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LAUGHING MATTERS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Philosophy  
The University of Mississippi

by

MATTHEW MOORE

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis defends a weak version of the superiority theory of humor: the superiority theory explains some instances of humor better than the incongruity theory. This thesis features an overview of the philosophy of humor in ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophy; this section contains criticisms of the incongruity theory. Connections between the superiority theory and humor about death are explored. Parallels are then drawn between this type of humor and Aristotle's great-souled man. A new type of laughter, jubilant laughter, is subsequently identified as being similar to laughter classified under the superiority theory since both exhibit a triumphant quality. But there is an important difference between the two: humor classified under the superiority theory involves a comparison with others while jubilant laughter does not. Finally, the implications of the superiority theory on the ethics of humor are examined, and ethical norms are adapted from Aristotle's account of the great-souled man.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Al and Sherri Moore. My work would not have been possible without their love and support.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Robert Westmoreland, as well as my thesis committee members, Dr. Steven Skultety and Dr. Timothy Yenter.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will be writing about humor as a philosophical topic. I will give an overview of what ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophers have had to say about humor and offer some criticisms of their views (particularly those subscribing to the incongruity theory which holds that humor results from a discrepancy between our rational expectation and what actually occurs). I will then be arguing in favor of a weak version of the superiority theory. The superiority theory holds that we laugh because we see ourselves as superior to other people or things; the weak version is that the superiority theory explains many, but not all, instances of laughter. Although my primary aim in this paper is descriptive, I do address the ethical implications of the superiority theory's role in humor in the final section of the paper.

The superiority theory has received little attention (aside from criticisms) in the past few hundred years, but I will argue that it explains numerous instances of humor that the popular incongruity theory fails to fully explain. I will do this, in part, by drawing upon examples from both art and life. I will then discuss the connection between the superiority theory and jokes about death as well as how the attitude one possesses in such situations relates to Aristotle's great-souled man.

I then present a new type of laughter, which I term *jubilant laughter*, which has not been addressed before in the philosophy of humor. This is the type of laughter one experiences when "all is right in the world." I argue that this type of laughter is similar to the laughter captured by the superiority theory since both express a feeling of triumph, but while the latter involves a comparison of oneself with someone or something, the former does not.

## II. HUMOR AS A PHILOSOPHICAL TOPIC

Philosophers have paid relatively little attention to humor. This is unfortunate since humor is an important part of life. Humor plays an important role in relationships: most people arguably place a high value on the character trait of humor when looking for friends or a romantic partner. Comedy constitutes a significant portion of art: there are numerous movies, television series, books, etc. that fall into the genre of comedy. Humor also plays an important role in human beings' emotional lives; when faced with tragedy or depression, people often utilize humor to help alleviate the emotional toll of the situation.<sup>1</sup> Also, humor and laughter are uniquely *human*.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's observation is correct: man is the "only animal that laughs" (673a5).<sup>3</sup>

Humor is clearly an important aspect of life, but is it a topic for philosophical consideration? It is for several reasons. First of all, this topic plays a role in two branches of philosophy: ethics and aesthetics. When is it immoral to laugh or to find something funny? Is humor a part of the good life? Since comedy constitutes a large percentage of art, aesthetics is concerned with humor as well. But before the ethical and aesthetic components of humor can be addressed, one must know what humor is and why we find certain things humorous. Analyzing this concept falls within philosophy's province. Finally, there is a sense in which humor is like

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<sup>1</sup> Whether or not a person ought to laugh at a tragic occurrence just to make themselves feel better is an issue for the ethics of humor—a topic which I will address in a later section of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Some animals do engage in behavior that resembles laughter; one could even go so far as to say that these animals laugh, but these animals' laughter is not *humorous* laughter.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. W. Ogle, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1049.

philosophy. Morreall relays the following quote from William James, who said that philosophy "sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar."<sup>4</sup> Humor does the same thing; for example, the popular sitcom *Seinfeld* took many instances from everyday life, such as waiting for a table at a restaurant or forgetting where you parked your car, and caused us to look at these things differently. Philosophy also causes us to look at the world differently. The similarity between humor and philosophy will be addressed further in a later section.

Differentiating humor from laughter is important. A person can laugh without finding anything humorous (e.g. a person being tickled; an actor laughing; etc.), so laughter without humor is possible. Also, a person can find something humorous and not laugh; sometimes when we find something humorous we only smile. While it is often the case that finding something funny causes one to laugh, humor is not reducible to laughter since we do not always laugh when we find something funny. Throughout the rest of this paper when I use the word *laughter* I will be referring to humorous laughter unless I specify otherwise. It is important to note something that Morreall points out: the word *humor* was not used to indicate something funny until the 18th century.<sup>5</sup> So in the next section when I discuss ancient and early modern philosophers' views on "humor" I will actually be discussing their views on laughter and comedy, but the sort of laughter that all of them are referring to is humorous laughter (unless I indicate otherwise).

While the distinction between the laughter and humor is usually accepted, Joshua Shaw has recently argued against it.<sup>6</sup> Shaw suggests that the widely-held view that humor is distinct

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<sup>4</sup> John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2012 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified December 31, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/humor/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Shaw, "Philosophy of Humor," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 2 (2010): 119, doi: 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00281.x.

from laughter presupposes a cognitivist view of emotion.<sup>7</sup> Shaw argues that humor is not as "cognitively laden" as most people suggest.<sup>8</sup> Shaw gives several examples where individuals are presumably experiencing humor but are not engaging in a cognitive appraisal of the situation (e.g. a one-year-old laughing at a pratfall or a silly voice).<sup>9</sup> Shaw thinks that humor is best explained by reference to "feelings of mirth" or an "emotion of humorous amusement" which are explained "in terms of one's internal experience of certain bodily states."<sup>10</sup> Shaw thinks that laughter helps us identify "the bodily states that typify humorous amusement" and that in this way "humor may not be separable from laughter."<sup>11</sup>

While Shaw is correct when he states that laughter helps us identify humorous states, he unnecessarily downplays the cognitive explanation of humor. The cognitive capabilities of a one-year-old are quite limited; but, arguably, they do possess enough cognitive ability to find some things humorous. One-year-old human beings laugh at pratfalls and similar silly behavior while mature animals of other species do not. A one-year-old's laughing at a pratfall, a silly voice, etc., is successfully explained by the incongruity theory (which is outlined in the next section).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> A one-year-old (or other similarly young child) has had enough experiences to come to expect a regularity of certain occurrences; when such regularities are violated in a way that does not harm the child, then the child will be amused (e.g. a child is used to seeing an adult successfully cross a room, so when the adult performs a melodramatic fall the child is pleasantly surprised by this unusual event).

### III. THE HISTORY OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HUMOR

Plato was the first philosopher to address the issue of humor. In his dialogue *Philebus*, Socrates argues that humor involves a mixture of pain and pleasure (48a).<sup>13, 14</sup> Socrates argues that ridiculousness is a certain kind of vice wherein a person misjudges himself; he imagines himself to be wealthier, more attractive, or more virtuous than he actually is (48c-e). Socrates then distinguishes between powerful people who misjudge themselves and weak people who misjudge themselves; he asserts that only the latter group are ridiculous because they do not have the power to avenge themselves when ridiculed (49b-c). The former group, however, do have the ability to avenge themselves and are, therefore, not ridiculous but odious (49b-c). So, for Socrates, ridiculousness gives rise to humor. He then goes on to make a further distinction between rejoicing at an enemy's misfortunes, which is a good thing, and laughing at a friend's misfortune, which is wrong (49d-e).<sup>15</sup> Socrates summarizes his argument as follows: "if we laugh at what is ridiculous about our friends, by mixing pleasure with malice, we thereby mix pleasure with pain. For we had agreed earlier that malice is a pain in the soul, that laughing is a pleasure, and that both occur together on those occasions" (50a).<sup>16</sup> This view has come to be classified as

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Dorothea Frede, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 437.

<sup>14</sup> Socrates uses the word "comedy" in the translation I am using. He is referring to plays (he and Protarchus are discussing tragedies prior to this section), but the examples he uses later refer not to plays but to other comedic instances. Since this is the case, I have opted for the synonymous word "humor" in order to be consistent with the rest of this paper.

<sup>15</sup> The text is not clear on the issue of whether or not Socrates thought rejoicing at an enemy's misfortune was an instance of humor.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 439.

the superiority theory of humor: when a person laughs they do so because they view themselves as superior to the person or thing that they are laughing about.

Plato's view that humor contains a malicious element caused him to have a negative view of humor. In *The Republic* Plato has the following to say about laughter: "[The Guardians] mustn't be lovers of laughter either, for whenever anyone indulges in violent laughter, a violent change of mood is likely to follow" (388e).<sup>17</sup> Plato is even harsher in the *Laws* where he writes the following: "No composer of comedies, or of songs or iambic verse, must ever be allowed to ridicule either by description or by impersonation any citizen whatever, with or without rancor. Anyone who disobeys this rule must be ejected from the country" (935e).<sup>18</sup> This negative characterization of laughter had a lasting impact upon Western culture; John Morreall writes, "Bringing together negative assessments of laughter from the Bible with criticisms from Greek philosophy, early Christian leaders such as Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, Ephraim, and John Chrysostom warned against either excessive laughter or laughter generally."<sup>19</sup>

It would be unfair to ascribe a full-fledged theory of humor to Plato; all of his references to humor occur in passing and are very brief in comparison to other discussions in his dialogues. It is also unclear if Plato equated laughter with humor; he makes no distinction in his dialogues, but there is no good reason to assume that he necessarily equated the two. Although Plato did not develop a complete theory of humor, it safe to assume that Plato believed humor always contained an element of malice based on the information that we do have. I disagree with Plato

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, revs. C.D.C. Reeves, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1026.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1588.

<sup>19</sup> Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor".

on this point; my reasons for disagreeing with him will become evident later in the paper, and other reasons for rejecting Plato's view on this point will emerge shortly.

Aristotle also addressed the issue of humor. To an extent, Aristotle's views align with Plato's; Aristotle refers to wit as "well-bred insolence" (*Rhetoric* II.12, 1389b11).<sup>20, 21</sup> This corresponds with Plato's view that humor involves malice. Aristotle also writes, "The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others" (*Poetics* 5, 1449a35).<sup>22</sup> Aristotle gives the example of someone wearing a mask that makes her face look ugly and deformed; such a mask excites laughter, but the individual wearing the mask is not in pain. This view of Aristotle's reflects Plato's view that we laugh at harmless forms of self-ignorance. Aristotle suggests that perhaps lawmakers should have outlawed jests since they are a type of abuse (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV.8, 1128a29-31).<sup>23</sup> But, overall, Aristotle has a much more positive attitude towards humor than Plato did. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle lists wit as a virtue (IV.8). Aristotle applies his virtue of the mean to humor; on one end there are vulgar buffoons, and on the other end there are boorish people who can neither make nor take jokes. The virtuous person jokes in a tasteful manner; what Aristotle means by this is that the virtuous person's jokes do not cause pain in the listener, whereas the buffoon's jokes do. Aristotle censures the buffoon for "striving after humor at all costs, and aiming rather at raising a laugh

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<sup>20</sup>Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2214.

<sup>21</sup> I take *wit* to be a species of humor.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. I. Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2319.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, revs. J.O. Urmson, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1780.

than at saying what is becoming and at avoiding pain to the object of their fun" (1128a5-7).<sup>24</sup> The virtuous person's jokes entertain the listener without causing them pain; the boor fails to entertain the listener. Everything that I have cited from Aristotle so far indicates that he is a superiority theorist, but Aristotle is also the first philosopher to put forth incongruity as an explanation of humor. In his discussion of metaphors, Aristotle notes that a writer can make a joke by using a word that does not fit the audiences' expectation (*Rhetoric* III.11, 1412a25-b30).<sup>25</sup>

Descartes adopted a position similar to Plato's and Aristotle's. He wrote that the surprise of noticing some small evil in a person deserving of such causes us to laugh; likewise, we will laugh at a great evil befalling someone we hate (*The Passions of the Soul* Article 178).<sup>26</sup> Descartes' view is reminiscent of Plato's view that laughing at an enemy's misfortune is a good thing. In connection with this point, Descartes makes an interesting claim that people who are lame or blind are especially given to mockery since they desire others to be brought down to their level (Article 179).<sup>27</sup> Like Aristotle, Descartes also has something positive to say about humor; he writes: "As regards the modest bantering which is useful in reproofing vices by making them appear ridiculous, [... this is] a quality pertaining to the well disposed man which gives evidence of the gaiety of his temper and the tranquility of his soul, which are characteristic marks of virtue; it often also shows the ingenuity of his mind in knowing how to present an

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2253-2255.

<sup>26</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. Ross, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

agreeable appearance to the things which he ridicules" (Article 180).<sup>28</sup> Descartes gives no example of ridicule that has "an agreeable appearance." Although he is referring to instances in interpersonal scenarios, I am reminded of sitcoms such as *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Cosby Show* which often taught moral lessons through humor. That method of conveying a moral point is often more effective than a solemn lecture because while the latter can seem condescending the former is affable; and this, I would argue, is Descartes' point.

Another modern philosopher who tackled the subject of humor was Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes believed "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" (*Human Nature*, ch. 8, §13).<sup>29</sup> In other words, all cases of laughter (or humor) involve us asserting our superiority over someone or something. Hobbes' view was later criticized by Francis Hutcheson.

Hutcheson first criticized Hobbes' view by citing several counterexamples where people laugh but yet do not experience a sense of superiority: one example he cites is witticisms in poetry.<sup>30</sup> His second line of criticism, which I find more compelling, is to note that even when we do feel superior to someone we do not always react with laughter; Hutcheson writes:

It must be a very merry state in which a fine gentleman is, when well dressed, in his coach, he passes our streets, where he will see so many ragged beggars, and porters, and chairmen sweating at their labor, on every side of him. It is a great pity that we had not an infirmary or lazaret-house to retire to in cloudy weather, to get an afternoon of laughter at these inferior objects: Strange! – that none of our Hobbists banish all canary birds and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 27-28.

squirrels, and lap-dogs, and pugs, and cats out of their houses, and substitute in their place asses, and owls, and snails, and oysters to be merry upon.<sup>31</sup>

Hutcheson goes on to note that in many cases where we are superior to the person we perceive our reaction is often compassion and sorrow, not laughter.<sup>32</sup> Hutcheson then suggests that laughter is caused by a contrast between ideas.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Hutcheson touches upon the various functions of humor: a bond in friendship, a gentle method of rebuke, etc.<sup>34</sup>

Hutcheson is an early proponent of the view which would later come to be called the incongruity theory. One interesting example he offers is the sight of a person who makes a mistake in speech or action; Hutcheson contends that we laugh at these instances because we associate the idea of a human being with wisdom and dignity, and these ideas contrast with the mistake the person just made.<sup>35</sup> Hutcheson concedes that in these situations there is "an opinion of superiority in the laughter," but he thinks that is not the true cause of the laughter for we can laugh at someone who we hold in high esteem when they make a mistake without diminishing our high regard for that person.<sup>36</sup> Hutcheson's observation that we can laugh at someone we admire without losing respect for that person is correct, but that does not mean that the superiority theory fails to explain such cases. There is a limited sense in which we regard ourselves as superior to the person we laugh at in such cases (even if we generally hold them as being superior to ourselves): we imagine that had we been in the same position as that person we

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35-40.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

would not have made the mistake that he or she did. Likewise, when we laugh at ourselves we do so because we now realize something that our past self did not. For example, I might look all over my apartment for my car keys only to realize that the keys are in the most obvious of all places: my pocket. I might then have a laugh at my former state of ignorance ("What an idiot I was!"). Hobbes pointed this out when he wrote that laughter arises 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* [emphasis added]."<sup>37</sup>

The next major philosopher who addressed the issue of humor was Immanuel Kant; he also happens to be the first major proponent of the incongruity theory. Kant held that the pleasure of laughter was "merely bodily, although it is excited by the ideas of the mind" (*Critique of Judgment*, Part I, Div. 1, 54).<sup>38</sup> Kant's explanation of humor is partly psychological and partly physiological. Kant held that when we are listening to a joke our rational faculty is engaged, but when the punch line is delivered it defies our expectations so that the mental energy we were expending is suddenly stopped short; Kant writes, "we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by the oscillation of the organs."<sup>39</sup> Kant notes that the cause of laughter necessarily involves an absurdity; and, since absurdity is the cause, the understanding "can find no satisfaction."<sup>40</sup>

Kant relays the following joke and then gives an explanation of how his theory accounts for our amusement:

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<sup>37</sup> Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 46.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Suppose this story to be told: an Indian at the table of an Englishman in Surat, when he saw a bottle of ale opened and overflowing, testified his great astonishment with many exclamations. When the Englishman asked him, "What is there in this to astonish you so much?" he answered, "I am not at all astonished that it should flow out, but I do wonder how you ever got it in." At this story we laugh, and it gives us hearty pleasure; *not because we deem ourselves cleverer than this ignorant man* [emphasis added], or because of anything in it that we note as satisfactory to the understanding, but because our expectation was strained [for a time] and then was suddenly dissipated into nothing.<sup>41</sup>

I am not convinced by Kant's dismissal of the alternate take on why this joke is funny: that we laugh at the joke because we see ourselves as superior to the Indian who is ignorant of carbonation. Might not there be something to the superiority theory's take on this joke? I think that there is.

Kant is also wrong when he states that the pleasure of humor is "merely bodily." While we clearly derive bodily pleasure from laughter, there also is an intellectual component to the appreciation of humor as well. Criticizing Kant on this point is tricky since he does not completely deny that the intellect is involved in the process of enjoying humor; but Kant understates the role of the intellect in this regard since, on his account, the intellect's role ceases once the punch line is told. This is contrary to the evidence; there are occasions when I enjoy a joke but do not laugh. I might smile or even chuckle but I'm certainly not laughing so heavily that my organs oscillate. In these cases where one mildly enjoys humor, the body is affected very slightly (perhaps even not at all in some cases); so the enjoyment of the humor must be intellectual in nature. In cases where one is having a good belly laugh, I see no reason to think that the intellectual component of enjoyment is decreased simply because the physical aspect of enjoyment has increased. Perhaps in cases of hearty laughter the intellectual aspect of enjoyment is even greater than in cases where one only smiles at a joke.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

One might object that in cases where one only chuckles or smiles at a joke the physical effects of humor are simply more subtle. This is a compelling possibility, so I will now raise another objection to Kant's account which demonstrates the intellect's role in the appreciation of humor and thereby strengthens my first objection. We can find jokes funny even after hearing them multiple times (arguably some jokes become even funnier with each successive telling). On Kant's account laughter is caused by the expectation of our understanding being defied and the sudden transformation which follows the understanding suddenly stopping short. I see how this account can, to an extent, capture our experience the first time we hear a joke, but when we subsequently hear the same joke and laugh at it our expectations are not defied: we already know the punchline. Our understanding now knows what to expect, but this does not diminish our enjoyment of the joke, at least in some cases. In such cases, there is still a physical aspect of enjoying the joke; but there is reason to believe that one's enjoyment of the joke contains an intellectual component as well since the understanding knows what will occur but is still engaged in the process (i.e., listening to and appreciating the joke).

Arthur Schopenhauer also subscribed to the incongruity theory, but his version is significantly different from Kant's. He writes, "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects that have been thought through it in some relation" (*The World as Will and Idea*, Book I, §13).<sup>42</sup> So, according to Schopenhauer, humor arises when there is a difference between our conception of a thing and what we discover it truly to be through our perception.<sup>43</sup> Like Kant, Schopenhauer also sees

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane and John Kemp, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 52.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

humor as possessing an antirational character.<sup>44</sup> Morreall states that Kant downgrades humor because of this quality, giving it a less important role in aesthetics than beauty or the admiration of moral goodness.<sup>45</sup> Schopenhauer, on the other hand, celebrates this supposed quality of humor; he writes, "[Perception's] conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract conceptions, cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of difference of the concrete."<sup>46</sup> Schopenhauer tells the following joke as an example of his theory of humor:

In the Berlin theatre he [an actor named Unzelmann] was strictly forbidden to improvise. Soon afterwards he had to appear on the stage on horseback, and just as he came on the stage the horse dinged, at which the audience began to laugh, but laughed much more when Unzelmann said to the horse: "What are you doing? Don't you know that we are forbidden to improvise?" Here the subsumption of the heterogeneous under the more general context is very distinct, but the witticism is exceedingly happy, and the ludicrous effect produced by it excessively strong.<sup>47</sup>

We do not laugh at that anecdote *because* our rational expectation has been defied; rather, we laugh because we know that the horse's action was not an instance of improvisation. The incongruity theory does capture some of this anecdote's humor, but the superiority theory also explains part of the anecdote's humorous appeal. The actor was improvising when he joked about improvisation, and by doing so he was perhaps joking at his boss's expense. The audience laughed at this because they, presumably, knew that the actor was being reined in by his boss.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>45</sup> John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 45.

<sup>46</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>48</sup> I'd also like to add that I find it amusing that Schopenhauer denigrates reason for failing properly to subsume all concrete instances since he cites this as evidence in favor of his conceptual theory of humor which is supposed to subsume all concrete instances of humor!

Another theory of humor is the relief theory.<sup>49</sup> Morreall notes that this theory of humor was originally put forth by Lord Shaftesbury and was later advocated by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud.<sup>50</sup> This theory holds that humor (particularly laughter) is the result of a release of nervous energy. Morreall states that both Spencer's and Freud's theories were based on the "hydraulic" theory of psychic energy which enjoyed some popularity during the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> Spencer takes an example of laughter caused by incongruity and explains it as follows: "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. [...] The excess must therefore discharge itself in some other direction; and in the way already explained, there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter."<sup>52</sup> Spencer's account is not limited to instances caused by incongruity; he also discusses laughter caused by tickling which he sees as also involving "muscular excitement."<sup>53</sup>

Freud adopted this account of humor and added his psychoanalytic psychological theory to it (e.g. humor serves as an outlet for the energy caused by repressed emotions).<sup>54</sup> Morreall writes that "few contemporary scholars defend the claims of Spencer and Freud that the energy expended in laughter is the energy of feeling emotions, the energy of repressing emotions, or the

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<sup>49</sup>I mention this theory since all of the sources I consulted mentioned it, but I did not allot as much space to this theory for several reasons. First of all, I don't find it very compelling; I admit that it might capture some cases, but it's bogged down in an incorrect view of physiology and Freud's psychoanalytic psychology. Secondly, this theory is not the favored theory today nor is it the theory I will be arguing in favor of.

<sup>50</sup> Morreall, "The Philosophy of Humor."

<sup>51</sup> Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 99.

<sup>52</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Physiology of Laughter*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 106-107.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Humor*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 112-113.

energy of thinking, which have built up and require venting."<sup>55</sup> This theory has fallen out of favor because it is based on the outdated hydraulic view of the nervous system. Also, Freud's psychological theory has fallen out of favor; in a *New York Times* article about the popularity of Freud's theory, Patricia Cohen writes, "if you want to learn about psychoanalysis at the nation's top universities, one of the last places to look may be the psychology department."<sup>56</sup>

In this section I have presented the various philosophers' views as belonging to one of three theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. This is the standard presentation, and it has its merits. But I am not sure that the lines are so clear cut. For example, while Aristotle is classified as an adherent of the superiority theory, he also states that laughter can be caused by an incongruity. Also, while Kant's views are classified under the incongruity theory, his views could be construed as a type of relief theory since the energy the intellect was utilizing has a bodily manifestation once the intellect's activity ceases. One final example is that while Herbert Spencer's views are classified under the relief theory he does hold that humor is related to incongruity. There are many other problems like these; I just wanted to indicate that this trichotomy might not be entirely accurate. But I presented things under this trichotomy since this is the standard way philosopher's views are presented in the literature, and I think that despite its problems the theory does have a good deal of merit.

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<sup>55</sup> Morreall, "The Philosophy of Humor".

<sup>56</sup> Patricia Cohen, "Freud is Widely Taught at Universities, Except in the Psychology Department," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Nov. 25, 2007.

#### IV. CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF HUMOR

John Morreall put forth a new theory of laughter in his book *Taking Laughter Seriously*; he presents a condensed version of his thesis in *A New Theory of Laughter*. Morreall's goal is to find an explanation for both humorous and non-humorous laughter. Morreall believes that the incongruity theory "can account for all cases of humorous laughter."<sup>57</sup> But Morreall contends that incongruity alone cannot explain instances of humor; he writes: "not just any incongruity that a person experiences will trigger laughter: the experience must be felt as pleasant by the person. An incongruity which evokes negative emotions such as anger, fear, or indignation, will not do the trick. If I opened my bathroom door to find a large pumpkin in the bathtub, for example, I would probably laugh. But if I found a cougar in the tub, I would not laugh, though this situation would be just as incongruous."<sup>58</sup> So Morreall suggests that "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift" and humorous laughter results from an incongruity accompanied by a pleasant psychological shift.<sup>59</sup> He believes that all three theories of humor hint at this common element of a pleasant psychological shift, but unlike those theories he thinks that his account holds true for non-humorous cases of laughter, such as tickling, which also involve pleasant psychological shifts.<sup>60</sup> While Morreall holds that not all laughter is caused by humor, it is unclear whether or not he thinks that humor always evokes laughter. I agree with Morreall that laughter

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<sup>57</sup> John Morreall, *A New Theory of Laughter*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 130.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-134.

results from a pleasant psychological shift, but I disagree with him about all instances of humorous laughter being explained through a pleasant psychological shift triggered by an incongruity. I will give my reasons for why I disagree with him on this issue in a later section.

In *Humor and Incongruity*, Michael Clark suggests a revised version of the incongruity theory. He writes, "amusement is *the enjoyment of (perceiving or thinking of or indulging in) what is seen as incongruous, partly at least because it is seen as incongruous* [emphasis in original]." <sup>61</sup> Clark later writes that he does not know if there are any counterexamples where a person enjoys something incongruous but is not amused. <sup>62</sup>

I have thought of two counterexamples from film. In Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* the main character, Alex DeLarge (played by Malcolm McDowell), rapes a woman and beats her handicapped husband while singing "Singin' in the Rain." The juxtaposition of such a cheery tune with a horrific, violent scene is certainly incongruous; and most viewers watch the film for the sake of enjoyment. <sup>63</sup> But the scene is certainly not amusing—it is revolting. Another example that comes to mind is David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. Midway through the film, the main character transmogrifies into a different character who is played by a different actor. This event is not explained in the film, and the characters in the film are just as puzzled by this occurrence as the viewers are. This event is definitely incongruous (not only within the film but also with the

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Clark, *Humor and Incongruity*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 150.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>63</sup> It is difficult to say whether or not viewers enjoy this terrifying scene. On the one hand, the actions portrayed in the scene do not excite pleasant emotions but instead give rise to feelings of disgust, hatred, fear, etc. But, on the other hand, one can derive pleasure from Kubrick's bold directorial decision to capture such a scene on film or the quality of the actor's performances which give the scene such a powerful impact. I think it is in this latter sense that a viewer can be understood as enjoying the scene.

traditional structure of films and other forms of storytelling); and, once again, people watch the film for the sake of enjoyment. But this incongruous element in the film is not humorous.

Ted Cohen takes a very different approach to humor in his book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*; he does not attempt to explain jokes by reference to any all-encompassing theory.<sup>64</sup> So instead of trying to come up with a "theory of joking" Cohen contents himself with making a few theoretical observations. Cohen contends that jokes involve intimacy: when one person tells another person a joke and this person listening to the joke laughs this happens because the person who hears the joke and the person who tells it share a set of background beliefs that makes humor possible.<sup>65, 66</sup> This intimacy not only involves shared background beliefs but also the way one *feels* about something. Cohen gives an analogy about Maine's climate during the summer; two people can agree about facts concerning Maine's climate, but it is another thing for them to share the view that summer in Maine possesses a "beauty that seems dim and fragile."<sup>67</sup> Agreement over this latter point involves an intimacy that is not captured by agreeing on the average high temperature in August in Maine. Cohen states that sharing a joke is similar because when we do so we are seeking to connect with other people by sharing with them what it is that we find to be funny.<sup>68</sup> He writes that one cannot prove that a

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<sup>64</sup> Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 9-10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>66</sup> Another way to put this point is to say that one must possess certain knowledge that provides the background for the joke, but one need not believe this knowledge to be true. For jokes that involve stereotypes, it is necessary that the listener knows about that particular stereotype in order to understand the joke, but this does not mean that the listener or the person who told the joke necessarily thinks that the stereotype is true.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-32.

joke is funny in the same way that one can prove the reasoning of an argument is valid.<sup>69</sup> He goes on to say that a person can explain to someone else why he or she finds something funny but the two do not *reach* each other unless they both find the joke amusing.<sup>70</sup> Another way that Cohen puts this point is to say that jokes are *conditional* which means that they only work with certain audiences, and the degree to which a joke is conditional varies.<sup>71</sup> Some jokes are understood by a wide audience while some jokes are only funny to a select group of people such as this joke: "What did Lesniewski say to Lukasiewicz?' 'Logically, we're poles apart.'" <sup>72</sup> One very interesting claim that Cohen makes is that offensive jokes are funny; he holds that we do nothing to remedy the situation when we deny this fact.<sup>73</sup>

Simon Critchley discusses many aspects of humor, such as its theoretical perspective, in his book *On Humor*. Critchley writes that philosophy and humor share a common attribute: detachment from one's immediate experience.<sup>74</sup> Critchley observes that in this way humor is a tool for social criticism; he writes that a "joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage."<sup>75</sup> He also suggests that humor's aspect of detachment is evident in humor that plays on the fact that while human beings have a body they are not their body.<sup>76</sup> Critchley goes on to write that comedy allows us to adopt a "theoretical attitude towards the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>75</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 43-45.

world," but one that is "eminently practical and interesting."<sup>77</sup> I take Critchley to be saying something along the lines of William James quote that I mentioned earlier: humor causes us to see the strange as familiar and the familiar as strange, and it is in this sense that humor is theoretical. When joking we detach ourselves from the world we inhabit; we are like an outsider looking in at a strange world. For example, an adherent of Leibniz's philosophy thinks that the world is comprised of "windowless" monads—a strange view indeed! For this person the familiar view of the world (naive realism) is strange, and their strange view about monads is familiar. Similarly, when we listen to a stand-up comic joke about going to the movies, for instance, the comic takes a familiar activity and puts a twist on it or highlights something odd about it that we might not have noticed before; and the familiar thereby becomes strange. But Critchley thinks humor has an advantage over philosophy; he writes: "Descartes famously and perhaps rightly said that one could only do metaphysics for a few hours a year. The great virtue of humor is that it is philosophizing in action, a bright silver thread running through the duvet of existence. And one can easily engage in it for an hour or two every day."<sup>78</sup> That is the sense in which humor is more practical than philosophy, according to Critchley; joking is easy and fun—philosophizing, on the other hand, while fun for some, is almost never easy.

Critchley follows Cohen by observing that we do sometimes laugh at offensive jokes; he writes, "Perhaps one laughs at jokes one would rather *not* laugh at. Humor can provide information about oneself that one would rather *not* have."<sup>79</sup> In the book's final chapter, Critchley adopts a thoroughly Freudian view of humor and states that "laughter at oneself is better than

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 74.

laughing at others."<sup>80</sup> I strongly disagree with Critchley's adoption of Freud's views; unfortunately, critiquing this lies beyond the scope of this paper since doing so would involve a critique of Freud's psychoanalytic psychology. I can say, however, that (in a very specific way) it is immoral to laugh at oneself; I will explain what I mean by this in a later section.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 96.

## V. DEFENDING THE SUPERIORITY THEORY

Aaron Smuts observes that the incongruity theory is the reigning theory of humor today.<sup>81</sup> I do not wish to unseat the incongruity theory from the throne—I think it covers many instances of humor. Also, I see no reason to be a monist about the philosophy of humor. Instead, I want to emphasize the superiority theory which I think has been unduly neglected for the past few hundred years. There are many instances of humor which can be explained by both the superiority and incongruity theories, but the incongruity theory offers a trivial explanation in most cases. In other words, the incongruity theorists' interpretation of these instances cannot be definitively refuted, but I will argue that the superiority theory offers a *superior* interpretation of these instances.<sup>82</sup>

In the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* article on humor, Smuts distinguishes two forms of the superiority theory:

We can give two forms to the claims of the superiority theory of humor: (1) the strong claim holds that all humor involves a feeling of superiority, and (2) the weak claim suggests that feelings of superiority are frequently found in many cases of humor.<sup>83</sup>

I agree with Smuts' division and take Hobbes to be representative of the first form since he held that humor was "nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some

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<sup>81</sup> Aaron Smuts, "Humor", *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified April 12, 2009, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>

<sup>82</sup> I know that's a bad pun, but you'll have to forgive me since this is a paper on humor after all!

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

eminency in ourselves."<sup>84</sup> Aristotle is representative of the second form since he thought that some instances of humor resulted from incongruity. I will be defending the second, weak claim by presenting several examples from art and showing that the superiority theory explains these examples better than the incongruity theory does.

Arthur Schopenhauer and George Santayana have both defended readings of *Don Quixote* which support the incongruity theory. Schopenhauer writes, "Most of the actions of Don Quixote are also cases in point, for he subsumes the realities he encounters under conceptions drawn from the romances of chivalry, from which they are very different."<sup>85</sup> Santayana describes Don Quixote as contradictory; on the one hand, Don Quixote is crazy and old, but on the other hand he is courageous, idealistic, and good.<sup>86</sup> Santayana thinks it is the incongruity between these qualities which gives rise to the novel's humor.<sup>87</sup> While both of these explanations have some degree of credibility, they do not fully capture the essence of the humor in *Don Quixote*. For example, the famous section where Don Quixote jousts with the windmills definitely exhibits incongruity: he subsumes the reality of the windmills under the conception of giants; and there is an incongruity between the concept of jousting, which involves two human beings engaged in combat, and his action of trying to joust with inanimate objects. But is the incongruity the sole reason for our finding Don Quixote's action funny? No. We laugh at him because he is a fool. We laugh at him because he is inferior to us: he mistakes windmills for giants while we do not.

Another beloved fool in popular culture is Barney Fife from *The Andy Griffith Show*. Fife is a bumbling deputy sheriff who consistently overestimates his abilities. His inflated opinion of

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<sup>84</sup> Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 59.

<sup>86</sup> George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 97.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

himself does not match up with the reality of who he is; although there is an incongruity here, the incongruity as such is not the source of the humor. Imagine that the incongruity was reversed: Fife has a low opinion of his skill-level which is, in fact, very high. This inverted version of Barney Fife would not be as funny even though his character would still exhibit incongruity. The fact that we feel superior to Barney Fife is what makes him funny.

My third and final example from art is the character of Gob Bluth from the television series *Arrested Development*. Gob is an incompetent magician who displays a lot of bravado. The opening of his magic act is very grandiose—perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as an attempt at grandeur. But the act that follows is always an extreme let-down from the opening's implied grandeur. Once again, there is an incongruity here; but the humor of Gob's act cannot be explained by an appeal to incongruity alone. If the act's opening was lackluster and rest of the act was very impressive, then that would be incongruous; but this inverted act would not be very funny. What makes Gob's act funny is the fact that he is a terrible magician; we laugh at him because we feel superior to his incompetence.

All three of the characters I have just cited possess a common feature: they lack self-awareness; Socrates pointed to this fact in his discussion of humor in *Philebus*. In other words, their idea of themselves does not correspond with the reality of who they are. Don Quixote thinks that he is a gallant knight, but in reality he is a delusional old man. Barney Fife thinks he is a tough and sharp lawman, but in reality he is bumbling and incompetent. Gob Bluth imagines himself to be a world-class magician, but in reality he is not fit to perform at a child's birthday party.

The issue of self-awareness is an important factor in the superiority theory because it is self-awareness that makes us superior to these characters. While Don Quixote, Barney Fife, and

Gob Bluth are an inferior knight, deputy sheriff, and magician respectively, they still might very well be superior in their respective fields to those who laugh at them; in other words, while Barney Fife is an incompetent deputy sheriff he is still a more competent deputy sheriff than I would be if I were to trade places with him.<sup>88</sup> But that is not what the superiority theory is concerned with in these cases. We laugh at these characters because we are superior to them on the issue of self-awareness. These characters are not aware of the discrepancy between the way they see themselves and the way they actually are, but we are aware of this discrepancy.<sup>89</sup>

With the three previous examples, I suggested that if the incongruity was reversed, i.e., if the person appeared to be incompetent but was actually competent, the scenario would not be funny (or, at least, it would not be as funny). Someone might object that some instances of this reversed incongruity might be funny; for example, the television series *Columbo* featured a brilliant police detective who appeared to a bumbling incompetent. Columbo is the opposite of Barney Fife. The series was not a comedy, but there were humorous moments, most of which flowed from Columbo's seeming incompetence. Is this a counterexample to the superiority theory? No. We find Columbo's behavior amusing because it misleads the villains into thinking that they are smarter than, or superior to, Columbo. We are rooting for Columbo to catch the murderer, so we delight in seeing him add insult to their injury by lulling them into a false sense of confidence. We laugh because we enjoy seeing the hero be superior to the villain; I will return to this point shortly. It is also worth noting that unlike Don Quixote, Barney Fife, and Gob Bluth, Columbo does not lack self-awareness; to a large extent, Columbo's seeming incompetence is an act designed to fool people into thinking that he is not capable of discovering their guilt.

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<sup>88</sup> I might become more skilled than him with the passage of time, but that's not important. What matters is that at present when I laugh at him I am in an inferior position of skill when it comes to deputy "sheriffing."

<sup>89</sup> This is not to say that we are, on the whole, more self-aware than these characters. I am only claiming that in this highly delimited respect we are more aware of their true nature than they are.

A further piece of evidence in favor of the superiority theory is mockery. There are numerous examples of mockery; I will indicate a few: children mocking each other on the playground; politicians being mocked on *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live* as well as late night shows; cheesy B-movies being mocked on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*; roasts; etc. If someone catalogued the jokes in those shows and activities I imagine that the incongruity theory could capture some of them, but the vast majority of such jokes would be better explained by the superiority theory. When we mock something we see ourselves as superior to it (at least at that moment in time). Also, when we laugh at someone else's joke that is mocking someone or something we see ourselves as superior to the object of ridicule. At this point, it is worth noting that the superiority theory helps explain racist and sexist humor: the person making jokes about another race or sex views himself as superior to the target of the joke. I will return to this issue later when I address the ethics of humor.

Robert Solomon observes that while the Three Stooges might appear to be a classic example of the superiority theory, appearances can be deceiving.<sup>90</sup> Solomon writes, "One doesn't walk away from the Stooges feeling superior, but, rather, released and relieved."<sup>91</sup> This, Solomon observes, seems to be evidence that the Stooges' humor is an example of the relief theory.<sup>92</sup> In other words, when we enjoy watching Moe, Larry, and Curly abuse each other and those around them, we are expressing our violent desires in a safe manner.<sup>93</sup> But Solomon writes that although he cannot disprove that theory he thinks we should be hesitant to accept it since the

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<sup>90</sup> Robert Solomon, "Are the Three Stooges Funny? Soitainly? (Or When Is It OK to Laugh?)," in *Ethics and Values in the Information Age*, eds. Joel Rudinow and Anthony Graybosch (Wadsworth, 2002), 183.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 183-184.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

"Three Stooges' humor does not feel particularly vicious, and those who complain that it seems so are easily dismissed as those who have not allowed themselves to 'get into it.'"<sup>94</sup>

Solomon then considers if the Stooges' humor fits the incongruity theory; he decides that it does not since that theory fails to explain why the Stooges' get better with repeated viewings and why people enjoy imitating the Three Stooges.<sup>95</sup> Finding that none of the three main theories fit, Solomon advances what he calls the inferiority theory.<sup>96</sup> Solomon describes the inferiority theory as follows: "... laughter as the great leveler, beyond contempt or indignation, antithetical to pretension and pomp."<sup>97</sup> Solomon claims that when we watch the Stooges "we allow ourselves to enter a world of miniature mayhem in which we feel as foolish as they are."<sup>98</sup> After suggesting that the Western philosophical tradition has failed to fully appreciate humor, Solomon concludes his paper by writing, "Nothing is so important in philosophy or anywhere else as not taking oneself too seriously."<sup>99</sup>

I will return to Solomon's final point in a later section. Right now I want to address his suggestion of an inferiority theory. First of all, Solomon made an unfortunate word choice when naming his theory since he is not suggesting that we feel inferior to the Stooges when we laugh at them; rather, he is suggesting that we see ourselves on the same level as the Stooges: we enjoy being silly with them (hence, the enjoyment of imitating them). Perhaps Solomon should have instead dubbed his theory the *egalitarian* theory of humor since he views humor as placing

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 185.

everyone on a level playing field whether they are a doctor, plumber, philosopher, or Stooge. But this account is not entirely true of the Three Stooges' humor. Solomon observes in his article that "[The Three Stooges] ridicule every profession and the world of the wealthy in particular by their very presence within it."<sup>100</sup> In other words, the Stooges' humor pokes fun at those in superior social circles, but this fact does not mean that the Stooges' humor is contrary to the superiority theory. The superiority theory is not so much concerned with the existential circumstances of the joker and the object of ridicule but with the attitude of the those who find the joke funny; people who laugh at the Stooges because they disrupt the world of the upper class do so because they enjoy seeing what they view as pretense being unmasked. I do not mean to suggest that this explanation captures all (or even most) of the Three Stooges' humor; in fact, I think the incongruity theory captures a good deal of the Three Stooges' humor, but I think Solomon's alternative theory misses the mark because he misinterprets the superiority theory as suggesting that those who laugh at others must be in the superior social position.<sup>101, 102</sup> Solomon is correct that the Stooges' presence in a hospital or a courtroom makes a mockery of that environment; the doctors, lawyers, judges, or any other respected figures become belittled in the process, and this particular aspect of the Stooges' humor is best explained by the superiority theory.

## LAUGHING AT DEATH

Cohen writes:

To joke about death is a way of domesticating something that cannot be tamed...  
The idea of death can be terrifying, numbing, incomprehensible. Joking about it

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>101</sup> I think the incongruity of the Three Stooges lies in the sight of three grown men acting like children, and their exaggerated mannerisms are dissimilar to the mannerisms one usually encounters. To be fair Solomon also notes that "incongruity is central to much of [the Stooges'] humor" (p. 184).

<sup>102</sup> Cohen seems to adopt a similar view of the superiority theory.

returns a kind of balance. It is a way of being in charge, even of death. A way of being in charge of something, sometimes, is simply being able to speak about it, because if you can speak about it, it hasn't numbed you completely, hasn't robbed you of everything.<sup>103</sup>

Cohen does not mention the superiority theory in connection with this; in fact, he dismisses the superiority theory in an earlier paragraph on that same page. But I think the superiority theory plays an important role in explaining why people joke about death: they joke about it because not even something as final and nullifying as death can conquer their spirits.

One fictional character who subverts the gravity of death through the use of humor is James Bond. When Bond has been captured by his enemies and is facing an imminent death, he usually makes a quip. One of Cohen's objections to the superiority theory was that although people in superior positions joke about their inferiors the opposite is often true (he mentions Jews joking about Germans in the 1930s and 1940s).<sup>104</sup> Although in these near-death situations Bond is in an inferior position to his captors, his quips still fall under the superiority theory because he is asserting his superiority over the villains through humor. There is a subversive element to humor, and that element is being utilized in these situations. This element is best brought out by way of contrast. For a moment, imagine Bond in a similar scenario; but instead of having a flippant attitude toward his captors, he is whimpering and fear-struck—if that were his attitude, then he would be evincing his captors' superiority over him both in terms of body and spirit. But that is not Bond's attitude. By being flippant about the situation, he undercuts the (temporary) victory of his captors: they might have his body, but they do not have his soul; similarly, the Jews in Nazi Germany who made jokes about Nazis manifested the same attitude: the Nazis might take their property and incarcerate them, but the Nazis could not touch their

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<sup>103</sup> Cohen, *Jokes*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

souls.<sup>105</sup> With the case of Bond, not only is he having a laugh at his captor's expense but the audience is laughing along with him because they enjoy seeing the hero assert his superiority over the villain.

One can also laugh at a hero triumphing over a villain even when the hero is not joking. In *The Count of Monte Cristo* the Count, disguised as an abbot, confronts one of the men, Caderousse, who ruined his life years ago. Near the beginning of this encounter, Caderousse proclaims that he does not believe in God; but after the Count reveals his true identity—that he is Edmond Dantès, the man who Caderousse allowed to be wronged all those years ago—Caderousse starts praying to God begging for forgiveness right before the Count kills him. This is not a humorous scene in any typical sense: it is a serious scene in an adventure novel. But when I first read the book I laughed out loud at this scene, and while writing this paragraph I have been smiling because I take great pleasure in seeing the evil Caderousse get his just deserts. What this reveals is that individuals can delight in the superiority of others (in this case the Count) so long as they approve of that person's action. Instances of laughter classed under the superiority theory need not be instances of an individual laughing at his or her superiority over someone or something; rather, an individual can instead delight in the triumph of others. In other words, Hobbes is wrong; personal triumph is not an integral part of the superiority theory: individuals can delight in the triumph of good over evil.

Some of my readers might object to me using fictional characters as evidence that one can laugh in the face of death, so I present some real-life examples of humorous last words. When Voltaire was on his deathbed a priest asked him to renounce Satan; Voltaire replied,

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<sup>105</sup> No doubt many Jews lost their sense of humor in such ghastly and horrible circumstances. In light of what I say in the next section, I would like to emphasize the fact that I do not think that any Jews who lost their sense of humor in those circumstances are any less moral for having done so. The horror they went through is unfathomable and far beyond the difficult circumstances which I utilize as examples in this essay.

"Now, now my good man, this is no time for making enemies."<sup>106</sup> Groucho Marx supposedly said, "Die my dear? Why that's the last thing I'll do!"<sup>107</sup> John Maynard Keynes purportedly said, "I wish I'd drunk more champagne."<sup>108</sup> There are many more witty last words (all of somewhat dubious authenticity, might I add); but what matters here is not so much the historical authenticity of those famous last words but their popular appeal. The appeal of these quotes lies in the fact that by getting the "last word" these individuals are asserting their superiority over death. These individuals did, of course, die; but what is important is that they died without fear; they faced life's final obstacle as if it were nothing to them.

The attitude one adopts when joking in the face of death is reminiscent of Aristotle's great-souled man. The following is one of the ways Aristotle describes the great-souled man: "And it would be most unbecoming for a proud man to fly from danger, swinging his arms by his sides, or to wrong another; for to what end should he do disgraceful acts, he to whom nothing is great?" (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3 1123b31-3).<sup>109</sup> Those last words, "he to whom nothing is great," really stand out as representative of the attitude a person possesses when joking in the face of death; they do not regard death as anything great. I will explore the connection between humor and the great-souled man in further detail in the section on the ethics of humor.

Before that, however, I want to present a criticism that Simon Critchley has raised against the type of laughter I have been presenting. Critchley writes, "... the heroic laughter that rails in the face of the firing squad – 'Go ahead, shoot me, I don't care'. [*sic*] This is the laughter that I

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<sup>106</sup> John H. Lienhard, "No. 2077: Last Words," *The Engines of our Ingenuity*, accessed April 7, 2013, <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2077.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> David Smith, "Famous Last Words," *Mapping*, accessed April 7, 2013, <http://www.mapping.com/words.shtml>.

<sup>109</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1773.

always suspect of emanating from the mountain tops, from the cool summits of lofty isolation. This is precisely a *manic* laughter in Freud's sense: solitary, juvenile, perverse, verging on sobbing. This is the ego bloated and triumphant in empty solitude and infantile dreams of omnipotence."<sup>110</sup> Critchley's criticism of this type of laughter rests upon his acceptance of Freud's theory of psychology, a critique of which lies beyond the scope of this paper. But the essence of Critchley's criticism is that in such scenarios the person who laughs is feigning courage. I respond that if the individual is feigning courage, then he is only imitating the great-souled man. While such behavior is not as worthy of honor as genuine courage in the face of danger, I do regard it as worthy of some honor since the individual is attempting to be virtuous (but falling short of the mark). Although this person falls short of the mark, he or she is far closer to the virtuous ideal than the coward who whimpers in such a situation.

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<sup>110</sup> Critchley, *On Humor*, 105.

## VI. JUBILANT LAUGHTER

One type of laughter that, surprisingly, is not referenced in the literature is what I shall term *jubilant laughter*. I define jubilant laughter as laughter that is a celebration of greatness. An example of jubilant laughter would be the following: sometimes when I am listening to a piece of music that I cherish, I laugh; I laugh because of the admiration that I have for the work of art (and the artist who created it). This type of laughter is a celebration of life. It is laughter that expresses this sentiment: "Life is great. Life is worth living." There are many other occasions when I have experienced such laughter. I have laughed when "all is right with the world." I have laughed when contemplating a great person or a great achievement. These instances of laughter are not related to humor in the sense that humor is defined as something that is comical or funny, but I do think this type of laughter does relate to humor in the sense that a person can be said to be "in good humor." I do not want to be accused of the fallacy of equivocation; I admit that these two uses of the word *humor* have different definitions. But I still think there is a relation, for that which is comical or funny invokes a certain mood or humor.

Someone might suggest that jubilant laughter falls under the incongruity theory; one laughs at these things because they are the exception: great achievements and sublime moments are rare. Not only is this possible interpretation horribly pessimistic, it fails to capture why one laughs in these cases; we do not laugh because the thing in question defies our expectations. On the contrary, if the piece of music has been heard before, then one knows what to expect when listening to it. But if one did think that great and wonderful moments in life were terribly incongruous with the rest of life, then one's reaction would not be jubilant laughter but rather

sadness since on this account life is a "vale of tears." Many people do have such a reaction to joyous moments, and this is manifest in the phenomenon known as "tears of joy." These people cry at the sight of joyous moments because these joyous moments stand in contrast to what they perceive to be the everyday nature of life.<sup>111</sup> Having "tears of joy" is not the ideal reaction to joyous moments; it is better to react with jubilant laughter since jubilant laughter presupposes an optimistic view of life—a view which I think is correct.

This type of laughter is triumphant; it is triumphant in the following sense: "If this is possible, then the rest does not matter." When one is laughing jubilantly that which is evil, painful, upsetting, etc. melts away; those things seem terribly unimportant. Jubilant laughter is life-affirming.

This triumphant quality of jubilant laughter leads me to propose that it is related to the type of laughter that one sees in the superiority theory. Under the superiority theory, one laughs triumphantly at someone or something because one is better than (or has bested) that person or thing. With jubilant laughter, one laughs triumphantly because the evil in the world is insignificant in comparison to the good (or perhaps one could say that good is superior to evil).

But there are two significant differences between these two types of laughter. First, when I laugh jubilantly because of something, I do not regard myself as superior to that thing; in fact, the opposite is often true. In many cases, the achievement which I admire is something that I cannot equal. But this is not to say that I feel inferior to the object of my admiration; the focus of this occurrence is not me comparing myself to the object. In the moment I am focused on the object of admiration, not a comparison of myself and the object.

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<sup>111</sup> I am engaging in a bit of armchair psychologizing which is risky business, so allow me to add a disclaimer: it is quite possible that some (or perhaps even most) people who shed tears of joy have an optimistic view of laugh that is entirely compatible with jubilant laughter; in that case, my example fails. But if there are a few people for whom this analysis holds true, then those individuals stand in contrast to the individuals who jubilantly laugh at joyous moments.

A more important difference is that under the superiority theory, there is an element of malice in the humor; the focus is on the negative (e.g. one laughs at another person's stupidity). Although laughing at death is far less malicious than mockery, there is still a focus on the negative: namely the looming specter of death. But jubilant laughter is malice-free; with jubilant laughter, the focus is on the positive. Socrates said that comedy was an admixture of pleasure and pain; but this is not true of jubilant laughter: it is free of pain. There is not a sharp divide between jubilant laughter and laughter under the superiority theory; rather, there is a continuum with very malicious laughter on one end and malice-free laughter on the other end.<sup>112</sup> Cases such as laughing at death lie somewhere in the middle.

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<sup>112</sup> Jubilant laughter and laughter under the superiority theory lie along the same continuum because they both possess a triumphant characteristic.

## VII. THE ETHICS OF HUMOR

Joking about death and joking in the face of other adverse circumstances is admirable because it is indicative of two virtues: courage and wit. Instead of cowering, the great-souled man faces adverse circumstance with calm; but, even more than that, he displays his calm not only in outward appearance but through his jest: this shows that his mind is calm and his outlook is hopeful as well. This is not to say that the great-souled man does not take death seriously; joking in this context does not indicate indifference or resignation. Instead, humor is used to assert his greatness.

There are some other cues we can take from the great-souled man in reference to the ethics of humor. Aristotle writes, "For the proud man despises justly (since he thinks truly), but the many do so at random" (1124b5).<sup>113</sup> This idea can be applied to humor in the following manner: the just man mocks those who deserve to be mocked instead of mocking just anybody. Of course, this raises the following question: who deserves to be mocked? The simple answer to this complex question is that evil people deserve to be mocked while virtuous people do not. As I indicated earlier in the paper, humor can be used as a corrective; in such cases, one must aim at the good, and in this case the good is getting the person to realize her vice in such a way as to gently prod her towards virtue.

In connection with the last point, there is at least one more aspect of Aristotle's description of the great-souled man that can be applied to the ethics of humor: "... for it is a

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<sup>113</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1774.

difficult and lofty thing to be superior to the former [people who enjoy high position and good fortune], but easy to do so to the latter [the middle class], and a lofty bearing over the former is no mark of ill-breeding, but among humble people it is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak" (1124b20-22).<sup>114</sup> This passage can be adapted to apply to the ethics of humor in the following way: do not mock easy targets because that is an easy task and easy tasks are not for the great-souled man; instead, one should mock those who are one's equals or are in a higher position than oneself and who deserve to be mocked.

Critchley, Cohen, and Solomon all regarded laughing at oneself as both good and important. I disagree. I am afraid that I am quite liable to be misunderstood on this point, so I want to clarify that I am not opposed to self-deprecatory humor. I do *not* think that a person should never laugh at himself and always regard himself and his affairs with the utmost solemnity. What I am opposed to is best expressed by the following quote from Critchley: "[this type of] laughter insists that life is not something to be affirmed ecstatically, but acknowledged comically."<sup>115</sup> He goes on to write that such laughter "arises out of a palpable sense of inability, impotence, and inauthenticity."<sup>116, 117</sup> While Critchley writes of such nihilistic laughter approvingly, it is profoundly immoral since life is the root of value and the rational human being's life is the standard of value (for a human).<sup>118</sup> To regard not any specific life but rather life

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 1775.

<sup>115</sup> Critchley, *On Humor*, 106.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Although Cohen and Solomon regard laughing at oneself as a good thing, they do not express this view in the virulent way Critchley does. The quotes express Critchley's views, not theirs; and it is this strong view of Critchley's that I am arguing against.

<sup>118</sup> It is far beyond the scope of this paper to present and defend my views on ethics, so I shall instead have to refer readers to the following work which best represents my views on the subject: Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (United States of America: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

*in general* as comical (i.e. absurd, foolish, ridiculous, etc.) is to attack all values. The moral person ought to affirm life ecstatically, and as a result she ought to take her life very seriously. But this is not to say that the moral person should not laugh at herself if, for example, she makes a harmless mistake such as looking around the house for her glasses only to discover that the glasses have been resting atop her head the entire time; in cases such as that, it is perfectly alright to laugh at oneself because incidents such as that are not very important. But to regard one's life, one's achievements, or one's values as a joke is to commit moral treason.

I am now going to turn my attention to racist and sexist humor. These types of jokes can perhaps be explained by the incongruity theory: someone ascribes a characteristic to the class; that characteristic is not descriptive of the group; and so the two are incongruous.<sup>119</sup> But on the incongruity theory it is difficult to see why these jokes are immoral when other instances of incongruous humor are moral (or at least morally neutral). On the superiority theory, however, it is much easier to see why these jokes are vicious: those who tell them / laugh at them are attempting to assert superiority over the object of the joke.<sup>120</sup> This is immoral since superiority and inferiority are about virtue not race or gender; also, virtue (of a lack thereof) is a property of an individual, not a group.

The above comments apply to instances of jokes/humor that are subsumed under the superiority theory. I am not going to go into any detail on the ethics of humor where it applies to instances of the incongruity theory since I think that instances of humor that fall under that classification are largely morally neutral (e.g. Groucho's line when one of the other Marx

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<sup>119</sup> One might object that what is malicious about racist and sexist jokes is that group does actually possess the characteristic ascribed to them by the joke. If this is the case, then that is a knock against the incongruity theory and further evidence in favor of the superiority theory's take on these types of jokes.

<sup>120</sup> This has been noted by Critchley and others.

brothers is about to throw a telephone: "Don't throw that phone! That one's for long distances."), so whether or not one should tell such a joke is more a matter of tact than morality.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Tact could be viewed as an aspect of morality, but that level of detail lies outside the scope of this paper.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper defended the superiority theory of humor by pointing to various examples of humor that the superiority theory explains better than the popular incongruity theory. This paper also defended the superiority theory against criticisms of it posed by various authors and offered criticisms of the popular incongruity theory. This paper also explicated a related type of laughter termed *jubilant laughter*: laughter that is celebratory of the good. A connection between the superiority theory of laughter and Aristotle's great-souled man was then demonstrated. Finally, cues were taken from Aristotle's account of the great-souled man in regard to the ethical implications of the superiority theory.

In the past, humor did not receive as much attention from philosophers as it should have. Thankfully, there has been a sharp increase of interest in this topic in the last few decades. It is unfortunate that the superiority theory has been ignored and/or unfairly criticized for the past few hundred years; I hope this paper will help remedy that situation.

During the past few months as I have been thinking a lot about this topic, I developed the habit of often introspecting after I laughed or found something amusing and questioning why I laughed; the superiority theory or the incongruity theory often explained these cases, but occasionally I could not discover an explanation for my laughter. This is at least one indication that there is still much work to be done in the philosophy of humor.

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