

2014

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Incongruity Theory and Explanatory Limits of Reason

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May 9th, 2014

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Chapter 1 — Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and attempt to understand some ways in which humor and comedy operate with the particular goal of showing how incongruity theory explains why people find certain types of situations or experiences amusing. Many others writing on the philosophy of humor have remarked on the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of producing a comprehensive theory of humor. The sheer number and variety of situations capable of precipitating amusement has, throughout history, rendered every attempt at a formulating a foundational theory of humor ultimately unsuccessful; some are too austere and fail to account for the wide range of humorous situations while others are far too broad, allowing non-humorous situations to meet their criteria for the presence of humor.

Given the apparent elusiveness of the fundamental nature of humor, this thesis is not in the business of asserting a fundamental theory of comedy. Rather, I will present a popular and fairly successful account of humor most commonly referred to as incongruity theory. I will examine the strengths of this account according to a modern formulation of incongruity theory as well as formulations set forth by Kant and Schopenhauer in the 18th and 19th centuries. I will show that incongruity theory provides a relatively reliable framework for analyzing humor in spite of several important criticisms I will level against it. Finally, I will examine the relationship between humor as described by incongruity theory, reason, and the brand of philosophical absurdity identified by Thomas Nagel (1972). By applying incongruity theory to foundational yet persistently unanswerable metaphysical questions about existence, death, God, etc., I will show that

humor not only bears a close relationship to these issues but that humor also serves as a means by which we can engage and cope with the unsolvable nature of these problems.

Though humor and comedy have historically received relatively little attention as areas of philosophical study, the existing body of work addressing them is promising and warrants further investigation; humans, after all, spend a great deal of time and money in search of amusement. The relationship between laughter and the perception of humor, however, is less straightforward than many historical theories of humor seem account for. We laugh when we perceive humor, to be certain. But we laugh just as readily out of nervousness, relief, scorn, intoxication, etc. By conflating theories of humor with theories of laughter, many philosophers have unnecessarily complicated, and in some cases fatally damaged, their work. It is plain to see that there are many cases in which a person can perceive humor and be amused by it without laughing. Conversely, there are many cases in which laughter is not caused by experiencing something funny. It is very likely that strong and interesting connections exist between laughter of all types (humorous and non-humorous alike), but attempting to understand humor by working backwards from laughter to the thing that causes laughter is doomed to fail; the situations and events that precipitate non-humorous laughter are simply too numerous and varied to account for. To this point, consider how inefficient it would seem to make an inquiry into the nature of sadness by first trying to explain what types of things make us cry.

Incongruity theory, in many cases, is presented as a theory of laughter. As a matter of fact, it is capable of explaining laughter as a reaction to a variety of situations, humorous and otherwise. Nonetheless, it is my contention that there is very little to be gained from attempting to provide a single theory to explain all instances of laughter.

Given that humor— as opposed to laughter—is the domain of this paper, I have modified incongruity theory from an explanation of human laughter into theory that explains (a) why certain things have the potential to be funny and (b) why people *find* certain things funny. For the sake of concision and clarity, from here forward any mention of laughter (unless otherwise noted) should be taken as a reference to the physical expression of amusement resulting from the perception of humor.

Chapter 2 - Incongruity Theory

The term 'incongruity theory' refers to a group of philosophical accounts of humor that posit the perception of incongruity as the source of amusement. Though it is not entirely flawless, incongruity theory stands as one of the most prominent accounts of amusement in the contemporary discussion of philosophy of humor. Incongruity theory operates in two ways. First, and most importantly, it explains why people react with laughter in a very wide range of situations (including, as mentioned in the introduction, some which are not funny). In other words, incongruity theory provides an explanation for why humans find certain things funny. Second, it provides an explanation of what makes a situation itself funny. This explanatory versatility is an attractive feature of incongruity theory. In this chapter, I will provide a rough sketch of incongruity theory and then complicate it to provide a more nuanced and accurate account. Incongruity theory essentially posits that people feel amused when they have an experience that violates the normal order of things according to their own subjective understanding of what the normal order of things is. Incongruity theory relies on the premise that in their daily lives (that is, outside the philosophy seminar room), most people believe that the world is ordered; they believe that objects behave and interact with other objects in a consistent manner, that actions have consistent results. We perceive humor and are amused, according to incongruity theory, when we are presented with an experience that is *incongruous* with what we understand to be the normal order of things. A politician's pants falling down as he is receiving an award; the village drunk saving the day accidentally and only in virtue of his inebriation; uttering a double entendre and having

the accidental meaning taken seriously as the intended meaning, are all examples of funny violations of the normal order of things. These violations can also include disruptions of causal chains and the flawed use of logic (many jokes, in fact, can be boiled down to elaborate examples of logical fallacies). Other times, we are amused simply by people behaving in ways that are incongruous with their title or position in society like the infamous photo of George W. Bush in a flight-suit or a monkey wearing a tuxedo.

It is important to make clear that incongruity theory is a subject-dependent theory of humor. Different people have different understandings of what constitutes the 'normal order', so an experience that seems humorously incongruous to one person might not seem so funny to another. Though incongruity theory explains that the presence of an incongruity gives a situation the *potential to be amusing*, funniness is a property that is perceived subjectively. If a person perceives an incongruity, they may find that incongruity amusing. A different subject, however, might not find that same situation incongruous, and therefore would likely not be amused. This accounts for different senses of humor across cultural backgrounds, education, religious beliefs, etc.

What is an Incongruity?

If we are to seriously consider incongruity theory's potential to explain humor, we must understand what exactly is being referred to by the word "incongruity". John Morreall (2011) and Robert Latta (1999) among others have pointed out that many incongruity theories are plagued by confusion and disagreement over the use of the terms

'incongruity' and 'incongruous'. In order to avoid such pitfalls, we ought to spell out a careful definition of the type of incongruity for which incongruity theory is named.

It is exceedingly tempting to attempt to define an incongruous situation or occurrence by reference to words with meanings that are closely related to incongruity but have slightly different connotations. Terms like 'absurd', 'illogical', 'out of context', 'unexpected', 'ludicrous', 'ridiculous', or 'inappropriate' are often invoked to describe a humorous incongruity, but they are ultimately inaccurate and unwieldy (Morreall, "*Comic Relief*", loc. 405). That is not to say that a humorous incongruity cannot be absurd or illogical, in fact many are, but what is meant by incongruity in the context of a discussion of humor is better described as a mismatch between a subject's conceptual understanding of how an action ought to happen, an event ought to unfold, or an object ought to appear, and a particular experience that contradicts this conceptual understanding. John Morreall (2011) describes the fundamental meaning of "incongruity" as it is used in incongruity theories as what occurs when, "some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations." (Loc. 405). It is not quite right to describe an incongruity simply as something "unexpected". Rather, the incongruous object or event must clash with the systems of thought we use to generate expectations about the outcomes of our and others' actions. These systems can be understood as conceptual patterns used to organize, synthesize, and understand our experiences.

These conceptual patterns develop in response to our interactions with our material and social environment. Informed by experience, they are the mechanism by which we are able to constantly form accurate expectations about the future. These

expectations, in turn, guide our actions. More often than not, such thought patterns work remarkably well—so well, in fact, that we hardly notice them. I expect to feel heat if I extend my bare hand towards a campfire; when passing an oncoming stranger on the sidewalk, I expect that they will simply stroll past me, not suddenly extend their leg to trip me; when watching a cheesy romantic comedy it is reasonable for me to expect, based on my previous experiences with the genre, that the 'nice guy' will get the girl. These relatively simple examples serve to illustrate the principle, but it is important to emphasize the complexity and sophistication of these processes. Many of our conceptual patterns overlap and interact with each other. Furthermore, these conceptual patterns are constantly synthesizing incredible amounts of sensory data and accounting for countless variables. In the course of any given conversation, for instance, we form expectations for the progression of the interaction based on innumerable factors such as previous conversations, body language, tone of voice, knowledge about the person we are talking with, conversations we've had with people who seem similar to the person we're talking with, and myriad others. Some conceptual patterns are more reliable than others, but for the most part they provide us with a highly reliable framework for interacting with our environment. An incongruous event or object disrupts these ordinarily reliable conceptual patterns. This disruption, when combined with some other conditions, is liable to amuse us. These other conditions, of course, are extremely important in terms of human perception of humor. A conceptual incongruity itself is not sufficient for amusement. If, for example, I reach towards a fire and feel cold, I most likely won't be amused. I will examine the other necessary conditions for amusement much more closely in the coming

pages but first I would like to dwell for a moment on incongruity itself and its function in the amusement-reaction as a necessary condition for our perception of humor.

Incongruity Theory at Work

Before diving into an in-depth analysis of incongruity theory, let's illustrate the account by showing how it can explain the funniness of a handful of short jokes. Here's an old standby that strikes me as pretty amusing.

An 80 year-old man goes into the confessional and tells the priest, "Father, I am an 80 year-old man, I'm married, I have 4 children and 11 grandchildren. Last night I strayed and had an affair with two beautiful 23 year-old girls. We partied and made love all night long."

The priest says, "This is very serious, my son. When was the last time you were at confession?"

The old man says, "Well, Father, I'm Jewish. So I've never been to confession before."

The priest says, "You're Jewish? Then why are you here telling me this?"

"I'm telling everyone!"

It's relatively straightforward to see how incongruity theory explains why many people find this joke amusing. In the West, at least, there are certain widely-held conceptual patterns governing the understanding of the institution of marriage and the sanctity and sobriety of the confessional as a religious space. We also understand the stereotypical sexual appeal of two beautiful young women to an old man who is long past his sexual peak. What this joke does, however, is show how the old man has, according to the norms of western society, incorrectly ordered the importance of sexual desire, religious austerity, and the sanctity of his marriage. The carelessness and glee with which he cheats on his wife strikes those of us who find this joke funny as incongruous. Furthermore, the old man's wildly inappropriate decision to use a sacred occasion like confession to brag

about his sexual conquests is incongruous in virtue of the very nature of Catholic confession, an institution commonly associated with sincerity, guilt, and forgiveness. Finally, and perhaps most amusingly, is the incongruity between our conceptual understanding of the confessional as a place that is absolutely private and personal and the old man's use of it as just another place to "tell everybody".

In simpler jokes, the incongruities at play are even more straight forward and easily visible. This pun, for instance: *At a nudist colony for communists, two gentlemen are sitting naked on the porch. One turns to the other and says, "I say old boy, have you read Marx?" To which his comrade replies, "Yes... I think it's these wicker chairs."* (Keillor, 28). This joke, like almost all puns, simply trades on a miscommunication in which one meaning of a homophone is intended by the speaker but a different meaning is heard. This kind of miscommunication is easily understood as a semantic incongruity. The audience, along with the first communist in the joke is under the impression that the second communist's answer will be something about Marx or political theory in general. His response about wicker chairs, however, is incongruous in light of the intended meaning of the question.

Here is one more example of joke that exploits a relatively straightforward humorous incongruity:

This guy walks into a pub, sits down, and says, "Give me two beers, I've had a rough day at work."

The bartender says, "Sorry to hear that, what do you do?"

The guy says, "I take care of the corgis— you know, the dogs the royal family owns."

The bartender says, "Tough job, huh?"

The guy says, "Well, all that inbreeding has led to low intelligence and bad temperament. And the dogs aren't that smart either."

(Keillor, 157)

This joke operates by exploiting the differences between the linguistic conventions we use to talk about people and those we use to talk about dogs. In many cases using the terms "inbreeding", "low intelligence", and "bad temperament" to describe a family of dogs is perfectly acceptable. However, we don't ordinarily use this type of language in reference to a family of humans (let alone the royal family). By using dog breeding terms to describe a family (even if the family is being accurately described), the dog breeder in this joke presents a humorous incongruity to the bartender and to the audience of the joke.

In some cases, however, there are many layers of incongruity at play. It is particularly difficult to parse jokes that contain incongruities relative to several conceptual patterns. This (by now) classic joke about a small-town rabbi, for example, contains incongruities strictly within its story as well as incongruities between events described in the story and the normal order of things in real life. This version of the joke is taken from Ted Cohen (1999):

After many days of hard, continuous rain, the river is in danger of flooding, and word goes out that people may have to abandon their homes. When the river crests, water pours through the town, inundating houses, and it continues to rise. Firemen are sent in a small motorboat to go through the streets to make sure everyone is leaving. When they come to the house of the rabbi, they find him standing knee-deep in water on his front porch.

"Come on, Rabbi," say the firemen. "The river will go much higher, and you should leave with us."

"No," says the rabbi. "God will protect me."

And he sends them away. The river rises higher, the rabbi is forced to go up to the second floor of his house, and now the police come in a motor launch.

"Come on, Rabbi," say the police, "there isn't much time."

"No," insists the rabbi. "I will stay right here. God will look after me."

And he sends them away. Now the river rises so high that the rabbi is forced to stand on the roof of his house. When the National Guard arrive in a large boat, telling him that the river is sure to go even higher, the rabbi says, "All my life I

have been a man of faith, and I will stay now, and trust in God,” and sends them away.

The river rises, the rabbi is swept away, and the rabbi drowns. Forthwith the rabbi appears in heaven, where he angrily approaches the throne of God, demanding, “How can You have let this happen to me? For all my life I have kept Your *mitzvot*. I have done what You asked, and trusted in You. Why?”

A voice sounds from the throne: “You shmuck, I sent three boats!” (20)

If we find this story funny, we do so, according to incongruity theory, in virtue of a discrepancy between the behavior of the characters as described in the joke and our conceptually produced expectations for how those characters ought to behave. Note that the joke's set up is written in such a way as to imitate the affect and cadence of the religious parables with which Western audiences are so familiar. It features a small town, a dramatic and unanticipated weather event, and spiritual leader who is willing to sacrifice his life to prove his faith; were it not for the punch-line, this joke would read as the beginning of a perfectly serious religious story. As the joke is told, the audience develops an expectation for its ending based on their previous story-hearing experiences. This process leads us to expect that upon the rabbi's arrival in heaven God will reward him for his faith or offer a piece of divine wisdom. Instead, we are given a description of God calling a lifelong spiritual devotee a "shmuck". This depiction clashes with our normal way of thinking about God and this incongruity, in turn, is amusing.

There is, however, a deeper incongruity at play. The joke would still be funny if the "shmuck" line were cut. Many of us familiar with the mythology of the Judeo-Christian tradition have come to associate the omnipotence of God with supernatural acts. We understand divine intervention to be marked (as it is in many religious texts) by unexplainable phenomena; boats and firefighters are not sent by God, we think, they are sent by EMS dispatch—acts of God are never so mundane. The incongruity between the

water-into-wine, burning-bush style miracles we've learned to expect from holy interventions and the lackluster but ultimately more practical deliverance offered by God in the story, is at the core of what we find amusing about this joke. The audience that finds this joke amusing does so not because the punch-line is simply unexpected or absurd, but because what is delivered in the punch-line violates a conceptual pattern with which the audience is familiar. The humorous effect of this tension is compound by the rabbi's character, whose funniness derives from his embodiment of the incongruity noted above; he is a deeply faithful man, but his conceptual understanding of the way God ought to act prevents him from being able to recognize the act of God unfolding right before his eyes.

In this respect, incongruity theory can present a slightly tricky analytical challenge. For any given instance of amusement—after hearing the rabbi joke, for example—we are presented with the problem of identifying, from a number of potentially humorous incongruities, the incongruity responsible for amusing us. Is the incongruity simply contained within the joke, between what happens in the joke and what ordinarily happens in situations akin to the joke's set up? Is it between what actually happens and what the audience expects will happen? Or does the joke bring out some incongruity in the audiences own beliefs about how God might act—why couldn't, for example, the arrival of the three boats be taken as proof of God's existence? Answering this particular question can be very difficult, particularly because the answer seems to be that it is a combination of some kind.

In some cases of amusement, the humorous incongruity is easy to spot. Puns, for instance, often play on clear and simple linguistic incongruities between the way a certain

word or term is usually used in a certain context and a different connotation of the same word/phrase or a homophone. For instance, "*I'm terribly afraid of escalators, so I'm taking steps to avoid them*". The incongruity at play in this quip is quite simple and easily recognizable. When we talk about "taking steps to avoid a problem" we tend to assume that we are talking about a plan of action used to steer clear of whatever it is that we want to avoid. In this case, however, "taking steps" refers literally to walking up a set of stairs to avoid engaging with something the speaker is afraid of, namely, escalators.

Nonetheless, jokes like the rabbi joke that draw out an incongruity between a relatively unquestioned belief held by the audience and the possibility that that belief is unfounded seem to strike us as the most funny, insightful, and brilliant jokes out there; reflecting on this joke prompts us to wonder if maybe we should be seeing acts of God everywhere in our daily lives. And, like the rabbi joke, these are the jokes that tend to get told over and over again. I will address this contention in much greater detail in Chapter 5.

Repeated Amusement

Some will surely object, however, that even though the rabbi joke is set up to imitate a non-funny story, anyone hearing it will surely know from the outset that they are listening to a joke. If this is true, how can we be amused by the incongruity; if incongruity theory is true, shouldn't any joke's funniness be neutralized by the audience knowing that they are hearing a joke? This point, which is important and certainly worth considering, is ultimately untenable. If we know that we are being told a joke, we can nonetheless appreciate the joke's funniness by recognizing that it still violates conceptual patterns. Even if we anticipate a violation of these conceptual patterns, the violation and

the incongruity presented by the violation, can still be funny. To feel amused, it is not necessary that we be surprised by an incongruity, an incongruity must simply be present. *The presence of an incongruity gives a situation or event the potential to amuse, the perception of an incongruity in certain contexts causes us to feel amused.* For this reason it is important to emphasize that humorous incongruities do not simply consist in ‘the unexpected’. To the contrary, we are often amused while explicitly holding the expectation that we will be amused. No one goes to a comedy club expecting to hear a series of short, serious stories, for instance (although, as I will show in the coming paragraphs, such an experience *might* amuse us), and we often preface joke-telling by announcing our intentions. We expect to be amused in these situations, and therefore, whether we realize it or not, expect to be presented with a story that is humorously incongruous. We are often amused at times when we expect to be amused. Surprise, therefore, is not a necessary condition of amusement (although it often seems to help). It is, rather, recognizing that a conceptual pattern has been or is being violated that amuses us.

The fact that we need only recognize a conceptual violation—rather than being surprised by a conceptual violation—in order to be amused serves to explain why we can find the same thing funny more than once. Though we never seem to find a joke as funny as when we first heard it (independent of the objective potential funniness of the joke), we nonetheless find ourselves constantly amused by jokes, movies, episodes of TV shows, etc. that we've experienced time and time again. This is possible because we recognize the violation of a conceptual pattern even if we already know *how* and *when* it will be violated. If you hear a joke you've already heard, you can still appreciate that it is

funny and be (at least somewhat) amused by it because the incongruity between the action in the joke and a given conceptual pattern is still present. However, as is the case with all experiences, repeated exposure to jokes both fresh and familiar leads us to develop certain conceptual patterns for understanding and appreciating humor. We become less and less impressed with "simple" or "silly" jokes because they slowly stop presenting a dramatic enough break with our conceptual patterns (consider how the form of the generic knock-knock joke has become, for the most part, too familiar to amuse us in any significant sense). While this dynamic has led to increasingly elegant and clever jokes structured in conventional ways (e.g. *a woman walks into a bar and orders a double entendre, so the bartender gives it to her*), it also has engendered a host of jokes and comedic styles that use violations of the conceptual patterns governing joke-hearing to generate amusement (sticking with the knock-knock theme, consider the ubiquitous 'interrupting cow' variation). This latter category of jokes might accurately be considered metahumor, as they are often jokes about jokes or jokes about the structure of jokes.

Metahumor: Jokes About Jokes, Anti-Jokes, Shaggy Dog Stories

Incongruity theory is appealing as a theory of humor in virtue of its ability to explain why audiences, especially contemporary audiences, are so amused by jokes that violate the conventions of traditional joke-telling. This kind of humor can work in a number of ways. Some of these jokes violate our normal conceptual patterns by adhering to standard joke structure—thereby leading an audience familiar with joke-telling to expect a certain kind of disruption to their normal conceptual patterns in the punch-line—but then delivering a punch-line that doesn't, in any context other than the joke, disrupt

the audience's normal conceptual patterns. These jokes are sometimes called 'anti-jokes'. Many such jokes are childish and are often circulated by young people who have fairly recently become accustomed to the standard patterns used in joke construction ("what's the difference between...", "What do you call a...", "Knock, knock...", "A man walks into a bar...", "How many x does it take to change a light bulb?" etc.). Take this joke, which was quite popular in my 5th grade class, for instance. "What's brown and sticky? *A stick.*" The punch-line here isn't a clever pun, it isn't a double-entendre, it doesn't violate our normal conceptual patterns in any significant sense *except* for the conceptual pattern we have associated with jokes that start with questions like "what's brown and sticky?" The punch-line, in fact, is funny only because it is a perfectly literal and painfully obvious answer to the question posed in the set up; it is incongruous because the audience often expects, based on the normal conceptual patterns associated with joke-telling, an unexpected twist in the punch-line. It turns out, of course, that an unexpected twist is delivered, it's just that it is unexpected in an unexpected way, so to speak. Consider some other examples from the schoolyard: "Why did the monkey fall out of the tree? *Because it was dead.* Why did the second monkey fall out of the tree? *Because it was tied to the first one.*" Or, "When geese fly in V formation, why is one side is always longer than the other? *Because that side has more geese on it.*" Once again, these punch-lines are only funny because they are so obviously not the kind of statements that ordinarily constitute punch-lines. Furthermore, and more importantly, the punch-lines in these jokes do not bear the kind of relationship to their set-ups that our normal conceptual patterns instruct us to expect between set-ups and punch-lines. In these cases, we perceive funniness because we recognize the relationship between punch-line and set-up as incongruous in

virtue of conventional joke-telling practice. This, as opposed to more traditional cases in which the incongruity is between the joke itself and the conceptual patterns we have concerning some activity, object or event described in the joke. Here are some more widely circulated examples of jokes that play on the conventions of the "a man walks into a bar" formula: *A priest, a rabbi, and Buddhist monk walk into a bar, the bartender looks up and says "what is this, some kind of joke?"; an Irishman walks past a bar; a man walks into a bar and says "ouch"; two men walk into a bar, the third one ducks; A blind man walks into a bar. And a table. And a chair; etc.*

The 'anti' element of such anti-jokes can be pushed to the extreme for a somewhat different kind of humorous effect. For example, "What's worse than finding a worm in your apple...? *The Holocaust*." Though it is certainly in worse taste, this joke is somewhat similar structure to the stick joke above, but it also incorporates a categorical incongruity based on the way we qualify different levels of misfortune. The punch-line could easily be, "finding two worms in your apple" (which would put it in the same category as the stick joke and the geese joke), but by making the punch-line something so incalculably worse than a worm-ridden apple, the joke presents, in addition to the kind of incongruity presented by the stick and geese jokes, an incongruity between degrees of badness (*of course* the Holocaust is worse than finding a worm in your apple!). Furthermore, upon hearing the punch-line, the audience realizes that the answer could be any atrocity (e.g. "murder", "genocide", "the Bosnian civil war", "9/11", etc.); the punch-line only relates to the set up in the somewhat tenuous sense that both the set up and punch-line refer to some bad thing happening and the joke's funniness is derived from the absurdity of the comparison.

A similar dynamic is at play in the telling of "shaggy dog" jokes, in which the listener is given an exceedingly long and tedious set-up followed by a punch-line that is so trivial and dull that calling it a punch-line at all feels like a bit of a stretch. These jokes, while they certainly don't number among the funniest out there, are somewhat interesting because they boil down to nothing more than anti-climactic stories dressed up as jokes. The audience expects a joke and is given a boring, drawn-out story instead. A not-funny story presented as a joke can sometimes be funny in virtue of its violating the conceptual patterns we associate with joke telling. Incongruity theory is supported by this ability to provide us with a cogent explanation for why a joke might be 'so not funny that it's funny'.

However, there are also more sophisticated brands of metahumor that derive their funniness, at least in part, from violating the conventional structure of jokes. For example: *What do you get when you cross a joke with a rhetorical question?* When the listener inquires about the difference they are met with silence. If anyone is amused by this joke, they are amused by the incongruity between the conceptual pattern they usually use to make sense of "what do you get when you cross..." type jokes and this particular joke where the punch-line is cleverly embedded in the set-up. The ordinary joke formula, in which a set-up is followed by a punch-line that bears an incongruous relationship to the set-up, is violated by this joke; its success, rather, is based entirely on the incongruity between its unique structure and our understanding of how "what do you get when you..." jokes work.

Finally, I would like to address one last category of humorous incongruity, and that is the humor of switched perspective. This kind of humor is interesting because it

brings out assumptions we make about the objectivity—or at least the authority of a given subjective viewpoint—of certain kinds of statements. By suggesting a viewpoint that is different from the audience's ordinary viewpoint, humor of altered perspective presents incongruity between the perspective from which we ordinarily experience a situation or event and a different, if equally valid, perspective with which we are unfamiliar or at least unused to adopting (Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 72). One such example is Oscar Wilde's reversal of the temperance movement's adage, "drink is the curse of the working class" into "work is the curse of the drinking class". I've heard a similar joke made by members of sports teams or other groups who say things like, "hockey gets in the way of my drinking team". This tactic is often used by comedians who render ordinary situations funny by examining them from unusual perspectives. Jerry Seinfeld, a master of observational humor, does a bit in which he imagines what aliens might assume about the inter-species power dynamics on planet earth upon seeing people picking up after their dogs.

On my block a lot of people walk their dogs, and I always see them walking around with their little 'poop bags', which to me is just the lowest function of human life. If aliens are watching this through telescopes they're going to think the dogs are the leaders. If you see two life forms—one of them is making a poop and other one is carrying it for them—who would you assume is in charge? (*The Dog*)

By presenting a behavior as innocuous and ubiquitously accepted as picking up after a pet dog in a public place from the point of view of aliens who are unfamiliar with it, Seinfeld achieves a humorous effect. This kind of joke presents an incongruity between our unquestioned perception of a certain 'normal' behavior, and the possibility that said behavior is not, necessarily, such a normal thing to do. Such perspective switching is stock and trade of observational comedy, a genre that thrives on framing the mundane as

humorously absurd. A final example of humor based on altered perspective is the written joke:

*Day 19 -
I have successfully conditioned my master to get up and write in his notebook
every time I drool.
-Pavlov's Dog.*

Other Factors in the Funniness of Incongruities

These joke examples serve to illustrate the range of situations and joke structures that operate in accordance with the tenets of incongruity theory. The perception of funniness in a great many cases can be coherently understood as resulting from the violation of normal conceptual patterns. As is likely self-evident given the variety of jokes presented in the preceding pages, there are many different shapes a humorous incongruity can take. I have discussed at some length the process through which we can be amused by an incongruity and how jokes take advantage of this by violating our conceptual patterns. This violation, however, can be delivered in a number of ways, via either jokes or humorous situations in day-to-day life. It is clear, however, that not all incongruities are humorous. To reuse an example from the introduction, if I were to reach toward fire and feel cold I would most likely not find the incident amusing. Mike Martin (1987) aptly points out that we find many incongruities pleasing but not amusing, citing surrealist art as an example (177). Another such example is the experience of observing a magician perform. If he is talented, the audience is bound to encounter innumerable incongruities (between their perceptions of the show and their conceptual understanding of the laws of nature) throughout the performance: rabbits coming out of hats, coins

disappearing, women sawed in half then miraculously resurrected. Though we enjoy experiencing such incongruous events, it seems like a stretch to consider them funny *per se*, although it might be noted that we sometimes respond with non-humorous laughter in these situations. Additionally, many incongruous events or situations are neither amusing nor pleasurable, some are unsettling or uncomfortable while others can be downright distressing or traumatic. Missing a step while walking down a dark staircase can be incongruous and not at all funny (at least not for the person falling). The same is true for the person who takes a sip from a glass of clear liquid thinking it's gin, only to discover that it's gasoline (again, not funny for the accidental gas-drinker). There are many such cases of non-humorous incongruities, and their incontrovertible existence suggests that incongruity may well be a necessary condition for amusement, but it cannot possibly be sufficient. So, we must ask of incongruity theory, what conditions besides the presence of an incongruity must be met in order that we find a given situation, event, or object amusing?

A number of philosophers have followed James Beattie (1779) in addressing the existence of non-funny incongruities by arguing that the laughter reaction to an incongruity only occurs when there is no more powerful emotional or psychological reaction simultaneously present. In other words, if an incongruity triggers grief, anxiety, jealousy, anger, etc. in the subject, they will not find it funny because these more powerful emotions take precedent. This would explain why we don't find the sight of a truck hitting a pedestrian after running a red light funny. Alarm, stress, and concern would presumably override anything we might find humorous about the situation. (Again, it's worth noting, as an aside, that in some of these cases people might react with

non-humorous nervous or hysterical laughter). Psychological or emotional distance, however, is capable of muting these other reactions. An event that would be traumatic to witness in person can be rendered funny in a film or a cartoon; a character getting blindsided by a truck or bus is a mainstay of the slapstick genre. Of course there are degrees of separation that influence how amused we will be by a given situation. Take, for instance, the previous paragraph's examples of stumbling down the stairs or accidentally sipping gasoline with the pretense that it is gin. If these misfortunes befell us personally, we would likely not be amused (at least not right away), unless we were unharmed and in a relatively light-hearted mood. But even if we emerge unscathed, falling down the stairs after a long, stressful day at work is unlikely to amuse anyone. Mood, too, then, is an important variable in the amusement equation. A film poking fun at an unlucky-in-love middle-aged man would likely not amuse a viewer watching the film the day after his wife leaves him, regardless of how funny he might have found it the week before.

In addition to mood and psychological or emotional distance, there is the factor of temporal distance. As Mark Twain is said to have remarked, "comedy is tragedy plus time". Experiences that are humiliating in the moment can also eventually become funny memories once embarrassment is no longer our primary emotional reaction (we are often embarrassed by accidentally behaving in ways that violate the normal order of things). The same can be said about the tragic. There are endless, if for the most part somewhat offensive, jokes made about events like the Holocaust, American slavery, natural disasters, and so forth. Jokes about celebrity deaths and other violent news items also abound. When telling such jokes, the remark "too soon" is often made, either as a

criticism by the listener or as a question by the teller, tacitly suggesting that there is some appropriate amount of time that ought to elapse before jokes about a tragedy can be funny.

Comedian Louis C.K. (2008), known for his crude, self-deprecating brand of humor, has played on this convention, joking that, "you can figure out how bad a person you are by how soon after 9/11 you masturbated—like, by how long you waited. For me it was between the two buildings going down". This joke, while still quite controversial, would have been wildly offensive (to many) if it had been delivered on the heels of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The psychological distance afforded by time mitigates the offensiveness of jokes like this one, allowing us to find the incongruity presented amusing rather than enraging, depressing or otherwise upsetting. Of course, some of us may have found it funny immediately after the incident and some of us might never think that this joke is funny.

Somewhat similarly, the comedian Tig Notaro (2013) received a great deal of attention after delivering an extremely personal stand-up comedy performance in which she makes jokes about her recent (three days prior) diagnosis with breast cancer. Much of the humor in this routine is derived by making fun of the audience for laughing at the jokes while simultaneously making fun of them for being uncomfortable with the jokes. Early in the bit she recounts an anecdote in which upon finding out about Notaro's illness, a friend asks her if she's seen 'those funny cancer greeting cards'.

"And so my friend texted me one of the cards. The outside of the card says: So you have cancer. Sad face. Then you open the card. And it says, 'thank goodness. I've been looking for a reason to shave my head.'"

When this remark was greeted with hesitant laughter from the audience she continues:

"I can't believe that's what you guys haven't laughed at tonight. That was straight from the funny cancer greeting cards." (*Live*)

Terminal illnesses like cancer, that wreak havoc on the lives of many people, are ordinarily considered taboo topics for joking. By joking about her disease, Notaro creates an incongruity between the conceptual norm and an specific experience for the audience. When they are uncomfortable laughing at that incongruity she pushes it a step farther, highlighting the incongruity inherent in "funny cancer greeting cards" as well as the incongruities between what the audience is willing to laugh at. After all, if they can laugh about 9/11 why can't they laugh about cancer?

Chapter 3 — Origins of Incongruity Theory

Kant and Schopenhauer

The initial development of incongruity theory is most often attributed to the work of Immanuel Kant who briefly addresses the issue of humor and, more precisely, laughter, in his seminal Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790). Though the term "incongruity" itself is conspicuously absent from these pages (the phrase "incongruity theory" has been retroactively applied to a group of early philosophical accounts of humor in recent years), Kant's work on laughter and amusement is clearly in the business of describing the kind of dynamic at play in incongruity-based humor. In spite of the frustratingly small amount of space devoted to his theories of humor, the handful of passages Kant dedicates to examining the cause of laughter seem to suggest that he understood the amusement-reaction to comedy as an intellectual, cognitive process. This interpretation of Kant, if it is in fact accurate, is consistent with our contemporary conceptual pattern-based account of humor and its framing of amusement as a cognitive process rather than an emotional one (Morreall, "*Taking Laughter Seriously*", 15). Though Kant never actually writes the word "incongruity" when addressing humor, he posits laughter (which he seems to conflate with the perception of humor) as a reaction to a situation or utterance that is unexpected, absurd, illogical, or otherwise inappropriate in some way. Though these terms are not sufficiently specific to constitute the basis of a cogent theory of humor, interpreting this language as a recognition of—and attempted articulation of— a certain kind of incongruity at the source of amusement is relatively uncontroversial.

Kant seems to identify three main components of the humorous. I will articulate them and then attempt to explain how they fit together as a theory of humor. First of all, Kant argues that, "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)" (*CPJ*, §53 5:333). Absurdity, then, Kant seems to be saying, is a necessary condition for amusement. We cannot be amused by anything that is not, at least somewhat, absurd. In order for the amusement reaction to take place, Kant argues, a subject must have a sensory perception that cannot be properly processed by his intellectual faculties. In other words, amusement is the result of an experience that is so absurd or nonsensical that we are incapable of understanding it.

Equally important in Kant's account of humor is the relationship between amusement and disappointed or frustrated expectations. Kant makes his own view on this matter quite clear, writing that, "Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (*CPJ*, §53 5:333). There is some ambiguity as to what precisely Kant means by the "transformation of a strained expectation into nothing", but it seems reasonable to interpret this clause as a reference to expectations that are shown to have been misguided or unfounded. In any situation we generate expectations for certain outcomes based on our previous experiences of similar situations. When those expectations are shown to be inaccurate, we laugh, says Kant.

Finally, though it bears some relation to Kant's emphasis on the importance of frustrated expectations for the perception of humor, Kant argues that a third important part of the amusement process is momentary deception. That is, we must be fooled at least a little bit by whatever it is that we find funny. Kant writes, "a joke must always

contain something that can deceive for a moment" (*CPJ*, §53 5:334). In some senses, this assertion seems to be an extension of Kant's criteria of frustrated expectations; we are deceived into expecting outcomes that are not delivered. However, this does not necessarily exclude other kinds of deception from amusing us, so it seems valuable to leave the option open.

In sum, Kant posits three *necessary conditions* for amusement: in anything we find funny there must be some element of absurdity; anything we find funny must frustrate our expectations; and anything we find funny must momentarily deceive us. In order to more fully understand and critique Kant's view, I will attempt to apply it to several jokes as an explanation for why they are funny. In doing so I hope to show the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's account as it applies to actual instances of amusement. Perhaps it is best to begin with a (not so funny) joke that Kant himself provides as an example for his account.

The heir of a rich relative wished to arrange for an imposing funeral but he lamented that he could not properly succeed; "for" (said he) "the more money I give my mourners to look sad, the more cheerful they look!" (*CPJ*, §53 5:333)

How does Kant's account explain what is funny about this joke? Let's begin with the criteria of absurdity. It is hard to know exactly what Kant means when he refers to absurdity in the context of humor. In fact, there is some discrepancy amongst translators as to how the term should be rendered in English, some translations read "absurd" while others read "nonsensical". Either way, Kant seems to think that the absurdity or nonsense at play in this joke has to do with the 'paradox' surrounding the affect of the mourners. Namely, the more money they are given to do their job well (that is, to look sad), the less able they are to do their job well (because they are so pleased with their reward). Does

this dynamic qualify as absurd? Perhaps to a certain extent, but not in the most robust sense of the word.

Kant however, places a great deal of emphasis on the dynamics of the audience's expectation for the joke. He writes—literally repeating himself—that the reason we laugh upon hearing this joke is that, "an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing" (*CPJ*, §53 5:333.). The expectation engendered by the beginning of the joke—namely that we are about to hear a sad story about a failed funeral—is reduced to nothing when we realize that the rich relative is upset about something trivial. This transformation, Kant says, is what causes our amusement. Momentary deception, in the case of this joke, only seems to apply to the audience's expectations. That is, we are momentarily deceived when we think we are about to hear a sad story about a failed funeral because what we are about to hear is, in fact, a funny story about a failed funeral.

In Kant's lectures reproduced in *Anthropology from A Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), he restates his account of laughter in such a way that he combines the absurdity condition and the frustrated expectations condition. Kant writes, "If a mistaken judgment involves a great absurdity, this can produce exactly the same effect [laughter]" (*"Anthropology"*, §79 7:262). With this in mind, it is easier to understand Kant's account of absurdity as a necessary condition for humor in terms of the audience's expectations rather than as absurdity in general. It seems unlikely that he thinks we only laugh at absurd things because this would be an obviously false claim (there are innumerable situations in which we laugh at things that are not absurd or fail to laugh at things that *are* absurd). His emphatic inclusion of frustrated expectations as an important part of amusement suggests his possible belief in a relationship between absurdity and

misinformed expectations, a relationship that is foundational to incongruity theory. If we find an experience absurd, Kant may be arguing, we do so because it fails to conform to the expectations we have about the way the world works. We laugh when we generate expectations for a certain outcome of a given situation and then are presented with an outcome that is absurd in light of those expectations. We don't perceive our expectations as absurd, rather, we perceive experiences that fail to meet our rationally generated expectations as absurd. When we try and fail to conform the absurd experience to our expectations we realize that our expectations were, in fact, misguided, and we laugh.

Let's try applying Kant's theory to some more contemporary jokes. For clarity's sake, let's summarize Kant's position thus far: amusement results from an experience that deceives us momentarily, and, which gives rise to expectations that do not adequately apply to the experience. Here is a joke that, according to a 2002 study by Richard Wiseman of LaughLab, is one of the funniest jokes in the world (although that does not necessarily mean that it is).

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?". The operator says "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says "OK, now what?"

According to Kant's formulation of incongruity theory, this joke might be funny for a number of reasons. First of all, the punch-line contains a behavior that is absurd (or nonsensical) in light of audience expectations engendered not only by the set up but also by their experiences in the world. In any situation where a normal person is trying to determine if their friend, god forbid, is dead, we expect them to check vital signs, to listen

for a heartbeat or for breathing. In this respect, the hunter's actions are absurd—he called 911 trying to save his friend's life, why would he then proceed to shoot him (an action that is in direct contradiction with his goal of saving his friend)? There is, however, in this joke, something that clearly does "deceive for a moment". Namely, the ambiguous wording of the EMS operator's command. Though her words would ordinarily be sufficiently clear, we are deceived by the way the joke conceals the hunter's misinterpretation. After the punch-line is delivered, the audience realizes that they failed to understand the possibility that the operator's words could be misconstrued *and* that they failed to realize that the hunter had in fact misconstrued the operator's words. This, in addition to the manipulation of audience expectations and the absurdity of the hunter's actions, make the joke amusing on Kant's account.

Preliminary Objections to Kant

Though Kant's account is relatively sophisticated, it suffers from some major flaws. The most basic of which, perhaps, is the emphasis he places on frustrated expectations rather than, as it is put in Chapter 2, violations of conceptual patterns or of the normal order of things. It is problematic to reduce incongruity theory to the frustration of expectations because doing so removes any possibility for explaining why we can be amused by the same thing more than once or when we know that we're hearing a joke. As discussed in Chapter 2, surprise cannot be a necessary condition for amusement because if it were, expecting to be amused (as in many cases of joke-telling or film-going, for instance) would preclude the possibility for actual amusement. This is clearly not the case. As Kenneth Lash (1948) puts it, "it is not the *surprise* of the

spontaneous that makes us laugh, but rather its incongruous relationship with the more or less static pattern it interrupts" (116).

Additionally, Kant's vague language opens his account up to criticism. For instance, his insistence that audience expectations specifically "be reduced to nothing". Rather than simply saying that their expectations need to be frustrated to perceive humor, he emphasizes the "nothing" aspect. He writes, "it [the expectation] must not be transformed into the positive opposite of an expected object—for that is always something, and can be distressing—but into nothing" (*CPJ*, §53 5:333). This consideration is somewhat baffling, but Kant seems to be attempting to create a distinction between what constitutes a funny joke (a statement that often contains false information) and a flat-out lie. When we are told something that immediately recognize as untrue, we are not amused.

Similarly, Kant's emphasis on the necessity of absurdity for the perception of humor to take place is untenable. For instance, in the joke above, if instead of shooting his friend to make sure he was dead the hunter stripped and climbed a tree nude, we wouldn't find the joke amusing. If this modification were actually made, the joke would still be absurd and the expectations of the audience would still be frustrated but it wouldn't be nearly as funny. It seems that Kant's account is missing a third consideration for what makes jokes funny because it is entirely possible for a situation to be absurd and to frustrate a subject's expectations without amusing them. I suspect Kant may have been getting at this third consideration with his discussion of the deceptive quality of humor, but he doesn't quite seem to articulate it properly. With three somewhat vague necessary

conditions for the perception of amusement, Kant's account suffers from a combination of excessive complication and lack of specificity.

It difficult to say with certainty if Kant's account suggests that these three necessary conditions combine to produce a sufficient condition for the perception of humor. It seems likely, however, that this is his intention. Nonetheless, there are numerous counterexamples to this interpretation of his account. In a slight modification of the cold fire case, imagine reaching out towards a fire and feeling cold, only to realize that it wasn't in fact a fire but a block of ice very convincingly disguised as fire. In this case your expectations are frustrated, an element of absurdity is present, and you are momentarily deceived by the convincing disguise. Furthermore, in this case you wouldn't be met with the positive opposite of your expectations and as far as I can see your expectations would be "reduced to nothing". Nonetheless, you would most likely not be amused. The necessary conditions provided by Kant are too broad and do not appropriately combine into a sufficient condition for the perception of humor. By placing too much emphasis on the condition of frustrated expectations and absurdity, Kant allows for too many non-humorous incongruities to meet his criteria for the humorous. By orienting his view along the lines of concept-object incongruity, Schopenhauer is able to somewhat improve on Kant's account of incongruity theory.

Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer improves Kant's account by focusing less on absurdity and frustrated expectations, instead suggesting that amusement is caused by incongruities between individual perceptions and conceptual abstractions (*WWI I*, §13).

Schopenhauer's position on humor and, as he calls it, 'the ludicrous', stands on his assertion of a gap between rational abstractions about the world and individual perceptions of it. In Volume I of The World as Will and Idea, Schopenhauer argues that abstract rational knowledge is founded on our perceptions of the world around us but that it is impossible for our abstract, conceptual representations to ever fully "apply to the fine distinctions of difference and innumerable modifications of the actual" (§13). In other words, considering the infinite shades of nuance given to objects in the perceived world, our abstract ideas or concepts, which are drawn from the synthesis and extension of individual perceptions, can never describe the material world with complete accuracy. To illustrate this aspect of his metaphysics, imagine the abstract concept of a chair. After many years of looking at, sitting in (and maybe even falling out of) chairs, we develop an abstract concept for the kind of objects that can be described as chairs. This concept might be something like "a sturdy structure for sitting in, usually with four legs, sometimes with wheels or rockers". Though this abstract concept accurately describes a lot of chairs, it is impossible for the concept to describe every chair you will ever perceive with complete accuracy. Schopenhauer likens the difference between the world given to us through perception and our abstract, conceptual ideas about the world to the difference between a painting and a tile mosaic; the mosaic closely approximates the shapes and colors of the painting but will never be able to achieve the same level of descriptive detail (*WWI*, §13).

In the passages he devotes to his discussion of the ludicrous and the cause of laughter, Schopenhauer asserts that laughter is caused by the recognition of a particularly striking incongruous relationship between an individual perception of an object and a

subject's conceptual representation of it. "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (*WWI I*, §13). Schopenhauer identifies two ways in which we come to recognize such an incongruity. In the first case, we subsume two different objects under the same concept. When it becomes clear that the two objects are different in many respects and can only be subsumed under the same category from a "one-sided point of view", we recognize the incongruity between our conceptual representation of the object(s) and the objects themselves (*WWI I*, §13). Humorous puns, for instance, would be an example of this process. Equally common, according to Schopenhauer, are occasions on which we notice an incongruity between a single real object and a concept under which, in some respects, it is correctly subsumed but in other respects it is incorrectly subsumed. About this process, Schopenhauer writes, "the more correct the subsumption of such objects under a concept may be from one point of view, and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox...whether expressed in words or actions" (*WWI I*, §13).

Though no examples of this theory are provided in Volume I, Schopenhauer provides an example of this kind of humorous incongruity in Volume II of The World as Will and Representation (1844). He suggests the image of a physician's headstone inscribed with an epithet usually reserved for heroic fallen soldiers: *Here like a hero he lies, and those he has slain lie around him* (93). In this case, Schopenhauer writes, the individual perception of the doctor is, in one respect, correctly subsumed under the

conceptual representation of "hero". Equally correctly subsumed under the concept of "hero" is a fallen soldier who claimed the lives of many enemies. The specific hero-making properties of the doctor and soldier are completely different, however, so different in fact, that they are opposites. Though the perception of the doctor matches the conceptual representation of "hero" as, say, "a great man", it does not match the conceptual representation of a hero as "a man who has killed many people" (*WWR II*, 93). The concept of "hero" applies correctly to the particular perception of the doctor from some angles but not from others; the concept is too general to capture all the various instantiations of heroes that are available in the real world. Because, on Schopenhauer's account, the concept "hero" is extremely appropriate to perception of "a doctor" on the hand but extremely incongruous on the other, this incongruity is capable of amusing us (Lewis, 43).

We can observe comedy functioning in a similar way when we consider this contemporary joke set in a doctor's office:

A man goes in to see the doctor for a physical. The doctor comes into the room and says,

"I've got some bad news, you're going to have to stop eating that red meat."

"Oh no", the patient moans, "How come?"

The doctor replies,

"So I can examine you!"

If we analyze this joke's funniness according to Kant's account, we would be forced into saying something about the absurdity of the situation. While there is something absurd about a man eating a steak in a hospital gown on an examination table, there is nothing really absurd about the doctor's reaction; in most cases, it seems, if a patient were to eat a large, messy meal at their appointment, the doctor would tell them to stop.

Schopenhauer's account, however, avoids this pitfall by acknowledging that there is a set of expectations and an assumed etiquette that conceptually govern doctor-patient interactions; these expectations and norms are features of the conceptual representations of 'a doctor' and 'a visit to the doctor's office' that may not be present in every instance of doctors and doctor's office visits in the real world. When the doctor tells the patient that he shouldn't eat so much red meat, the audience makes a number of assumptions about what the doctor means based on their conceptual, abstract understanding of a doctor as a person who gives useful health advice to patients. We also assume—in accordance with doctor's office etiquette—that most patients would never consider eating a T-bone while sitting on an examination table. With these assumptions in place, the joke's set up leads us to be amused by the incongruity between our conceptual representation of doctor-patient interaction and the individual perception of the doctor-patient interaction in the joke. Namely, that the doctor is not giving the patient a direct command to stop eating red meat *at that moment*, but that he is suggesting that his patient eat less red meat in general. The instruction to "stop eating so much red meat" in the context of a doctor's office is ordinarily correctly subsumed under the concept of "health advice" but in this particular case that concept is inaccurate; the instruction isn't health advice but an expression of a logistical concern. When the incongruity between concept and perception is recognized, we react with laughter.

It may be worth noting that a joke like this seems to intentionally promote the latter assumption. Though "you're going to have to stop eating that red meat" is technically something the doctor might say to refer to a particular instance of his patient eating red meat, if someone were actually eating a steak on the examination table the

doctor would probably use more specific language, i.e. "please stop eating that steak, this room was just sterilized 5 minutes ago!". The use of general term "red meat" leads the audience to categorize the intent of the statement, conceptually, as general advice rather than as a specific, practical instruction.

Peter Lewis (2005) uses an apt example from the opening of Woody Allen's opus *Annie Hall* (1977) to illustrate Schopenhauer's account. In the film, Allen recites 'an old joke': *Two women are at a Catskill mountain resort and one turns to the other and says, "Gee, the food at this place is really terrible." to which her friend responds, "I know and such small portions"*. Parsing this joke with Schopenhauer's account of humor, Lewis writes that, "ordinarily, when assessing hotel food, 'small portions' is an acceptable complaint; but in this case, while 'small portions' is a correct description, it is a paradoxical complaint in light of the fact that the food is especially poor" (41). Lewis' analysis here is quite helpful in illustrating an important point about Schopenhauer's articulation of incongruity theory. Namely, his argument that we laugh when an object or event can be subsumed properly under an abstract concept in most respects but in one particularly relevant respect is incongruous (*WWII*, §13). In this case, "small portions" as an instantiation of the conceptual category of "food complaints" is incongruous because of one particular aspect of the particular food in question, namely that it is terrible. In most cases, a complaint about small portions would be congruous with the concept of "food complaints", and so would not be funny

Chapter 4 — Objections and Critique

Both Kant and Schopenhauer provide interesting and somewhat successful accounts of incongruity theory, but they both suffer from ambiguity about whether or not they are providing necessary or sufficient conditions for amusement. It seems that in both cases the intent is to provide sufficient conditions but the conditions provided are only serviceable as necessary conditions. Both Kant and Schopenhauer frame their accounts as explanations for all instances of laughter (though I suspect their work is intended to be limited to the scope of humorous laughter), but counter-examples are readily available against both accounts. Namely, the existence of incongruities that are not amusing regardless of how the incongruity is framed.

A serious problem with incongruity theory is that it seeks to explain both why a given subject finds certain situations amusing and why certain situations have the potential to amuse certain subjects. Incongruity theory as an account of the features a situation must have if it is to potentially be perceived as funny by a given subject can get away with providing only necessary conditions. Even if the necessary conditions for potential funniness are met by some situation (i.e. if the situation is perceived as incongruous by the subject), it is still possible for the subject not to be amused by it. In this respect, those who defend incongruity theory could assert that any incongruous situation has the potential to be funny (even reaching out toward fire and feeling cold), but that a subject's not perceiving it as funny is due to some aspect of their psychology, their mood, their conceptual frame of reference, etc. This alone, however, is not particularly satisfying if we are looking for an explanation of *why* we, as individuals, find

things funny. It seems that there are plenty of situations that present an incongruity by violating our normal conceptual patterns at times when we are easily disposed to amusement, that don't amuse us. I've already mentioned Mike Martin's point about surreal art, and my own example of incongruities at a magic show. In the previous chapter on Kant I discussed how the joke about the hunter can be modified to remain incongruous but lose its humorousness nevertheless; it has been well established that a situation can meet the necessary conditions for the perception of humor laid out by incongruity theory but nevertheless fail to amuse us.

It seems that Kant and Schopenhauer, as well as the contemporary accounts of incongruity theory on which my own is based, are vulnerable to this criticism. Essentially, they are too broad and fail to provide sufficient conditions for amusement. Incongruity theory asserts that a subject will be amused if and only if (a) they perceive an incongruity between an actual experience and a conceptual pattern while being (b) in the right kind of mood and (c) bearing the right kind of emotional and temporal relationship to the incongruity in question. These conditions are too complex and contingent to form a satisfying account.

It is my contention that incongruity theory needs to provide an explanation for why we don't always find instances of random absurdity amusing. It seems possible that providing a completely watertight sufficient condition for amusement or the perception of humor may be beyond reach. And though I doubt it will solve the sufficient condition problem entirely, I believe that an inquiry into the relationship between humorous incongruities and their relationship to rationality, or the congruous, will provide some insight into the question of what distinguishes humorous conceptual incongruities from

incongruities in general. It is my contention that we are most amused by incongruities that present themselves in such a way that their incongruity is not immediately apparent and that amusement results from recognizing the incongruity at the core of an event or object that doesn't immediately appear incongruous. I also believe that by engaging in this inquiry we can show that there is something fundamentally humorous about the human condition itself.

Chapter 5 — Humor and Fundamental Incongruities

In the final chapter I turn my attention to the relationship between comedy and reason. The goal of this investigation is two-fold. First, I hope to identify and provide evidence for the existence of an important relationship between reason and humorous incongruity that helps incongruity theory respond to the objection raised in the previous chapter. To accomplish this I will show that we are most amused by the presence of incongruities that do not immediately seem incongruous. Secondly, I will show how humor's close relationship with reason is responsible for humor thriving in the spaces where reason fails to satisfy our curiosity. I will identify two closely related fundamental incongruities inherent in the human condition. The first is between the abstract rationality that frames conceptual thought and the irrationality of human behavior and the world. The second fundamental incongruity is between the seriousness with which we take our lives, beliefs, thoughts, reasons, etc. and our ability to acknowledge the possibility that everything about our lives is arbitrary or meaningless and thus not worth taking seriously. Some form of these two fundamental incongruities, I believe, can be found in almost all instances of amusement.

That there is a close relationship between humor (or, as it is often put, laughter) and reason has been asserted for quite some time, although historically the discussion of this relationship often paints humor in an exceedingly negative light. In *The Republic*, Plato repeatedly argues against the virtue of laughter and comedy on the grounds that laughing not only renders people irresponsible and weak, but that all humor frustrates reason (Morreall, "*Taking Laughter Seriously*", 85). Plato writes that "any poetry which

portrays eminent humans as being overcome by laughter" ought to be refused and gives a doubly emphatic condemnation of depictions of the gods laughing (Republic III, 388e). Similar statements about the frustration of reason inherent in amusement can be found in the work of many thinkers throughout history. Morreall (1983) has collected a number of salient examples. For instance Lord Chesterfield's insistence that, "there is nothing so illiberal, and ill-bred, as audible laughter. True wit, or sense, never yet made anybody laugh...I am as willing and apt to be pleased as anybody; but I am sure that since I had full use of my reason nobody has ever heard me laugh" (Morreall, 88). Equally vehement is Ludovici's assertion that, "humour is the lazier principle to adopt in approaching all questions [compared to reason], and that is why the muddle is increasing everywhere" (88). Along the same lines, George Vasey wonders if, "children would ever begin to laugh...if they were treated naturally and rationally" (88). Though most contemporary writers in the philosophy of humor take a more favorable approach to the matter of humor itself, incongruity theory—however formulated—necessarily allows for amusement to result from the frustration of reason (but not, as Kant argues, that amusement will *necessarily* result from the frustration of reason). On Kant's account events or objects that pervert or distort reason will strike us as absurd, unexpected, or deceptive. For Schopenhauer especially, humor necessarily frustrates reason because his metaphysics asserts that our conceptual representations (which are shown to be inadequate by the humorous) are derived rationally. Finally, it is clear how reason itself and our faith in the power of reason underlie and account for many of our conceptual patterns. We understand the world as ordered, as governed by rational chains of causes and justifications. Our picture of the normal order of things, in this sense, is based on our

rationally derived conceptual models of experience; we perceive objects or events as incongruous when they fail to conform to this rational conceptual model of the world. Incongruity theory, therefore, is obligated to assert the contradiction or failure of reason as (at least) a possible source of amusement. Nonetheless, our continued adherence to rational thought and our faith in the firm structure of reason as a governing framework for the universe is crucial to the comedic process; if the universe were absolutely chaotic, there would be no incongruity (in virtue of the fact that there would be no expectation of congruity), and therefore, according to incongruity theory, no humor. Kenneth Lash (1948) addresses this aspect of incongruity theory, writing that, "in a universe completely dominated by chance...any fixity or semi-fixity of expectation would be nonexistent; therefore because we have found humor to result from the incongruity between preconceived ideas and actuality, the comic would, of necessity, disappear" (116). Because humor frustrates reason is no cause to think that it dismantles its tenets, however. Rather, humor seems at once to subvert and uphold reason, it fills in where reason is stymied and reminds us that although reason is often reliable, there are aspects of life that don't fit the rational model.

The end goal of this chapter is to investigate the way humor operates in the epistemological void left by rational inquiry into metaphysical problems beyond the realm of experience. In order to do so, however, it is prudent to first demonstrate the existence of an important relationship between reason or humor in mundane or simple jokes. Manipulations and perversions of logic are a consistent part of jokes and a great many joke formulas and jokes themselves are essentially dressed-up examples of logical fallacies or simple plays on the flawed use of logic. The relationship between the paradox

and comedy has long been noted, perhaps most significantly by Schopenhauer who uses the term 'paradox' as a foundational component of his theory of the ludicrous. Marie Swabey (1961) also finds evidence of the paradoxical aspect of humor in Plato's *Philebus* where he likens laughter to relieving an itch by scratching it in that both experiences result in both pleasure and pain (161). It seems natural, then, that one type of logical incongruity frequently employed for humorous effect is the paradox. Here is an exceedingly simple example from Cathcart and Klein's (2007) book of philosophical jokes:

Salesman: "This vacuum cleaner will cut your work in half!"

Customer: "Terrific, give me two of 'em!"

(94)

It shouldn't be much of a stretch to understand how this old routine plays on a logical paradox (seemingly sound reasoning, based on seemingly true premises that leads to a false conclusion) for humorous effect. Cathcart and Klein explain this joke in terms of Zeno's Paradox, but it also plays on the failure of pure reason to adequately account for the peculiarities of language and of human life in general. Though at first blush it may be hard (at least for the non-philosopher) to see what exactly is wrong with the reasoning in this joke, almost everyone who hears it will understand that there is something off about the logic. If the customer has x amount of vacuuming to do and he buys a vacuum that will cut his work in half he will have $1/2x$ work to do. If he buys the second vacuum he'll have $1/2(1/2x)$ work to do, or $1/4x$ work to do. And so on for each additional vacuum he buys. Instead, the customer incorrectly understands the phrase "cut your work in half" to mean that the vacuum will do $1/2x$ work as a concrete, non-relative amount of work. If he takes this faulty interpretation seriously, it would follow that buying two vacuums would

cut his work by 100%, a conclusion that is obviously false but is arrived at in a seemingly sound way. A similar process is at play in simple linguistic tricks like Yogi Berra's famous quip, "Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours". The reason provided in support of his suggestion to "always attend other people's funerals" seems, at first glance, to be a valid reason; after all, if you *don't* attend someone's funeral they certainly won't be at yours. It's just that the *reason* they won't be at your funeral isn't that you failed to attend theirs, but due to the fact that they'll necessarily (given the nature of funerals) be dead.

We are often amused by statements that appear to be necessarily false but also appear necessarily true at the same time. Morreall gives this example:

An art dealer bought a canvas signed 'Picasso' and travelled to Cannes to see if it was genuine. Picasso took one look and said, "It's a fake".

A few months later, the man bought another canvass signed 'Picasso' and returned to Cannes. Again Picasso said, "It's a fake".

"Cher Maître", the man protested, "It so happens that I saw you with my own eyes working on this very painting several years ago".

Picasso simply shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I often paint fakes".
(76)

This anecdote is amusing because it presents the listener with a situation that seems possible and impossible at once; the painting in question is an authentic, fake Picasso, a situation that seems unworkable. In fact, the only possible way a painting could qualify as fake *and* as an authentic Picasso is if Picasso himself painted a 'fake' (which, of course, seems impossible for Picasso to do). This story is humorously incongruous in its violation of our understanding of what constitutes authentic authorship and what constitutes a fake piece of artwork. We ordinarily believe that a painting *p* created by artist *q* is authentic if and only if *q* in fact painted *p*. However we also give creative authority to artists as to the nature of their art. In this case, Picasso is insisting

that the painting is a fake, an assertion that contradicts the results of the formula for authenticity above. If Picasso says that p is a 'fake Picasso' but that he in fact painted p , then p is both authentic and fake at the same time. In fact, Picasso is the only person on the planet who would seem incapable of painting a fake Picasso.

Here is another example of a joke based on flawed logic. In this case the story manipulates the process of deductive logic, its potential to amuse is derived from a flawed premise in the argument.

An old cowboy goes into a bar and orders a drink. As he sits there sipping his whiskey, a young lady sits down next to him. She turns to the cowboy and asks him, "Are you a real cowboy?"

He replies, "Well, I've spent my whole life on the ranch, herding horses, mending fences, and branding cattle, so, yeah, I reckon I am a real cowboy."

The woman responds, "I'm a lesbian. I spend my whole day thinking about women. As soon as I get up in the morning, I think about women. When I shower or watch TV, everything seems to make me think of women."

A little while later, a couple sits down next to the old cowboy and asks him, "Are you a real cowboy?"

He replies, "Well, I always thought I was, but earlier today I found out that I'm a lesbian!" (Cathcart, Klein, 34)

This joke is funny because the cowboy employs a false premise in his evaluation of his identity. Using the argument,

P1) If a person spends all their time doing X and thinking about X, then they are a real X-er
P2) I spend all my time doing X
∴ I am a real X-er

The cowboy arrives at the conclusion that he is a real cowboy. When the woman uses the same reasoning to show she is a lesbian, substituting "if a woman" for "if a person" in P1, the cowboy, failing to understand that P1 is no longer true for him, comes to the false conclusion that he, too, is a lesbian (34). In this case, what is amusing

is the cowboy's slavish adherence to deductive logic coupled with his failure to revisit his argument after arriving at an obviously faulty conclusion. Such devotion to the results of deductive reasoning is incongruous with the ordinary way in which we construct identities for ourselves. Furthermore, the cowboy's willingness to re-identify himself on a dime is incongruous with our conceptual understanding of how personal identities work; that is, that they are not ordinarily changed so lightly.

Another logical fallacy that is often invoked by jokesters is the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. This fallacy is to conclude that because one event follows another the second event is caused by the first (Dowden, IEP). An outrageously exaggerated instance of this fallacy would be to believe that because every morning the train passes your house right after you wake up, that your waking up is what causes the train to pass by. In many cases, instances of this fallacy are easy to spot, but sometimes, especially when they are cleverly hidden, instances of this fallacy can slip past us unnoticed. Here is an example of a joke that manipulates the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy very nicely.

An older Jewish gentleman marries a younger lady, and they are very much in love. However, no matter what the husband does sexually, the woman never reaches orgasm. Since a Jewish wife is entitled to sexual pleasure, they decide to ask the rabbi. The rabbi listens to their story, strokes his beard, and makes the following suggestion:

“Hire a strapping young man. While the two of you are making love, have the young man wave a towel over you. That will help the wife fantasize and should bring on an orgasm.”

They go home and follow the rabbi's advice. They hire a handsome young man and he waves a towel over them as they make love. It doesn't help, and she is still unsatisfied. Perplexed, they go back to the rabbi.

“Okay,” says the rabbi to the husband, “let's try it reversed. Have the young man make love to your wife and you wave the towel over them.”

Once again, they follow the rabbi's advice. The young man gets into bed with the wife, and the husband waves the towel. The young man gets to work with great enthusiasm and the wife soon has an enormous, room-shaking, screaming orgasm. The husband smiles, looks at the young man and says to him triumphantly,

"You schmuck, that's the way you wave a towel!" (Cathcart, Klein, 40)

There are a number of incongruities at play in all these jokes between conceptual patterns and individual experiences that contradict or don't properly apply to them. Inasmuch as conceptual patterns are rationally derived from the abstraction and synthesis of experiences, the fundamental incongruities are between the bare system of rationality we use to make sense of the world and experiences that seem like they should—but ultimately don't—fit neatly into that system. For a joke to be funny, it seems, it must not only present an incongruity, but must present an incongruity that at first blush doesn't entirely appear to be incongruous. It has been shown time and time again that the mere presence or perception of an incongruity *can* be funny, but is not sufficient for the perception of humor. It is fair to say that some oddball jokes are amusing simply in virtue of their absurdity ("*How many surrealist painters does it take to screw in a lightbulb?*" "*Fish.*"), but the jokes we find the most amusing always seem to present an incongruity in such a way that the incongruity is not immediately apparent. In slightly different terms, we are especially amused by incongruities created by processes—behavioral or intellectual—that seem, in some sense, reasonable or rational. The joke about the hunters discussed in Chapter 3 is a wonderful example of such a joke. As I suggested, the joke would remain incongruous if the hunter, instead of shooting his friend, did something completely unexpected and absurd like hanging up the phone, sprouting wings, and flying to Canada. This punch-line, however, would not make for a particularly funny joke. It is funny precisely because the incongruous object in the joke is the product of fallacious reasoning that has the appearance, however briefly, of being sound.

Here is another (very famous) example of a joke that exploits the potential failure of inductive reasoning (though misarticulated in the story as deductive reasoning!) to generate amusement.

Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson are on a camping trip in the English countryside. They pitch their tent under the stars, eat their dinner and go to sleep. Around 3 a.m. Holmes wakes Watson with a light nudge and asks:

"Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson pauses for a moment, thinking, then answers: "I see millions and millions of stars."

Holmes says: "And what do you deduce from that?"

"Well," Watson says, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I see that God is all-powerful, and we are small and insignificant. Why do you ask, Holmes?"

"Watson, you idiot, it means that somebody stole our tent."

Watson's musings in this joke are rational inductions based on his observations and it could even be said that all his conclusions are in fact correct. But in spite of his observational prowess, Watson fails to notice one incredibly relevant feature of his environment, namely that the tent he went to sleep in is missing. His reasoning is sound, but fails to bring him to an appropriate conclusion. He doesn't pay attention to the fact that he is only able to make his inductions from the stars' positions because his tent is missing. There is an incongruity between Watson's reasoning, which is sound and leads to technically correct conclusions, and the fact that in this particular case his rational process leads him away from the practical information he needs to acquire.

Schopenhauer, it seems, is interested in and aware of the gap between abstract reason and perceptions of the actual. He writes that, "although abstract rational knowledge...is founded on [ideas of perception], it is by no means in such entire congruity with them that it could everywhere take their place: indeed it never corresponds

to them quite accurately" (*WWII*, §13). This, in fact, is the foundation for his theory of laughter, which is situated as a part of his larger metaphysics. This persistent lack of congruity between abstract rational knowledge and actual experiences is really at the heart of any formulation of incongruity theory. When we perceive humor we are perceiving an incongruity between an actual experience and our conceptual model for that kind of experience. Some such incongruities seem to exist between experience and rationality indirectly, as incongruities between experiences and rationally derived conceptual patterns. Others, like the jokes above, seem to present incongruities between experience and reason itself.

Ted Cohen (1999) argues that a great deal of traditional Jewish humor is constructed by highlighting incongruities between rationality and actual experiences. Describing such jokes, Cohen writes, "They all display a crazy logic. They have an insane rationality, a logical rigor gone over the edge" (46). Take this example:

A poor Jewish man stopped at the house of a rich Jewish man to ask for a handout.

"I don't just give away money," declared the rich man, "but I have a Gentile who mows my lawn and I pay him \$20. You mow my lawn and I'll pay you \$25."

"Let the Gentile keep the job," says the poor Jew. "Just give me the \$5." (49)

As Cohen points out, there is something incredibly rational about the poor man's request in this joke in spite of the fact that his reasoning brings him to a conclusion that seems, in some respects, quite ludicrous. Though it seems like there must be a mistake in his reasoning, the flaw is somewhat difficult to identify. This may be because, in fact, there is no serious problem with the poor man's reasoning, it is merely that his rationally arrived at conclusion is incongruous with our beliefs about the importance *earning* the

money that we receive. Additionally, the conventional thinking (at least in capitalist ideology) is that the poor man ought to eagerly accept \$25 in exchange for work rather than \$5 for nothing. The rich man says he never gives out charity, but he is willing to give the poor Jewish man \$5 more than the Gentile for no reason other than their shared faith. It is, essentially, charity. When the poor Jew just asks for the five extra dollars he exposes something irrational about the rich Jew's attitudes and beliefs about charity and earning money. This joke highlights an incongruity between our faith in, and reliance on, logic and the fact that our behavior often fails to adhere strictly to rationality.

I am particularly fond of this humorous anecdote, reproduced by Cohen (1999), which parodies the kind of hardcore logic often employed by Talmudic scholars.

A young man applies to study with a Talmudic scholar. The scholar rejects him, saying, "Before you can study Talmud, you must know Jewish logic."

"But I already know logic," protests the student, "Aristotelian syllogisms, truth-functional logic, predicate logic, set theory, everything."

"That's not Jewish logic," replies the scholar, but the student persists, and so the scholar offers to give him a test to determine whether he is prepared.

"Here is the question," says the scholar. "Two men go down a chimney. One has a dirty face, one has a clean face. Which one washes?"

"That's easy," says the student, "the one with the dirty face."

"Wrong," says the scholar. "The one with the clean face looks at the other one, sees a dirty face, and thinks his must also be dirty, and so the one with the clean face washes."

"I see," says the student. "It is a little more complicated than I thought, but I can do this. Please test me again."

"All right," sighs the scholar. "Here is the question. Two men go down a chimney. One has a dirty face, one has a clean face. Which one washes?"

In surprise the student answers, "Just as you said, the one with the clean face washes."

"Wrong," says the scholar. "The one with the dirty face observes his companion looking at him and making ready to wash his face. 'Ah ha,' he thinks. 'He must see a dirty face, and it's mine.' And so the one with the dirty face washes."

"It is even more complicated than I yet realized," says the student, "but now I do understand. Please test me once more."

"Just once more," says the scholar. "Here is the question. Two men go down a chimney. One has a dirty face, one has a clean face. Which one washes?"

“Now I know the answer,” says the student. “The one with the dirty face washes, just as I thought in the beginning, but for a different reason.”

“Wrong,” says the scholar. “If two men go down a chimney, how can only one have a dirty face? Go and study. When you know Jewish logic, come back.” (Cohen, 65)

This story is funny because it presents, once again, an incongruity between abstract reason and individual experiences that somehow refuse to be described appropriately by reason. This particular joke, however, contains an insightful truth within its humor, namely that no matter how soundly and logically one tries to reason their way through a problem, the universe can be irrational. Sometimes, as in this story, the appropriate response to the problem is to inquire about the premises. After all, if two men go down a chimney how could only one have a dirty face? In this sense this story is similar to the Sherlock joke above because both examples demonstrate the practical futility of reason if the peculiarities and irrationalities of the perceived world are unaccounted for.

My suggestion here is that Schopenhauer is right to assert a fundamental incongruity between reason in the abstract and the particular experiences that constitute day-to-day life. We use reason to extrapolate from our experiences to conceptual patterns and models of how the world works. These conceptual models are necessarily incongruent with some of our experiences because the world itself is not governed wholly by reason and no abstract concept can adequately describe the innumerable shades of nuance that characterize worldly experience. There is an incongruity fundamental to the human experience between the rational, conceptually ideal world, and the flawed, sometimes irrational reality of the world we inhabit and, perhaps more strikingly, the irrationality of human behavior. This particular incongruity is the operational incongruity

at the foundation of a great deal of humor. When we laugh at intellectual or moral ineptitude, when we laugh at miscommunications or linguistic ambiguity, when we laugh at absurdities, it is because we are amused by the failure of our actual experiences to live up to the rationally derived, conceptual ideals we have created; just as the comic cannot exist in a world defined by chaos, it is equally impossible in a perfectly rational world. As Baudelaire writes, "the Incarnate World was never known to laugh, for Him who knows all things, whose powers are infinite, the comic does not exist" (Morreall, "*Taking Laughter Seriously*", 126).

There is, I believe, a brand of comedy which, in addition to being quite popular, takes direct advantage of the incongruity between the human aspiration towards rationality and the persistent and inevitable human failure to achieve such a state. This kind of humor delights in pointing out the cosmic irrationality of the beliefs, goals, and traditions that we hold dear, and in some cases as sacred. Take, for instance, this Jerry Seinfeld routine, which exemplifies this type of comedy:

We don't understand death. And the proof of this is that we give dead people a pillow. I mean, I think if you can't stretch out and get some solid rest at that point, I don't see how bedding accessories really make the difference. They've got the guy in a suit with a pillow. Now, is he going to a meeting, or is he catching forty winks? I mean, let's make up our mind where we think they're going. (The Pony Remark)

This piece of stand-up comedy perfectly articulates the incongruities between the absolute unjustifiability of so many widely-held and unquestioned beliefs and the fact that we hold them nonetheless. In a related routine, Seinfeld riffs on a survey finding that reports Americans' number one fear to be public speaking and Americans' number two fear to be death. Which means, as Seinfeld points out, "for most people, if you're ever at a funeral, you'd rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy" (*The Pilot pt. 1*). Once

again, the humor in this quip is derived from highlighting the irrationality of human behavior and implicitly contrasting it with the rational purity we hold up as an abstract ideal.

It is not a coincidence that these jokes are both about death, an event that unites us in its inevitability. In his Critique of Pure Reason (1781) Kant shows that the answers to many persistent metaphysical problems like those about the nature of death are unattainable through the use of pure reason. It is impossible, on his account, for us to have justifiable knowledge of things beyond the realm of experience. In the wake of the Kantian critique, we are struck, and at times frustrated, by the impotence of rational inquiry into questions about the nature of death, the purpose of existence, the existence of god. Interestingly enough, however, these are topics about which a great many people hold very serious beliefs. This inability to satisfactorily confirm or disconfirm our beliefs or even our conjectures about the realm beyond our experience, perhaps, is the great uncertainty of the human condition.

Thomas Nagel (1971) address this fundamental incongruity of human existence in terms of what he calls 'philosophical absurdity', a close cousin of robust epistemological skepticism. Though he doesn't frame his argument in terms of comedy, there is a humorous aspect in his writing, highlighted perhaps by his use of the humor-term 'ironic' to characterize life's potential meaninglessness. Nagel's suggestion is that "most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually" (716). He dismisses arguments in support of this intuition based both on the temporal or spatial insignificance of humanity in the cosmic scheme, and on the assertion that the inevitability of death necessitates that all chains of justification for any given action be

broken, as inadequate. He argues instead that our sense of life's absurdity comes from, "a collision of the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt...[Life] is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them" (719). This collision culminates, according to Nagel, not in failing to find some next link in the chain of justification supporting our actions (i.e. being unable to explain *why* we do anything), but in failing to find justification for the very system we use to evaluate, justify, and critique. "We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question" (720).

So beyond the fundamental incongruity outlined above (between the rational ideal and the flawed real), lies a deeper internal incongruity within reason itself, occasioned by our faith in rationality as an adequate (if not perfect) system of justification for everything we believe, think, and do. The incongruity lies in the single exception to rationality's scope as a system of justification: we cannot use rationality to justify our faith in rationality as a system of justification without circularity (720). Of course, as Nagel points out, what is remarkable about humanity in general is our capability to step back and acknowledge the very real possibility that everything we take seriously is arbitrary and then return to our (possibly meaningless) lives with as much sincerity as ever.

It is my contention that by situating the philosophical absurdity outlined by Nagel as a humorous incongruity, it is possible to understand the potential unjustifiability of all our convictions and beliefs (as long as we don't find the possibility too emotionally taxing) as comic in and of itself in addition to serving as the operational incongruity at the core of many kinds of humor. It would seem that if anything should be justifiable, the system we use to justify our actions and beliefs ought to be, but it isn't.

Here is a good example of a joke that highlights the way in which we provide ourselves with faulty justifications for the things that we believe but can't be sure of. Atheists and the devoutly religious are both groups that tend to hold strong convictions for which they can offer little to no definitive proof. This joke pokes fun at the lengths people are willing to go to find supporting evidence for their convictions.

A little old Christian lady comes out onto her front porch every morning and shouts, "Praise the Lord!" And every morning the atheist next door yells back, "There is no God!" This goes on for weeks.

"Praise the Lord!" yells the lady.

"There is no God!" responds the neighbor.

As time goes by, the lady runs into financial difficulties and has trouble buying food. She goes out onto the porch and asks God for help with groceries, then says, "Praise the Lord!"

The next morning when she goes out onto the porch, there are the groceries she asked for. Of course, she shouts,

"Praise the Lord!" The atheist jumps out from behind a bush and says,

"Ha! I bought those groceries. There is no God!" The lady looks at him and smiles. Turning her face to heavens, she shouts,

"Praise the Lord! Not only did you provide for me, Lord, you made Satan pay for the groceries!" (Cathcart, Klein, 99).

This joke is amusing because it highlights the futility of arguing 'rationally' over an irresolvable dispute; neither party will ever be convinced by the other. Nevertheless we engage in these kinds of arguments all the time and can easily imagine the scene depicted in this joke unfolding in real life. The seriousness with which these bickering neighbors

fight is incongruous with the fundamental truth that neither can be sure of their own position let alone successfully convince the other. George Carlin told a famous joke that is funny for similar reasons: "Tell people an invisible man in the sky created all things, they believe you. Tell them what you've painted is wet, they have to touch it to believe". Again, the funniness of this joke comes from highlighting the incongruity between the different epistemological standards some people use to evaluate the merit of their beliefs. On the one hand, being told that God exists is enough for some people to believe, but many of those same people want empirical verification before they believe the paint is wet.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

By this point I hope I have articulated clearly and thoroughly how incongruity theory operates as an analytic tool for understanding the comic. Additionally, I have shown incongruity theory's strength as an explanation for what gives a situation, object, or event the potential to be perceived as amusing as well as identifying a significant weakness in the account. Namely, that it provides an insufficient explanation for why a given subject is amused by a given incongruous object when there are so many examples of non-amusing incongruous perceptions. Though I do not claim to have solved this problem in its entirety (I wonder if such a solution is attainable), it is my assertion that the closer semblance a given incongruity bears to a non-incongruity, relative to a given subject's conceptual schema, the greater is the likelihood that that subject will be amused. Finally, I have discussed at some length the existence of a fundamental incongruity between the rational foundation of our conceptual patterns, beliefs, and systems of

justification, and the persistent possibility that, in fact, these beliefs and systems rest on a foundation of assumptions.

Humorist Stephen Leacock wrote that the ultimate humor arises from, "the incongruity between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness" (Morreall, "*Taking Laughter Seriously*", 124). There is, I believe a sense in which this is true. At the conclusion of his piece, Nagel writes that, "if *sub specie aeternitatis*¹, there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of despair" (727). The ultimate incongruity of human existence lies between zeal with which we believe in and trust in the rationality of the universe and the uncomfortable truth that we'll never know if doing so is justified. Louis C.K. employs this incongruity for the purposes of amusement in a particularly inspired bit. In it, he describes having protracted conversations with his six year old daughter in which she responds to every statement he makes with the question, "why?". He recounts a particular example to illustrate his daughter's insatiable desire for answers and her inability to accept anything. As he tries to explain (albeit somewhat tacitly), with increasing exasperation, that at the bottom of everything there is no satisfying answer to the fundamental *why* of existence, he highlights the incongruity outlined above. Though the transcription doesn't quite do the bit justice, here is the routine:

"Poppa, why can't we go outside?"
"Because it's raining."
"Why?"
"Well, water's coming out of the sky."
"Why?"
"Because it was in a cloud."
"Why?"
"Because clouds form when there's ... I don't know, vapor."

¹ 'under the aspect of eternity',

"Why?"
"I don't know, I don't know any more things, those are all the things I know!"
"Why?"
"Because I'm stupid, OK? I'm stupid."
"Why?"
"Because I didn't pay attention in school! I went to school but I didn't listen in class."
"Why?"
"Because I was high all the time, I smoked too much pot!"
"Why?"
"Because my parents gave me no guidance, they didn't give a shit!"
"Why?"
"Because they fucked in a car and had me and they resented me for taking their youth."
"Why?"
"Because they had bad morals, they just had no compass..."
"Why?"
"Because they had shitty parents, it just goes on and on like that!"
"Why?"
"Because, fuck it, we're alone in the universe! Nobody gives a shit about us!"

I'm going to stop here to be polite to you for a second, but this just goes on and on for hours and hours and it gets so weird and abstract... it's like:

"Why?"
"Because some things are and some things are not!"
"Why?"
"Well because things that are not can't be!"
"Why?"
"Because then nothing wouldn't be! You can't have fuckin' nothing isn't! And everything is!"
"Why?"
"Because if nothing wasn't then there'd be fuckin' all kinds of shit that we don't... like giant ants with top hats dancing around. There's no room for all that stuff"
"Why?"
"Oh fuck you, eat your french-fries you little shit, goddammit!"

With comic brilliance this routine makes us laugh at the incongruity between the systems that we rely on and trust in and the fact that we don't truly understand any of them. Even if you know how rain forms or how particles interact there eventually comes

a *why* that is unanswerable. It doesn't usually leave us stammering that, "you can't have nothing isn't because things that aren't not can't be!" but C.K.'s parody of the dissolution of rational inquiry when confronted with metaphysical issues beyond the realm of experience is striking both in its funniness and for the philosophical wisdom lurking beneath its surface. We can and will most likely continue to demand explanations from the world around us, but at no point will we be satisfied with the answers. Hume (1984) writes of investigating these issues that, "Fortunately...since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterates these chimeras...And when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strain'd and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther" (316). Amusement at the incongruity of life gives us a chance to take a breath and temporarily remove ourselves from the struggle to find meaning. In doing so we realize that sometimes it's OK to shut up and eat our french-fries.

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