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Humor and Enlightenment, Part I: The Theory

Peter H. Karlen

Abstract

Part I of this article advances a new theory of humor, the Enlightenment Theory, while contrasting it with other main theories, including the Incongruity, Repression/Relief/Release, and Superiority Theories. The Enlightenment Theory does not contradict these other theories but rather subsumes them. As argued, each of the other theories cannot account for all the aspects of humor explained by the Enlightenment Theory. The discussion is illustrated with examples of humor and explores the acts and circumstances of humor, its literary and artistic expressions, and its physical reactions. Part II shows how the Enlightenment Theory meets challenging issues in humor theory where other theories sometimes falter, including issues such as failed humor, motivation for humor, tickling, laughing gas, and sadistic humor. Also mentioned are literary and musical humor and the relationship of wit to humor.

Key Words

enlightenment humor, humor aesthetics, humor philosophy, humor theory, incongruity theory, laughter theory, relief theory, repression humor theory, superiority theory

1. Introduction

A parrot says something rude, a music contestant sings badly off key, a product name is ludicrous in a foreign language, and famous people are immortalized by memorable quips: "Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution?" (Groucho Marx) "Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't go to yours." (Yogi Berra) These are examples of humor, that is, communications, acts, circumstances, or their consequences that elicit mirth. Though these and other kinds of humor come from different eras and cultures, they share a common thread of incongruity.

This article, in two Parts, offers a new theory of humor, not to replace other well-established theories but rather to incorporate and reorient them. Particularly of late, others have advanced theories of humor especially based on evolutionary and biological considerations, but the unifying theory here has aesthetic dimensions and consequences.^[1]

As mostly discussed in Part II, this new theory explains aspects of humor that other theories hardly fathom, including failed humor, motivation for humor, tickling, laughing gas, and sadistic humor. Also mentioned are literary and musical humor and the relationship of wit to humor. The discussion is illustrated with examples of humor and explores the acts and circumstances of humor, its literary expressions, and its physical reactions, such as smiles and laughs.

2. The problem of humor theory

Humor and its physical reactions have long been enigmas, as

have emotional reactions to fictions. Why we laugh at a joke and weep at a tragic drama both remain mysteries.^[2] With humor, the enigma arises, in part, because of the wide variety of humorous acts and circumstances; humor's infinite literary, artistic, and musical expressions; and the wide range of physical reactions it evokes.

A comprehensive theory should explain the entire range of acts, circumstances, expressions, and reactions associated with humor, an ambitious task because humor can arise from action (slapstick, physical mimicry, and tickling), authorship (jokes, quips, banter, wit, wordplay, cartoons, and musical mimicry), foolishness and mistakes (Spoonerisms, malapropisms, and faux pas), and circumstances (animals acting like human beings or laughable situations like a burglar alarm being stolen).^[3] ^[4] The physical reactions a theory should explain range from inward mirth to belly laughs.

As noted above in Section 1, here we posit a broad definition of humor: any acts, circumstances, communications, or their consequences that elicit mirth. By "mirth," we mean joyful amusement, not just happiness or contentment. We also assume that the physical reactions are inextricably linked to humor, though not every laugh or smile emanates from humor, for example, nervous or courtesy laughter. These broad assumptions are challenging, but the new theory offered here arguably accommodates all aspects of humor and its physical reactions.

3. Principal existing theories

Theories of humor abound, reflecting the variety of humor itself.^[5] Many notable thinkers have devised theories, developing explanations that complemented their work in philosophy, psychology, and literature, and many famous philosophers have expressed opinions, or sometimes only noteworthy remarks, regarding humor's origins. Among the notable theorists and commentators are Plato (*Philebus*), Aristotle (*Poetics, Rhetoric*), Kant (*Critique of Judgment*), Spencer (*The Physiology of Laughter*), Freud (*Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*), Hobbes (*Human Nature, Leviathan*), and Bergson (*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*). The numerous explanations generally fall into three categories: the Superiority, Repression/Relief/Release, and Incongruity Theories.^[6]

Roughly speaking, the Incongruity Theory holds that humor arises from acts, circumstances, and aesthetic expressions, literary, artistic, and even musical, that are incongruous with the observer's expectations. As Schopenhauer wrote, "In every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity."^[7] Or, as stated by Kant, "In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."^[8] For example, René Descartes walks into a pub and the bartender asks, "Aren't you the guy who owes me 20 quid?" Descartes replies, "I think not" and vanishes. However, the opposite may prevail:

Laughter may arise from a sudden transformation of a minimal expectation into a stimulating surprise, as with a joke's punch line. *Question:* "What's round and really violent?" *Answer:* "A vicious circle." (Mike Leigh's film *Life is Sweet* 1990)

This theory is persuasive since all or almost all kinds of humor entail incongruities or changes of reference. For instance, under this theory the baby who laughs when his or her parent makes a funny face is reacting to an incongruity because the parent is temporarily associated with a distorted face. The reader of a New Yorker cartoon that juxtaposes ordinary dialogue with an anomalous picture, or the person surprised by a "knock knock" joke's punch line, is also reacting to an incongruity.^[9]

Incongruity results from collision of two or more frames of reference, a "bisociation" that might never be manifested in everyday life, sometimes produced by wit, mistake, chance, or deliberate physical actions.^[10] For instance, in the New Yorker cartoon below, an attentive cat sitting near a litter box is admonished by its well-dressed owner: "Never, ever, think outside the box!", a collision between cat litter and management philosophy.



"Never, ever, think outside the box."

© Conde Nast. Leo Cullum/ The New Yorker Collection/
The Cartoon Bank.

One can change a situation to create an incongruity, as when a dignitary is addressing a crowd one minute and gets a pie in the face the next, or when one moment the self-assured

person is confidently striding but the next instant slips on a banana peel, falls into the clutches of gravity, and is utterly deprived of dignity. Or incongruity is created by a nonsensical observation about a famous restaurant: "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." (Yogi Berra) Or by wit: "I can't tell you whether genius is hereditary, because heaven has not granted me any offspring." (James McNeill Whistler) Or by temporal pause: "My wife and I were happy for 20 years. (Pause) Then we met." (Rodney Dangerfield) Or by double entendre: "A girl at a pub asked the bartender for a double entendre, so he gave her one." Or by imaginary situations: *Question (addressed to Mr. Churchill):* "If you could not be who you are, who would you like to be?" *Answer:* "I would most like to be Mrs. Churchill's second husband." Even the incongruity caused by a misspelling, malapropism, or Spoonerism can evoke laughter. "It is kisstomary to cuss the bride." (Rev. Spooner) Or, "The doctor felt the patient's *purse* and said there was little hope."

Although theorists have categorized incongruities, such categorization may not capture all incongruities.^[11] For instance, incongruity may result from *literalization*, that is, construing a statement literally, as in not recognizing the true meaning of an innuendo, hyperbole or idiom; *reversal*, by doing or saying the opposite of what is usually expected or confounding the listener's expectations, as in the Dangerfield joke above; or *exaggeration*, such as unduly magnifying or intensifying what is normal and blowing it out of proportion. But a malapropism is not a literalization nor an exaggeration, nor exactly a reversal. In addition, the Churchill witticism above doesn't neatly match any of the three categories. And, "Anyone who goes to a psychiatrist should have his head examined" (Samuel Goldwyn) may overlap more than one category.

A problem with the Incongruity Theory in its basic form is that, though it proffers a possible *sine qua non* of humor, *by itself* it does not explain why incongruity causes laughter. Why should someone chuckle at Oscar Wilde's "Work, the curse of the drinking classes," a semi-chiasmus sporting a surprise reversal?^[12] Also, *by itself* this theory provides no *raison d'etre* for humor; after all, what social, moral, spiritual, or other gain is achieved by laughing at an incongruity in a "knock knock" or other silly joke? Furthermore, most incongruities are not funny; some are even dead serious. As with any theory, it is insufficient to explain a necessary condition but not the cause.

The Repression Theory, also known as the Relief or Release Theory, advanced by Freud and Spencer, explains the *raison d'etre* and physical reactions to humor.^{[13] [14]} Humor, particularly in the form of trenchant wit, ridicule, and sarcasm, is conceived as a way of expressing repressed desires, and the physical reactions to humor, the giggle or laugh, are viewed as expressions of relief from anxiety, tension or repression. This theory explains Scrooge's Christmas morning laughs after a night of terrifying dreams or the laughter of someone who narrowly escapes death, or even the need to "break the ice" by starting a lecture with a joke. It also explains the lewd or malicious joke insofar as it relieves a repressed desire to engage in unacceptable behavior.^[15] In societies that don't

enjoy humor books and standup comedians, humor is just as much release as entertainment. Moreover, this theory correctly assumes that all physical reactions to humor ostensibly involve an energetic release, even if sometimes subtle, as with inward mirth or a Mona Lisa smile. As conceived by Spencer, laughter is an economical phenomenon to release nervous energy mobilized by incongruities or false expectations.[\[16\]](#)

However, the Repression Theory is stretched when humor is highly intellectual and no repressed desire is being expressed, or the situation is so relaxed that no anxiety is being relieved, as with person viewing a sophisticated New Yorker cartoon or smiling at a funny face. Additionally, this theory fails to fully explain failed jokes, which are discussed in Part II. Furthermore, why should incongruities which characterize all, or almost all, kinds of humor cause an energetic release and be the means of relieving anxiety or expressing repressed desires?

Finally, the Superiority Theory claims that humor appeals to those who coin, hear, or see it because it makes them feel superior to the events or persons who are humor's objects and gives them a comforting feeling of competency, superiority, or control. As articulated by Hobbes, "[T]he passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."[\[17\]](#) Or as noted by Aristotle, "Comedy... is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly."[\[18\]](#) This is somewhat true in relation to the strutting man or woman who slips on ice or the hapless utterer of a malapropism. Also, this theory is widely applicable because the joke teller—or, if he or she gets the joke, the listener—is made to feel relieved, competent, and secure, often at someone else's expense. In addition, this theory subsumes Bergson's notion that humor is an antidote to vanity and promotes social standards by mocking mechanical rigidity, clumsiness, stupidity, hubris, or other disagreeable qualities.[\[19\]](#)

Though the Superiority Theory provides a *raison d'être* for humor, *by itself*, in its basic form, it does not fully explain the physical reactions to humor or the role of incongruity in generating humor. Besides, not all humor generates superiority. For instance, what feeling of superiority comes from making a funny face or performing a funny magic trick? Moreover, like the Churchill reincarnation quip above, many jokes praise rather than ridicule, particularly when a joke character cleverly meets a challenge. Examples are the three-character jokes, such as those involving an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scot, with the Scot or Irishman devising the offbeat clever solution. Furthermore, laughter often rewards "harmless wit" that mocks no one, or Quaker wit, which usually leaves behind no sting or shame.[\[20\]](#)

Though each of these theories correctly explains many aspects of humor, they are like three blindfolded persons each feeling many parts but never the whole elephant. The Superiority Theory supplies motives, for example, to mock others and revel in superiority; the Incongruity Theory helps with means,

including the necessary zany juxtapositions or absurd logic; and the Repression Theory explains motives and manifestations, such as relief of tension, anxiety, and repression via laughter. However, none fully identifies humor's overall purpose in relation to *all* kinds of humor.[21]

4. Enlightenment theory

There is a fourth way, a more comprehensive theory that doesn't contradict but rather complements and subsumes the others. This theory, like the others, can be distilled into one word, "Enlightenment," but not an 18th century Enlightenment or Kantian intellectual enlightenment.[22] Instead it is a philosophical and spiritual enlightenment sought in philosophy and in wisdom traditions such as Buddhism, especially those traditions embodying moral principles beyond ordinary concepts of good and evil. This is the enlightenment of Plato's cave, the gaining of insight or awakening to the true nature of reality, a concept of enlightenment that underlies ancient belief systems still adhered to by billions of people and reflected in the yearnings of Western and Eastern philosophers over the millennia. Such enlightenment is not based on ordinary knowledge or intellect, nor necessarily associated with visions or supernatural experiences; rather it is the wisdom of a higher life without many Earthly attachments. Enlightenment's doctrines include transcending egoism; avoiding attachment to worldly desires and possessions; cultivating gratitude for ordinary life experiences; accepting the world as it is; and living in the present moment. A fundamental aspect of such enlightenment is seeing the interconnectedness of things and transcending worldly dualities, in contrast to established "Manichaeism" religions that contrast good and evil, saved and damned, belief and heresy. It's the kind of enlightenment akin to Zen's "satori."

The Enlightenment Theory explains humor's causes and physical reactions. Humor "enlightens" the observer by making him more wise and competent, by temporarily relieving him of the anxieties, emotional afflictions, and dross of daily life, and by temporarily restoring him to the more blissful condition he would enjoy without such burdens.[23]

The twist to the theory is this reversal: Enlightenment, with its smiles and laughs, is the natural state of a person without earthly attachments, so humor restores a person to his or her natural state rather than elevate him to a different state. Enlightenment is the consciousness of true being that is otherwise submerged by a socially constructed "reality," a notion echoing the Nietzschean concept of laughter as an expression of liberation coming from the height of existence.[24] [25] In other words, in the state of enlightenment, a "higher" plane of existence, all things not violating universal laws are possible, including absurd incongruities, so the joke merely restores the person to that higher realm of complementary contradictions and incongruities.[26] As discussed below, humor's goal, then, is to detach from and transcend the burdensome realm of dualities and restore a higher realm of experience, emotion, and logic. Laughter is not created but rather revealed, just as literary and musical works are sometimes not necessarily created but arguably discovered.[27]

This Enlightenment Theory incorporates but also reorients the Repression Theory. Rather than humor relieving anxiety or repression, under this new theory humor temporarily restores a natural physical and emotional state by momentarily lifting that unbearable heaviness of being. The joke merely releases the ballast of social repression that keeps laughter under control. Even the word "enlightenment" refers more to removing a burden than to adding a lighter substance. The Enlightenment Theory also complements the notion that someone beset by severe anxiety caused by threat or illness is often more open to enlightenment than someone seemingly contented, because those facing misfortune are more prone to seeing the absurdity and humor in false duality.[\[28\]](#)

Similarly, this new theory incorporates the Incongruity Theory but partially reverses it. Humor results not just by surprising someone with incongruity but also by temporarily restoring someone's consciousness to a state where seeming incongruities are the rule, not the exception. As expressed by Maslow, "At the level of self-actualizing, many dichotomies become resolved, opposites are seen to be unities and the whole dichotomous way of thinking is recognized to be immature."[\[29\]](#) Humor temporarily restructures the ordinary matrix of thought in which contradictions of daily existence are not resolved. After all, resolving incongruity is a source of enlightenment, as per the Zen Koan technique of transcending false duality and achieving enlightenment by confronting students with absurd contradictions, like the sound of one hand clapping, and asking them to resolve the contradictions.[\[30\]](#) One difference between the joke and the Koan is that with humor the contradiction is usually illuminated or even resolved.[\[31\]](#) (Alternatively, many a Koan is a joke without a punch line.) Often the greater the contradiction or incongruity, the greater the enlightenment and the physical reactions it awakens.

Connecting incongruous phenomena in humor achieves enlightenment since enlightenment depends on revealing interconnectedness, a yearning of so many fields of human endeavor as exemplified by the concepts of Unified Field Theory, nonlocality and "quantum-interconnectedness" in physics, Six Degrees of Separation in sociology, Indra's Net in Hindu and Buddhist theology, and The Glass Bead Game involving "interwangled" knowledge in Hermann Hesse's Nobel-prize-winning futuristic novel of that name.

Enlightenment from incongruity mostly arises because life is filled with paradoxes and contradictions into which we seek insight. The enlightening aspect of, "The doctor felt his *purse* and said there was no hope," is not only the mockery of medical greed but also that switching a single letter in a word can have profound consequences, as with many a pun.[\[32\]](#) Zen humor actually uses incongruity to directly achieve enlightenment and break down false dualities. *Senior Monk to Dying Master*: "Do you have any last words of wisdom for our young monks?" *Master*: "Truth is like a river." *Young Monk*: "Master, what do you mean by that?" *Master*: "OK. Truth is not like a river." This Zen exchange amuses because it is dualistic: Either the dying monk is exasperated by the question or else inspired to show the absurdity of such philosophical notions, or both.[\[33\]](#)

A prime example of incongruity and enlightenment is the chiasmus, that Möbius strip of wit, a classic being Samuel Johnson's review (attributed) of a young man's manuscript: "Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good." Compare Abe Lincoln's book review (attributed): "People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like." The chiasmus and semi-chiasmus, like "Time's fun when you're having flies" (Kermit the Frog), spawn much humor. With Johnson's chiasmus the incongruity is between initial praise for something entirely virtuous followed by criticism for everything utterly meritless. The enlightenment comes from realizing that things are not always what they seem to be.

Similarly the Enlightenment Theory subsumes the Superiority Theory because the humorist or listener is momentarily made to feel wise, competent, or superior to worldly circumstances presented by the humor. Choosing Enlightenment rather than Superiority means restoring an original superiority rather than newly elevating one to superiority. Sometimes the Superiority Theory may actually account for enlightenment insofar as the jest at another's expense is "educational" because it reveals a foible and encourages its correction. As Bergson observed, "A humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist [of human behavior]."[\[34\]](#)

The Enlightenment Theory also accounts for the disparate reactions to humor because, when humor releases the socially induced ballast all at once, the belly laugh results, whereas the smile is only leaking ballast. It is the suddenness and quick repetition of the release usually determines the response's intensity. For instance, the rapidity and connectedness of jokes told by a standup comedian largely creates the intensity. An illustration is the list of causes of philosophers' deaths: Freud/slip, Plato/cave in, Heraclitus/second plunge in same river, Ockham/razor cut, Sartre/nausea, Hegel/dispirited, etc. A single entry alone is hardly amusing, but as the list is cleverly expanded, the cumulative result is funny.

The reason why humor depends on surprise and can elicit a sudden, intense physical response while other manifestations of enlightenment are quite different is that enlightenment ranges between two principal manifestations, one Dionysian, the other more Apollonian. The more Apollonian manifestation may emerge from deep relaxation or extended efforts to achieve enlightenment via study, mindfulness, prayer or meditation, and is characterized by awe, wonder, contentment, and often an intense aesthetic appreciation of the world. The Dionysian manifestation, the product of a joke, prank or intoxicant, is characterized by surprise, sudden elation, and perhaps momentary dissolution of the ego. Standing high on a slagheap of crude humor hardly equals the lasting enlightenment following years of study, prayer, or meditation, but crude humor can achieve instant glimpses of enlightenment by exposing incongruities from the most repressed parts of the psyche.[\[35\]](#)

The Enlightenment Theory also explains why a joke heard a second time is usually not as funny because the listener is less

enlightened by something already experienced.[36] However, the Incongruity and Superiority Theories struggle to explain this phenomenon because under those theories it is not obvious why incongruity or mockery, when repeated, should not produce the same laughs.

Moreover, the Enlightenment Theory is supported by the idiomatic and metaphoric words that characterize humor and good cheer, such as "buoyant," "light-hearted," "footloose," "fancy free," and "intoxicated." Another linguistic indication is that intoxicated persons unable to contain their laughter are deemed "high"; to many people high on drugs, most everything is funny. (And there's not much sound difference between discovery's "aha" and humor's "ha ha.") Also, supposedly many sages freed from worldly attachments constantly laugh or smile, as with the laughing Buddha. Other than a madman—but yet some madmen, too—anyone constantly smiling and laughing is often regarded as having that kind of enlightenment which bestows happiness.

Thus the four Theories form a tetrahedron: Incongruity, Repression, and Superiority, all explainable in terms of Enlightenment, are the three upward sides complementing each other, while Enlightenment is the foundation. So if the three prior theories explain and represent *motivation* (Superiority), *means* (Incongruity), and *motivation and manifestations* (Repression), Enlightenment represents fundamental *meaning and purpose*.

5. Consequences of the new theory

The reorientation posited by the Enlightenment Theory seems simple, but that's what Ockham's razor, the principle of parsimony, is all about, for the simplest, most inclusive theory is usually the best. This notion especially applies when the new theory incorporates the others without contradicting them.[37] The shift from "release from repression" to "restoration of original consciousness" has profound consequences.

Laughter's domain is often a totally "fictional" interconnected universe where everything is possible: Animals speak, people talk to God, St. Peter engages in humorous exchanges at the Pearly Gates as does the Devil in the dark recesses of Hell, and light bulbs are screwed in by groups of ethnic peoples. The fictional worlds of humor are typically much more divorced from "reality" than those depicted in serious literature, since humor's rules are less attached to social norms or laws of a Newtonian universe. Consider, for instance, the Monty Python philosophers' football sketch, pitting a German team of Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, et al. against a Greek team of Heraclitus, Plato, Sophocles, Archimedes, et al., which would not be subject matter for serious fiction. Humor exists in the realm of all possibilities, unrestrained by physical, temporal, moral, and social constraints of everyday life or even of the universes revealed in literary fiction.

In humor, the plurality of worlds is flattened into a single interconnected universe, so characters from different nested, parallel, or intersecting universes may interact with each other on the same plane of existence, at the same place in space-

time.[38] [39] Even a character can meet itself at different places in space-time, as when Mark Twain recounted a Havana museum that exhibited two skulls of Christopher Columbus, "one when he was a boy, and one when he was a man." Characters may even travel any direction in space-time, e.g., travel back or forward in time, or "spatially" move from one world to another, or both.[40] Characters' behaviors may also contradict their personalities and life stories. Thus, humor may remove or ignore existential discontinuities and boundaries.[41] The extent of temporal, spatial, or social distance between characters may accentuate the humor since the greater the leap of imagination, the greater enlightenment: *Question*: "What did the Buddha say to the hotdog man?" *Answer*: "Make me one with everything."

What makes a joke, quip, or malapropism especially funny is both the incongruity and the revelation coming from it, so the observer is enlightened not only in the sense of restoration to happiness but also in his social, moral, or spiritual outlooks. As Bergson wrote:

Laughter, then, does not belong to the province of aesthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement. And yet there is something aesthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.[42]

It's easy to understand the emotional enlightenment but not always the social, moral, or spiritual one. For example, what enlightenment comes from slipping on a banana peel? The answer emerges if we look closely. When a disabled person falls in the street, the natural reaction is concern, but when a strutting, well-dressed man or woman slips, we laugh. The enlightenment, as implied by Bergson, arises from dispelling vanity insofar as everyone prideful or overconfident is in for a "fall." [43] The incongruity is the self-assured person mechanically going about life without a care, juxtaposed with the fallen person, humbled and humiliated.[44] Even humorous scatology enlightens, because in a society obsessed with cleanliness it's useful to challenge taboos and be reminded of life's basics. More broadly stated, humor enables a sudden substitution of "reality" or truth for deception, self-deception, or error, thus providing enlightenment.

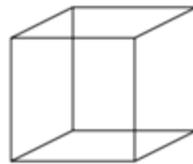
As with literary fiction, understanding the "real" or fictional world of the joke is vital for humor to succeed because understanding is a key to enlightenment. Unlike the serious realistic novel or story where the aesthetic universe is amply populated with well-described characters, events, and surroundings created or discovered by the author, the joke usually provides only a brief glimpse into real or fictional worlds and only minimal narrative and character development.[45] Also, unlike serious drama or literature, where characters take on substantial meaning and importance to the audience, in humor the character may have minimal importance to the audience who laughs at him or her. Yet when the listener is unfamiliar with the worlds or characters

quickly revealed, the joke fails.[46]

For instance, to fully enjoy the following fictional dialogue the listener must know who Hemingway and Toulouse-Lautrec were. *Hemingway to Taxi Driver*: "Do you like Toulouse-Lautrec?" *Taxi Driver (either ignorant or mocking Hemingway's pretentiousness)*: "I don't like to lose nobody." (From Ira Wallach's *Hopalong-Freud Rides Again*) Consider also this real courtroom exchange: *Judge*: "Do you have anything to say before sentencing?" *Prisoner convicted of robbery, opening a folding wallet in front of his mouth*: "Yes. Beam me up, Scotty!" Not knowing Star Trek would mute the humor.

With jokes utilizing only factual material for both frames of reference, the same principle applies, that the listener must understand the factual material or else miss the humor. There is little difference between fact and fiction in devising a joke because, in humor, real and fictional characters can easily wormhole into each other's worlds with equal effect, and real, fictional, and fictionalized characters meet each other in many jokes.[47] [48] "Superman, Santa Claus, and a blonde see a \$100 bill on the sidewalk. Who grabs it first? (Pause) The blonde—the other two don't exist."

With tragic drama, we temporarily pretend the fictional, suspend the real or our disbelief in the fictional, or otherwise focus on the fictional world.[49] With humor, we meld the two worlds, the two frames of reference, in that we simultaneously see both sides of the Janus face or both cubes in the Necker Cube (see illustration below), which releases a burst of energy like matter meeting antimatter.[50]



Necker Cube

Though often used to mock eccentricity and social foibles, humor, rooted in the realm of all possibilities, exists in that aesthetic dimension, that realm of critical thought which often stands against the established reality.[51] This is why humor books and standup comedians may thrive in a free society but suffer in a totalitarian one, and why a cartoon may be more potent than a diatribe. As expressed by Jean Paul, "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom." [52]

The Enlightenment Theory fits with the humorlessness of many established religions. For example, in the Bible and the Koran laughter and mirth are mentioned almost exclusively in relation to mockery or to the saved who will laugh while the damned will suffer.[53] Organized religions typically divide the world between faithful and heretical, good and evil, and saved and damned, so the melding of wildly imaginative incongruities, the very stuff of humor, is often alien to established religions. Religion may inspire but not always enlighten; it asks for faith in beliefs, unlike humor, which often juxtaposes good and bad, true and false, without judging either. Religion abhors temptation, but humor brags that it "can resist anything—except temptation." (Oscar Wilde)[54]

6. Conclusion

As argued above, all arrows point to Enlightenment. Each of the other main theories favors Enlightenment since Enlightenment is served by release of repression and anxiety, is nurtured by confronting or resolving incongruities from multiple frames of reference, and is reflected in laughter from the "height of existence." The fictional worlds of jokes and wit contemplate all possible, and even impossible, events in space-time and the interconnected, entangled universe— the very field of Enlightenment Theory. Moreover, jokes and wit enlighten because they often reflect a higher logic that breeds incongruities, the strange logic of paradoxes and transfinite numbers in which parts can equal wholes, things may not equal themselves, and quantities can be both equal and unequal to other quantities. "The future ain't what it used to be." (Yogi Berra) (a thing unequal to itself) "A gentleman is one who never hurts anyone's feelings unintentionally." (Oscar Wilde) (a whole equal yet unequal to a part) "I have a higher . . . standard of principle than George Washington. He could not lie; I can, but I won't." (Mark Twain) (something unequal yet also equal to something else)

Perhaps one way to prove the Enlightenment Theory's virtues is to show how it meets challenges that the other theories may or may not meet. We attempt to do that in Part II of this article.

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The author thanks the *Contemporary Aesthetics* reviewers whose time, effort, and critiques made this article better. "Whenever people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong." (Oscar Wilde)

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Endnotes

[1] William F. Fry, "The Biology of Humor," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 7, 2 (1994), 111-26; J.E. Caron, "From Ethology to Aesthetics: Evolution as a Theoretical Paradigm for Research on Laughter, Humor and Other Comic Phenomena", *HUMOR: Journal of Humor Research*, 15, 3 (2002), 245-81; M. Gervais and D.S. Wilson, "The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humor: A Synthetic Approach," *Quarterly Review of Biology*, 80, 4 (2005), 395-430; Glenn E. Weisfeld, "Humor Appreciation as an Adaptive Esthetic Emotion," *HUMOR: Journal of Humor Research*, 19, 1 (2006), 1-26.

[2] Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Pity and Fear Fictions?,"

British Journal of Aesthetics, 21, 4 (1981), 291-304; Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy*, 75, 1 (1978), 5-27; Mark Packer, "Dissolving the Paradox of Tragedy," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 47, 3 (1989), 211-19; Christopher Williams, "Is Tragedy Paradoxical?," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38, 1 (1998), 47-62.

[3] Charles R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), pp. 10-11.

[4] "Humor has many faces: comedy, farce, burlesque, the witticism, the conceit, the joke, the jest; banter, badinage, persiflage, satire, parody, caricature; the funny, the laughable, the ludicrous, the jocular, the facetious the droll, the ridiculous, the comic, the absurd, the fantastic, the grotesque. . . One could characterise the shades and colours of humor almost indefinitely." Harold Osborne, "Humour and the Aesthetic," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 21, 3 (1981), 287-88; ref. on 287.

[5] J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923) accounts for 88 theories of humor, though most borrow from others and are not substantially different. Joshua Shaw, however, notes a relative dearth of "current philosophic scholarship on humor." "Philosophy of Humor," *Philosophy Compass*, 5, 2 (2010), 112-26; ref. on 118-19.

[6] D. H. Monro, "Theories of Humor," in *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* (3d ed.), eds. L. Behrens and L. J. Rosen (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman & Co., 1988), pp. 349-55; "Humor" in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/h/humor.htm>.

[7] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, E.F.J. Payne, trans. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), vol. I, p. 59 (sec. 13).

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), bk. II, part I, para. 54.

[9] In general, see Mike W. Martin, "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 23, 1 (1983), 74-85.

[10] Arthur Koestler used the term "bisociation" to reflect the intersection of such frames of reference. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1975), pp. 35-36.

[11] Richard F. Taflinger, *Sitcom: What it is, How it Works. A Theory of Comedy*, <http://www.wsu.edu/~taflinge/theory.html> (1996), chap. 6.

[12] A "chiasmus" is a rhetorical device having two or more phrases related to each other through a reversal of structures and inverted parallelism in order to make a larger point. For example, "Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go." (Oscar Wilde) A semi-chiasmus contains a reversal but only in one phrase since the inverted parallel phrase is implied. An "antimetabole," a species of chiasmus, repeats the same words in successive phrases, but in transposed order, each phrase having the same grammatical

structure. For instance, "It's not the men in my life; it's the life in my men." (Mae West)

[13] Sigmund Freud, "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, A. A. Brill, trans. (New York: Random House, 1938), pp. 631-803.

[14] Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," in *Illustrations of Universal Progress: A Series of Discussions* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1864), pp. 194-209 (chap. IV).

[15] Freud, "Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious," pp. 696-97.

[16] Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," pp. 200-04. Compare Freud, "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious," pp. 712-14.

[17] Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* (1650), chap. IX, sec. 13.

[18] *Poetics*, sec. 1449a.

[19] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Cloudesley Brereton & Fred Rothwell, trans. (New York: MacMillan Co., 1914), chap. III, sec. II.

[20] "Harmless wit" is a term employed by Freud, "Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious," pp. 688-90.

[21] For an excellent, succinct critique of these theories, see Noël Carroll, "Humor," in *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2005), pp. 344-65 (chap. 19).

[22] Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* (1784).

[23] See Lydia Amir, "Humor as a Virtue: Pride, Humility and Humiliation," *International Journal of Philosophical Practice*, 1, 3 (2002), 1-9, hypothesizing that humor is a vehicle for truth and wisdom.

[24] See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 104-28, on socially constructed reality and "universe maintenance."

[25] See John Lippitt, "Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32, 1 (1992), 39-49; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 231-33 (sec. 294). Most importantly, see John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany, NY: State U. of New York Press, 1999), pp. 54-55, 59-60, showing laughter as a reaction to and manifestation of enlightenment.

[26] An excellent example is Gary Larson's "The Far Side" cartoons, as discussed in Gary Larson, *The PreHistory of the Far Side: A Tenth Anniversary Exhibit* (New York: Andrews McMeel, 1989).

[27] R.A. Sharpe, "Could Beethoven Have 'Discovered' the

Archduke Trio," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41, 3 (2001), 325-27; Julian Dodd, "Musical Works As Eternal Types," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40, 4 (2000), 424-40; Donald Walkout, "Discovery and Creation in Music," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 45, 2 (1986), 193-95.

[28] Compare Bergson who argues: "It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion." (*Laughter*, chap. I, sec. 1)

This is arguably incorrect since people who have just successfully confronted danger may burst out laughing.

Professor Morreall theorizes that laughter originated as a gesture of shared relief at the passing of danger. John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: State U. of New York Press, 1983), pp. 45-46.

[29] Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1968), p. 207.

[30] Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), pp. 154-73 (part II, chap. 3).

[31] "To know the answers [to the koans] without having so discovered them would be like studying the map without taking the journey. Lacking the actual shock of recognition, the bare answers seem flat and disappointing, and obviously no competent [Zen] master would be deceived by anyone who gave them without genuine feeling." *Ibid.*, p. 160.

[32] As Aristotle wrote: "The effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word; this too is a surprise. You find this in verse as well as in prose. The word which comes is not what the hearer imagined." *Rhetoric*, bk. III, chap. 11, sec. 6.

[33] For Zen and humor, see Conrad Hyers, "Humor in Zen: Comic Midwifery," *Philosophy East & West*, 39, 3 (1989), 267-77. "[H]umor in Zen is often a kind of comic midwifery in the Socratic sense of a technique for precipitating (or provoking) an inner realization of the truth." *Ibid.*, p. 270. See also John Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," *Philosophy East & West* 39, 3 (1989), 243-65; ref. on 257-63.

[34] Bergson, *Laughter*, chap. II, sec. II.

[35] This distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian experiences of enlightenment echoes the distinction between Zen's *kensho*, that first glimpse of enlightenment, and *satori*, that lasting realization of enlightenment.

[36] One exception is the joke not understood the first time told. Compare Stephen Davies, "Bob, Little Jim, Bluebottle, and the Three Stooges," *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics (British Journal of Aesthetics)*, 5, 1 (2008), 1-6; ref. on 3-5, regarding the humorous effects of catchphrases used repeatedly, though arguably each humorous use of a catchphrase is a new joke since the context is different.

[37] "[T]he new theory might be simply a higher level theory than those known before, one that linked together a whole group of lower level theories without substantially changing

any." Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1970), vol. II, no. 2, p. 95. On Kuhnian theory as applied to aesthetics, see Daniel Shaw, "A Kuhnian Metatheory for Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 45, 1 (1986), 29-39.

[38] For the concept of nested art and thus nested worlds in literature, see Paisley Livingston, "Nested Art," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 61, 3 (2003), 233-46; Robin Le Poidevin, "Worlds Within Worlds? The Paradoxes of Embedded Fiction," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35, 3 (1995), 227-38.

[39] See Paul Bloom and Deena Skolnick, "Intuitive Cosmology of Fictional Worlds" in *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, ed. Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2006), pp. 73-86; ref. on pp. 80-81.

[40] See Robin Le Poidevin, "Time and Truth in Fiction," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28, 3 (1988), 248-58, regarding transworld characters and temporal positions of fictional characters.

[41] Gerhard Hoffmann, "The Comic and Sublime in Postmodern American Fiction: Comedy and Humor in Contemporary Culture," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Discourse*, ed. Herbert Grabes (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994), pp. 231-283, ref. on p. 281. For these reasons, humor achieves instant glimpses of enlightenment that most forms of literary, musical, and artistic expression cannot.

[42] Bergson, *Laughter*, chap. I, sec. II.

[43] *Ibid.*, chap. III, sec. II.

[44] *Ibid.*, chap. I, sec. I.

[45] Amie L. Thomasson, "Fictional Characters and Literary Practices," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, 2 (2003), 138-57, regarding creation, discovery, and ontology of fictional characters. Compare James Harold, "The Value of Fictional Worlds (or Why 'The Lord of the Rings' is Worth Reading)," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 8 (2010), sec. 2, on the relationships between fictional works, worlds, and characters.

[46] See Peter Kivy, "Jokes are a Laughing Matter," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 61, 1 (2003), 5-15; ref. on 6, noting that jokes are "conditional," relying on "stock of knowledge or belief."

[47] Besides, who knows who's "real" and who's fictional? A 2008 canvass showed that a substantial number of British teenagers believed Winston Churchill was fictional but Sherlock Holmes, King Arthur, and Eleanor Rigby real. *Telegraph*, 4 February 2008.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1577511/Winston-Churchill-didnt-really-exist-say-teens.html>

[48] In the same fashion, arguably there is little difference in the role of fiction and nonfiction narratives in forming beliefs. See Melanie C. Green, "Transportation Into Narrative Worlds: Implications for the Self," in *On Building, Defending, and Regulating the Self: A Psychological Perspective*, eds.

Abraham Tesser, Joanne Wood & Diederik Stapel (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), pp. 53-75; ref. on p. 56. Compare Sarah Worth, "Narrative Understanding and Understanding Narrative," *Contemporary Aesthetics 2* (2004), secs. 4-6 regarding narrative in both fact and fiction.

[49] For different approaches to pitying fictions, see Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 21, 4 (1981), 291-304; Stephen Davies, "Responding Emotionally to Fictions," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 67, 3 (2009), 269-84.

[50] Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, pp. 93-95.

[51] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

[52] Jean Paul, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, 1804, a quote mentioned by Freud, "Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious," p. 634, though A.A. Brill's translation is: "Freedom begets wit and wit begets freedom."

[53] See, e.g., Samuel Joeckel [good aptronym], "Funny as Hell: Christianity and Humor Reconsidered," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 21, 4 (2008), 415-33.

[54] Ignacio L. Götz, "Humor and Faith," in *Faith, Humor, and Paradox* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), pp. 101-13 (chap. 8).