptation is still superior, and thus dampen your own feelings of superior adaptation and quell your laughter. It is all quite unconscious, both in him and in the crowd'.<sup>163</sup>

It seems impossible to refute a theorist who simply claims that something is unconsciously known. But it is surely reasonable to ask what justifies Ludovici in talking about it being known, unconsciously and instinctively, that laughter is the sign of superior adaptation. In order to defend his position that all laughter can be explained in term of superior adaptation, he has shown that he needs to resort to assuming as instinctively knowable a view which he has been trying to get us to accept as an informative theory.

What can we conclude as a result of our consideration of puns, nonsense and absurdity? This consideration has necessarily been a lengthy one, in order that we see exactly how well these areas can or cannot be explained in terms of superiority. We have seen that superiority-based explanations are possible, but not satisfactory. Not all puns can adequately be explained in this way, and to offer superiority-based explanations of nonsense and absurdity involves an unacceptable stretching of terminology. It is perfectly possible to enjoy a piece of humour for its own sake, and an explanation of our three categories would benefit from bearing in mind the importance of a spirit of playfulness - a point the superiority tradition tends to overlook.

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<sup>163</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.76.

### 3.5 Laughing at oneself

We now consider a final objection to superiority-based theories: the phenomenon of laughing at oneself. We will consider three superiority-based explanations of this phenomenon. Ludovici explains such laughter in terms of feigning superior adaptation; we can attribute to Hobbes an explanation in terms of laughing at a former self to whom we are now superior; and Albert Rapp offers the view that the person at whom we laugh is a different self to the one that does the laughing. None of these attempted solutions, we shall see, is satisfactory.

We turn to Ludovici first. If we laugh at jokes at our own expense, he claims, it is:

‘only out of vanity, to convince the joker that we are still superiorly adapted, or else that we are good fellows, or “good sports”, or whatever the jargon of the day may be for the gregarious hero. If we are not vain, we either do not show teeth at a joke against ourselves, or else we show them out of courtesy, to encourage the joker.’<sup>164</sup>

This bluff is most important when the ‘joke’ is a taunt. Here Ludovici explicitly demonstrates a Hobbesian view of human nature: ‘Shakespeare said: “They laugh that win.” Yes, but they also laugh that lose, if they who lose are anxious to despoil the victor of one of the most precious fruits of his victory - the evidence of inferior adaptation in the vanquished.’<sup>165</sup> In laughing at himself, then, a person in a position of inferior adaptation unconsciously exhibits to the outside world the sign of superior adaptation.

Apart from our doubts about the range of experiences Ludovici is attempting to subsume under the heading of ‘superior adaptation’, and that one cannot refute what is asserted as being unconscious knowledge, a further objection applies to Ludovici here. It applies also to Hobbes, though, and so before outlining it, we shall first consider Hobbes’s view.

Hobbes places definite limitations on our ability to laugh at ourselves. The claim made in the sentence prior to his conclusion, that we **never** laugh at jokes of

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<sup>164</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, pp.80-81.

<sup>165</sup> Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, p.85.

which we are the butt, is modified in the very next sentence, where he is prepared to allow that we do sometimes laugh at the follies of our **former** selves 'except they bring with them any present dishonour.' Couple this with the claim in the conclusion that in laughing at ourselves we must be conscious of some eminency of our current self over this former self, and it is clear that for Hobbes, we must, in laughing, have transcended the self at which we laugh in the respect in which we find it laughable: we must have become superior to it. (Similar sentiments are expressed by a later theorist, Harold W. Watts: that a recognition of ourselves is comic only if 'it is ourselves as we were some years since, not as we now are'<sup>166</sup>.)

The problem with both Hobbes's and Ludovici's explanations is that they both exclude the possibility of finding something about one's current self genuinely amusing. But it is surely possible so to do. For instance, consider this. A former acquaintance of mine, a Mathematics postgraduate, was highly intelligent, but very absent-minded, and tended to spend a fair proportion of the year in a dream-world. One Christmas, back home from university for the holidays, he wandered into the kitchen, where his mother was about to start drying-up, only to find that the only available tea-towel was dirty. 'Go up to the airing-cupboard, please Steve, and see if there there are any clean tea-towels', she asked. Disappearing upstairs, Steve returned a couple of minutes later, empty-handed, and reported: 'Yes, there are.' It had genuinely not occurred to him that the reason for his mother's enquiry was that she wanted him to fetch a clean tea-towel if he found one. When his highly amused mother pointed this out to him, Steve too was able to see the absurdity of the situation, and also found it funny. Whatever is funny here - the incongruity of someone of very considerable academic intelligence not possessing the common sense to interpret the most simple of requests, perhaps - there is no need to doubt Steve's sincerity in claiming to have found this genuinely amusing. And yet he, and he alone, is the butt of the joke here. In Steve's laughing there and then, it cannot be claimed, along Hobbesian lines, that it is a former self at whom he is laughing, as, say, we might laugh when recalling an error we made as children. Here, no change in Steve's character has taken place which would guard him against making a similar mistake in the future.

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<sup>166</sup> Harold W. Watts, from 'The Sense of Regain: A Theory of Comedy', in *University of Kansas City Review*, 1940; reprinted in Paul Lauter (ed.), *Theories of Comedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp.448-449.

A modified claim, made by Albert Rapp, concerns not the difference between a present and a past self, but rather claims that the person we laugh at, and to whom we feel superior, is a view of ourselves as someone other than the person who laughs. Rapp maintains: 'What happens, in effect, is: a person learns to regard himself as though he were someone else...He then proceeds to smile amiably and objectively at the antics and predicaments which accrue to his *alter ego*.'<sup>167</sup> Morreall disagrees with this. In numerous places<sup>168</sup>, he describes getting up and making one's breakfast before being fully awake, and pouring coffee all over one's cornflakes by mistake. In instances like this, he claims, we often laugh all the more heartily because it is indeed 'our very selves - the ones who are laughing - who made the blunder.'<sup>169</sup>

Morreall is right to say that we do not consciously dissociate our laughing selves from the self at which we laugh. This applies to Steve's laughter at himself just as well as to that of Morreall's groggy breakfast-maker. What we do do in such circumstances is cultivate a certain distance from ourselves: we step back and view ourselves from outside, thereby attaining a more objective view of our situation. (This important idea will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.) But this does not mean that in so doing we are in any way denying that the person that we step back and look and laugh at is ourselves.

### 3.6 A pro-superiority point: being laughed at

Before concluding, a similar observation should be made here as was made in the previous chapter: we should not let the numerous important objections to the idea of basing a theory on superiority obscure the positive qualities of this theoretical tradition. We have denied that superiority is a necessary ingredient in humour, but it is certainly true that it is sometimes a factor. We have already mentioned some of the kinds of humour which a superiority-based theory can well explain. In addition, those who would deny that superiority is involved in humour must find an alternative explanation to the highly important question of why we dislike being laughed at. Is it not offensive to us because, unless we are voluntarily

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<sup>167</sup> Albert Rapp, *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1951), p.67.

<sup>168</sup> See, for instance, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.13.

<sup>169</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.12.

‘playing the fool’, we are laughed at because we have shown ourselves to be, or are being treated as if we were, inferior in some sense? One can obviously feel inferior for reasons other than being the victim of a derisive, malicious ‘laughter of the playground’. The parent who laughs lovingly at his child’s errors in getting to grips with language, such as referring to ‘par carks’ or ‘chish and fips’, may be surprised to see the child burst into tears on being laughed at, though no malice at all was intended. This is explicable in terms of the child’s associating being laughed at with being in a position of inferiority, and indeed, the adult is superior in that he has a superior command of language, and has already mastered the simple vocabulary with which the child is still struggling. Hobbes’s emphasis is surely wrong in examples such as this: the adult’s laughter is not explicable in terms of his ‘sudden glory’ over the child, nor in that the adult recognises and glories in superiority over a former, childish, self. But this should not obscure the fact that a feeling of inferiority of the object of laughter in comparison to the laugher is present even in examples as devoid of derision or **intentional** degradation as this.

### 3.7 A new interpretation of ‘superiority’: the ‘god’s eye view’

One more aspect of the connection between humour and superiority is worth briefly mentioning. In his entry on humour in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Monro brings a new twist to the notion of superiority, in his comment that ‘in humor at its best we are conscious of surveying the whole human scene from some godlike level at which all men look pretty much alike: all weak, all lovable, all transparently obvious in their petty pretences’<sup>170</sup>. Monro is making an important point. There is such a thing as what might be called the ‘humour of recognition’, in which one is reminded of what it is to possess the weaknesses and foibles of a human being. This is, of course, a very long way from superiority in the sense of Hobbesian ‘sudden glory’; the constant comparison of oneself with others, and the glorying in the fact that one does not share the slightest fault one notices in another. But this ‘god’s-eye view’ sheds light upon one of the great rewards which humour can offer: the ability to stand back and for a moment transcend the world through laughter. This idea has certain parallels with the Nietzschean view of laughter which we will discuss in Chapter Six.

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<sup>170</sup> Monro, in Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p.91.

### 3.8 Summary and conclusion

The tradition relating humour to superiority is an important one. Important areas of humour can be well explained in this way: much humour has a 'victim' and involves, in one way or another, laughing at 'the infirmities of others'. However, just as the incongruity tradition puts all the emphasis upon the structure of items of humour at the expense of the feelings or attitude of the laugher, so Hobbes makes the opposite mistake: he considers only the feelings of the laugher, largely ignoring both the fact that there must be something to spark off this laughter, and the qualities of the joke itself. Also, though a consideration of the feelings and attitude of the laugher is important, these feelings and that attitude are by no means always those of superiority or derision. An attitude of childlike playfulness is vitally important to the enjoyment of much humour. It is true that areas of humour, such as puns, nonsense and absurdity, which are not **clearly** explicable in terms of superiority, **have** been explained by superiority theorists in these terms. But these explanations are unsatisfactory. It is perfectly possible to be amused at something for its own sake, without feelings of superiority. Amusement at many puns cannot adequately be explained in terms of superiority, and it is more plausible to explain most nonsense and absurdity as being enjoyable for its own sake, the pleasure taken therein being more akin to that of play. Superiority-based explanations of these kinds of humour involve stretching the notion of 'superiority' so far that it becomes almost meaningless, in the same way as we saw, in the previous chapter, the term 'incongruity' being stretched. Finally, the superiority tradition cannot explain an important aspect of laughing at oneself: one's ability to be genuinely amused at one's own current weaknesses.

Having dealt with incongruity and superiority, then, we next need to consider the third and final main humour-theoretical tradition: that which relates humour, laughter and release.

## Chapter IV

### The release tradition

We concentrate on two theorists in this third main tradition: Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud<sup>171</sup>. We consider Spencer because he seems to have been the first to offer a theory along these lines, and Freud because his version is far more complex and elaborately worked out. Keith-Spiegel remarks that 'Freud could be characterized as the most eminent of the release theorists'<sup>172</sup>. In fact, Freud's theory is one of the most commonly discussed of **all** contributions to the theory of humour, the book in which it is presented being one of the 'classics' of our field of enquiry.

This chapter will give an exposition and critique of the key aspects of these two release-based theories: first Spencer, and then Freud. Both the deficiencies of each theory, and what is of value in this theoretical tradition, will be pointed out.

#### 4.1 Herbert Spencer and nervous energy

Spencer's main concern is with the physiology of laughter<sup>173</sup>. His theory is massively influenced by the nineteenth-century view of nervous energy, whereby this is stored up in the body, and must somehow find release by physical means: 'laughter is a form of muscular excitement, and so illustrates the general law that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action'.<sup>174</sup> For

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<sup>171</sup> Two reviews of theories in this tradition, which mention more theorists than our two, but in very little detail, are Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor', pp.10-13, and Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, pp.38-40. In Chapter Four of *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall devotes more time and more careful attention to this tradition than to the superiority and incongruity traditions, his discussions of which are comparatively superficial. Morreall's discussion of what he calls 'the relief theory' has been a considerable influence on the present chapter.

<sup>172</sup> Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor', p.13.

<sup>173</sup> Herbert Spencer, 'On the Physiology of Laughter', published in *Macmillan's Magazine* (Mar, 1860) and also in Herbert Spencer, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* (London: Dent, 1911), pp.298-309. This essay is reproduced in Morreall's collection, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp.99-110, and page numbers given here refer to that book.

<sup>174</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', p.104.

Spencer, 'strong feeling of almost any kind'<sup>175</sup> can produce laughter. However, he recognises incongruity as 'the usual reply'<sup>176</sup> to questions about the explanation of laughter, and attempts to explain 'the laughter which follows certain perceptions of incongruity'<sup>177</sup>. He dismisses as inadequate the claim that 'laughter is a result of the pleasure we take in escaping from the restraint of grave feelings'<sup>178</sup>. Often, laughter results when there exist no such feelings from which we want to escape: 'no explanation is thus afforded of the mirth which ensues when the short silence between the *andante* and *allegro* in one of Beethoven's symphonies is broken by a loud sneeze. In this, and a host of like cases, the mental tension is not coerced but spontaneous, not disagreeable but agreeable; and the coming impressions to which attention is directed, promise a gratification which few, if any, desire to escape.'<sup>179</sup> So how may such laughter situations be explained? To get an answer, we need only to consider 'the quantity of feeling which exists under such circumstances, and then to ask what are the conditions determining the direction of its discharge'<sup>180</sup>. This is explained by means of an illustration of one particular case. A theatre audience is watching a play in which a climax has been reached: the long-awaited reconciliation of hero and heroine. Just as they are finally to be reunited, something totally unexpected happens. A tame kid wanders on to the stage, stands looking at the audience, and then walks up to the couple and sniffs them. The audience bursts out laughing. Spencer has an explanation for this:

'it is readily explicable if we consider what, in such a case, must become of the feeling that existed at the moment the incongruity arose. A large mass of emotion had been produced; or, to speak in physiological language, a large portion of the nervous system was in a state of tension. There was also great expectation with respect to the further evolution of the scene - a quantity of vague, nascent thought and emotion, into which the existing quantity of thought and emotion was about to pass. Had there been no interruption, the body of new ideas and feelings next excited, would have sufficed to absorb the whole of the

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<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', p.99.

<sup>177</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', p.105.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', p.106.

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*

liberated nervous energy. But now, this large amount of nervous energy, instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of the new thoughts and emotions which were nascent, is suddenly checked in its flow. The channels along which the discharge was about to take place, are closed. The new channel opened - that afforded by the appearance and proceedings of the kid - is a small one; the ideas and feelings suggested are not numerous and massive enough to carry off the nervous energy to be expended. The excess must therefore discharge itself in some other direction;...there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter.<sup>181</sup>

When some people laugh and others do not, Spencer goes on to explain, this is because in the latter, an emotion has arisen which is 'sufficiently massive to absorb all the nascent excitement'<sup>182</sup>. For instance, when someone falls, those who do not laugh are those in whom sufficient sympathy has arisen. Contrasting those incongruities which produce laughter with those which do not, Spencer claims that 'we see that in the non-ludicrous ones the unexpected feeling aroused, though wholly different in kind, is not less in quantity or intensity'.<sup>183</sup> Citing Bain's list of incongruities which do not cause laughter, which we quoted in Chapter Two, Spencer claims that 'in these cases, where the totally unlike state of consciousness suddenly produced is not inferior in mass to the preceding one, the conditions to laughter are not fulfilled...laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small - only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity.'<sup>184</sup>

## 4.2 Critique of Spencer

There are many flaws in Spencer's theory, and some of these will be outlined below. We mentioned above that the theory is rooted very firmly in nineteenth-century physiology, though a detailed discussion of physiology is beyond the scope of this dissertation. A major worry is the lack of explanation as to exactly what

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<sup>181</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', pp.106-107.

<sup>182</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', p.107.

<sup>183</sup> Spencer, 'Physiology of Laughter', p.108.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

nervous energy is. However, even if we are generous enough to give him the benefit of the doubt here, taking an intuitive idea of nervous energy, it is still not possible to adequately account for laughter along Spencerian lines.

One reason for this is that in many instances of laughter at humour, it seems that no nervous energy is introduced to or developed in the situation, and so none could require release. This is especially true of much humour of pure incongruity or absurdity; and we recall that it is incongruity-based humour which Spencer purports to be explaining. Morreall illustrates this point with a cartoon of a perfectly serious optician's client trying on various pairs of glasses, all of which are attached to a false nose and moustache. There is no reason to suppose that in the incongruity-based humour of which this is an example, any nervous energy has to be generated prior to experience of it in order to find it amusing and laugh.

Indeed, we can advance this point about Spencer's own example of the kid on the stage. Spencer's account seems to present the situation as being as if the reaction of every member of the audience were identical. Yet this is never the case. Some people may well experience the tension Spencer describes, but others may be disinterested in the play, and experience no emotional involvement in the lovers' reconciliation, and therefore no build up of nervous energy. But there is no need to assume that this will prevent them from laughing at the appearance of the kid. How could Spencer's theory explain this?

A connected point is the familiar fact that a given event or piece of humour will make some people laugh, but not others. Spencer's explanation of why this is so is inadequate. We have seen that he explains differing reactions to the person who falls in terms of differing degrees of sympathy for the faller in different spectators. But this overlooks the obvious point that some people may not laugh, not because they have developed a great deal of sympathy for the faller, but simply because they do not find the mere fact of someone's falling over in the street amusing. This is particularly true in the case of fictional falls - in slapstick movies, say - rather than those in reality. Many people simply do not find slapstick funny; rather, they find it boring. In such people, bored at yet another 'banana-skin joke', there again seems no reason to suppose that any nervous energy is built up, and so none could require release.

Another criticism, made by Morreall, is that even in situations which do involve the build-up of emotion, Spencer's notion that such feelings are suddenly rendered superfluous is often inapplicable, because in some such cases, 'the conclusion of the stimulus is just what we were expecting and the feelings we had been building up are perfectly appropriate.'<sup>185</sup> Morreall's example here is of the hostile practical joke, such as offering an enemy an exploding cigar, where we laugh when precisely what we had been expecting to happen does happen. As we approach our victim, says Morreall, our excitement mounts, increasing as we offer him the cigar, and he accepts and lights it. 'This kind of situation', Morreall continues, 'is especially troublesome to Spencer's theory, in which the conclusion of a laughter stimulus must involve a "descending incongruity"; our emotions, he says, must change from strong emotion to weak emotion, so that the excess can be discharged in laughter. In cases like the exploding cigar, however, we have just the opposite: what starts as weak emotion gradually builds until it reaches its greatest strength at the moment of laughter.'<sup>186</sup>

It is not entirely clear what Spencer means by 'descending incongruity', or by consciousness being transferred 'from great things to small'. However, if laughter results when excess energy is left over in the nervous system, and this corresponds to consciousness transferring 'from great things to small', then it would appear that 'great' things are those which generate a large amount of nervous energy, and 'small' things those which do not. But this does not help much. It does not get us any closer to making the theory testable, since Spencer offers only very scanty details on what circumstances and subjects generate large amounts of nervous energy and which do not. Using an intuitive idea, we might reasonably assume that most people expend a considerable amount of nervous energy on the subject of sex. But if this is so, it casts further doubt on Spencer's hypothesis. There are many examples of humour in which our attention is diverted on to sex from a humdrum topic on which little emotional energy is spent (for example, 'Excuse me, Miss, have you got the time?' 'I've got the time if you've got the energy.'). In such examples, using the above understanding of 'great and 'small', our attention is not diverted 'from great things to small', but vice versa. Monro remarks that

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<sup>185</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.26.

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*

'the most successful jokes are those which suddenly plunge us into some subject highly charged with emotional tension.'<sup>187</sup> Such jokes, together with those scenarios of which Morreall's exploding cigar is an example, cannot be explained by the Spencerian theory.

So there are many faults with Spencer's theory. However, his central idea, that laughter serves as a release of tension, is plausible in some laughter situations. It makes sense to say that in the case of the exploding cigar, tension has been built up in the practical joker, and an outlet for its discharge is found in laughter. (The fact that the conclusion of the stimulus, at the time of discharge, is one which we might have anticipated, does not affect this claim.) In fact, the build-up of tension is a regular comic ploy. We will consider three uses of this technique: in bedroom farce, slapstick and audience-participation. And fourthly, we will consider the tension built up by trying to hold back laughter.

Scenes in the direst bedroom farces, where the audience, but not the returning husband, knows that his wife's lover is hiding in the wardrobe or under the bed, are often greeted with the most uproarious laughter when the lover, trousers around his ankles, is eventually found out. This is clearly explicable in terms of a release of built-up tension in the audience. (If an audience member finds this kind of comedy tedious, it seems plausible to explain his failure to laugh by claiming that little or no tension has built up inside him.)

In slapstick, too, comics such as Laurel and Hardy play upon the tension factor. When, due to Stan's accidental clumsiness, food or water is first spilled over Ollie, and Ollie mistakenly assumes Stan has done this on purpose, he does not retaliate immediately. There is instead a short period in which our attention is focussed upon Ollie's face, and his attempt to keep his composure in the face of mounting annoyance. A few titters of expectancy can normally be heard from an audience at this stage, which give way to a much greater burst of laughter when Ollie finally loses his battle with himself, and flings food at Stan, the slapstick escalating from this point onwards. Our opponents of slapstick, mentioned above, will find the later, uncontrolled pie-throwing tedious rather than hilarious, but watching Ollie gradually lose his composure and eventually resort to attacking Stan often will

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<sup>187</sup> *Monro, Argument of Laughter*, p.160.

make them laugh. This indeed seems explicable in terms of a need to release empathetic tension built up by the sight of Ollie trying and failing to restrain himself, a factor which is not present once the pie-throwing gets out of hand.

Thirdly, an easy way for a stand-up comedian or revue group to get a laugh is to pick on a member of the audience. When each member of the audience thinks, until the last possible moment, that he might be the victim, the laughter that results when a victim is finally selected is surely explicable in terms of the release of tension in those who have 'escaped'. This was done very effectively by a recent *Cambridge Footlights* team. They started off by speaking disparagingly about humiliating an audience, but pointing out that anyway, the chances of any particular member of the audience being selected were very low. Two members of the cast then moved menacingly into the stalls, looking around at various giggling spectators, and saying in rather sinister voices, 'Just relax...', 'There's nothing to worry about...', 'You won't be picked...unless of course, you happen to be...this man here!' The tremendous burst of laughter which greeted the poor victim's eventual selection seems excellently to fit the release from tension formula. Tension was built up in each member of the audience, each irrationally convinced, despite the cast's perfectly reasonable assurances to the contrary, that he was certain to be the unfortunate person chosen. When all but one found that they were safe, they were able to relax and discharge the built-up tension in laughter. Although the victim, when dragged up on stage, took his fate in good spirits, he did not join in the uproarious laughter of relief at the moment of his selection, for reasons which a release theory can explain.

Finally, the tension built up and which has to be released is often the tension of trying to prevent oneself from laughing. Few cannot have had the experience of trying to hold back one's laughter, and failing, in the way described by William Hazlitt:

'We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. If we think we must not laugh, this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater; for by endeavouring to keep the obnoxious image out of sight, it comes upon us more irresistably and repeatedly, and the inclination to indulge our mirth,

the longer it is held back, collects its force, and breaks out the more violently in peals of laughter.’<sup>188</sup>

A release theory more complex and elaborately developed than Spencer’s is offered by Freud. Unlike most of those thinkers considered so far, Freud devotes an entire book, and a later paper, to developing his theory, which we shall outline now.

### 4.3 Sigmund Freud and psychical energy

At the outset of any discussion in English of Freud’s *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, a preliminary point should be made concerning the translation of its title. James Strachey, whose translation I have used, translates this as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*<sup>189</sup>. Strachey admits that this is not perfect, since the word ‘joke’ seems to cover the German *Scherz* as well, but it is preferable to ‘wit’, the word used in the original translation<sup>190</sup>, since ‘wit’, as ordinarily used in English, has far too narrow a meaning to plausibly cover some of the examples Freud offers.<sup>191</sup>

‘Jokes’, then, is the better of two inadequate translations. That said, we turn to the work itself. Freud spends considerable time analysing what he calls the ‘technique’ of jokes. We shall discuss this only briefly, since the main interest in Freud’s contribution to the theory of humour does not lie here. However, a brief outline is necessary, in order to understand some of the more important material which follows.

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<sup>188</sup> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, quoted in Boston, *An Anatomy of Laughter*, p.50.

<sup>189</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976).

<sup>190</sup> *Wit and its relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A.A.Brill (London: Kegan Paul, 1916).

<sup>191</sup> Strachey remarks that: ‘The only solution to this and similar dilemmas has seemed to be to adopt one English word for some corresponding German one, and to keep to it quite consistently and invariably even if in some particular context it seems the wrong one. In this way the reader will at least be able to form his own conclusions about the way in which Freud is using the word. Thus, throughout the book, *Witz* has been rendered “joke” and *Scherz* “jest”.’ (Strachey, in the editor’s introduction to his translation of Freud, *Jokes*, p.35).

### 4.3.1 'The Technique of Jokes'

Freud presents the techniques at work in different types of joke, illustrating each with examples. He opens with one from Heine's Hirsch-Hyacinth, who boasts of his relations with the wealthy Baron Rothschild: 'I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal - quite famillionairely.'<sup>192</sup>

In the technique of this joke, which Freud assures us is 'an excellent and most amusing one'<sup>193</sup>, one of the key factors is 'abbreviation' or 'condensation'. Freud interprets the thought contained in the joke as being 'Rothschild treated me quite as his equal, quite familiarly - that is, so far as a millionaire can.'<sup>194</sup> In the joke itself, this thought is expressed more succinctly. We will see shortly the full importance for Freud of this 'condensation' or, to use his later term, 'economy'.

The second type of joke-technique considered is 'multiple use of the same material'<sup>195</sup>. This can occur in several ways. For instance, a word can be used in two ways, once as a whole, and then as separate syllables. An illustration is this quip made at the expense of a red-haired and extremely awkward young relative of Rousseau, of whom the hostess to whom he had been introduced complained: 'Vous m'avez fait connaître un jeune homme roux et sot, mais non pas un Rousseau.'<sup>196</sup> Or the same word may appear twice, being slightly modified on its second appearance. A man of Jewish origin, on making a derogatory remark upon the Jewish character, is reprimanded by the comment: 'Your ant~~is~~emitism was well known to me; your ant~~is~~emitism is new to me.'<sup>197</sup>

Further cases of 'multiple use' Freud brings under a third heading which he calls 'double-meaning'<sup>198</sup>, and which he divides up into further sub-classes such

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<sup>192</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.47.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.* To be fair to Freud, this joke works better in German than in English, since the 'ly' is not required: as Strachey points out (pp.49-50), the German for familiar is *familiär*, and millionaire is *Millionär*. Hence the composite word translated as 'famillionairely' is *famillionär*.

<sup>194</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.48.

<sup>195</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.76.

<sup>196</sup> 'You have introduced me to a young man who is *roux* (red-haired) and *sot* (silly), but not a Rousseau.' Quoted by Freud, *Jokes*, on p.63.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted by Freud, *Jokes*, p.67.

<sup>198</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.69.

as *double entendres* and the literal interpretation of metaphors, both of which we have illustrated in Chapter Two.

Freud claims that there is in fact something common to all these techniques. It is the theme of condensation. All 'are dominated by a tendency to compression, or rather to saving. It all seems to be a question of economy.'<sup>199</sup> Take, for instance, the Rousseau joke: 'We save having to express a criticism or give shape to a judgement; both are already there in the name itself.'<sup>200</sup>

All the jokes Freud has considered up to this point have been verbal ones. There is a second category, which he describes as conceptual jokes. An important technique here is 'displacement'<sup>201</sup>. By means of an example, Freud tells of an impoverished man who convinces a wealthy friend how desperate is his need of some money, which he succeeds in borrowing. Later that day, the friend comes across him eating salmon mayonnaise in a restaurant.

'The benefactor reproached him: "What? You borrow money from me and then order yourself salmon mayonnaise? Is *that* what you've used my money for?" "I don't understand you", replied the object of the attack: "if I haven't any money I *can't* eat salmon mayonnaise, and if I have some money I *mustn't* eat salmon mayonnaise. Well, then, when *am* I to eat salmon mayonnaise?"'<sup>202</sup>

The creditor deliberately misses the point of his benefactor's objection, namely that in his financial circumstances, he has no right to eat luxuries such as salmon mayonnaise at all. Freud's reason for placing jokes such as this under the heading 'displacement' is that 'the technique of this joke lies precisely in this *diverting* of the reply from the meaning of the reproach'<sup>203</sup>.

Faulty reasoning is another common joke-technique:

'A gentlemen entered a pastry-cook's shop and ordered a cake; but he soon brought it back and asked for a glass of liqueur instead. He drank it and began

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<sup>199</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.77.

<sup>200</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.78.

<sup>201</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.88.

<sup>202</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.86.

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*

to leave without having paid. The proprietor detained him. "What do you want?" asked the customer.- "You've not paid for the liqueur."- "But I gave you the cake in exchange for it." - "You didn't pay for that either."- "But I hadn't eaten it." <sup>204</sup>

Thirdly, we have 'unification'<sup>205</sup>. An example here is the story of the royal touring the provinces who notices a commoner who looks incredibly like himself. 'Was your mother once in service at the Palace?', he asks. 'No, your Highness', comes the reply, 'but my father was'. In this technique generally, the idea is that 'new and unexpected unities are set up, relations of ideas to one another, definitions made mutually or by reference to a common third element.'<sup>206</sup> This has close parallels with that type of joke mentioned in connection with 'configurational theories' in Chapter Two: where something common is noted between entities which had previously been seen as disparate or unconnected; where something suddenly 'falls into place'.

These, then, are some of Freud's most important joke-techniques. He does not claim that his is the definitive list thereof, but he is satisfied that 'a continued examination of fresh material can convince us that we have got to know the commonest and most important technical methods of the joke-work.'<sup>207</sup>

### 4.3.2 'The Purposes of Jokes'

Freud next goes on to discuss the purpose [*Tendenz*] of different jokes, making a distinction between 'tendentious' and 'innocent' jokes. Initially, the exact nature of this distinction is not made very clear: we are merely told that in an innocent joke, 'the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve such an aim'<sup>208</sup>. (What these 'aims' are becomes clearer later.) 'Innocent', Freud stresses, merely means 'non-tendentious': innocent jokes are not necessarily trivial, and may have something of substance to say. (Some innocent jokes are also

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<sup>204</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.98.

<sup>205</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.105.

<sup>206</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.105.

<sup>207</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.130. The 'joke-work' is Freud's term for the psychical processes involved in **constructing** a joke, as opposed to those required to understand it.

<sup>208</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.132.

trivial, however, and in such cases, since there is neither an underlying purpose nor any considerable intellectual content from which we can derive pleasure, it must be from the very techniques of the jokes themselves that we derive that pleasure.) In general, the pleasure derived from innocent jokes is less than that derived from tendentious jokes. Why is this? The answer, says Freud, is that ‘tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access’<sup>209</sup>. There are only two purposes which a tendentious joke can serve.

‘It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure).’<sup>210</sup>

Freud deals with obscene jokes first. He first considers smut, ‘the intentional bringing into prominence of sexual facts and relations by speech’<sup>211</sup>. It is important to note that ‘smut is directed to a particular person, by whom one is sexually excited and who, on hearing it, is expected to become aware of the speaker’s excitement and as a result to become sexually excited in turn’.<sup>212</sup> But surely smut is often not explicitly directed at such a person? Maybe in recognition of such a potential objection, Freud adds the following rider:

‘If a man in a company of men enjoys telling or listening to smut, the original situation, which owing to social inhibitions cannot be realised, is at the same time imagined. A person who laughs at smut that he hears is laughing as though he were the spectator of an act of sexual aggression.’<sup>213</sup>

Smut in its undisguised form is popular amongst ‘the common people’<sup>214</sup>, but in the more refined and educated, it is only tolerated when in the form of a joke. From this, we begin to see more clearly the purpose of tendentious jokes:

‘They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent this obstacle

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<sup>209</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.140.

<sup>210</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.141.

<sup>214</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.144.

and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible.<sup>215</sup>

The development of this obstacle, or ‘repression’<sup>216</sup>, is brought about to a large extent by civilisation and higher education, which causes the more primitive pleasures to be lost to us. Tendentious jokes allow us to retrieve them:

‘When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut. In both cases the pleasure springs from the same source. We, however, could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or it would seem to us disgusting. We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help.’<sup>217</sup>

We cannot tell what part of the pleasure taken in tendentious jokes comes from the technique and what from the purpose. With this in mind, Freud makes the following point:

‘With all obscene jokes we are subject to glaring errors of judgement about the “goodness” of jokes so far as this depends on formal determinants; the technique of such jokes is often quite wretched, but they have immense success in provoking laughter.’<sup>218</sup>

The above comments on tendentious jokes apply just as well to the hostile subdivision of that category, as to the obscene. Civilised life demands that we repress our hostile, as well as our sexual, urges. Here jokes allow us to ‘exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in our way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke *will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*.’<sup>219</sup> This repression is particularly strong when dealing with persons who hold positions superior to our own. Our hostility finds an outlet in hostile jokes, such as the commoner’s reply to the lookalike royal mentioned above.

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<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.145.

<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.146.

<sup>219</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.147. Throughout, any italics are Freud’s.

But an enormous question remains unanswered. **How**, exactly, do tendentious jokes circumvent the obstacle which stands in the way of the satisfaction of the hostile or lustful instinct? What, to use Freud's phrase, is 'the mechanism of the pleasurable effect'<sup>220</sup>? In a section entitled 'The Mechanism of Pleasure', Freud eventually offers his answer to this question.

### 4.3.3 'The Mechanism of Pleasure'

We have seen that tendentious jokes satisfy purposes which could not, in civilised society, be satisfied in any other way. We have also seen that what opposes the satisfaction of these purposes is either an external factor, such as the higher standing of the person one is addressing and hence the possible dangers of getting on the wrong side of him, or an internal impulse such as an inner aversion to undisguised hostility or coarse smut. When a joke 'comes to our help', one of two things happens. If the obstacle is internal, the joke allows the obstacle to be overcome and the inhibition **lifted**, on this particular occasion at least. Alternatively, if the obstacle is external, by making a joke we avoid having to **create** the psychological inhibition that would otherwise be necessary to restrain ourselves. Now for the beginnings of Freud's explanation. He maintains that in either creating or maintaining such a psychological inhibition, some expenditure of psychological energy is required. When pleasure is obtained from a tendentious joke, 'it is therefore plausible to suppose that *this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychological expenditure that is saved.*'<sup>221</sup> The psychological energy that has thus been saved can be discharged in laughter. The principle of economy has reemerged, then: the secret of the pleasure derived from tendentious jokes is '*economy in expenditure on inhibition or suppression.*'<sup>222</sup>

What about innocent jokes? We saw earlier that there are some such jokes, those which are also trivial, in which the pleasure is derived from the technique of the joke alone. Here again, Freud explains this in terms of our economising upon psychological expenditure. In plays upon words, for instance, our psychological attitude is focussed upon the sound of a word rather than its meaning. 'It may really be

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<sup>220</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.165.

<sup>221</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.167.

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.*

suspected that in doing so we are bringing about a great relief in psychical work and that when we make serious use of words we are obliged to hold ourselves back with a certain effort from this comfortable procedure.<sup>223</sup> Similarly, with a second group of techniques, such as unification and modifying familiar phrases, 'something familiar is rediscovered, where we might instead have expected something new'<sup>224</sup>. This recognition is pleasurable simply because it provides a relief from the need for psychical expenditure. Finally, with a third group of techniques such as displacement, faulty reasoning, absurdity and nonsense, spotting the relief in psychical expenditure is 'particularly easy...It cannot be doubted that it is easier and more convenient to diverge from a line of thought we have embarked on than to keep to it, to jumble up things that are different rather than to contrast them - and, indeed, that it is *especially* convenient to admit as valid methods of inference that are rejected by logic and, lastly, to put words or thoughts together without regard to the condition that they ought also to make sense.'<sup>225</sup>

Freud thinks that strictly speaking, the first and third of the above groups involve 're-establishing old liberties and getting rid of the burden of intellectual upbringing'<sup>226</sup> and hence are 'psychical reliefs'<sup>227</sup> slightly different from the psychical **economies** of the second group. However, the main point is that:

'Relief from psychical expenditure that is already there and economizing in psychical expenditure that is only about to be called for - from these two principles all the techniques of jokes, and accordingly all pleasure from these techniques, are derived.'<sup>228</sup>

But let us return to tendentious jokes, since the question we posed at the end of the previous subsection has still not been adequately answered. If, as Freud believes, tendentious jokes 'are able to release pleasure even from sources that have undergone repression'<sup>229</sup>, how exactly is this achieved? After all, it would

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<sup>223</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, pp.167-8.

<sup>224</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.169.

<sup>225</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.174.

<sup>226</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.177.

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.185.

seem that in facing what has been repressed, we have a potential clash between pleasure and what Strachey translates as ‘unpleasure’, for the following reasons. Take the urge one might have to insult a particular person. This urge is opposed by the constraints put upon one by a feeling of propriety. Freud claims that if the insult ‘were able to break through as a result of some change of emotional condition or mood, this breakthrough by the insulting purpose would be felt subsequently with unpleasure’<sup>230</sup>. And so, ordinarily, no insult takes place. Suppose, however, that instead of a bare-faced insult, a good joke can be made ‘from the material of the words and thoughts used for the insult’<sup>231</sup>. In this way, a relatively small amount of pleasure may be generated from the technique of this joke. Freud thinks that this pleasure - the ‘fore-pleasure’<sup>232</sup> - acts as an ‘*incentive bonus*’<sup>233</sup> by means of which the ‘suppressed purpose can...gain sufficient strength to overcome the inhibition, which would otherwise be stronger than it’<sup>234</sup>. Once repression is thus overcome, and the veiled insult or sexual reference made, the ‘incomparably greater’<sup>235</sup> amount of pleasure derivable from the purpose, as opposed to the technique, can be released. Hence, overall, ‘with the assistance of the offer of a small amount of pleasure, a much greater one, which would otherwise have been hard to achieve, has been gained’<sup>236</sup>.

#### 4.3.4 Jokes, ‘the comic’ and humour

One further section of Freud’s book which we need to discuss is the last one, where he pursues his distinction between jokes, ‘the comic’, and ‘humour’. We first consider the distinction between the first two categories. Freud seems to assume that this distinction is more obvious than is justified, though we are offered some clues as to what ‘the comic’ means:

‘A joke is made, the comic is found - and first and foremost in people, only by

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<sup>230</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, pp.186-7.

<sup>231</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.187.

<sup>232</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.188.

<sup>233</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.187.

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.188.

a subsequent transference in things, situations, and so on, as well.<sup>237</sup>

To make Freud's understanding of the comic clearer, we shall consider two of his most important sub-classes thereof. Since the key distinction here is between the mental and the physical, we shall consider one example of physicality being comical, and one of an aspect of someone's mental life being so. The first of these is illustrated by what Freud calls 'the comic of movement'<sup>238</sup>. Under this heading he includes such examples as the 'extravagant and inexpedient'<sup>239</sup> movements of a clown, a child learning to write who unconsciously sticks out his tongue when concentrating upon the movements of his pen, and the tenpin bowler who, even after releasing the ball, follows its course as if doing so had some effect on that course.

In these cases, says Freud, we recognise that these movements are exaggerated and inexpedient, and laugh as a result of comparing such movements with those which we ourselves would have made in similar circumstances. Ideation or thinking uses up less cathectic energy than does action. Nevertheless, Freud assures us that physiology:

'teaches us that even during the process of ideation innervations run out to the muscles...Now it becomes very plausible to suppose that this innervatory energy that accompanies the process of ideation is used to represent the quantitative factor of the idea: that it is larger when there is an idea of a large movement than when it is a question of a small one. Thus the idea of the larger movement would in this case in fact be the larger one - that is, it would be the idea accompanied by the larger expenditure of energy.'<sup>240</sup>

So in comparing the exaggerated movement with my own:

'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. This would be the way in which, other circumstances being favourable, pleasure in a comic

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<sup>237</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.239.

<sup>238</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.249.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.252.

movement is generated - an innervatory expenditure which has become an unusable surplus when a comparison is made with a movement of one's own.<sup>241</sup>

We move on to our second sub-class, 'the comic which is found in the intellectual functions and the character traits of other people'<sup>242</sup>. Freud's example here is the kind of 'comic nonsense'<sup>243</sup> produced by ignorant examination candidates. We have here the opposite of the comedy of movement. Whereas in the latter it is excess **physical** expenditure on the part of the person to whom one compares oneself which causes laughter, a **mental** function becomes laughable in precisely the opposite circumstances: 'if the other person has spared himself expenditure which I regard as indispensable'<sup>244</sup>, as in the case of the ignorant examination candidate.

So 'a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones'<sup>245</sup>. On the other hand, if this balance is reversed, 'we are filled with astonishment and admiration'<sup>246</sup>.

However, even if comic pleasure derives from the above-discussed difference in expenditure, there remains the fact that such a difference does not **always** give rise to pleasure. Freud's explanation for this is that laughter arises only if the difference is not otherwise utilised and is therefore dischargeable. For instance, often, 'the comic is greatly interfered with if the situation from which it ought to develop gives rise at the same time to a release of strong affect'<sup>247</sup>.

Freud closes his book with a few pages on 'humour'. Again, exactly what he understands this term to mean is not entirely clear, but the fact that he treats it as a third category, alongside jokes and the comic, shows that he is using the term in a much narrower sense than it is used in most contemporary humour research, this dissertation included<sup>248</sup>.

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<sup>241</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.254.

<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.255.

<sup>245</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.256.

<sup>246</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.284.

<sup>248</sup> Freud returns to the subject of humour, in his narrow sense of the word, in a much later paper

As mentioned above, the greatest obstacle to the emergence of the comic is ‘the release of distressing affects’<sup>249</sup>: pity, anger, pain, and so on. In contrast, humour emerges in situations where ordinarily we would release such an affect but where for some reason that affect is suppressed *in statu nascendi*. So the pleasure of humour arises ‘at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: it arises from *an economy in the expenditure of affect*.’<sup>250</sup> ‘The crudest case of humour’<sup>251</sup> is gallows humour, such as the comment of the criminal about to be executed one Monday morning: ‘Well, this week’s beginning nicely’.<sup>252</sup> (An arguably better example of gallows humour is the comment attributed to St. Lawrence whilst being burned at the stake: ‘Turn me over, I’m done on that side’.) The affect we would ordinarily feel here is pity, but as soon as we understand that the condemned man is capable of seeming unconcerned at his fate, our pity ‘becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off’<sup>253</sup>. ‘An economy of pity’, Freud tells us, ‘is one of the most frequent sources of humorous pleasure’<sup>254</sup>, and is not limited to gallows humour. Much of Mark Twain’s humour, for instance, works in this way. Take Twain’s story of his brother, working as a road-builder, who was blown into the air and far away by the explosion of a mine. His wages were duly docked for his having been absent from his place of employment. Here, whereas ordinarily we would expend energy building up pity, ‘we become distracted from our pity’<sup>255</sup>, and so we are again able to laugh off this expenditure. In some cases, the affect may only be partially arrested, and in these circumstances we get ‘the humour that smiles through tears’<sup>256</sup>.

Humour is essentially a defensive process:

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(‘Humor’, trans. Joan Rivière, in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol.9-1 (1928); reprinted in Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp.111-116), written after he had formulated his theory of the tripartite division of the mind into ego, id and superego. However, I shall not discuss this here since again, it is not relevant to our consideration of Freud as release-theorist.

<sup>249</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.293.

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.294.

<sup>252</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.295.

<sup>254</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.298.

‘It scorns to withdraw the ideational current bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defence. It brings this about by finding a means of withdrawing the energy from the release of unpleasure that is already in preparation and of transforming it, by discharge, into pleasure.’<sup>257</sup>

In summary, then, the pleasure derived from jokes, the comic and humour, is all explicable in terms of an economy in expenditure: on inhibition in (tendentious) jokes, on ideation or cathexis in the comic, and on feeling in humour.

‘All three are agreed in representing methods of regaining from mental activity a pleasure which has in fact been lost through the development of that activity. For the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy - the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life.’<sup>258</sup>

There are aspects of Freud’s book, such as his discussion of the relationship between jokes and dreams, which I have not mentioned, since this lies beyond the boundaries of my predominant concern here, which is Freud’s central notion, the release theory aspect. The above exposition has been lengthy, but necessarily so, if we are to avoid the superficiality of which so many brief discussions of Freud’s theory of joking are guilty. We now need to consider what we can make of the theory.

#### 4.4 Critique of Freud

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the falsifiability or otherwise of the claims of Freudian psychoanalysis, and the connected question of whether it should be accorded scientific or pseudo-scientific status<sup>259</sup>. However, it should be noted that the intangibility of certain aspects of Freud’s theory makes it difficult

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<sup>257</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.299.

<sup>258</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.302.

<sup>259</sup> For an interesting discussion of this, see Frank Cioffi, ‘Freud and the Idea of a Pseudo-Science’, in Robert Borger and Frank Cioffi (eds.), *Explanation in the Behavioural Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp.471-515.

to deal with. The most obvious respect in which this is true concerns the central notion of psychical energy. Here, Morreall is right to claim that in Spencer, though the concept of nervous energy is vague, explaining certain experiences of laughter in terms of the release of nervous energy is at least plausible to the extent that we are familiar with the idea of needing to release energy which has built up: in 'letting off steam', for instance. 'In Freud's account, however, not only is the notion of psychic energy vague, but the kind of psychic energy supposedly released in laughter is some new kind of energy, the energy of inhibition, about which we have few or no intuitions...If Freud wants to explain laughter in joking as the release of "saved" inhibitory energy, in short, he should first explain just what kind of energy this is and how we might measure, or at least detect, it.'<sup>260</sup> If Freud intends his theory to be understood as a scientific one - and he certainly presents it that way - then this is a fair criticism: the notion of psychic energy appears merely speculative. It is precisely this type of problem which makes Freud difficult to assess.

#### 4.4.1 'The Purposes of Jokes'

Our critique of Freud will deal with aspects of the purposes of jokes, the mechanism of pleasure, and finally his analysis of 'the comic' and 'humour'. We start with the purposes of jokes. We recall that Freud opens this part of his account by distinguishing between innocent and tendentious jokes, and claims that tendentious jokes generally produce more pleasure than innocent ones: 'The pleasurable effect of innocent jokes is as a rule a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearer...A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible.'<sup>261</sup>

This is a misleading over-generalisation, against which three points are worth making. Firstly, this is an example of a general tendency in Freud to base his theory on an overview of the human being which fails to account for the great diversity of individual experiences and perceptions. In this case, Freud is virtually ignoring the vast differences in individuals' senses of humour. Many people will be

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<sup>260</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.30.

<sup>261</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.139.

able to derive tremendous pleasure from innocent jokes, jokes which are indulged in purely for their own sake, rather than to indulge lustful or hostile instincts. This claim can be strengthened if we remember Freud's admission that innocent jokes need not be trivial or lacking in substance: that an innocent joke may 'be of great substance, it may assert something of value'<sup>262</sup>. Freud overlooks the pleasure, neither lustful nor hostile, which is obtainable from such jokes, as their hearer recognises a profound truth.

A second problem is that Freud makes the unreasonable assumption - akin to a position we have already criticised in Chapter Two - that the amount of pleasure derived from a joke can be measured by the amount of laughter it generates. But in fact one **cannot** conclude from the fact that I laugh less at joke A than joke B that I thereby derive less pleasure from joke A. As suggested by our mention of jokes which 'assert something of value', there are jokes of many different levels of sophistication, and correspondingly different levels of pleasure taken therein, and the more sophisticated pleasures - the appreciation of a particularly clever piece of wit, for instance - are not necessarily expressed in laughter. So there is no reason to suppose that the sophisticated innocent joke which reveals something of great substance, will be greeted with a belly-laugh. And yet we should be mistaken in thinking that this necessarily means that the pleasure derived from it is less than that derived from the *double entendre* which, maybe for reasons of the social pressure to laugh at such jokes in certain company, one may greet with raucous laughter. In short, Freud cannot assume that laughter is an accurate measure of the degree of pleasure taken in a joke.

Furthermore, Freud uses his claim made in the quote under consideration to make an inference which there is no logically compelling reason to accept. The argument goes like this. Tendentious jokes generally give more pleasure than innocent ones. The difference between a tendentious and an innocent joke is that the former has a purpose, whilst the latter does not. Therefore 'tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access'<sup>263</sup>. This conclusion does not follow. Freud is reasoning from what generally **tends** to be the case, to a conclusion about the entire

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<sup>262</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.134.

<sup>263</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.140.



class of tendentious jokes. Were it the case that **all** tendentious jokes gave more pleasure than **all** innocent ones, Freud would be on safer ground. But, we are forced to repeat, this is not the case: some, highly amusing, innocent jokes, give greater pleasure than some, very poor, tendentious ones. (It is clear from the quote under consideration that Freud is generalising, and hence it is reasonable to assume that he himself would accept this.) And yet the very poor tendentious joke, by virtue of its being a tendentious joke, has a purpose, which the highly amusing innocent joke does not. So if the greater pleasure usually derived from a tendentious joke is to be explained precisely in terms of purpose, what goes wrong in a poor tendentious joke: **why**, despite its having a purpose, is it poor?

Freud's answer would presumably be that, in such a case, the technique of the joke is insufficiently good to offer enough fore-pleasure to circumvent the obstacle which stands in the way of the satisfaction of the lustful or hostile instinct. But Freud's understanding of 'technique' renders this an inadequate answer. Freud's 'techniques' are essentially just kinds of joke. Consider, for instance, his technique of 'double-meaning'. Within this category, we can meet both innocent jokes, and tendentious ones, such as sexual *double entendres*. Many people feel that at some point in their development they 'outgrow' the kind of sexual innuendo they may have enjoyed as sniggering adolescents. Such a person may therefore derive more pleasure from a good innocent 'double-meaning' joke than a typical *Carry On* gag, the likes of which he has heard many times before. Yet, according to Freud's understanding of 'technique', both jokes have the **same** technique: that of 'double-meaning'. In addition, the tendentious joke has a purpose. So how can the innocent joke possibly afford more pleasure?

Clearly, in order to do so, it must have some quality which its tendentious rival lacks. One such quality is one which we have touched upon before: the 'cleverness' of a joke. This is an important factor in the appreciation of jokes, and one which Freud has overlooked. One way in which a double-meaning joke can appear 'clever' is in the sheer originality of the double-meaning used. One might prefer the afore-mentioned innocent 'double-meaning' to its tendentious competitor because one feels the former's creator to have discovered a double-meaning which is original; one whose humorous potential one has never before seen tapped, as opposed to yet another sexual innuendo. So we can reasonably doubt whether the

different receptions our two jokes received can adequately be explained in terms of technique. At the very least, it must be said that if Freud is determined to explain the difference in these terms, a far more sophisticated understanding of 'technique' is required: one that takes into account factors such as the appreciation of a joke's 'cleverness'.

We move on. Another important objection to Freud's discussion of the purposes of tendentious jokes concerns the limitations he places on the purposes such jokes can serve. We recall that there are but two, being related to either sexual or aggressive instincts. (Although initially Freud explicitly says there are only these two, he later discusses 'cynical' jokes, in which aggressiveness is directed against institutions or prevailing attitudes rather than particular people, and 'sceptical' jokes, which are also hostile: they attack 'the certainty of our knowledge itself'<sup>264</sup>. In places, Freud reads as if these are new categories, but generally, they seem to be intended as sub-categories of 'hostile' jokes.) In fact, these are not the only purposes tendentious jokes can serve. In particular, there is Max Eastman's point that sex and aggression can themselves be 'ideal standards against which some people are in suppressed revolt.'<sup>265</sup> Discussing aggression, Eastman offers the following from Mark Twain's account of his trip through the Jordan Valley:

'We were moping along down through this dreadful place, every man in the rear. Our guards - two gorgeous young Arab sheiks, with cargoes of swords, guns, pistols and daggers on board - were loafing ahead!

"Bedouins!"

Every man shrunk up and disappeared in his clothes like a mud turtle. My first impulse was to dash forward and destroy the Bedouins. My second was to dash to the rear to see if there were any coming in that direction. I acted on the latter impulse. So did all the others. If any Bedouins had approached us, then, from that point of the compass, they would have paid dearly for their rashness. We all remarked that, afterwards. There would have been scenes of riot and bloodshed there that no pen could describe.'<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.161.

<sup>265</sup> Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, p.287.

<sup>266</sup> Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, quoted in Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, p.288.

The repressed feeling which is released here is indeed our opposition to something like what Eastman calls 'aggression as a cultural ideal'<sup>267</sup>: the pressure to exhibit bravery, to 'be a man'. The pleasure we take surely springs from the transparently obvious cowardice of Twain and his companions, in whom we can recognise a part of ourselves which, ordinarily, we are pressurised into repressing.

Similarly, an example of a joke which frees the listener from the ideal of sexual potency is the Rodney Dangerfield gag quoted in Chapter Two:

'I said to my wife, "All things considered I think I'd like to die in bed." She said, "What, again?" '

In our society, there remains fairly strong pressure on males to live up to the ideal of sexual potency. Empathy with Dangerfield, and the attainment of a momentary release from such pressure, does indeed seem a plausible explanation of the pleasure taken in such a joke.

There is a further problem with Freud's analysis of hostile jokes. Although it is true that a joke at someone's expense is generally more acceptable than a more direct means of venting one's hostility towards that person, Freud is wrong to claim that a joke is necessarily a safe way of venting a hostile urge. For instance, in the example of the commoner's reply to the royal ('Was your mother once in service at the palace?' 'No, your Highness, but my father was. '), the commoner's reply is a clever response to the insult to his mother's virtue that is implied in the royal's question. Freud claims that by this reply, the insult is 'safely avenged'<sup>268</sup>. But this is surely not the case. It would only be so if the royal failed to realise its implications, and given the similarity of the thought behind it to that behind his own question, this possibility may be discounted. Freud says that the problem faced by the commoner is that one cannot insult a royal 'unless one is prepared to purchase that revenge at the price of one's whole existence'<sup>269</sup>. There is no reason to suppose that a person who would react to being insulted in such a way would not react just as extremely to being made fun of. Indeed, to be on the receiving end of a 'put-down' is often worse than being insulted outright, especially if one

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<sup>267</sup> Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, p.288.

<sup>268</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.149.

<sup>269</sup> *ibid.*

has been hoisted by one's own petard in quite so ingenious a way as has the royal in the above example. With an outright insult, there is no sense of being outwitted. Also, wit, and particularly repartee such as the above, is a much-admired quality. Few of us, surely, can say that we have never at some point thought 'I wish I had said that'. So, if one is on the receiving end of such a piece of repartee, there is the additional humiliation of having been made to look ridiculous. (It may well be that what is laughable in this situation is not the royal, but the witty comment itself; but, in such a situation, it is often not easy to convince oneself of this, and the idea that it is a witty comment **at one's expense** will often be uppermost in one's mind.) If, on the other hand, you are the object of a direct insult, there is a considerably greater chance of bystanders' sympathising with you rather than taking the side of the person whose only line of attack is the unsophisticated one of direct abuse. So in the above example, the commoner does not 'safely avenge' the insult to his mother. For the joker who makes fun of his 'superiors', this joking is a far more risky business than Freud allows. In a more everyday scenario in which one makes fun of a 'superior', there is no telling what resentment this may foster in someone who cannot 'take a joke', even if they recognise the need to appear to do so, and hence of what damaging repercussions may result from their taking their revenge at a later date. The interesting question that arises from this is what it is about the pleasure derivable from joking which sometimes makes such a risk seem irresistible. Yet to this Freud offers no answer.

#### 4.4.2 'The Mechanism of Pleasure'

There are problems with Freud's account of the mechanism of pleasure, as well as with his account of the purposes of jokes. Consider again the mechanism of pleasure in a tendentious joke. To create or maintain an inhibition against sexual or hostile urges, we are told, we need to expend psychical energy. But when a tendentious joke allows us to circumvent the obstacle which stands in the way of the satisfaction of the sexual or hostile urge, the yield of pleasure we thereby obtain corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved, and this saved psychical energy then becomes available for discharge in laughter. In other words, the listener 'laughs with the quota of psychic energy which has become free through the lifting

of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off'<sup>270</sup>. Also, 'the expenditure economized corresponds exactly to the inhibition that has become superfluous.'<sup>271</sup> So the more psychic energy one has to invest in repressing one's sexual or hostile urges, the more one will laugh at jokes which afford release from these inhibitions.

There are big problems with this. It is here that Freud's theory seems at its most speculative. Firstly, nowhere in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* does he offer evidence to support his claim that psychical expenditure is needed to create or maintain inhibitions, and it is particularly difficult to see what justifies his conclusion that, simply because in 'the use of tendentious jokes pleasure is obtained, it is therefore plausible to suppose that this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychic expenditure that is saved'<sup>272</sup>.

Secondly, there is no reason to accept the claim made in the last sentence of the penultimate paragraph as true. Morreall points out that the very limited empirical research which has been conducted in regard to this question sheds grave doubt on such a hypothesis. In fact, experiments by Hans Eysenck suggest that precisely the opposite is true: that unrepressed people; those who tend readily to express their sexual and aggressive feelings, are more likely to enjoy sexual and aggressive jokes than those who are repressed. So 'a person's "typical" behavior extends to his preferences in the humor field, instead of "repressed" trends finding an escape through humor, as Freud had maintained.'<sup>273</sup> There are problems with drawing definite conclusions from the results of psychological experiments, since once one puts subjects in laboratory conditions, one may well be measuring something other than what is their 'natural' sense of humour. But nevertheless, such empirical evidence as Eysenck's is sufficient to justify our having strong reservations about such a hypothesis.

But there is a more fundamental objection than this. Morreall points out that we would only view there as being actually existing energy left over for discharge

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<sup>270</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.201.

<sup>271</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.167.

<sup>273</sup> H.J.Eysenck, in his foreword to Jeffrey H.Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p.xvi.

through laughter if we believed that when we express a hostile or obscene feeling instead of suppressing it, 'we "summon" the energy to suppress it anyway.'<sup>274</sup> Morreall does not seem aware that it becomes perfectly clear later in the book that this is exactly what Freud thinks happens. In discussing why it is important that the internal inhibitions of the hearer of a joke are similar to those of the joker, Freud claims that the hearer 'must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person's joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken. This readiness for inhibition, which I must regard as a real expenditure, analogous to mobilization in military affairs, will at the same moment be recognized as superfluous or too late, and so be discharged *in statu nascendi* by laughter.'<sup>275</sup> It is important not to get confused here. Freud's talking of summoning the energy for inhibition as a 'real expenditure' could easily lead one to wonder how much sense it makes to talk about 'saved' energy being available for discharge in laughter. How can energy which has already been summoned, energy the summoning of which involves psychical expenditure, possibly be 'saved' energy? But it seems Freud means that the psychical expenditure is intuitively felt as necessary, and the psychical energy needed for inhibition is therefore built up in a way rather similar to Spencer's nervous energy. It is this built-up energy itself, not the expenditure made in generating it, which is seen as superfluous, and which is then discharged in laughter.

But again, no evidence is offered to support the claim that we intuitively summon the energy for inhibition whenever we hear a joke. And there is a further problem with the similar line of reasoning used in Freud's discussion of the comedy of exaggerated movement. Remember that the energy saved in laughter at the comic is supposed to be that of ideation or thought. The energy summoned to understand an exaggerated physical movement, one is asked to believe, is greater than that required to understand the movement one would need to make oneself in order to achieve the same end. So the increased expenditure required to understand the first is rendered superfluous and discharged in laughter. But in what sense is it superfluous? In order for the comparison upon which Freud's case depends

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<sup>274</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.31.

<sup>275</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.204.

to take place, the energy required to understand each movement must actually be expended, otherwise we would have no way of knowing that the movement at which we laugh is exaggerated. So while Freud's line of reasoning previously seemed merely implausible, in the case of the comedy of exaggerated movement it seems totally incoherent.

Next we move on to a problem with the mechanism of pleasure in innocent jokes. In all three groups of joke-techniques which he mentions here, Freud's explanations sound implausible. We shall limit our discussion to the third group. Remember that here, in displacement, faulty reasoning, absurdity and nonsense, we save psychological energy in that we are released from the constraints of having to think logically, to keep to a train of thought or to put words and thoughts together so as to make sense. This is an inadequate explanation for the following reasons. Consider, for instance, nonsense verse. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the cleverness of the first verse of *Jabberwocky*, for example, lies in the fact that the words have been ingeniously put together so as to sound as if they ought to mean something. As in most nonsense verse, the person who really appreciates the humour in this, when coming across it for the first time, is the person who tries to make sense of it, and fails to do so. Trying to make sense of something, and failing, surely involves greater psychological expenditure than instantaneously making sense of something in the usual way.

The notion of fore-pleasure is also problematic. We can question, as does Richard Wollheim, how the fore-pleasure is of sufficient strength to make sure that an inhibition is lifted<sup>276</sup>. We have seen that fore-pleasure is that derived from the technique alone of a tendentious joke. On Freud's admission, this is a 'small amount'<sup>277</sup> of pleasure. And yet we are asked to believe that this small amount of pleasure is sufficient to overcome, at least momentarily, deep-rooted inhibitions. It is very difficult to see why. And given the importance of the notion of fore-pleasure in Freud's account, this is a major problem.

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<sup>276</sup> Richard Wollheim, *Freud* (London: Fontana, 1973), p.102.

<sup>277</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.188.

#### 4.4.3 'The comic' and humour

Freud's determination to explain everything in terms of differences in psychic energy makes his discussion of the comic in character look reductionist and very implausible. The claim that a character is comic to the extent that he expends, in comparison to oneself, more energy on the physical and less on the mental is unsupportable. Who expends more energy on the mental, via his daydreaming, and is comic because of it, than James Thurber's Walter Mitty? Moreover, the example Freud provides here, of laughter at the ignorant exam candidate, is a particularly bad one. Precisely the opposite of what Freud claims is true. If the pleasure is derived from an enjoyment of one's superiority over those more ignorant than oneself, this may be heightened if the person at whom one laughs puts in considerable mental expenditure in order to produce the 'comic nonsense' which constitutes his answers. The candidate who tries hard and produces rubbish is more comic than he who, realising he cannot do the exam, spends just half an hour and minimal psychical expenditure writing his 'comic nonsense' and then, with a carefree attitude, walks out. Indeed, the candidate who has studied hard and yet is finding the exam difficult, although he will do much better than the carefree student, may even feel a sneaking 'astonishment and admiration' for his lazier, more laid-back colleague, whereas this 'astonishment and admiration' is what we are supposed to feel for those whose mental expenditure is greater than our own.

Also, to stress differences in psychical energy is to explain inadequately cases of the comic which depend upon shared experiences; shared predicaments in life. Often a character is comic not because of any difference between the amount of his mental or physical expenditure and ours, but because he finds himself in the same predicament that we have done. Or alternatively, as Morreall mentions, when we see him in a predicament which we have never experienced, we laugh precisely because we recognise that if we were in such a predicament, we would have no alternative but to act in the same way as he does. One example of this would be in farce, where the semi-naked lover, hiding on the window ledge until the coast is clear, finds himself locked out and has to find a way of reaching safety. If we find this amusing, our amusement can be explained either by *Schadenfreude* or by empathy with the lover and his predicament, depending upon our attitudes

towards adultery and to that particular character in the play. There is no reason to suppose, however, that our amusement depends in any way upon perceiving any difference between the lover's expenditure and what our own would be.

Freud is forced to admit essentially this point when he comes to discuss 'the comic of situation'<sup>278</sup>, and mentions a situation in which 'in the middle of an activity which makes demands on a person's mental powers, he is suddenly interrupted by a pain or excretory need'.<sup>279</sup> Although he recognises that in similar circumstances we could act no differently, Freud still tries to stick to his formula, insisting that here, 'the comic difference is that between the high degree of interest taken by [the person concerned] *before* the interruption and the minimal one that he has left over for his mental activity when the interruption has occurred.'<sup>280</sup> This is wholly inadequate, and shows just how far Freud is prepared to twist his interpretations in order to get them to fit his theory.

Finally, the problem of psychic energy emerges yet again in Freud's explanation of 'humour'. Consider the story about the navy's being absent from his place of employment. Is it necessarily the case that pity arises and is then distracted? It seems to make far more sense to say that the appeal of this story is that it is so ridiculous, so obviously a joke (to use this term, for a moment, in a more general sense than Freud's), that, realising this, we recognise immediately that pity would be inappropriate here, and so none is actually generated. We have a similar scenario in gallows humour. Contrary to Freud's claim, it is not that pity is built up and then becomes unutilizable. A genuine feeling of pity will prevent the appreciation of gallows humour: to appreciate such humour, we need to be sufficiently 'distanced'. This condition is only fulfilled if little or no pity is built up. So in both cases, no pity is generated in the first place, and so we have the problem that the energy upon which Freud claims we 'economize' is not actually existing energy.

## 4.5 The value of the release tradition

It seems very clear that neither Freud nor Spencer offers anything like an ad-

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<sup>278</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, p.257.

<sup>279</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *ibid.*

equate theory. One of the key problems, in both cases, springs from taking the concept of 'energy' too literally, and trying to give an account of laughter within which nervous or psychological energy is understood as one would understand other kinds of energy. Indeed, since this energy is supposed to be dischargable as laughter, 'the supposition is accepted', as Swabey remarks, 'that, when there is a surplus of stored or available energy in an organism, there is a tendency (unless obstructed) for its conversion to kinetic forms.'<sup>281</sup> This supposition leads Spencer and Freud inappropriately to **quantify** nervous or psychological energy: Spencer talking of the 'quantity' of a 'feeling' and of one 'state of consciousness' as being 'inferior in mass' to another, and Freud explaining laughter in terms of the amount of superfluous psychological energy available for discharge. As Wollheim remarks, Freud 'sometimes treated propositions about energy and its liberation as though they were descriptions of observable or even introspectible phenomena'<sup>282</sup>.

However, provided we think of nervous or psychological energy in less literal terms, the central idea behind the release tradition can be made plausible, at least for some laughter situations. We mentioned some of these at the end of our critique of Spencer. More generally, it may be said that we operate under a number of constraints, and that laughter can act as a 'safety-valve'. We are under pressure to conform to social norms and moral codes; to obey the laws of reason and logic; even the need to be serious for most of the time can be felt as a constraint. We can see that it makes sense to claim that humour which breaks these rules can afford us a release, albeit transitory, from these constraints. In an essay on seaside postcards of the 'dirty joke' variety, George Orwell writes: 'Whatever is funny is subversive, every joke is ultimately a custard pie...A dirty joke is...a sort of mental rebellion, a momentary wish that things were otherwise'<sup>283</sup>. The same applies to other jokes, which, centring around 'cowardice, laziness, dishonesty or some other quality which society cannot afford to encourage'<sup>284</sup>, give the subversive side of human nature a momentary freedom.

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<sup>281</sup> Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p.202.

<sup>282</sup> Wollheim, *Freud*, p.103.

<sup>283</sup> George Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill', in *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p.176.

<sup>284</sup> *ibid.*

One extreme example of this is the festivals of the medieval period described by Mikhail Bakhtin: ‘Nearly all the rituals of the feast of fools are a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing.’<sup>285</sup>

An apology for such revelries was offered by the Paris School of Theology in 1414. Such a diversion, and the release it affords, are needed:

‘so that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man, might freely spend itself at least once a year. Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air. All of us men are barrels poorly put together, which would burst from the wine of wisdom, if this wine remains in a state of constant fermentation of piousness and fear of God. We must give it air in order not to let it spoil. This is why we permit folly on certain days so that we may later return with greater zeal to the service of God.’<sup>286</sup>

One of the benefits of laughter, then, is that it can act as a ‘safety-valve’, allowing us a momentary freedom from the constraints life puts upon us.

## 4.6 Summary and conclusion

To recap on this theoretical tradition, we will start by returning to Spencer. We observed that his notion of nervous energy was obscure - though less so than Freud’s psychical energy. Moreover, much of the time, no nervous energy is introduced to or developed in a situation, and so none could require release. In addition, to the extent that Spencer can account for individual differences in senses of humour at all, his answer, in terms of other emotions of sufficient ‘mass’ being available to absorb the superfluous nervous energy, is wholly inadequate. And finally, we observed that a joke often plunges us **into** a situation of emotional tension, rather than our being in one in which our emotional energy is suddenly rendered superfluous.

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<sup>285</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp.74-75.

<sup>286</sup> Quoted in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.75.

As regards Freud, the objections we raised included questioning his assumption that innocent jokes necessarily afford less pleasure than tendentious jokes. This may be true as a generalisation, but largely ignores individual differences in sense of humour. Also, we pointed out that jokes can serve more 'purposes' than the venting of lustful and hostile instincts, two of these additional purposes being release from the pressures of sexual potency and aggressiveness as cultural ideals: the converses of the very pressures which Freud stresses. On the mechanism of pleasure, we noted the speculative nature of Freud's theory: that no evidence was offered to support some of his most central claims, such as why we should assume that the pleasure derived from a joke should be equivalent to a saving in psychical energy. There seemed no good reason to accept Freud's claim that when we hear a joke, we summon inhibitory energy in case it is needed, and then realise it is superfluous and discharge it. Furthermore, when applied to areas such as the comedy of exaggerated movement, this notion seemed incoherent. Indeed, Freud's explanations of 'the comic' and humour in general seem rather contrived - all stemming from his determination to mould the evidence to fit his hypothesis, desired conclusions simply being read into his material. This is reminiscent of the stretching of terminology we encountered in both the incongruity and superiority traditions.

cf. *Competition*  
*with the*

To Freud's credit, however, we should note, with our previous two chapters in mind, that he at least sees the need to consider both the object of amusement, on which incongruity theorists focus but superiority theorists do not; and the question of why we laugh, which is central to the superiority tradition but not the incongruity tradition. His account of joke-techniques addresses the former question, and the rest of his theory the latter. But we also observed that we have been given insufficient reason to see why the small amount of fore-pleasure derivable from a joke's technique is sufficiently strong to lift an inhibition. It therefore seems that Freud has failed to adequately link the first part of his theory with the most important aspect of the second.

The nature of Freud's theory is such that we cannot offer a critique of it in terms of demonstrable proof or refutation. However, it is insufficiently plausible to be convincing. Nevertheless, we concluded that, if the notions of nervous or psychical energy are taken less literally, we can see what is of value in this third

theoretical tradition, and that it serves as an adequate explanation of at least some important laughter situations.

## Chapter V

### A conclusion and its implications

Our discussion so far has taken in the three main humour-theoretical traditions. We have shown what is of value in each, and that each thereby succeeds in throwing some light on the phenomena of humour and laughter. We have also seen, however, that none is adequate as an all-encompassing theory.

#### 5.1 A synthesis of theories?

One possible reaction to this realisation would be to suggest a synthesis of the theories. It has been argued that one would be mistaken in viewing these theoretical traditions as being in competition with each other. For instance, Raskin claims that they:

'are not at all incompatible...The three approaches actually 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. In our terms, the incongruity-based theories make a statement about the stimulus; the superiority theories characterize the relations or attitudes between the speaker and the hearer; and the release/relief theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the hearer only.'<sup>287</sup>

This is not strictly true, of course: the superiority of the hearer may be over a third person or group rather than the joke-teller, and Freud, the most eminent release-theorist, makes an attempt, in his discussion of joke-techniques, to deal with the 'stimulus', as well as the hearer's feelings. But Raskin's main point is reasonable, being similar to one we have already made: that the incongruity tradition concentrates on the joke itself, and the other two traditions on the laugher's feelings.

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<sup>287</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, p.40.

However, while it is true that Hobbes, Schopenhauer and Freud do indeed focus on different aspects of the subject, their theories were not intended to be complementary to one another. Each theory seems to have been offered as a comprehensive one. This is clearest in the case of the most detailed theory, that of Freud, but is also true of Hobbes and Schopenhauer, as we have seen: Hobbes asserts that 'laughter is **nothing else** but sudden glory...', and Schopenhauer announces his as 'the true theory of the *lächerlich*'. There are no qualifying clauses here saying that these writers intend their theories to refer only to certain kinds of humour or laughter experiences. To this extent, then, they **are** competitors: competing attempts to offer a general theory of humour and laughter.

Nevertheless, Raskin might retort, the idea that we should aim for a synthesis of theories can be considered regardless of the the original intentions of Hobbes, Schopenhauer and Freud. Raskin claims that a synthesis would give a better approximation to what humour is than any single theory alone. And this is probably true. Indeed, it is interesting to note that such a synthesis is evident - albeit pre-Freud - in Charles Darwin's remarks on the causes of laughter:

'Something incongruous or unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laugher, who must be in a happy frame of mind, seems to be the commonest cause...If the mind is strongly excited by pleasurable feelings, and any little unexpected event or thought occurs, then, as Mr Herbert Spencer remarks, "a large amount of nervous energy instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of the new thoughts and emotion which were nascent, is suddenly checked in its flow...The excess must discharge itself in some other direction, and there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter".'<sup>288</sup>

But the key point is this. Such a synthesis will still not give us an adequate general theory. We have seen that the inadequacies of the theoretical traditions are not merely those of omission, whereby a combination with another theory or set of theories which looked at the phenomena from a different perspective would solve

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<sup>288</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p.198.

the problem. Some of the most important problems are **intrinsic** to the theories - most notably the stretching of terminology we observed in both the incongruity and superiority traditions. So it cannot be overemphasised: while Raskin may well be right to suggest that a synthesis of theories would be an improvement, as a theory, on each of those theories by itself, it would still not give us an adequate general theory. And unless it can do so, it is not clear that we can learn any **more** from dealing with incongruity, superiority and release in synthesised form, than we can learn from considering each theoretical tradition separately.

## 5.2 Suggestions for future work on humour and laughter

We will now briefly reflect upon the reasons for the failure of the theories we have considered, and ask what these reasons imply for future work on the philosophy of humour and laughter. In the case of the incongruity- and superiority-based theories, a common denominator in their failure is very clear. We recall our conclusion that in both of these cases, a key reason for the theories' failure was the need, in their attempt to account for some of the kinds of humour which they faced, to stretch the meaning of the key term, be it incongruity or superiority. With Freud, the terminology is not stretched, but there is another major problem: Freud's approach to his material is so heavily influenced by his own preconceptions that he often moulds the evidence to fit his hypothesis, offering explanations which sound like conclusions are being read into, rather than genuinely elicited from, that evidence.

It may be objected that the fact that these traditions have failed to provide an adequate general theory does not imply that no such theory could exist. Logically, of course, this is true. But when we consider the vast range of material, situations and experiences for which an adequate general theory of humour and laughter would have to account, it becomes reasonable to doubt that **any** essentialist, universalist account could hope to succeed without being forced to resort to some such move as stretching its terminology or offering explanations which merely serve to confirm whatever theory-laden preconceptions are brought to it. The detailed analysis of the previous chapters, though it has shed light on various aspects of our subject, has also lent weight to the common-sensical view that in

humour and laughter we are dealing with phenomena far too rich and complex to be adequately explained in terms of a single formula.

And yet this does not prevent contemporary theorists from continuing in this vein. Morreall bemoans the fact that despite the increased academic interest in humour and laughter of recent years, there have of late been 'very few attempts to construct a comprehensive theory of laughter and humor'<sup>289</sup>. Morreall then spends a lengthy chapter of *Taking Laughter Seriously* outlining a rather forced theory which is intended to rectify this deficiency, based around the vague formula that 'laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift'<sup>290</sup>. Morreall is right that in those fields in which humour research is most actively pursued - principally psychology - many recent writers have concentrated on smaller, more manageable questions about certain aspects of humour and laughter, rather than general all-encompassing theories thereof. But surely a major reason for this, as humour scholars look at previous attempts at 'comprehensive' theories and consider the reasons for their failure, is the increasing suspicion that the task is impossible. Besides, *pace* Morreall, we can state that there is simply no need for future philosophical work on humour and laughter to continue the seemingly doomed attempt to construct further general theories which are intended to be all-encompassing. Indeed, it makes far more sense for humour theorists to abandon the attempt to offer an essentialist, universalist account of humour and laughter. The views of literary critic Paul E. Lewis on the faults of literary critical work in this field sound a cautionary note to humour theorists in all disciplines:

'Humor criticism...has suffered far too much already from overgeneralization: attempts to argue that humor can be easily explained or subsumed under a catchy formula or definition...the last thing humor criticism now needs is another reductive and too-broad theory'.<sup>291</sup>

In conclusion, then, we can say that the basic question motivating each of the major theories seems to be: 'What does all laughter, or all humour, have in common?' And it seems likely that the reason that this question has not been

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<sup>289</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.x.

<sup>290</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.39.

<sup>291</sup> Paul E. Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.x.

satisfactorily answered is not simply that the perfect ‘comprehensive theory of laughter and humor’ has yet to be found, but that no such theory is possible. No answer can be given to the above question because there is no one factor which all humour, or all instances of laughter, have in common.

### 5.3 An introduction to a ‘smaller’ question

So the approach of the rest of this dissertation, unlike the approach of Morreall, will not be to offer yet another theory which is intended to be ‘comprehensive’. Instead, I will follow a suggestion made by Lewis: that humour research should move away from all-encompassing theories and towards ‘questions about the forms and functions’<sup>292</sup> of humour and laughter.

We will deal with such a question in the final chapter. Here we will consider two views of the **functions** of laughter: one social, and one individual. Let us pause to reconsider the theories we have looked at so far, in the light of the question: ‘What is the function of humour and laughter?’ How would Schopenhauer, Hobbes and Freud respond to this? The answer is most obvious in Freud: tendentious jokes offer the means by which a freedom from inhibitions may be attained. There is no reason to suppose that these inhibitions are forever triumphed over, however: the freedom seems likely only to be a momentary one. We have also seen that Schopenhauer explains the pleasure taken in incongruity in terms of a momentary freedom: in his case, from reason. Finally, if one takes a Hobbesian view of man and laughter, the feeling of sudden glory which causes laughter can also be viewed as a momentary freedom: for the brief time during which we laugh, we need not fear the other’s self-assertion as the threat which it usually constitutes, as we can glory, for the moment, in our superiority over him.

Of course, these freedoms are all of different kinds: we would not be justified in falling back into the universalist trap of attempting to bring all of these diverse functions of laughter under one banner heading, and attempting to construct a new ‘freedom’ theory of laughter. However, it does make it interesting to consider just how far the connection between laughter, the sense of humour, and individual freedom can be taken. It is this question which we will explore in the final chapter,

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<sup>292</sup> Lewis, *Comic Effects*, p.x.

via a consideration of two views of the function of laughter - one restricting, and one celebrating, individual freedom.

## Chapter VI

### Two views of the function of laughter: social correction and individual liberation

The purpose of this chapter is to compare and contrast two views of the function of laughter. The first of these comes from the author of one of the best known and most influential books on laughter, the second from a philosopher hardly ever mentioned in connection with the subject. These writers are Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche respectively. We will consider Bergson's view that the function of laughter is to act as a social corrective, and contrast this with the role laughter plays in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where it is presented as the appropriate response to the ultimate liberation of an individual.

#### 6.1 Henri Bergson and the social function of laughter

Bergson is one of the best-known theorists of laughter. His book *Le Rire*<sup>293</sup> has been described by one literary critic, D.J.Palmer, as 'the beginning of modern comic theory'<sup>294</sup>, and shares with *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* the distinction of being arguably the best known text in the field.

The aspect of Bergson's theory on which we will concentrate here, that laughter is above all a social corrective, is a central one therein. We will consider Bergson's claims that 'our laughter is always the laughter of a group'; that therefore laughter must be considered in its 'natural environment' of society; and that its function is a social one. We will need briefly to consider the dualism between the mechanical and the living in Bergson, as it relates to his claim that the comical consists in 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'. The examples he offers to illustrate this point are intended to give us a glimpse of laughter's social function:

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<sup>293</sup> First translated, as *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic*, by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London and New York: Macmillan, 1911). Also included, under the title *Laughter*, in Wylie Sypher (ed.), *Comedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp.61-190. Page numbers given in this chapter refer to this latter edition.

<sup>294</sup> D.J.Palmer, in the editor's introduction to his *Comedy: Developments in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.15.

society plays upon the fact that nobody likes being laughed at by using laughter as a weapon to hold over individuals who exhibit 'inelasticity' and 'unsociability'; qualities which stand in the way of what society requires of an individual. Individuals are thereby coerced into acting in the way which is required for social living.

### 6.1.1 Laughter as a social entity

The first place to start in our task of fleshing out the above outline is the beginning of *Laughter*. There, Bergson stresses three fundamental observations on the comic which he intends to guide his approach to the subject. One of these is that laughter is a social entity: 'You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others...Our laughter is always the laughter of a group.'<sup>295</sup> In support of this claim, he mentions the experience of overhearing:

'travellers relating to one another stories which must have been comic to them, for they laughed heartily. Had you been one of their company, you would have laughed like them, but, as you were not, you had no desire whatever to do so. A man who was once asked why he did not weep at a sermon when everyone else was shedding tears replied: "I don't belong to the parish!" What that man thought of tears would be still more true of laughter. However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group!'<sup>296</sup>

Bergson's assumption throughout his essay, then, is that: 'To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations.'<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.64.

<sup>296</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, pp.64-65.

<sup>297</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.65.

### 6.1.2 Mechanism, life, automatism and inelasticity

How is this 'leading idea' used in Bergson's theory? To understand *Laughter*, we must bear in mind Bergson's overall philosophical position. Reacting against mechanistic and materialistic attempts to understand reality, he offers a vitalist view central to which is the idea of an *élan vital* or 'life force'. A key contrast here, then, is between the mechanical and the living, and it is in this context that we must understand what has become the most quoted phrase from *Laughter*: namely, that the comical consists in 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'<sup>298</sup>.

To understand the emergence of this formula, and its connection with the Bergsonian view of the function of laughter, we need to consider some of the examples Bergson gives. The first is the man who stumbles and falls in the street - basically the familiar 'banana-skin' joke - and the second the simple victim of common practical jokes, such as filling his pen's inkstand with mud or removing his chair when he goes to sit down. 'The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.'<sup>299</sup> It is a 'lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*'<sup>300</sup> that makes one continue 'like a machine in the same straight line'<sup>301</sup>, thus failing to avoid the stone in the road. A trace of this self-same inelasticity is also present in Bergson's third example, that quality which he claims has inspired many a comic writer: absent-mindedness. The absent-minded individual demonstrates his rigidity by failing to adapt himself to reality. Fourthly, the 'over-romantic, Utopian bent of mind'<sup>302</sup> of a Don Quixote betrays a similar inelasticity. Such impractical idealists bear strong affinities with Bergson's first two examples: 'They, too, are runners who fall and simple souls who are being hoaxed - runners after the ideal who stumble over realities, child-like dreamers for whom life delights to lie in wait.'<sup>303</sup> Finally, those who are guilty of comic vice also display rigidity. The kind of vice capable of making a character

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<sup>298</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.84.

<sup>299</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.67. Throughout, any italics are Bergson's.

<sup>300</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.66.

<sup>301</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.69.

<sup>303</sup> *ibid.*

comic is 'that which is brought from without, like a ready-made frame into which we are to step. It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility. We do not render it more complicated; on the contrary, it simplifies us.'<sup>304</sup> Hence we can see how a particular 'comic type' can come into existence. Rather than seeing, as in tragedy, characteristics incorporated in a particular individual, here the vice itself, rather than the characters as individuals, remains central. The vice 'plays on them as on an instrument or pulls the strings as though they were puppets.'<sup>305</sup> We see them not as a particular individual, but in terms of their vice: as a miser, a misanthropist, or whatever.

What is common to all these examples? The answer, Bergson is keen to stress, is 'an effect of automatism and of inelasticity.'<sup>306</sup> And it is from here that we get a glimpse 'of the laughable side of human nature and of the ordinary function of laughter.'<sup>307</sup> That function is as follows. Life requires from each individual **tension** - a constant alertness to whatever is the present situation - and the **elasticity** necessary to adapt to it. Absence of these from the body can cause sickness, infirmity and accidents; from the mind mental deficiency and insanity; and from the character those serious inadaptabilities to social life which cause misery and sometimes crime. The standards set by society, however, are higher than those of life: whereas a moderate degree of adaptability enables one to live, society 'is not satisfied with simply living, it insists on living well.'<sup>308</sup> Consequently, it fears that we might 'give way to the easy automatism of acquired habits'<sup>309</sup> and also respect only the basic conditions of social adjustment rather than striving for 'an increasingly delicate adjustment of wills which will fit more and more perfectly into one another.'<sup>310</sup> Hence society is suspicious of all inelasticity or rigidity of character, mind or body, as this is 'the sign of an eccentricity'<sup>311</sup>, and uses as its weapon laughter, a '*social gesture*'<sup>312</sup> which, by inspiring fear, restrains such

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<sup>304</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.70.

<sup>305</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>306</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.72.

<sup>307</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.73.

<sup>312</sup> *ibid.*

inelasticity.

Bergson does not intend this to be understood as a **definition** of the comic, but it is intended to be 'the *leitmotiv* which is to accompany all our explanations.'<sup>313</sup>

### 6.1.3 'The Comic in Character'

He explicitly returns to this theme in his third and final chapter, 'The Comic in Character'. One of the 'essential conditions'<sup>314</sup> needed in order that a character may appear laughable is that character's unsociability. Bergson claims that comedy begins with:

*'a growing callousness to social life. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream...Each member [of society] must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment; in short, he must avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar character as a philosopher in his ivory tower. Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is really and truly a kind of social "ragging".'*<sup>315</sup>

This social corrective view of laughter is the central assumption of the discussion from then on. 'The man who withdraws into himself is liable to ridicule, because the comic is largely made up of this very withdrawal. This accounts for the comic being so frequently dependent on the manners or ideas, or, to put it bluntly, on the prejudices, of a society.'<sup>316</sup>

The character's unsociability is essentially a form of **automatism**. Automatism, we have observed, can manifest itself in the form of absentmindedness, ex-

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<sup>313</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.74.

<sup>314</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.155.

<sup>315</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, pp.147-148.

<sup>316</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.150.

tending itself as far as the 'systematic absentmindedness'<sup>317</sup> of Don Quixote. No character can be comical, claims Bergson, 'unless there be some aspect of his person of which he is unaware, one side of his nature which he overlooks; on that account alone does he make us laugh'<sup>318</sup>. For instance, often a character condemns a certain line of action, and is then immediately guilty of it himself: an example, from Molière, being M. Jourdain's philosophy teacher's criticising anger and then himself flying into a passion. This is but one example of 'inattention to self, and consequently to others'<sup>319</sup>. Such inattention:

'is here equivalent to what we have called unsociability. The chief cause of rigidity is the neglect to look around - and more especially within oneself: how can a man fashion his personality after that of another if he does not first study others as well as himself? Rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character.'<sup>320</sup>

#### 6.1.4 Bergson's conclusions on laughter

Bergson's theory highlights the negative side of laughter. Though we sometimes sympathise with a comic character, and put ourselves briefly in his place, this sympathy cannot last long, claims Bergson, precisely because the function of laughter is to humiliate. 'By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness.'<sup>321</sup> Of necessity, it works in a very hit and miss fashion:

'Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general result and incapable of dealing separately with each individual case'.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.155.

<sup>318</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.156.

<sup>320</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>321</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.187.

<sup>322</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.188.

This negative side of laughter results from the negative side of human nature: laughter can succeed in its aim of humiliating because of the trace of spite, or at least mischief, within man. This realisation leads to 'a curious pessimism which becomes the more pronounced as the laugher more closely analyses his laughter'.<sup>323</sup>

At the very end of his essay, Bergson remarks that laughter 'is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the aftertaste bitter.'<sup>324</sup>

So what is Bergson's justification for laughter as he sees it? Despite its negative aspects, his overall view is to hold laughter's function of correction by humiliation in a positive light. He believes that overall, 'nature has utilised evil with a view to good'<sup>325</sup>, and that, despite the injustices of laughter in each individual case, its overall result is 'a utilitarian aim of general improvement'<sup>326</sup>.

Despite his 'curious pessimism', then, it seems that in the final analysis, Bergson would sympathise with W.D.Wallis's remark that laughter is 'the jolly policeman who keeps the social traffic going after the approved manner'.<sup>327</sup>

### 6.1.5 Summary

In summary, then, we have seen that Bergson claims that 'our laughter is always the laughter of a group', and so we must understand its 'natural environment' to be society, and its function as being a social one. Examples are given to back up Bergson's claim that the comic consists in 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'. These are intended to give us a glimpse of the function of laughter: society requires from each individual a high degree of adaptability, or 'elasticity', and laughter is the weapon it uses to coerce individuals into adapting to its needs, since, by inspiring fear, laughter restrains inelasticity.

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<sup>323</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.190.

<sup>325</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.73.

<sup>327</sup> W.D.Wallis, 'Why Do We Laugh?', in *Scientific Monthly*, No.15 (1922), p.344.

## 6.2 Critique of Bergson

Before analysing Bergson, we should observe that his is essentially a kind of superiority theory, and we shall not in this section merely repeat criticisms applicable to Bergson which we have already made against superiority-based theories. However, there are two flaws Bergson's theory shares with theories previously criticised in Chapters Two, Three and Four, and which are worth briefly mentioning. Firstly, in his list of examples of the laughable, there is, just as we observed in the incongruity and superiority traditions, an element of stretching of terminology needed to subsume under the heading of 'automatism' and 'inelasticity' phenomena as diverse as a man's stumbling over an obstacle, the dreams of a Don Quixote, and vices such as miserliness and misanthropy. Secondly, one suspects that, like Freud, Bergson at times reads desired conclusions into his - selective - evidence, rather than genuinely eliciting those conclusions from the evidence. There are plenty of examples of the laughable of which 'automatism' and 'inelasticity' are unnatural and implausible explanations. Even a comedian such as Buster Keaton, who, with his stiff, robot-like walk, seems at first glance to fit well the Bergson formula of 'something mechanical encrusted on the living', is at his funniest when he is at his **least** 'automatic' and 'inelastic'. As Richard Boston points out, Keaton is at his best when 'he escapes from danger in a way that is intelligent, resourceful, graceful and unexpected - in short, human...we laugh at the marvellous ingenuity with which Keaton faces new and unexpected circumstances.'<sup>328</sup>

### 6.2.1 'The laughter of a group'

Apart from this, however, what is our response to be to our central concern in Bergson; the view of laughter as a **social** phenomenon? At first glance, one's tendency is to agree with his preliminary observation that laughter is a social entity. Laughter is far more common in those activities of everyday life pursued in common with others, than in those pursued alone. Phrases which tie in with this assumption have entered the language. 'He's a good laugh' conjures up an image of a 'life and soul of the party' type; likewise 'it was a good laugh' would be far less likely to be used to describe a solitary event than a social one such as a party, or an evening out with friends. More importantly, there is the point made in Chapter

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<sup>328</sup> Boston, *An Anatomy of Laughter*, p.135.

Two that one generally laughs with more gusto in company than alone; that there is something infectious about laughter.

However, Bergson's claim is far bolder than that made in the above observations. Let us look again: 'Our laughter is **always** the laughter of a group.'<sup>329</sup> The main problem with evaluating this claim is Bergson's equivocation over the word 'group'. We saw, in the first lengthy quote of section 6.1.1, that he mentions overhearing the comic stories of a group of which one is not a member, and also the infectiousness of laughter amongst theatre audiences. Here, he clearly understands 'group' in the sense of a group of friends, acquaintances, or people in the same place: an actual group of people, with a common physical location. Later in that same paragraph, however, he goes on to refer to 'comic effects' often being untranslatable due to their reference to the ideas of a particular social group. Here he clearly understands the term differently: 'the laughter of a group' can refer to a shared perspective or cultural understanding of a particular society, or section of society.

So we need to consider Bergson's claim in the light of these two different understandings of 'the laughter of a group'. On the first understanding, the claim is patently false. It is perfectly possible to laugh outside the company of others, as anyone who has ever, whilst alone, read a particularly funny piece of comic writing, or watched a hilarious television programme, could testify. There are, of course, the points made in the first paragraph of this section, and it could be claimed that, all other factors being equal, one is more likely to laugh at the same joke in company than when alone, due to whatever causes laughter's infectiousness: a feeling of togetherness, perhaps. However, this claim is a significantly weaker one than Bergson's. Bergson himself betrays unease with his claim here by his need to appeal, in the paragraph under consideration, to 'secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, **real or imaginary**'<sup>330</sup>. But even referring to imaginary fellow laughers does not adequately explain solitary laughter. In particular, it does not explain the experience of being the only person amused by something, and hence being embarrassed by receiving blank stares from everyone else in one's company. In such situations, it is not clear that there must be someone

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<sup>329</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.64, my emphasis.

<sup>330</sup> *ibid.*, my emphasis.

who, had they been there too, one is certain would also have laughed, thereby joining with one in forming a 'group'. Bergson's 'secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary' is not a necessary condition for either amusement or laughter.

We turn to the second understanding of the 'laughter of a group'. Interpreted in this way, Bergson can be seen to be making a very valuable point, namely that humour often does presuppose a set of values, and serves to reinforce these values, and thereby often the prejudices, of a particular set of people. One obvious way in which this manifests itself is in racist and sexist humour, which we have already mentioned in Chapter Three. Here, particular values and prejudices often manifest themselves in humour in the form of stereotypes: the 'thick' Irishman and the mean Jew, or the grotesque, nagging mother-in-law. Jokes which portray mothers-in-law as ogres, Irishmen as stupid, and Jews as mean, all reinforce existing social stereotypes. There is an element, in all value- and prejudice-reinforcing humour, of the 'them and us' technique outlined during our discussion of racist and sexist humour. In humour which makes 'them' appear inferior to 'us', 'our' values and prejudices can thereby be reinforced.

To this conservative view of laughter; that it reinforces a set of values, it may be objected that this fails to account for the subversive nature of much humour. Humour, especially satirical humour, often succeeds precisely because it **attacks** existing values and prejudices. P.G.Wodehouse - hardly the most obvious of subversives - approvingly reports the view of one Wolcott Gibbs that: 'Humour implies ridicule of established institution'<sup>331</sup>. We might reasonably suggest this is one of the reasons Plato considered comedy to be a threat to his ideal society.

But Bergson can be defended against this objection. It may indeed be possible to distinguish humour which attacks the established values and prejudices of society in general - 'radical' humour - from that which defends such values and prejudices - 'conservative' humour. But closer inspection of 'radical' humour reveals an interesting point. 'Radical' comedians, like their traditional counterparts, also reinforce a given perspective, albeit that of a smaller portion of society. By means

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<sup>331</sup> P.G.Wodehouse, 'Some Thoughts on Humorists', in Richard Usborne (ed.), *Vintage Wodehouse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.197.

of an example, take a comedian such as the black American Richard Pryor. Much of Pryor's early stand-up comedy consisted of anti-police material, viewing white authority as 'the enemy'. Although this is not the established view of society as a whole, it nevertheless served to reinforce the perspective and, indeed, prejudices, of Pryor's own audience, consisting primarily of young liberal whites, and blacks who may have shared Pryor's resentment of the police. A similar point can be made about the 'alternative comedy' movement which emerged in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and which was based around the rejection of sexist, racist and anti-gay material. The anti-authoritarian humour offered by 'alternative' comedians in place of the fare of the traditional stand-up comic itself presupposes a particular set of values, usually of the political left. Additionally, after a few years, during which a number of the first wave of 'alternative' comics became mainstream television performers and writers, there became evident a need, under the pressure of producing regular material, to draw upon a new set of stereotypes. Mothers-in-law, Irishmen and gays were replaced as stock comic characters by new figures of fun - Margaret Thatcher being a favourite - and new stereotypes, such as 'yuppies' and 'Essex Man'. So such 'radical', 'subversive' humour often ends up doing the same job as the jokes dependent upon the stereotypes of the traditional stand-up comedian: reinforcing the values and prejudices of a particular potential audience.

However, while the above shows that laughter is **often** that of a group, reinforcing values and prejudices even more often than may at first appear to be the case, we shall shortly see reason to dispute the claim that this is **always** the case. Hence we shall also dispute the claim that laughter must necessarily be understood as a social phenomenon, with a social function. We shall say no more about this at this stage, but will wait until our consideration of the laughter of the individual in Nietzsche.

### 6.2.2 The importance of playfulness

We turn to another objection to Bergson: an important factor which Bergson, like Hobbes, overlooks. In concentrating solely on the value- and prejudice-reinforcing side of laughter, Bergson fails to consider the spirit of playfulness which we have already accused Hobbes of ignoring: the playfulness which, we have maintained, is needed to explain the enjoyment of much humour based around nonsense

and absurdity. We mentioned before that adults can enjoy the humour in children's literature such as *Winnie the Pooh* to the extent that they have retained something of this spirit of childlike playfulness. The same may be said of adults who can enjoy 'childish' nonsensical jokes, such as the following:

'Q: What's purple and lies at the bottom of the ocean?

A: Moby Plum.'

One will be not be able to appreciate jokes like this unless one is prepared to allow oneself to relish a childlike 'silliness': the pleasure comes precisely from seeing something from a new angle and **in a spirit of playfulness**. This is certainly a more plausible explanation of how the above joke can be enjoyed than what seems to be the Bergsonian alternative, namely that we laugh in order to coerce by humiliation either whales or plums into being flexible enough to adapt to whatever society demands of them.

Another important deficiency of Bergson's theory is that it cannot answer the question of why each individual values humour, or the possession of a sense of humour. And yet, as we mentioned at the outset, virtually all individuals do. Recall the great offence taken by people accused of having no sense of humour. This cannot be explained in terms of Bergson's justification of laughter: that each individual values his sense of humour because he sees the value of laughter's pursuing 'a utilitarian aim of general improvement'. So **why**, exactly, do we value a sense of humour? Some of the advantages of having a sense of humour can be made clearer by considering serious and humorous attitudes to various experiences, or to life in general, as discussed by Morreall<sup>332</sup>. And this, we shall see, shows that Bergson's view of the motives behind laughter have far more in common with a serious than a humorous attitude: that accepting a Bergsonian view involves affirming a theory which attributes to laughter the most serious, even sinister, of motives.

### 6.2.3 Serious and humorous attitudes

To have a serious attitude towards a particular issue, claims Morreall, involves considering it as important and worthy of our resolute attention, allowing it to

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<sup>332</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, pp.121-129.

make demands upon us which call for earnestness both in our intentions towards it and in the way we think and speak about it. In contrast, having a humorous attitude towards something involves being distanced from its practical aspects. (We have mentioned before this idea of the need to maintain a certain 'distance'.) You do not feel governed by the situation which amuses you, and are able to feel playful towards it. To use a Morreall example we have also mentioned before, imagine getting up in the morning and, whilst still half asleep, pouring coffee over your cornflakes. To find this funny, you need to be able to step back from being practically involved in what you are doing: the person who gets upset because of wasted food and time is precisely the one who has not attained this distance, the one who is still engaged in the practicalities of making his breakfast. Morreall claims that if we can achieve this distance from a situation, we are free from being totally dominated by that situation. This is regularly attested to by humorists living under oppressive political regimes.<sup>333</sup>

In reality, of course, we all have practical concerns. But this ability to distance oneself, the ability not to get 'locked into a practical frame of mind'<sup>334</sup> makes the person with a sense of humour more flexible and open to experience than the individual whose attitude is fundamentally a serious one. The person with a sense of humour, Morreall continues, lives with:

'the awareness that nothing is important in an absolute way; to become obsessed with something he values, or to get locked into a particular way of looking at things, he will see as unhealthy. Even when engaged in some practical task, moreover, he realizes that it is often best to take a somewhat playful and humorous attitude toward what he is doing, for the simple psychological

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<sup>333</sup> Humour is often perceived by such regimes as being a great potential threat, because of its ability to enable people to see things from perspectives other than the officially approved 'correct' perspective. Ideologically unsound humour therefore tends to be heavily censored. In the days of hard-line Communism in the Soviet Union, the Central Committee of the Communist Party established a state journal of humour, *Krokodil*, the aim of which was: 'By the weapon of satire, to expose the thieves of public property, grafters, bureaucrats, boastful snobs, subservient individuals and rottenness;...and to subject to criticism the bourgeois culture of the West, showing its ideological insignificance and decay'. When on one occasion the writers of *Krokodil* strayed too far from these rigid aims, the entire staff was sacked. (See Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.102.)

<sup>334</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.123.

reason that the distance of humor will keep him calm and thus working more effectively.<sup>335</sup>

These latter claims make for a highly idealised description. Though most of us like to think of ourselves as having a sense of humour, few of us would claim to live up to the standards described here. Most of us, surely, whilst agreeing that keeping the distance necessary to be able to see things in perspective is a valuable asset, would admit that all too often we fail in this regard. We **do** get too involved in the day to day trivia of our lives; we **are** likely to curse that stupid coffee pot for allowing itself to be poured over the cornflakes when it knows perfectly well that we've got a train to catch.

Nevertheless, the point about the need not to be over-involved, and not to attach too great an importance to an issue are important characteristics of a humorous attitude towards it. We can see how such an attitude would help one attain a more relaxed and 'philosophical' attitude to life. We can see how this in turn could help protect us from unnecessary anxiety. Furthermore, 'getting' a joke often involves seeing things in a way which one hadn't thought of before, or from a new perspective: one realises that there are more ways of looking at the world than one previously realised. This realisation, coupled with the absence of self-absorption (that is, attaching to oneself as one currently is an inappropriate absolute importance), can be particularly useful in enabling one to laugh at oneself. To do this one needs to have attained the distance necessary for healthy self-criticism, and the potential for the improvement of one's character which thus results can make us feel more at home with ourselves, and make the personality of the person with a sense of humour more attractive to others than that of the person without.

These, then, are some of the advantages of having a sense of humour. The relevance of this to Bergson's theory is that, on Bergson's view, the motives behind laughter have far more in common with a serious attitude than with a humorous one. Suppose for a moment that Bergson was correct in his view that what is laughable is 'rigidity', and that laughter functions as 'social ragging' which aims to make us fit in with society's demand that we be less 'rigid' and more 'elastic'. Two points need to be made here. Firstly, we can laugh at ourselves. And if,

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<sup>335</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.125.

as argued above, an important aspect of the humorous attitude is the ability to distance oneself from a situation, to step back and see oneself from outside, then in laughing at ourselves, we must be recognising and laughing at our 'rigidity', and to the extent that we can do this, we have ceased to be 'rigid'. Secondly, consider society's motives when it aims to 'correct' socially undesirable characteristics through laughter. In so far as it is intolerant of such characteristics, society can be accused of attaching practical - even absolute - importance to its own goals. So in this respect, society is itself 'rigid'. It is practically involved in its own motives, it cannot stand back and take in the wider view: it is incapable of possessing one of the most important attributes of the humorous attitude, and instead exhibits precisely those qualities more appropriately described as a serious attitude. On an individual level, too, for the same reasons, when an individual uses humour in such a way as to humiliate people into playing the role he has allotted to them in his goals or into conforming with his way of thinking, he is attaching to those goals or to that way of thinking a practical importance inappropriate to a truly humorous attitude.

Bergson, then, presents us with a theory of laughter in which there lurks behind laughter the most serious and sinister of motives, and in which its social function puts great restrictions upon the freedom of the individual.

Let us consider an alternative view of the function that laughter can have: one which not only allows for individual freedom, but which views laughter as being the appropriate response to an individual's ultimate liberation.

### **6.3 Friedrich Nietzsche and the individual function of laughter**

Laughter is not one of the phenomena most commonly associated with Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, numerous people to whom I have mentioned my interest in Nietzsche on laughter seem to have assumed that connecting the two was my own, rather warped, idea of a joke. The momentous-sounding ideas for which Nietzsche is best known - the *Übermensch*, the will to power, the urgency of the need for self-overcoming - might at first glance appear to lend support to such a reaction. Moreover, in that small field of philosophical work on laughter and humour, Nietzsche is almost invariably ignored. But ignoring Nietzsche's contribution to this subject is an important oversight, since he awards laughter a status higher than

that granted by any other philosopher. For Nietzsche, laughter is far from being a trivial, frivolous phenomenon. Rather, it plays an important role in his entire world-view. According to Walter Kaufmann, 'for Nietzsche laughter represents an attitude toward the world, toward life and toward oneself.'<sup>336</sup>

Although there is in Nietzsche no extended analysis of laughter, the role it plays in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* sheds important new light on the role laughter can play in an individual's life<sup>337</sup>. To understand this role, we need initially to consider two kinds of laughter, 'the laughter of the height', and the 'laughter of the herd', and the question of how the former may be achieved.

### 6.3.1 'The laughter of the herd'

In the prologue *Zarathustra*, after ten years of solitude in the mountains, descends back into the world of men to share his wisdom with others. In the market place of the nearest town, he discourses on both the *Übermensch* who, he teaches, is 'the meaning of the earth'<sup>338</sup>, and the 'most contemptible'<sup>339</sup> Last Man. The Last Man is, and is perfectly happy to be, virtually the same as everyone else. By contrast, the *Übermensch* is, to quote Bernd Magnus, 'what is extraordinary rather than average, exceptional rather than everyday, rare rather than commonplace and common'.<sup>340</sup> The *Übermensch* is the goal for which Nietzsche wishes the best specimens of humanity to aim: a being who represents ascending life, self-overcoming and self-possession. It is important to realise, of course, that though Nietzsche has a very low regard for the common 'herd' of humanity, it is not a case of the

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<sup>336</sup> Walter Kaufmann (trans. and ed.), *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p.422n.

<sup>337</sup> In the light of the importance of laughter in the development of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, it is interesting to note, as an aside, Mikhail Bakhtin's report of Pliny's remark that only one man was said to have laughed at the time of his birth: the original *Zarathustra*, or Zoroaster. Based on Aristotle's claim that a child does not begin to laugh before the fortieth day after its birth, and that only thereafter does it become a human being, *Zarathustra's* having entered the world laughing was apparently interpreted as an omen of his divine wisdom. (See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.69.)

<sup>338</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J.Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p.42.

<sup>339</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.45.

<sup>340</sup> Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.33.

*Übermensch* overcoming the herd by over-powering it, but of overcoming the herd instinct within himself.

Back to Zarathustra in the market-place. The crowd greets Zarathustra's discourse with scornful, mocking laughter, and he realises that the townspeople hate him: 'there is ice in their laughter'.<sup>341</sup> They make it clear that they are not interested in the *Übermensch* and, mocking Zarathustra, ask him to make them into not the *Übermensch* but the Last Man. Note the function which the crowd's laughter serves. It has a strong Bergsonian flavour. Firstly, at this stage of the book, Zarathustra feels that he has a message (that of the *Übermensch*) to preach to the whole crowd. Clearly, Zarathustra's message is an idealistic one, and we have seen that Bergson includes idealism amongst his examples of the kinds of 'inelasticity' which can be comical. Secondly, we have also seen how for Bergson, each member of society 'must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment'. This Zarathustra singularly fails to do. (His failure is hardly surprising, given that he has lived as a solitary in the mountains for the previous ten years.) So for these reasons Zarathustra is, on Bergsonian terms, laughable. But he is not merely a figure of fun: we are told that there is 'ice' in the crowd's laughter. This is so because Zarathustra's radical discourse comes as a challenge and a threat to what the townspeople believe and want to believe. Behind the scornful laughter with which they dismiss it, lurks a deep resentment of Zarathustra, the outsider. Soon after his discourse, he is told: 'Go away from this town, O Zarathustra...Too many people here hate you. The good and the just hate you and call you their enemy and despiser; the faithful of the true faith hate you, and they call you a danger to the people. It was lucky for you that they laughed at you...you have saved yourself for today.'<sup>342</sup> So in merely being laughed at and no more, Zarathustra has had a narrow escape. Here, then, we have a very clear illustration of the serious and sinister side of the Bergsonian laughter of social correction. In Nietzschean terms, we can call the crowd's laughter 'the laughter of the herd'.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.47.

<sup>342</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.49.

<sup>343</sup> Note here, too, the fact that the crowd are not even prepared to consider Zarathustra's ideas before dismissing them: this reinforces our earlier point that, though it may indeed sometimes reprove the 'rigidity' and 'inelasticity' of individuals, society has its own 'rigidity' or 'inelasticity'.

### 6.3.2 'The laughter of the height'

With 'the laughter of the herd' may be contrasted the 'laughter of the height'. Zarathustra reaches 'the height' at the end of part three of the book, when he embraces eternal recurrence, Nietzsche's view that everything that happens has happened before and will happen again, time after time. The most important point about eternal recurrence is not the ontological question of whether this is the way the world actually is. Nietzsche's predominant concern is rather with the individual who could affirm eternal recurrence: who, by achieving self-overcoming, could make his life so joyous that he would be perfectly happy to live the same life over and over again, for all eternity. But what is the role of laughter in such an affirmation?

This is most powerfully illustrated by Zarathustra's vision near the start of part three. Within this vision, following the first explicit presentation of eternal recurrence, to his great enemy the 'Spirit of Gravity', Zarathustra is confronted with a young shepherd into whose mouth a heavy black snake has entered and bitten into the shepherd's throat. Try as he might, Zarathustra cannot tug the snake from the agonised shepherd, so he urges him to bite off its head.

'The shepherd...bit as my cry had advised him; he bit with a good bite! He spat far away the snake's head - and sprang up.

No longer a shepherd, no longer a man - a transformed being, surrounded with light, *laughing!* Never yet on earth had any man laughed as he laughed!

O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter - and now a thirst consumes me, a longing that is never stilled.

My longing for this laughter consumes me: oh how do I endure still to live! And how could I endure to die now!<sup>344</sup>

Zarathustra cannot endure to die now because he has not yet laughed this extraordinary laughter. The urge to do so drives him on, and eventually, his consuming thirst is quenched, the real culmination of the book coming in the final four sections of the third part. Indeed, Zarathustra's facing up to and finally

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<sup>344</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.180.

embracing his most 'abysmal thought'<sup>345</sup>, the eternal recurrence, is, in Laurence Lampert's words, 'the event for the sake of which the whole book exists.'<sup>346</sup>

As Zarathustra himself suggests at the time, his vision is best seen as a premonition. At the end of part three, we discover that the young shepherd is Zarathustra himself. And as for the heavy black snake:

'The great disgust at man - *it* choked me and had crept into my throat: and what the prophet prophesied: "It is all one, nothing is worth while, knowledge chokes."

... "Alas, man recurs eternally! The little man recurs eternally!"

'I had seen them both naked, the greatest man and the smallest man: all too similar to one another, even the greatest all too human!

'The greatest all too small! - that was my disgust at man! And eternal recurrence even for the smallest! that was my disgust at all existence!'<sup>347</sup>

Eternal recurrence is such an 'abysmal thought' because, if everything eternally recurs, this includes that which is small in man, which Nietzsche so passionately loathes. 'Nothing is worth while' because the ideal of a future *Übermensch*, it seems, cannot be realised. Confronted with this thought, Zarathustra is so sickened that he is unable to get up, eat or drink for seven days.

So how is this sickness triumphed over: how may the snake's head be bitten off? The answer, as Zarathustra comes to realise, is to give the highest affirmation of life possible: to say a joyous Yes to life despite its negative side, despite its horrors and suffering. When Zarathustra dances with Life following his redemption, he whispers to her words which are not explicitly revealed to the reader, but the progress of the book has left only one reasonable possibility. His words must be words which affirm eternal recurrence: as Lampert says, Life is told 'that she is of all things the sweetest. He loves her as she is and does not aim to alter

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<sup>345</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.178.

<sup>346</sup> Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p.210.

<sup>347</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, pp.235-236.

her.<sup>348</sup> Thus, in Zarathustra, the 'yea-saying attitude' which Nietzsche wants the exceptional individual to adopt to life in spite of its horrors and suffering, reaches its zenith: when there is nothing in life at which he cannot laugh the transforming, redeeming laughter of the shepherd.

### 6.3.3 'Laughing lions'

To further understand the role of laughter in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we should consider the fourth and final part, after Zarathustra's joyous affirmation. Harold Alderman expresses the view that the often overlooked part four is itself intended as a dramatic comedy which emphasises Nietzsche's claim that all things recur not by offering additional arguments, 'but by demanding that we re-experience and rethink what we have already experienced and thought. Thus does it become in both its content and form an icon of human existence by requiring of the reader what Zarathustra has required of himself: patient, finally playful, attention to the details of self-creation.'<sup>349</sup>

We need to say more about what is meant by 'self-creation': what is the self that Zarathustra has created? To understand this, we need to consider one of Nietzsche's most puzzling phrases: 'How one becomes what one is'. For Nietzsche, there is no unchanging entity that constitutes the self. The self is rather something one creates, consisting of the sum total of one's thoughts, desires and actions. According to Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche holds that 'a person worthy of admiration, a person who has (or is) a self, is one whose thoughts, desires and actions are not haphazard but are instead connected to one another in the intimate way that indicates in all cases the presence of style...an admirable self, as Nietzsche insists again and again, consists of a large number of powerful and conflicting tendencies that are controlled and harmonized...style, which is what Nietzsche requires and admires, involves controlled multiplicity and resolved conflict'.<sup>350</sup> It is one of Nietzsche's central messages that one has the power to create one's self.

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<sup>348</sup> Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*, pp.238-239.

<sup>349</sup> Harold Alderman, *Nietzsche's Gift* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), p.114.

<sup>350</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.7.

That explained, back to the laughter of the height. In part four, Zarathustra comes across a number of 'higher men'. While Nietzsche intends the reader to regard these higher men as superior to the 'herd', they are inferior to Zarathustra and are a long way from being *Übermenschen*. Each of them exemplifies, according to Alderman, 'some incomplete aspect of Zarathustra's experience'<sup>351</sup> and each comes to realise that, in comparison to Zarathustra, he is indeed incomplete in some way. Hence the higher men's cry of distress, which greets Zarathustra when he returns to his cave. Having already experienced the joy of the height, Zarathustra is capable of being more playful than the higher men and, announcing that they need someone to make them laugh, offers to play that role himself. Rejecting the adoration poured on him by one of the higher men on behalf of his fellows, Zarathustra tells them that 'You may all be Higher Men...but for me - you are not high and strong enough.'<sup>352</sup> What must follow are 'higher, stronger, more victorious, more joyful men, such as are square-built in body and soul: *laughing lions* must come!'<sup>353</sup>

This is a reference to the subject of Zarathustra's first discourse after the prologue, the three metamorphoses of the human spirit: into a camel, from a camel to a lion, and from a lion to a child. Nietzsche, of course, strongly rejects the belief in objective, universal moral facts, asserting rather that just as one can create one's self, so one can create one's own values. But in order to do this, one must first liberate oneself from the burden of these absolute values which, camel-like, the human spirit has taken on. By changing from a camel to a lion, the spirit becomes capable of struggling with and killing the dragon of absolutism. Thus the lion is able 'to create itself freedom for new creation'<sup>354</sup>: the creation of its own values. Because of the role it has played in his own liberation, Zarathustra's praise of laughter in his speech to the higher men is ecstatic. He urges them to 'learn to laugh at yourselves as a man ought to laugh!'<sup>355</sup> Contrasting himself with Jesus, who in Luke 6:25 wishes 'woe to you who laugh now', Zarathustra has an alternative to Jesus's crown of thorns: 'This laughter's crown, this rose-wreath

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<sup>351</sup> Alderman, *Nietzsche's Gift*, p.117.

<sup>352</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.293.

<sup>353</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.294.

<sup>354</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.55.

<sup>355</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.303.

crown: I myself have set this crown on my head, I myself have canonized my laughter'.<sup>356</sup> He describes himself as 'Zarathustra the laughing prophet'<sup>357</sup> and the speech ends on another passionate exhortation to the higher men to 'learn - to laugh!'<sup>358</sup> Laughing lions, then, are what the higher men have to become in order to embrace the eternal recurrence and laugh the laughter of the height. It is only when they do this, which they indeed eventually do in an affirmation almost as ecstatic as Zarathustra's own, that they realise their freedom: that they do not need to follow some preordained code, or even Zarathustra himself: that they have the potential to create their own selves and their own values. This creation can take place after their final metamorphosis into children, the child representing the 'new beginning'<sup>359</sup> and spirit of playfulness which Zarathustra wants the higher men to bring to their lives.

What is clear from all this is that Nietzsche views laughter, the laughter of the height, as the appropriate response to Zarathustra's and the higher men's ultimate liberation. But what must this liberation be like?

We must understand that Nietzsche is going far beyond those theories in the release tradition which regard laughter as being a release from the constraints of decency, politeness, and so on, for the following reasons. As suggested, the creation of one's self, for Nietzsche, involves 'a continual process of integrating one's character traits, habits, and patterns of action with one another.'<sup>360</sup> This is incredibly difficult to achieve, and even once it is achieved, what has been achieved is only the unification of one's past with one's present. There is still the future to consider, and so we can never afford to rest on our laurels. This is a vitally important point. Since the laughter of the height is an appropriate response to liberation, it is easy to think of it as a triumphant, joyous laughter of victory, of an obstacle finally overcome. In this regard, it is relevant to mention Pete A. Gunter, one of the very few critics to have written on Nietzschean laughter. Gunter remarks that we do not need to be able 'to conceive the laughter of an [*Übermensch*] to see

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<sup>356</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.305.

<sup>357</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.55.

<sup>360</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p.185.

that the kind of duality with which Nietzsche is concerned is a feature of the most ordinary laugh-experience'.<sup>361</sup> Nietzsche, for Gunter, is praising the laughter of a surfer on successfully riding a dangerous breaker over the mocking laughter of the crowd who take malicious pleasure in seeing him take a fall, the 'laughter of lovers' over that resulting from the telling of most dirty jokes, and the laughter of a child playing with a new toy over the laughter of a group of children at a particular child who does not fit in. In each of the first of this set of contrasting examples, says Gunter, laughter results from the overcoming, or the absence, of some obstacle. This leads him to suggest the general rule that the 'higher' laughter expresses the attainment of desire. But there is a danger of overlooking something important by taking this line. Even for the self which Nietzsche's admirable individual has become, the future is always a threat, since, as Nehamas says, 'any new event may prove impossible to unify, at least without further effort, with the self into which one has developed.'<sup>362</sup> So the creation of one's self, one's becoming who one is, cannot be some final goal, some final success which can be greeted with this triumphant, joyous laughter of victory. And yet at the end of part three, when Zarathustra has become what he is, this is where he laughs the laughter of the height. Why?

#### 6.3.4 'The comedy of existence'

The reason is that the laughter of the height, while certainly being joyous, also involves as an important element laughing at the comedy of existence; one's own existence included. Support for this view comes in the work prior to *Zarathustra*, *The Joyful Wisdom*<sup>363</sup>, in which Nietzsche looks forward to a time when 'laughter will have united with wisdom, perhaps then there will be only "joyful wisdom". Meanwhile, however, it is quite otherwise, meanwhile the comedy of existence has not yet "become conscious" of itself, meanwhile it is still the period of tragedy, the period of morals and religions.'<sup>364</sup> But the person who attains the height can laugh at 'all tragedies, real or imaginary'.<sup>365</sup> From the vantage-point of the height, there

<sup>361</sup> Pete A. Gunter, 'Nietzschean Laughter', in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.76 (1968), p.504.

<sup>362</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p.85.

<sup>363</sup> This passage is pointed to by Gunter.

<sup>364</sup> Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, trans. Thomas Common (Edinburgh: T.N.Foulis, 1910), pp.32-3.

<sup>365</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.68.

is nothing that cannot be amusing, and the ultimate joke is life itself. Nietzsche remarks elsewhere,

‘Perhaps I know best why man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was *compelled* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as might have been expected, the most cheerful’.<sup>366</sup>

We remarked earlier that despite the horrors and suffering that he sees in life, Nietzsche wants to adopt a ‘yea-saying attitude’ towards it. The suggestion in Nietzsche that the perception of the comedy of existence and the laughing of Zarathustra’s redeeming laughter involves an affirmation of suffering emphasises a vitally important point: that the tragic and the comic are not polar opposites, or mutually exclusive, but subtly and sometimes almost paradoxically inter-linked modes of experience. The melancholy disposition of many leading comedians is commonly remarked upon: T.G.A.Nelson comments that ‘a heightened sensitivity to the potential dreadfulness of the universe seems to be characteristic of those who know how to make others laugh’<sup>367</sup>. More importantly, writers usually classed as ‘comic’ regularly show their awareness of this close connection between the tragic and the comic. Eugène Ionesco writes: ‘Humour makes us conscious...of the tragic or desultory condition of man’<sup>368</sup>. (According to Martin Esslin, Ionesco’s ‘favourite theme’ is ‘the identity of comedy and tragedy’<sup>369</sup>.) James Thurber, too,

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<sup>366</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T.N.Foulis, 1909), p.74.

<sup>367</sup> T.G.A.Nelson, *Comedy*, p.34.

<sup>368</sup> Eugène Ionesco, ‘La démystification par l’humour noir’, quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd ed. (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1980), p.192.

<sup>369</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.173. Ionesco provides an especially interesting example of this inter-connection of the tragic and the comic, which lends support, in particular, to the view that there is nothing intrinsically comic or intrinsically tragic, but that it is all a matter of perspective. He is popularly viewed, as Esslin points out, as the writer of ‘hilarious nonsense plays’ (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.133.), perhaps the most famous of which is his first play, *La Cantatrice Chauve* (*The Bald Prima Donna*). The play contains a family all of the members of which - male and female - appear to be called Bobby Watson, and a recognition scene between a married couple who are amazed when, through a process of logical deduction, they arrive at the conclusion that, since they live in the same street, at the same house, on the same floor, in the same room, and sleep in the same bed, they must therefore be married to each other. One critic (Alain Bosquet, ‘Le théâtre d’Eugène Ionesco, ou les 36 recettes du comique’, in *Combat* (17 Feb, 1955), quoted in Esslin, p.195.) notes thirty-six comic techniques (or ‘recipes of the comic’) in the play, but on showing the play to friends, Ionesco was amazed that they found it funny, since he viewed it as a thoroughly serious play; ‘a tragic spectacle of human life reduced to passionless automatism through bourgeois convention and the fossilisation of language’ (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.141.). This is reminiscent of the writer Hajek in Jaroslav

remarks: 'The true balance of life and art, the saving of the human mind as well as of the theater, lies in what has long been known as tragicomedy, for humor and pathos, tears and laughter are, in the highest expression of human character and achievement, inseparable.'<sup>370</sup>

But as we have seen, Nietzsche does not merely point out the close connection between the comic and the tragic aspects of life: he urges us to make a positive response to life's tragedy; a positive response of laughter, which for Nietzsche is, in Kaufmann's words, 'a symbol of joyous affirmation of life and of the refusal to bow before the spirit of gravity'.<sup>371</sup> A parallel can be drawn between this and the attitude of the writer who, aware of the tragic, responds with humour. E.B.White remarked that:

'One of the things commonly said about humorists is that they are really very sad people, clowns with a breaking heart...there is a deep vein of melancholy running through everyone's life and...**the humorist, perhaps more sensible to it than some others, compensates for it actively and positively.**'<sup>372</sup>

Zarathustra idealises this active and positive attitude: as mentioned, in him the yea-saying attitude reaches its peak. What Zarathustra realises is the need to confront and destroy the 'Spirit of Gravity', and that 'one does not kill by anger but by laughter.'<sup>373</sup>

### 6.3.5 The humorous attitude revisited

So we have seen that Nietzsche sees laughter as the appropriate response the an individual's ultimate liberation. Now the liberation from absolutes includes liberation from the absolute importance we so often attach to our current selves. We mentioned earlier, in discussing the difference between serious and humorous attitudes, Morreall's claim that having a humorous attitude towards some-

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Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*: 'a very cheery and nice man. He used to go to a pub and always read his stories there, which were so sad that everybody roared with laughter at them.' (quoted by T.G.A.Nelson, *Comedy*, p.33.)

<sup>370</sup> James Thurber, 'The Case for Comedy', in *Atlantic*, May 1960, p.98.

<sup>371</sup> Walter Kaufmann (trans. and ed.), *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p.423n.

<sup>372</sup> E.B.White, 'Some Remarks on Humor', pp.173-174, my emphasis.

<sup>373</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p.68.

thing involves being distanced from its practical aspects, and we agreed that over-involvement in an issue often prevents our being able to take a humorous attitude towards it. Morreall also explains why a person with a sense of humour possesses the quality of flexibility. 'In part this flexibility comes from the realisation that what is important is relative to the situation someone is in and to his point of view. Nothing is important *simpliciter*.'<sup>374</sup> Noting the importance of perspectivism, and the rejection of absolutes, this sounds something like Nietzsche's view of life in general. The person whom Zarathustra has become, the one who realises that becoming what he is involves constant self-creation, that there is in life no final goal or final success, **and yet is able to laugh at this realisation**, to laugh the laughter of the height, is exhibiting to an enormous extent the qualities necessary to what could properly be called a humorous attitude to life. Zarathustra is showing the required flexibility and openness to experience, in accepting his need to continually integrate his traits, habits and patterns of action; always remaining open to whatever the future might bring, and surely, to be able to view this prospect with amusement, he must have attained the practical distance from his own current self necessary to this humorous attitude towards life. Contrast this with 'a realisation many of us make at some point in our life, when we see or decide that our character has developed enough and that we neither need nor want to change any more.'<sup>375</sup> Attaching such unnecessary importance to our current character, especially if we take practical steps to prevent ourselves changing, seems to have more in common with an over-serious attitude. It reminds us of Sartre's 'spirit of seriousness', which leads to the kind of 'bad faith' exhibited by those people who define themselves in terms of some particular current role, be it lover, grandfather or waiter, and explain their circumstances or natures in terms of external factors, rather than accepting their unlimited freedom for self-creation.<sup>376</sup>

What Zarathustra has learned, the vital skill upon which his liberation and self-overcoming is dependent, is the ability to laugh at himself 'as a man ought to laugh.' One can genuinely be said to be capable of laughing at oneself if one can accept Nietzsche's claim that one's life is, in an absolute sense, pointless, and laugh

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<sup>374</sup> John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.123.

<sup>375</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p.189.

<sup>376</sup> I am grateful to David E. Cooper, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Durham, for first suggesting the possibility of a link with Sartre in this respect.

the laughter of the height at this realisation, rather than resorting to some sort of 'bad faith'. When Zarathustra laughs the laughter of the height, the 'serious' side to his life; the constant self-creation which he will need to continue throughout the rest of that life, is, it seems at that point, no burden. And why? Because by embracing eternal recurrence, Zarathustra is bringing to life itself, and to the idea of the need for this constant self-creation, that spirit of childlike playfulness which we have on a number of occasions stressed as being a common element in humour, and which Bergson overlooks.

### 6.3.6 Nietzsche, Nagel and the absurd

At this point, it is worth comparing Zarathustran laughter with a view propounded by Thomas Nagel in his paper 'The Absurd'<sup>377</sup>. For Nagel, a situation in ordinary life is absurd 'when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality'<sup>378</sup>, such as a complicated speech being given in support of a motion that has already been passed, or my declaration of love to my girlfriend being made over the telephone to her answering machine. 'The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself.'<sup>379</sup> What makes everyone's life absurd, argues Nagel, is:

'the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd

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<sup>377</sup> Included in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp.11-23.

<sup>378</sup> Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p.13.

<sup>379</sup> *ibid.*

because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.<sup>380</sup>

Nagel, like Morreall in his discussion of the humorous attitude, focuses on humans' 'special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand.'<sup>381</sup> We are faced with what Stephen Leacock described as 'the incongruous contrast between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness'<sup>382</sup>. The view each person can have of his 'highly specific and idiosyncratic position', says Nagel, 'is at once sobering and comical.'<sup>383</sup>

So which of many possible reactions should we make to this realisation of life's absurdity? There is no need, in Nagel's opinion, to share the view expressed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*; the view that one may salvage a certain dignity by taking an attitude of defiance towards the world, since 'there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.'<sup>384</sup> To Nagel, this seems 'romantic and slightly self-pitying'.<sup>385</sup> A sense of the absurd need not occasion defiance or agony, since 'such dramatics...betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.'<sup>386</sup>

There are clear similarities and differences between Nagel's and Nietzsche's positions. Nietzsche would echo Nagel's claim about the need to make choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. For Nietzsche, in the absence of absolutes, creating our own values to live by is essential, if we are to give any meaning to our lives. Yet there is no ultimate reason or justification for our particular set of values, other than that which we ourselves provide. As suggested, the laughter of the height results, to an important degree, from the

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<sup>380</sup> Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, pp.13-14.

<sup>381</sup> Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p.15.

<sup>382</sup> Leacock, *Humour and Humanity*, pp.219-220.

<sup>383</sup> Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p.15.

<sup>384</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p.109.

<sup>385</sup> Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p.22.

<sup>386</sup> Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p.23.

perception of this incongruity. The most important difference between Nietzsche and Nagel is over the ease with which Nagel appears to think we can accept the absurdity of our existence. It may be possible for me to accept intellectually the 'cosmic unimportance' of my situation, but to assume, as Nagel appears to, that it is easy to choose to react to the comical or ironic aspect of this rather than the aspect which leads to despair is psychologically untrue for many, maybe most, people. Nietzsche, on the other hand, with his description of the attainment of the laughter of the height, has no such illusions as to the difficulty of this task. Morreall is like Nagel in failing to emphasise the difficulties in accepting the absurdity of our existence. In his discussion of the humorous attitude, Morreall discusses the science-fiction scenario of knowing that a star would be colliding with the Earth in a few days, leading to everyone's certain extinction. He casually remarks:

'In that situation everything would lose its urgency. It would be relatively easy to distance oneself from practical considerations, and laugh at any incongruity, since nothing that anyone did would make much of a difference. We might even imagine someone sufficiently distant from what was going on, that when the planet Earth met its demise he found that funny.'<sup>387</sup>

But we simply cannot assume that reacting to such a scenario in so 'laid-back' a way is so easy. If the comparison is not too unflattering, we could compare Nagel and Morreall to Zarathustra's animals, whose own plea to Zarathustra to affirm eternal recurrence<sup>388</sup> reveals them as insufficiently aware of the degree of suffering which this involves, and is rather too 'light and easy'<sup>389</sup>.

## 6.4 What can we learn from Nietzsche on laughter?

In commenting on Nietzsche, it is essential to understand that he is not attempting to offer a 'theory of laughter' in the same way as is Bergson, or any of the other theorists considered in our previous chapters. There is no established humour-theoretical tradition in which Nietzsche is the central figure, and nowhere does he claim, either explicitly or implicitly, that all laughter is of the liberating kind he portrays in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. (Indeed, as his consideration

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<sup>387</sup> Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p.124.

<sup>388</sup> I refer to the animals' fourth speech in the section entitled 'The Convalescent'.

<sup>389</sup> Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*, p.223.

of the crowd's laughter at Zarathustra shows, Nietzsche is perfectly aware that there are kinds of laughter radically different from that of individual liberation.) It would therefore be a wrong-headed approach to spend time detailing those aspects of laughter for which Nietzsche does not account. Nietzsche's contribution to our subject is of a different kind to any of the other writers we have considered. Our concern in this chapter is with the functions of laughter, and we have seen in Nietzsche a particularly powerful illustration of an alternative function to the Bergsonian one of social correction. He thereby raises the status of laughter to new heights, taking us beyond the realms of categorising and analysing examples of humour, and showing us something of the potential open to the individual who takes an attitude to life closely akin to what we have called a humorous attitude.

Let us consider in more detail, then, what we can learn from reading Nietzsche on laughter. There is much to be learned here, regardless of the possible moral objections that may be raised against laughing 'at all tragedies, real or imaginary', of whether one accepts anything like a Nietzschean view of the world, or of whether liberation to the extent that he talks of it is even possible.

A preliminary point worth making is that there is in the Nietzschean laughter of the height something of the elements identified in each of the three major theoretical traditions. We have seen that for Nietzsche the human situation is incongruous, at least in the extended sense of the word understood by the incongruity tradition as discussed in Chapter Two. There is also a clear element of superiority in Zarathustra's laughter: over both the members of the herd and his former self, who thought he could teach his doctrines to a crowd of townspeople; and also in the sense that through his standing back, he can be seen as momentarily transcending the world through laughter. Finally, we have seen that the release with which Nietzsche is concerned is one which goes way beyond our 'release theorists': if we take a Nietzschean view, we are not dealing with a mere momentary freedom, but with laughter as the appropriate response to an individual's ultimate liberation.

Two further points should be made. Firstly, as we mentioned at the beginning of our discussion, Nietzsche awards laughter a status far higher than that granted to it by any other philosopher. This is not merely restricted to laughter's role

in *Zarathustra*: in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he sets himself up in opposition to the anti-laughter sentiments of Hobbes, 'who, being a real Englishman, sought to bring laughter into disrepute among all thinking minds'<sup>390</sup>. Nietzsche says that, far from condemning laughter like Hobbes, he 'would go so far as to venture an order of rank among philosophers according to the rank of their laughter - rising to those capable of *golden laughter*'<sup>391</sup>. We have seen that Nietzsche's seeing laughter as the proper response of the individual to his liberation is the reason for this exaltation of it.

This touches on the second, connected, point: our consideration of Zarathustran laughter has highlighted that the laughter of the **free individual** is an important and valuable object of study. While accepting that **much** laughter must be understood in a social context, we can now explicitly reject Bergson's claim that we can **only ever** understand laughter as a social phenomenon, serving a social function. Nietzsche's individual laughter needs to be highlighted not only in response to Bergson, but also to restore the balance of much contemporary work in our field, which ignores the laughter of the individual, concentrating instead on that which occurs within the social context of a group.

We have observed a number of important factors necessary to the laughing of Zarathustran laughter. The first of these concerns the perception of the inter-relationship of the tragic and the comic. We remarked that the suggestion in Nietzsche that the perception of the comedy of existence and the laughing of Zarathustra's redeeming laughter involves an affirmation of suffering, and hence emphasises the vitally important point that the tragic and the comic are not polar opposites, or mutually exclusive, but subtly and sometimes almost paradoxically inter-linked modes of experience.

Zarathustra's being able to take an 'active, positive response' to the tragic side of life, and what he perceives as life's absurdity; and to 'laugh at himself as a man ought to laugh', depends upon two important factors. These are being able to achieve a certain 'distance' from the practical aspects of his life - which Bergson's personified society does not do; and being able to bring to that life a childlike

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<sup>390</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J.Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.199.

<sup>391</sup> *ibid.* Nietzsche's italics.

playfulness - an important aspect of laughter which Bergson overlooks. Zarathustran laughter highlights the sense of humour's potential to make your world bigger from your childlike 'new beginning' of being amenable to seeing things in a new way, or from a new perspective, and to realise that there are more ways of looking at the world than you previously acknowledged or of which you were even aware: one of the qualities we most admire in the best humorists. Since humour has this potential, it might reasonably be asked, why limit oneself to the conservative, Bergsonian 'laughter of the herd', which is designed to keep people 'in their place', if the option of laughing the more joyous laughter of liberation is available? We recall Bergson's own reservations about laughter as he describes it: his recognition of the unjust, hit and miss fashion with which it selects and punishes its 'victims', and the 'curious pessimism which becomes the more pronounced as the laughter more closely analyses his laughter'.<sup>392</sup> As Gunter points out, this 'curious pessimism' comes about precisely because Bergson has ignored the 'higher', affirmative laughter which Nietzsche highlights.

None of this is to ignore the obvious social or group aspects of humour. We are of course aware of these: the pleasure of sharing a joke; the feeling of togetherness which can accompany humour. And there are obvious advantages to feeling part of a group. It remains true, however, that group membership demands a price for its benefits: the individual in any group is placed under certain constraints by his very membership of that group. He must obey the rules of his society, or risk being ostracised by that society. Within a group of friends, there are certain things that one cannot afford to do without risking the loss of the others' friendship. Zarathustra laughs the laughter of the height because, as the solitary individual, he is free from these constraints too. To follow Zarathustra is no easy task: it means making some hefty sacrifices. As Harvey Mindess observes, we have a fundamental desire for security:

'We all feel a need to bank on something or someone, to believe in something or someone, be it reason, morality, science, the church, democracy, family, friends, or our own attractiveness, intelligence, strength, or charm. These anchors provide our security; they keep us safely moored in the frightening swirl of being, but they thwart the full development of our capacity for humor.'

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<sup>392</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.189.

Our sense of humor is stunted, individually, by our personal security-blankets; it is stunted, collectively, by the fact that we crave security at all.<sup>393</sup>

It is precisely these crutches of security that Zarathustra at the height challenges us to throw away. Jeff Mason offers a neat description of Nietzsche as ‘the outsider saying “Look at me, I’m on the outside and I dare you to come out”’.<sup>394</sup> There is an important point to be made here in connection with humour. In taking the attitude of the outsider as opposed to the group member, one is taking the attitude most akin to that of the best humorists: Mindess seems to be thinking along these lines when he speaks of ‘the frame of mind in which humor flourishes - the individual, iconoclastic outlook’<sup>395</sup>. If, as mentioned earlier, one of the things we most admire about the humorist is his ability to see things from a new perspective, we should recognise that he has been able to do this precisely because he has, unlike the rest of us, freed himself from, and stood outside, the accepted, shared perspective of his particular clique or society, and that it is this which has allowed his horizons to be expanded. Is it not possible, then, that by reaching the height, and the extreme freedom from constraints with which Nietzsche is concerned, that the sense of humour might realise its maximum potential?

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<sup>393</sup> Harvey Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), p.31.

<sup>394</sup> Jeff Mason, *Philosophical Rhetoric: the function of indirection in philosophical writing* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.30.

<sup>395</sup> Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation*, p.41.

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