The Function and Content of Amusement[1]

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Abstract

Once we establish that the fundamental subject matter of the study of humour is a mental state – which I will call *finding funny* – then it immediately follows that we need to find the content and function of this mental state. The main contender for the content of *finding funny* is the incongruous (the *incongruity thesis*); the main contenders for the function of *finding funny* are grounded either in its generally being an enjoyable state (the *gratification thesis*) or its tendency to lead to biased social attitudes (the *favouritism thesis*). While all three of these families of claims are well-supported and individually plausible, the situation looks different once we attempt to unify our accounts of the content and function of *finding funny*. While functions based in the gratification thesis readily combine with the incongruity thesis, it is not at all clear how the phenomenon described by the favouritism thesis arises from a state with this content. The upshot is that we may have to sideline the favouritism thesis in our theory of humour.

The philosophical discussion of humour has been sporadic; while it is true that important writers have broached the subject of humour – among them Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer, Shaftesbury, and Bergson – most of them have touched on the topic only briefly, and it has yet to be the subject of sustained philosophical discussion over time. Indeed, more work on humour has been carried on outside of philosophy – by psychologists, sociologists, and biologists – than by philosophers. One consequence of this is that we as yet have no clear sense of what a comprehensive theory of humour would look like.[2] Philosophers are by no means the only writers on humour suited to outlining the structure of a comprehensive theory of humour, but they are perhaps most *inclined* to do so, and their relative absence from the area may explain the absence of attention at this general level. This paper presses the need for, and explores the prospects for, unifying two central aspects of theory of humor: its content and function.

The initial task that we want any theory to perform is to identify the subject matter of our theorizing. What is a theory of humour about? What aspects of the world does it identify, describe, and explain? Perhaps more importantly, a theory of humour will single out certain aspects of the world as being more *fundamental* than others, by giving them a central role in explaining the occurrence of other aspects related to humour.

2   This observation is also made by John Morreall (1982:243).

In the first section of this paper, I will argue that the fundamental entity picked out by a theory of humour should be a state of mind, that of *finding something funny*.

This result immediately points us toward a further task that a theory of humour needs to perform. First, given that its fundamental entity is a state of mind, a theory of humour needs to tell us both the *content* and the *function* of this state of mind: What, precisely, is this *something* that we find funny? What role does *finding funny* play in our lives? I look at the main contenders for answers to these questions in Sections II and III. Furthermore, as I argue in Section IV, an acceptable theory of humour needs to show us how the content of *finding funny* is *related* to its function. The prospects for such a unification look better for one account of the function of humour than for another.

1. Humour's Ontology: Finding something funny

The first thing that any theory of humour must do is *identify* that about which we are theorizing; these are the theory's ontological commitments. Just as a theory in biology includes the concepts of *gene* and *species*, and a theory in epistemology includes the concepts of *knowledge* and *evidence*, a theory of humour will have its concepts, which label the things, processes, and states of affairs with which it is concerned. The more obvious phenomena recognized by a theory of humour will include *laughter*, *amusement*, *comedy*, and *jokes*.

Furthermore, a complete theory will tell us that certain of these entities are in some way more fundamental than others. A theory in biology may take genes to be more fundamental than species; this will be reflected in the direction of explanations that the purveyor of such a theory offers; genetic properties, such a theorist may say, is the source of individual change, not specific properties. An epistemological theorist may do something similar; seeing knowledge as more fundamental than evidence, she may say that evidence is to be understood in terms of how it leads us to knowledge. There may be alternative theorists who deny this direction of fundamentality.[3] In this section, I want to defend the thought that a theory of humour should take as its fundamental target the psychological state of *finding something funny*.

Certain central cases of humour involve two roles, which I will refer to as 'performer' and 'audience-member'. In such central cases, a performer (one or more individuals) attempts to elicit a response from her audience (one or more individuals). The performer may be a writer, speaker, or maker of sounds or movements; audience members are readers, hearers, or observers of such movements. We have names for many of the typical actions that performers undertake in order to achieve the desired response from their audience: jokes, puns, sight gags, facial distortions, mimicry, and mockery, to name but a few. In the face of this interactive dynamic, a researcher of humour might think that performers lie at the heart of a theory of humour. I think that this is incorrect.

That performers are not, *by themselves*, fundamental to the study of humour is revealed in the fact that performers are best understood as attempting to bring about a response in their audience members. A comedic performer is acting in order to elicit a response, and her performance is judged (at least partly) in terms of how successful this attempt is. The focus of a theory of humour, then, will not be primarily upon performers; it must also focus on the intended audience response for itself. So, a theory of

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3   In biology, this is done by the defenders of the *group* as a unit of natural selection; see, e.g., Sober and Wilson (1998). In epistemology, Timothy Williamson has recently argued that evidence and knowledge are equally basic; see Williamson (1997).

humour must focus its attention on either the *interaction* between performers and audiences, or the *responses* that performers attempt to elicit.

The former cannot be adequate. A theory of humour is not, at least fundamentally, about the *interaction* between performers and audiences, because there are many situations that do not include a performer, but with which a theory of humour nevertheless should be concerned. We often find things funny, although they do not in anyway involve another person intentionally attempting to elicit this state in us. For example, we are often amused by the behaviour and appearance of animals or young children, even though neither can be said to attempt to bring this response about in us. We also laugh at the unintentional behaviour of other adults, perhaps most paradigmatically when someone unintentionally embarrasses herself. Indeed, much performer humour involves the performer's intentional impersonation of someone who is unintentionally doing something funny; Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, who extremely carefully and skillfully impersonate bumbling, clumsy, and otherwise unfortunate but laughable characters, are excellent examples of this.

The recognition that what elicits the comedic response may or may not be something human, or some human intentional action, should lead us to conclude that the primary focus of the theory of humour should be neither the performer's behaviour nor the interaction between a performer and his audience. Rather, the fundamental focus of a theory of humour should be the comedic response, an individual agent's mental state. This mental state goes by various names in the literature on humor; Michael Clark, for example, calls it 'amusement' (Clark 1971:22), while Ronald de Sousa calls it 'mirth' (De Sousa 1987:277). I will refer to it as 'finding funny', a neologism whose awkwardness is intended to remind the reader throughout the paper that our concern is with a particular mental state.

Asserting the fundamentality of *finding funny* in a theory of humour amounts, primarily, to a decision to use that state in explanations of other comedic phenomena. A comic performance, for example, should be understood as an attempt to elicit the state of *finding funny* in an audience. *Finding funny* will also be used to explain the occurrence of the whole spectrum of behaviors that makes up our humour responses: laughing, smiling, snorting, raising our eyebrows, or feeling a lightening of our moods.

2. Humour's Content: What do we find funny?

To reject the centrality of the comedic performance is not to deny that finding something funny is always a response to and about something. On the contrary, the comedic response is an intentional state with representational content. It is both dependent upon and intertwined with an agent's beliefs or pretences regarding what is before him or what is said. *Finding funny* is, in all cases, a matter of finding *something* funny.

What is this 'something'? In writings on humour, the only real contenders for the intentional object of *finding funny* more or less fall within the broad family of the unexpected, the inappropriate, or most commonly, the incongruous. The claim that the incongruous is what we find funny can be traced back to Aristotle, but the position was not given an extensive airing until Francis Hutcheson in 1750 and Arthur Schopenhauer in 1818.[4] John Morreall, who has perhaps devoted more attention to humour than any other philosopher in recent years, writes:

> The basic idea behind the incongruity theory is very general and quite simple.
> We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns

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4   Hutcheson (1973/1750); Schopenhauer's comments are to be found in *The World as Will and Representation*, I:13.

> among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience
> something that doesn't fit into these patterns. (Morreall, 1983:15-16)

The claim that incongruity is the object of all humour has its critics, and there is
clearly a great deal of work to be done in making more precise the notion of incongru-
ity involved in humour.[5] However, there is a great deal of support for the idea that hu-
mour is a response to, at, and about incongruities or something closely related to them.
From childish laughter at physical differences and deformities to laughter at embar-
rassments to sophisticated puns and wordplay, the vast majority of humour seems to
involve something like a juxtaposition that one does not anticipate or an expectation
that is violated. Supporters of this claim have used it to explain a number of features of
humour, such as why it is unique to human beings, why what is found funny varies
from person to person and culture to culture, and how comedy can be seen as a cata-
lyst of social or attitudinal change.[6]

It is useful (although not uncontroversial) to gloss an agent's contentful mental states
as a kind of *commitment* (see Brandom, 1994: Chapter 3). Thus, a belief is a commit-
ment to the truth of some state of affairs, and the state of *finding funny*, says the incon-
gruity theorist, is a commitment to there being incongruity before her in some way. As
commitments, all mental states are susceptible to response and challenge; of any men-
tal state that an agent is in, it *makes sense* – even if it is not correct – to say to the
agent that she should or should not be in that mental state. As such, mental states are
all, we might say, in the 'space of reasons'. Accordingly, the content of an agent's men-
tal state is revealed, at least partly, in the particular responses and challenges that it can
call forth in others. Like all mental states, *finding funny* is susceptible to challenge and
disagreement. When someone finds a performance funny that I do not, I might explain
to her that I found the performance 'obvious', 'predictable', 'old' or 'monotonous'. Each
of these responses fits well with the idea that what we find funny is the unexpected or
incongruous.

The claim that the content of *finding funny* is the incongruous also fits well with the
fact that *finding funny* is to be contrasted with *taking seriously*. When I am serious, I
am deeply focused on my own concerns, my own expectations of how my life and the
world are, will be, and should be. When I find something funny, in contrast, my ex-
pectations are less important to me; I have experienced a break in my attention to
norms, rules, or regularities. This fits well with the idea that, in laughing at something,
I am aware of an incongruity; my expectations have been violated, and I am respond-
ing to that fact. 'The person who has a humorous attitude toward life,' Morreall writes,
'has the capacity for distancing himself from the practical aspects of most situations,
and simply enjoying the many incongruities he experiences or thinks up.' (Morreall
1983: 122)

The claim that incongruities are inherent in finding something funny has a good deal
going for it. However, even if we were to discover everything about the *content* of hu-
mour, we would by no means have a complete theory of humour. The claim that the
content of humour is the incongruous does not tell us what part the phenomenon plays
in our behavioral economy: what is this mental response to an incongruity *doing* for
us? Without an answer to this question, we will have no account of why we enter such

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5   For a criticism of the centrality of incongruity to humour, see Scruton (1982: Section 5). For an attempt
    to clarify the kinds of incongruity involved in humour, see Feinberg (1992).

6   For the first two points, see Hutcheson (1973/1750), Section II. For the third point, see Morreall (1983:
    Chapter 10.

a mental state; why we have a response of this kind to incongruity. So, the theory of humour needs more than an account of the content of *finding funny*. We need to know what is accomplished when we find something funny, what *function* it serves, and what role it plays in our lives.

3. Humour's Function: What does finding funny do for us?

It is common for writers on comedy to refer to the claim that the content of humour is the incongruous as the 'incongruity *theory*', and to set it up against its two 'rivals', the so-called 'superiority *theory*' and the 'relief *theory*'. Francis Hutcheson, for example, begins his *Reflections Upon Laughter* with an attack on Hobbes' superiority claims, and then he moves to defend his own claims about incongruity. More recently, we find D.H. Monro (1963), Michael Clark (1971), and Morreall (1983), three of the most influential twentieth-century philosophical writers on humour, structuring their writings around an apparent *competition* between these camps.[7]

This is a mistake. These two alternatives are best seen *from the outset* not as rivals but as claims concerned with an aspect of humour that is different from that with which the incongruity claim is concerned. Claims about superiority and relief in humour are not rival *theories* regarding the *content* of humour, but two *theses* best seen as describing the *behavioural tendencies* of those who are in the state of *finding funny*. They are both concerned with 'what happens' when we find an incongruity funny. As a consequence, either story might fit into a comprehensive theory of humour by providing us with a *functional role* for the state of *finding funny*. As such, the superiority and relief theses are not competitors of the incongruity thesis, but rather potential complements for it.

Relief and Gratification

The family of claims about humour often described as the 'relief' theses is unified by the thought that the state of *finding funny* involves some kind of pleasure.

A few early psychologists posited a form of *mental tension*, from which we escape in finding something funny. L.W. Kline took this tension to derive from norms and expectations guiding our thought, and the focus of attention necessary to guide ourselves through life; *finding funny*, Kline suggests, is a moment in which these tensions are released (Kline, 1907). In his earlier book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud spent a great deal of time comparing joke-telling to dreaming. Like dreaming, Freud claims, much humour involves a lifting of the repression of sexual and aggressive desires (Freud, 1905: Section VI).

As the mental tensions to which Kline and Freud were committed were not popular among the following generations of psychologists, later versions of the relief thesis dropped the thought that the pleasure involved in *finding funny* involves a kind of relief or release. As the psychologist Daniel E. Berlyne writes:

> the underlying notion of a quantity of pent-up 'nerve force', 'energy', 'excitation', or 'tension' that demands release receives little support from our present knowledge of how the nervous system works. Nevertheless, laughter seems clearly to be capable of a cathartic effect. People often feel better and more relaxed after it. (Berlyne, 1972: 52)

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7 I hasten to add that while Monro, Clark, and Morreall endorse the incongruity thesis over the other two, each writer explicitly brings elements of at least one of the 'rejected' rivals into his final conclusion.

Accordingly, Berlyne and other psychologists have examined the physiological processes involved in humour responses, and defended claims about the 'hedonic value' involved in them. The result is the 'gratification thesis'. Recently, psychologists used neuroscanning techniques to show that *finding funny* correlates with higher levels of activity in the mesolimbic area of the brain (Berns 2004). As the mesolimbic area contains dopamine-releasing 'reward centers', these correlations provide support for the claim that *finding funny* is a physiologically pleasurable state.

The gratification thesis lends itself quite readily to giving us the function of *finding funny* that derives from its psychological benefit. One simple possibility is to say that *giving us pleasure* is itself the function of finding funny; we find things funny because doing so is pleasurable. This is perhaps most plausible for the release theorists – e.g. Kline and Freud – who claim that when we laugh we are released from mental tension, restrictions, or self-imposed repression; we find things funny, says the release theorist, because doing so reduces a kind of anxiety. Release is itself a benefit of *finding funny*, and so relief from tension, the release theorist can say, is itself the function of humour. Alternatively, other gratification theorists claim that the pleasure we derive from *finding funny* encourages us to joke and laugh, and thus to obtain some *other* benefit that *finding funny* gives us; since *finding funny* is enjoyable, we tend to do it, and in doing so we reap additional benefits from finding funny. John Morreall defends a version of this claim, suggesting that *finding funny* leads us to cultivate the capabilities essential to our rationality (Morreall 1989). I will return to discuss both of these suggestions further in Section 5.

Superiority and Favouritism

In contrast to the gratification theses, the other main contenders for the function of humour emphasize the *social* relationship between the person who finds something funny and others involved in the comedic situation. The *superiority* thesis goes back at least to Thomas Hobbes, who wrote that laughter is 'a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (Hobbes, 1650: Chapter IX). Hobbes's superiority thesis is clearly not true of all humour; it is hard to believe that our laughter at puns, for example, involves a comparison between ourselves and other persons. Accordingly, the superiority thesis has evolved into the 'disparagement thesis', or as I prefer to call it, the 'favouritism thesis'.

The favouritism thesis holds that, in *finding funny*, I am in some way 'disposed towards' the maker of the joke and/or 'disposed against' the butt of the joke; *finding funny* is correlated with a partiality towards things in the humorous situation. There are two possible versions of the favouritism thesis, depending upon the direction of causation: a first version claims that *finding funny* affects one's partiality towards things in the humorous situation; a second claims the reverse, that one's partiality towards things in the humorous situation affects *how funny* one will find the comedic situation. Both versions have a good deal of support behind them.

The first version of the favouritism thesis holds that being in the state of *finding funny* influences an agent's partiality towards or away from another agent or thing. When I laugh at your joke, for example, this tends to lead me to a positive attitude towards you; when a joke makes fun of Jones, this tends to lead me to a disparaging attitude towards Jones. This tendency is perhaps most obviously illustrated by certain uses of *ridicule*, the attempt to bring about the state of *finding funny* in *others*, for pur-

poses of garnering their favour or agreement. Think of schoolchildren making fun of others in order to be popular; here, humour is *used* in order to bring about social grouping, a use that is only possible because – as the first favouritism thesis says – *finding funny* encourages a bias towards some people or things, and/or away from other people or things. In some cases of humour (e.g. embarrassing situations), there is no disparager; in other cases (e.g. puns or nonsense rhymes), no one is disparaged. Nonetheless, the first favoritism thesis holds that in each of these cases, there will be a tendency for the person laughing to have biased or partial attitudes for or against someone involved.

Like the gratification thesis, the second version of the favouritism thesis has some empirical support from experimental psychology. In one set of studies, subjects examined cartoons in which either a professor is hurling a pie into a graduating student's face, or a graduating student is hurling a pie in a professor's face. Faculty members report finding the first funnier than the second, while students find the second funnier than the first. This and other studies are described by a proponent of the second favouritism thesis, the psychologist Dolf Zillmann, who summarizes the findings thus:

> The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth. The more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth. (Zillmann, 1983:91-2)

My biased attitudes towards persons, my inclination to *side with* and/or *against* another person, says the second favouritism theorist, affects the extent to which I find something funny.

Both versions of the favouritism thesis readily suggest that finding funny may have the social function of *bonding*, that the state of *finding funny* is part of the complicated mechanisms by which we form and maintain social groups. The first version of the favouritism thesis, which says that *finding funny* encourages preferential attitudes towards other persons, indicates that amusement is a catalyst to social grouping; as Morreall writes, *finding funny* 'has a cohesive effect', 'Laughing together', he writes, 'unites people' (Morreall, 1983:115). The second version of the favouritism thesis, which says that current bonding attitudes affect *finding funny*, suggests that amusement is a display, sign, or reaffirmation of bonding. Both versions of the favouritism thesis remind us of the familiar saying that 'those who laugh together, belong together.'[8]

4. The Need for Unification
Because they concern the behaviour and function of the state of *finding funny*, the respective claims that humour involves gratification and favouritism appear more likely to clash with *each other* than with the incongruity thesis. This is not to say that the gratification and favouritism theses are inconsistent; on the contrary, as I suggest at the end of this paper, it may be that *finding funny* acts as a social bonding mechanism *because* it is a pleasurable state. However, it is clear that the gratification and favouritism theses do not conflict with the incongruity thesis; for the former target an aspect of the mental state of *finding funny* that is distinct from that targeted by the latter.

That said, these two aspects of humour – its function and content – are ones that we

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8   For a clear (albeit dated) discussion of mid-twentieth century work on the social function of humour, see Martineau (1972).

want addressed by a comprehensive theory of humour. Indeed, a comprehensive theory of *any* mental state must address not only its content, but also its function. In developing a theory of belief or anger, for example, we want to know not just what beliefs or anger are about, but also what role belief or anger are playing in our mental and behavioral lives.

Moreover, a complete theory of a mental state must show how the function and content of a state fit together; such a theory must *unify* the state's content with its function. Put metaphorically, we need to be able to see the link between what the state is *saying* and what the state is *doing*. A theory of a mental state that lacks such a unification element leaves us without a way of seeing why a mental state with *that* content should also be playing *that* role in our lives. We would have no story to tell about why a state that involves making such-and-such commitments is a state in which we would find ourselves. We would simply be left baffled by why we are ever in such a state at all. And there is clearly something lacking in a theory of a mental state that leaves us so baffled. Thus, there is what I call a 'unification requirement' on building a comprehensive theory of any mental state. An acceptable comprehensive theory of humour will show us how what we find funny is related in an appropriate way to the role that *finding funny* plays in our lives.

Proponents of the position in the philosophy of mind known as *functionalism* clearly appreciate the unification requirement, for functionalists *identify* mental content with the function of the state. The content of any particular mental state, the functionalist says, simply is its functional role. So, for example, the content of a belief is identical to the role the state plays as both a *product* of perception, testimony or inference, as well as an *input* to action. The functionalist says that I currently have a belief that *p* – that is, I am in a state the content of which is *p is true* – precisely because and insofar as I am in a state that is both the product of an appropriate experience of *p* and would lead me to act as if *p* were true; the content of a belief constituted by where it comes from and what role it plays in my behavior. States with characteristic experiential content, like anger, prove trickier for the functionalist, but he treats them in the same way; he identifies the experiential content of anger with its functional role, that is, with the kind of influence that certain stimuli have in bringing anger about and the kind of influence that anger itself has on behaviour and other mental states.

The functionalist readily meets the requirement that we unify content and function by identifying them with each other, but the unification requirement can be met with a relationship that is weaker than identity. The non-functionalist will say that the belief that *p* naturally *leads*, under certain conditions, to acting as if *p* is true. For the non-functionalist, my belief that *p* is not constituted by the functional role of the state, but it is, of course, intimately related to it; the content of the belief is informed or structured by its inputs, and informs or structures actions that flow from it. Although she denies that anger has a content wholly comprised of its associated inputs and outputs, the non-functionalist likewise says that anger is intimately related to these inputs and outputs; anger is a certain kind of discomforting experience that, for example, has a tendency to *lead to* an agent's striking out or rejecting the object of her anger. So, the non-functionalist can meet the requirement that we unify content and function by conceiving of their relationship in terms of influence; the content of the state, for the non-functionalist, *dictates* the state's role.

The particular differences between these two positions is not important for my point here, which is that there are various ways of meeting the need for unifying the content

and function of a mental state like *finding funny*. We have significant support for the claims that *finding funny* is positively correlated with both physiological pleasure and biased social attitudes, and each correlation suggests a function for *finding funny*. However, without a story concerning the relationship between the content of finding funny and these supposed functions, we are left without any understanding of how a state with this content could have the function that it does.

5. The Prospects for Unification

Finally, I reach the main question of this paper: What are our prospects for unifying the main contender for amusement's content – namely, the incongruity thesis – with either of the main contenders for amusement's function? As we will see, the gratification thesis seems to offer itself for such unification more readily than the favouritism thesis, and this suggests that the former will play a more central role than the latter in our theory of humour.

Gratification and Incongruity

At least two sophisticated attempts at unifying the gratification thesis and the incongruity thesis are available. One attempt is made by the early twentieth-century psychologist L.W. Kline. 'No stimulus, perhaps, more mercifully and effectually breaks the surface tension of consciousness,' Kline writes, 'than humor' (Kline 1907: 421). This 'surface tension of consciousness' is created by the norms and uniformities in life. In humour we experience these norms and uniformities being broken:

> humorous stimuli are departures, exaggerations, even violations of the laws, uniformities, concepts and what not that have evolved out of man's experience. (Kline, 1907:434)

Kline's 'departures, exaggerations, even violations' are incongruities; to experience incongruities in humour is thus to experience the breaking of norms and expectations. Experiencing this violation, Kline writes, is a kind of freedom:

> The significant fact for humour is that these departures, exaggerations, etc., ... [are] the only objective fact[s] in our experience that dare to defy the world order with impunity, that can violate ... without pain and without apology, the manifold human contrivances, social customs and relationships ... (Kline, 1907: 434 & 436)

In humour, we can experience the breaking of norms without the usual penalties that go along with such an infringement. *Finding funny*, he writes, 'not only creates the sense of freedom, but also assures us that we may temporarily escape from the uniformities and mechanisms of life' (Kline, 1907:436). As a consequence of this, 'the humorous process, like play, is its own end and justification' (Kline, 1907:434). When we laugh, just as when we play, we 'pretend' that these norms do not hold. For Kline, our norms and expectations are the source of mental tension; so, finding an instance of incongruity funny (a claim about the content of humour) constitutes a release of tension (a claim about the function of humour).

A second way of linking the gratification with the incongruity thesis has been developed by Morreall. In his (1989), Morreall – a staunch defender of the incongruity thesis – tells an evolutionary story about the role of *finding funny* in the natural development of reason. We are faced with many incongruous events in our day-to-day lives,

Morreall says. Some of these will bring about negative reactions like *fear* or *anger*, to which we respond by fleeing or attempting to overcome the unexpected object or behaviour; other incongruous events will bring about *puzzlement*, to which we respond by exploring or investigating the situation further. A third kind of incongruous situation, Morreall continues, we will find humourous. In contrast to the other two categories finding something funny does not lead to characteristic actions. Morreall writes,

> In amusement there are not unfulfilled desires for the incongruous situation or our understanding of it to be different. Indeed, we enjoy the incongruity and the mental jolt it involves. (Morreall 1989: 9)

Being able to simply enjoy the incongruous, Morreall suggests, has allowed human beings to develop and cultivate abilities that are essential to our rationality: the capacities to disengage from what is before us, to be objective about it, and to manipulate representations of what is not before us. '[A]musement involves these interrelated aspects of rational thinking and ... in developing their capacity for amusement, early humans would be developing their rationality' (Morreall, 1989:12). In this way Morreall nicely links the content of *finding funny* – the incongruous – with its function in an evolutionary explanation. Finding the incongruous funny is a pleasurable experience in which our rational abilities are fostered; because the disengagement that accompanies amusement is pleasurable, we tend to repeat the experience, and as a consequence cultivate our rationality (Morreall, 1989:13).

It is not clear whether Kline's and Morreall's respective positions would be cashed out as either functionalist or non-functionalist accounts; I suspect that the accounts of both are consistent with either reading. In any event, however, we have the basic structure of two gratification theorists answering our question, 'How are the content and the function of finding funny linked together?'

Favouritism and Incongruity

The favouritism theorist, in contrast, looks as if she will struggle to answer this question. The favouritism theorist says that finding something funny tends to bring about a denigration of the butt of the humour and/or approval of the subject of the humour.[9] Accordingly, humour has a social function; it encourages biasing attitudes toward people, and in doing so it encourages bonding with some people and separation from others. If the favouritism theorist is going to meet the unification requirement, then she must show us why it is that such favouritism is correlated with the recognition of incongruities that occurs in *finding funny*.

The favouritism theorist tells us is that we tend to look favourably on joke tellers and unfavorably upon joke butts. But once we introduce the incongruity thesis, it is difficult to see why this should be. Pointing out incongruities in someone or something is not, *prima facie*, commendable, so why should I side with a successful joke teller? Similarly, being characterized by incongruity – as joke-butts are – is not, *prima facie*, deplorable. Why should, for example, finding *someone* funny – understood as a state in which I see someone as characterized by incongruity – lead me to disparage her in any way whatsoever? Why should having incongruities pointed out about a joke butt lead me to denigrate her in any way? Why, in short, should *finding funny*, if it has this content, also have this social function?

A significant shortcoming of Hutcheson's *Reflections Upon Laughter* is that he does

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9   For the sake of simplicity, I will discuss only the first favouritism thesis in this section.

nothing to bring his incongruity account of the content of humour into any union with his favouritism account of the function of humour. The *Reflections* is comprised of three sections. In the first, Hutcheson attacks Hobbes' superiority thesis, and in the second he forwards his own incongruity thesis. In the third section, Hutcheson turns to the function of humour, writing that 'it may be worth our pains to consider the effects of laughter, and the ends for which it was implanted in our nature, that thence we may know the proper use of it' (Hutcheson, 1973/1750:113). Hutcheson begins with a brief defense of the gratification thesis, commenting that humour reduces 'the mind to an easy, happy state'; ironically, however, most of Hutcheson's discussion in this third section is concerned with defending a more sophisticated version of the superiority thesis, one which looks very much like the modern favouritism thesis. He writes that 'We are disposed by laughter to a good opinion of the person who raises it, if neither we nor our friends are made the butt', and 'Ridicule ... is apt to be extremely provoking, since [it] discovers contempt of us in the ridiculer, and that he designs to make us contemptible to others' (Hutcheson, 1973/1750:113 and 115).

None of these claims is, on its own, implausible. Indeed, as I have indicated in this paper, there are good reasons to believe each of the incongruity, gratification, and favouritism theses. However, Hutcheson fails to give us any sense of the relationship between his defense of the content of humour – as the incongruous – and his defense of the favouritism thesis. While he defends the incongruity thesis in Section 2 of the *Reflections*, once he comes to discuss the social use of humour in Section 3, the incongruity thesis is never mentioned. This is not just a stylistic shortcoming in the *Reflections*; it is a major failing in the overall picture that Hutcheson defends. We are given no sense of how and why a state with this content *could* have the social effects that he notes. And until we are given a plausible story regarding their relationship, we have no grasp of how they can both, at the same time, be true.

I end this paper, rather abruptly I am afraid, with little more than a shrug. While this may be a failure of imagination on my part, I cannot yet see what the favouritism theorist can offer us in order to meet the unification requirement. If she cannot find a response to this demand, then the favouritism theorist will have to admit that her thesis must play a less central role in the theory of humour than the gratification thesis. She may say that the favouritism thesis correctly describes a *correlation* between *finding funny* and other biased attitudes, but this, she will have to concede, implies no analogous social *function*. The favouritism thesis is a contingent tendency, explicable by some other more fundamental aspect of finding funny. Indeed, the favouritism theorist may end up having to say that the social effects of *finding funny* are dependent upon its psychological function, namely that of bringing about gratification; *finding funny* is correlated with biases and subsequently plays the social role that it does, perhaps, *because* it brings about gratification. In any event, without an account of how the favouritism thesis fits more intimately with the incongruity thesis, the former looks like it will be relegated to a more peripheral role than that held by the gratification thesis in our theory of humour.

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