

Did You Hear The One About The Philosopher Writing A Book On Humour?

Simon Critchley

Philosophy is a funny business and some philosophers are funny people. The philosopher asks you to look at the world awry, to place in question your usual habits, assumptions, prejudices and expectations. The philosopher asks you to be sceptical about all sorts of things you would ordinarily take for granted, like the reality of things in the world or whether the people around you are actually human or really robots. In this regard, the philosopher has, I think, a family resemblance with the comedian, who also asks us to look at the world askance, to imagine a topsy-turvy universe where horses and dogs talk and where lifeless objects become miraculously animated. Both the philosopher and the comedian ask you to view the world from a Martian perspective, to look at things as if you had just landed from another planet. With this rough resemblance in mind, I became interested in jokes, humour and the comic and I have just finished writing a short book on the topic.¹

Let's begin by considering what takes place in a joke? The first thing we can say is that joking is a specific and meaningful practice that the audience and the joke-teller recognise as such. There is what we might call a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke. There has to be a sort of consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking 'for us', as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognised as joking and which ones are not. Most jokes work through the experience of a felt incongruity between what we expect to be the case and what actually takes place in the joke: 'did you see me at Princess Diana's funeral? I was the one that started the Mexican wave.' But in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure. It is necessary that we all know that a Mexican wave certainly did *not* take place on the occasion of Diana's funeral in order to appreciate the incongruity of the above joke. When this implicit congruence or tacit contract is missing, then laughter will probably not result, which can be the experience of trying - and failing - to tell a joke in a foreign language. In his classic book, *Laughter*, published in 1900, the French philosopher Henri Bergson explains what he calls 'the leading idea in all our investigations',

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. (...) Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification.²

So, in listening to a joke, I am presupposing a social world that is shared, the forms of which the practice of joke-telling is going to play with. Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules. Ludwig Wittgenstein puts the point perspicuously in one of his posthumously published remarks, What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It's as though there were a custom amongst certain

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people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket'³

With this in mind, some anthropologists have compared jokes with rites.⁴ A rite is here understood as a symbolic act that derives its meaning from a cluster of socially legitimated symbols, such as a funeral. But insofar as the joke plays with the symbolic forms of society - the bishop gets stuck in a lift, I spread margarine on the communion wafer - jokes might be thought of as *anti-rites*. They mock, parody or deride the ritual practices of a given society, as the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, remarks,

Someone's hat falls on the coffin in a freshly dug grave, the funeral loses its meaning and laughter is born.⁵ Suppose that someone starts to tell you a joke: 'I never left the house as a child. My family were so poor that my mother couldn't afford to buy us clothes'. Firstly, I recognise that a joke is being told and I assent to having my attention caught in this way. Assenting to having my attention caught is very important and if someone interrupts the joke-teller or simply walks away in the middle of the joke, then the tacit social contract of humour has been broken. This is bad form or simply bad manners. Instead of throwing the ball back, I put it in my pocket. In thus assenting and going along with the joke, a certain tension is created in the listener and I follow along willingly with the story that is being recounted. When the punch-line kicks in, and the little bubble of tension pops, I experience an affect that can be described as pleasure, and I laugh or just smile: 'When I was ten my mother bought me a hat, so that I could look out of the window'.

What happens here is, as Immanuel Kant puts it in a brilliant short discussion of laughter from *The Critique of Judgement*, a sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing.⁶ In hearing the punch-line, the tension disappears and we experience comic relief. Rather than the tiresome and indeed racist examples of jokes that Kant recounts, involving Indians and bottles of beer, witness the poet Philip Larkin in a characteristic flourish, When I drop four cubes of ice Chimingly in a glass, and add Three goes of gin, a lemon slice, And let a ten-ounce tonic void In foaming gulps until it smothers Everything else up to the edge, I lift the lot in silent pledge: *He devoted his life to others*.⁷

The admittedly rather dry humour here is found in a combination of two features: conceptual and rhetorical. On the one hand, there is the conceptual disjunction between the wanton hedonism involved in preparing the gin and tonic, and the avowed altruism of the final line. But also - more importantly - there is the rhetorical effect generated by the sudden bathos of the final line in comparison to the cumulative overkill of what precedes it. It is important to emphasise the necessary suddenness of the conceptual and rhetorical shift. Both brevity and speed are the soul of wit.

Changing the Situation

But is that an end to the matter? Is that it? Hopefully not. I want to claim that humour is not just comic relief, a transient corporeal affect induced by the raising and extinguishing of tension, of as little social consequence as masturbation, although slightly more acceptable to perform in public. I rather want to claim that what goes on

in humour is a form of *liberation* or *elevation* that expresses something essential to the humanity of the human being. The shape of the thought I am after is expressed by Eddie Waters, the philosopher-comedian from Trevor Griffiths's brilliant 1976 drama *Comedians*,

'A real comedian - that's a daring man. He *dares* to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they *want*. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to *liberate* the will and the desire, it has to *change the situation*.'⁸

The claim here is that any joke releases tension, but a *true* joke, a comedian's joke, suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarised, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal, and we laugh in a physiological squeal of transient delight, like an infant playing peek-a-boo. In my view, the best humour brings about a change of situation, a transient but significant shift in the way we view reality. This idea of a change of situation can be caught in Mary Douglas's claim that, 'A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity'.⁹ Thus, jokes are a play upon form, where what is played with are the accepted practices of a given society. The incongruities of humour both speak out of a massive congruence between joke structure and social structure, and speak against those structures by showing that they have no necessity. The anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage. By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a *critical* function with respect to society. Hence the great importance that humour has played in social movements that have set out to criticise the established order, such as radical feminist humour, 'How many men does it take to tile a bathroom?', 'I don't know', 'It depends how thinly you slice them'. As the Italian street slogan has it, *Una risata vi seppellirà*, it will be a laugh that buries you, where the 'you' refers to those in power. By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realise that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed.

Reactionary Humour

But before we get carried away, it is important to recognise that not all humour is of this type, and most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus. You will have noticed a couple of paragraphs back that, following Eddie Waters, I introduced the adjective 'true' into our discussion of humour. 'True' humour changes the situation, tells us something about who we are and the sort of place we live in, and perhaps indicates to us how it might be changed. This sounds very nice, but it presupposes a great deal. A number of items cry out for recognition here.

Most humour, in particular the comedy of recognition - and most humour *is* comedy of recognition - simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticise the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves. Such humour does not seek to change the situation, but simply toys with existing social hierarchies

in a charming but quite benign fashion, as in P.G. Wodehouse's *The World of Jeeves*. This is the comic as sheer pleasing diversion, and it has an important place in any taxonomy of humour. More egregiously, much humour seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humour, or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider. Thus, the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies, the Americans laugh at the Poles, the Swedes laugh at the Finns, the Germans laugh at the Ostfrieslanders, the Greeks laugh at the Pontians, the Czechs laugh at the Slovaks, the Russians laugh at the Ukrainians, the French laugh at the Belgians, the Dutch also laugh at the Belgians, and so on and so forth. Such comic scapegoating corresponds to what Hobbes means in suggesting that laughter is a feeling of sudden glory where I find another person ridiculous and laugh at their expense. Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless.

The reactionary quality of much humour, in particular ethnic humour, must be analysed, which I cannot do fully here, but my claim is that such humour lets us reflect upon the anxious nature of our thrownness in the world. What I mean by the latter is that in its 'untruth', as it were, reactionary humour tells us important truths about who we are. Jokes can therefore be read as symptoms of societal repression and their study might be said to amount to what Freud would call 'a return of the repressed'. In other words, humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would really rather not be.

Structured Fun

Humour is being employed as a management tool by consultants – imagine, if you will, a company called 'Humour Solutions International' - who endeavour to show how it can produce greater cohesion amongst the workforce and thereby increase efficiency and productivity. This is beautifully caught in the slogan: 'laughter loves company and companies love laughter'. Some management consultants refer to such activity as 'structured fun', which includes innovations like 'inside out day', where all employees are asked to wear their clothes inside out, or 'silly hat day', which rather speaks for itself. Despite the backslapping bonhomie that such fun must inspire, it is difficult not to feel a little cynical about these endeavours, and the question that one wants to pose to the idea of 'structured fun' is: who is structuring the fun and for what end? Such enforced fun is a form of compulsory happiness, and it is tempting to see it as one further sign of the ways in which employees' private lives are being increasingly regulated by the interests of their employers.

I was recently in Atlanta, staying at a huge hotel, and had occasion to observe some structured fun from my breakfast table one morning. In one of the vast, anonymous, carpeted, windowless suites that pepper every large hotel in the USA, about fifty people from the same company were engaged in collective hopscotch, frisbee and kickball. It was quite a sight and much yelping and clapping was to be heard – the very soundtrack to happiness, I pondered. But looking at the sweating, slightly desperate faces of these mostly overweight grown-ups, one almost felt moved to tears. After breakfast, I found a huddle of employees standing outside, resolutely smoking in the Georgian January drizzle and we exchanged a few words. I was enormously

reassured that they felt just as cynical about the whole business as I did, but one of them said that they didn't want to appear to be a bad sport or a party pooper at work and that was why they went along with it. Also, he concluded, they weren't really offered a choice. I think this incident is interesting for it reveals a vitally subversive feature of humour in the workplace. Namely, that as much as management consultants might try and formalise fun for the benefit of the company, where the comic punch-line and the economic bottom line might be seen to blend, such fun is always capable of being ridiculed by informal, unofficial relations amongst employees, by backchat and salacious gossip. Anyone who has worked in a factory or office knows how the most scurrilous and usually obscene stories, songs and cartoons about the management are the very bread and butter of survival. Humour might well be a management tool but it is also a tool against the management.

Common and Uncommon Sense

Laughter is contagious - think about the phenomenon of giggling, particularly when it concerns something obscene in a context where one should be serious, such as listening to a formal academic paper. In such cases, and I am sure (or hope) that we all know them, the laughter can really hurt. One might say that the simple telling of a joke recalls us to what is shared in our everyday practices. It makes explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life. This is what the philosopher and aesthete Shaftesbury had in mind in the early 18th Century when he spoke of humour as a form of *sensus communis*, common sense.¹⁰ So, humour reveals the depth of what we share. But, crucially, it does this not through the clumsiness of a theoretical description, but more quietly, practically and discreetly. Laughter suddenly breaks out in a bus queue, watching a party political broadcast in a pub, or when someone farts in a lift. Humour is an exemplary practice because it is a universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives. It is practically enacted theory. I think this is why Wittgenstein once said that he could imagine a book of philosophy that would be written entirely in the form of jokes.

The extraordinary thing about humour is that it returns us to common sense by distancing us from it; humour familiarises us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarisation. If humour recalls us to *sensus communis*, then it does this by momentarily pulling us out of common sense, where jokes function as moments of what we might call *dissensus communis*, uncommon sense. At its most powerful, say in those insanelly punning dialogues between Chico and Groucho Marx, humour is a paradoxical form of speech and action that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbal inversions, contortions and explosions. Let me close this all-too theoretical essay with six practical examples:

'Do you believe in the life to come?'

'Mine was always that.'

'Have you lived in Blackpool all your life?'

'Not yet.'

'Do me a favour and close the window, it's cold outside.'

'And if I close it, will that make it warm outside?'

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'Do you want to use a pen?'
'I can't write', 'That's OK, there wasn't any ink in it anyway.'
'Which of the following is the odd one out? Greed, envy, malice, anger and kindness'.
(Pause) 'And.'
'What'll I say?'
'Tell them you're not here.'
'Suppose they don't believe me?'
'They'll believe you when you start talking.'¹¹

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¹ On *Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

² Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p.65.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p.83.

⁴ See Mary Douglas, 'Do Dogs Laugh?' and 'Jokes' from *Implicit Meanings. Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975)

⁵ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (London: Penguin, 1983), p.232-33.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp.196-203.

⁷ Philip Larkin, *High Window*, (London: Faber, 1974), p.11.

⁸ Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (London: Faber, 1976), p.20.

⁹ Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, op.cit. p.96.

¹⁰ Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis. An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Vol.1-2 (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p.49.

¹¹ From various Marx Brothers' scripts, Peter Chelsom's wonderful 1994 film *Funny Bones*, and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1958).