

Chapter 2

Humor, Truth, and Human Existence

Abstract This chapter focuses on that which I believe is missed or compromised when humor is not taken seriously and considered a genuine human capacity. I begin by showing that although laughter is likely to have evolved from play signals of primates, humor is a distinctively human phenomenon that involves the ability to enjoy cognitive shifts and appreciate ambiguities and incongruities. Next, I compare humor to other ways of knowing and understanding and show that it provides us with unique insights about human existence. I then illustrate the uniqueness of humor by focusing on the type of jokes that point to a truth about human existence. Here, I attempt to provide a provisional answer to the question: why do jokes that highlight some fundamental fact of our existence seem to be so appealing to us? The last part of this chapter explores the educational significance of the type of humor that is directed at making fun of human existence.

Keywords Jokes • Humor • Truth • Human existence • Ways of knowing • Education

2.1 Introduction

Do human beings need a sense of humor to survive? Are humor and laughter indispensable to our existence and flourishing? Is a sense of humor something that is valued by all human societies? Having studied humor and laughter for the past several years, I cannot provide a definitive answer to these questions. Although we know that some people seem to lack a sense of humor, it is hardly evident that these people wish they had one or that they suffer tremendously without it. What's more, we cannot be sure that every society values this quality or that many ancient and modern societies did not thrive without it. Still, my extensive research of humor indicates that something fundamental may be missed when we view reality from a perspective that is purely serious and solemn. I have also learned that

humor can provide human beings with a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them, which is significantly different from rational analysis and other more conventional ways of knowing the world.

This chapter is not intended to deal directly with the question of the indispensability of humor and laughter for human existence. Instead, it focuses on that which I believe is missed or compromised when humor is not taken seriously and considered a genuine human phenomenon. In what follows, I begin by showing that although laughter is likely to have evolved from play signals of primates, humor is a distinctively human phenomenon that involves the ability to enjoy cognitive shifts and appreciate incongruities. Next, I compare humor to other ways of knowing and understanding and argue that it provides us with unique insights about human existence. I then illustrate the uniqueness of humor by focusing on the kind of jokes that point to a truth about human existence. Here, I attempt to provide a provisional answer to the question: why do jokes that highlight some fundamental fact of our existence seem to be so appealing to us? The last part of this chapter explores the educational significance of the type of humor that is directed at making fun of human existence. I offer some suggestions about what this kind of humor can teach us about ourselves and our relations to others.

2.2 Is Humor a Human Phenomenon?

Although it may be difficult to demonstrate conclusively whether or not humor is a distinctively human phenomenon, like speaking and thinking, there is some scientific evidence that provides clues about this puzzle. Animal behavior scientist Jan van Hooff has studied the behavior of various kinds of monkeys (like chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans) and determined that they have a “laugh like vocalization that accompanies a relaxed open-mouth play face, during tickling and rough-and-tumble play” (Morreall 2009, p. 41). Since many scientists believe that humans developed from the same evolutionary line as these primates, it is reasonable to conclude that our laughter evolved from a play signal we inherited from the great apes who had already displayed this ability.

In his book *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, John Morreall (2009) argues that the hypothesis that human laughter evolved from the play signals of primates looks even more plausible when we consider the fact that “young children laugh during the same activities in which chimps, gorillas and orangutans show their laugh-like vocalization and play face” (p. 41). These children first laugh at aggressive activities such as tickling, play-biting, and being tossed in the air and caught. Such activities might be considered dangerous or aggressive if they were not done in play; but in an amusing context in which the adult participants are familiar most children laugh or smile when confronted with this kind of mock aggression.

Still, even if we accept the hypothesis that human laughter evolved from the play signals of primates this does not mean that *humor* is an adaptive human trait or that we share this trait with the apes. All that has been demonstrated thus far is that *laughter* seems to be a gesture that has developed from primate laugh-like sounds. Although humor and laughter are connected, they are not the same, as Morreall and others have shown. Laughter, as mentioned in [Chap. 1](#), refers to the physical activity that is caused by and expresses the feelings of a pleasant psychological shift. It can be produced by a wide range of activities that are amusing but not necessarily humorous such as tickling or regaining safety after being in danger. Unlike laughter, humor necessitates a cognitive shift and an ability to recognize incongruities and ambiguities on the part of the person enjoying the humor.

We do not know exactly when human beings first displayed this ability to enjoy incongruities and appreciate cognitive shifts. However, Morreall speculates that it is likely that the first instances of humor consisted of what scientists have called “false alarm laughter,” involving a sudden reinterpretation of some perceptual experience. An example of such a shift in our perceptual experience is the following:

A group [of early humans] is sitting around a fire at night, when they see what looks like a horned monster coming through the tall grass. If it really is an invader, then they should be serious and emotionally engaged. Fear or rage would energize them to escape or conquer the monster. But what if “the monster” is actually their chief returning to camp carrying an antelope carcass on his head? Then their fear or rage not only will waste time and energy, but could lead to pointless killing (Morreall 2009, p. 44).

In the latter case what is called for is a perceptual shift, which enables one to disengage oneself from the potentially dangerous situation and transform the nervous energy that has been built up into a playful attitude. In the case of the group sitting around a camp fire, if one of the members of the group recognized that the intruder was actually the chief, he would alert the others by smiling or even laughing at this seemingly stressful situation. We could easily imagine a similar scenario in which a false alarm was used to scare or play a prank on a particular individual when the others are aware that there is no danger at stake.

With the development of language, it became easier for humans to create cognitive shifts and incongruities and, therefore, to engage in humorous acts and speech. Morreall claims that language made possible two techniques that are central to comedy—the wild comparison and the wild exaggeration. “If someone did something clumsy, someone else could compare them to turkey or dodo, and perhaps confer these as nicknames. Refined, that became wit” (Morreall 2009, p. 46). Exaggeration is perhaps the most common and important comedic technique and it is very easy to create using language.

Morreall argues that eventually humor became part of most, if not all, cultures and was institutionalized in many ways including storytelling and jokes. Many cultures have created myths about tricksters who play practical jokes on others and have tricks played on them. “Monarchies from ancient Egypt and China to 19th century Europe institutionalized humor in the form of the court jester, giving him

permission to poke fun at the ruler and the court as no one else could” (Morreall 2009, p. 47). The fool in Shakespeare’s plays is one of the most important figures in the story and is usually the one who communicates the sobering truth. Many religions also show an appreciation for comic behavior and include rituals in which people play practical jokes on each other and behave in other silly ways.

In addition, several modern philosophers such as Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, emphasized the value of humor for human existence. Kant described wit as “the play of thought” and was undoubtedly aware of the mental flexibility that humor provides humans.¹ As such, he believed that humor and laughter can help us balance reason’s thirst for understanding and rigor. Schopenhauer (1964, vol. 2) clearly recognized the limits of rational thinking and the liberating power of humor when he noted that “it must therefore be diverting to us to see the strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once be convicted of insufficiency” (p. 280). He suggests that despite all of its analytical power, there are times in life in which relying on reason will lead us to view the world in ways that are rigid and narrow.

As demonstrated in Chap. 1, Nietzsche (1968, p. 407) praised the ‘laughing gale’ that can mitigate against our tendency to become dogmatic and overly gloomy. For him, humor and laughter were some of the healthiest and most mature responses to the modern form of nihilism of his time—a doctrine that emphasized our fundamental alienation from the highest ideals like truth, beauty, and love. Nietzsche clearly understood that a humorous attitude is not the same as an attitude that rejects serious examination. Rather, it is an ability to view things from multiple perspectives and accept the incongruities that such an enlarged mindset entails. To be sure, a humorous attitude cannot abolish nihilism nor do away with all negativity and sadness. However, it can encourage people to

become comfortable with holding within the mind a variety of contrasting and incongruous assessments of a situation all at once. Humorist thinking, for instance allows the nihilist to entertain feelings of personal frustration while also understanding at another level of conception that such frustration might be instrumental in the pursuit of collective progress and for the overall enrichment of the individual soul. Humor tolerates such ambivalent states of mind and in fact finds pleasure and amusement in them (Marmysz 2003, p. 162).

More recently, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell noted that “it has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this.”² Although Russell’s comment is said with a certain measure of irony and tongue and cheek, it nevertheless suggests that perhaps the Western tradition’s overemphasis on rationality and reason in humans is misguided, and that we need to at least consider the possibility that we are amusing and comical beings no less than rational. Moreover, Russell’s remark implies that

¹ See Kant’s selection from *Critique of Judgment*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall, (Albany: SUNY Press 1987), p. 46.

² This quote is taken from http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Bertrund_Russell.

in focusing so much attention on deduction and rational analysis we risk missing other ways of viewing and knowing the world that are no less important.

Today, we know that there are many ways of making sense of reality that are not grounded on reason, like using intuition, emotional intelligence, spirituality, and humor. Based on the works of Carol Gilligan (1993); Nel Noddings (2003) and Howard Gardner (1993) among others, we also realize that such ways of knowing can provide us with great insight into the human condition. Summarizing the value of humor for human existence, Arthur Bradford (1964) wrote:

Humor is an important part of the whole experience of life. It is so normal, so natural, so necessary that its total absence in any particular circumstance or person is itself humorous. The humorless person is something of a stock figure in the literature of laughter, a sure source of amusement because he is so unreal. The sense of humor is universally esteemed as one of the most winsome qualities of personality (p. 68).

In sum, this brief survey suggests that whereas human laughter probably evolved from the play signals of primates, humor is a distinctively human phenomenon that necessitates the ability to enjoy a cognitive shift and appreciate the incongruities that this shift entails. Humor plays an important role in most societies and is embedded in the traditions and practices of many religions and cultures. Learning from philosophers, psychologists, and educators we know today that humor is associated with a playful attitude, a tolerance for ambiguities and a kind of mental flexibility that can help us cope with the uncertainties of human existence.

2.3 Humorous Ways of Knowing

The above analysis suggests that humor and laughter should be considered genuine human phenomena that are worthy of serious investigation. Both Kant and Schopenhauer recognized some of the limitations of reason and suggested that humor can not only help us identify these limitations but also mitigate against them. Learning from Nietzsche, we understand that humor and laughter can enable people to cope with their miseries as well as help liberate them from the heavy weight of tradition. In addition, both Nietzsche and Russell have correctly called our attention to the power of humor and laughter to open up new ways of seeing and making sense of the world. Recognizing the capacity of humor to help us make sense of ourselves and the world around us, leads us to wonder: how can it enable us to grasp reality in ways that are different from rational discourse? In other words, what kinds of insights or truths does humor provide that are unique to this mode of human response?

To begin with, is the notion already mentioned above that comedic thinking is quite comfortable with incongruities and ambiguities of language and meaning. Of course, rational philosophers from Plato to contemporary linguists have also been very interested in dealing with language incongruities and ambivalent meanings.

As mentioned in chapter one, philosophers of language have provided us with great insights on questions such as how meaning and truth are situated in the concrete practices of linguistic communication. However, in their case the emphasis has been, for the most part, on *clarifying* these double meanings or inappropriate use of terms. In contrast, comedians and humorists celebrate these ambiguities in order to highlight the absurdities of our existence. Consider, for instance, Mae West's famous remark that: "marriage is a great institution—but I am not ready for an institution." West's remark includes a play on the word 'institution,' which she uses to convey both an honored tradition (in the first phrase) and a psychiatric hospital (in the second). Her comment is funny because it juxtaposes the positive aspect of marriage (as a significant commitment between two individuals) with the negative aspect (that these two individuals can often drive each other crazy).

In his book, *On Humor*, Michael Mulkay (1988) insightfully elucidates the power of humor to cultivate thinking in a way that is different from that of conventional philosophical discourse. Mulkay explains that "unlike serious discourse, humor actively creates and fosters ambiguity, and uses it to generate incongruity and interpretative contrast" (p. 28). Whereas in serious discourse ambiguity is often regarded as a problem that should be avoided or reduced, in humor ambiguity is an essential part of the discourse. The benefit of the ambiguity created by humor is that it can get us to think about issues from multiple perspectives and question things that we normally take for granted. Moreover, for Mulkay, the existence of humor "serves as a constant sign of the failures, inadequacies and limitations of our serious world and of the pattern of language-use by means of which we produce the world" (p. 222). This means that humor can function as a liberating force, one which can free us from conventional ways of speaking, acting, and being in the world that no longer make sense.

Second, is the notion that a sense of humor seems to be consistent with being open-minded and an ability to view issues from multiple perspectives. Arthur Koestler (1964) argued that humor, scientific insight, art, and other forms of creativity share a common mental process, which he called 'bisociation.' Koestler (1964) defined the process of bisociation as "the perceiving of a situation or event in two habitually incompatible associative contexts. This causes an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one matrix to another governed by a different logic or 'rule of the game'" (p. 95). Through this process, two concepts that have always been considered separate are suddenly seen as having a meaningful relationship with each other. Koestler believed that since the relationship between the two seemingly distinct concepts is not easy to see, the process of bisociation requires the exercise of creativity.

As mentioned, for Koestler, the type of thinking involved in creating humor is essentially the same as the one that humans use in artistic, literary, scientific, and other forms of creative activities. Humor scholar Paul McGhee (1979) affirmed this point when he wrote that "in order to create a cartoon or joke, an object or event must be seen outside of its normal context; an unexpected or unusual relationship must turn out to be essential to get the point of the joke" (pp. 164–165).

Thus humorous thinking entails an ability to bring a broad range of ideas and relationships to bear on any event or issue. It requires an enlarged mental perspective as well as the ability to switch one's viewpoint in a moment's notice if the situation calls for a shift.

In contrast to the enlarged mentality and flexibility of thought that characterizes humor and other creative activities, there is frequently something rather rigid and narrow about rational thinking and analytical discourse. To be sure, rational thinking enables us to investigate issues or critically analyze them in a deep manner, and to provide evidence to prove or disprove complex questions. The problem is that this type of thinking may be restricted by unexamined ideological commitments, and therefore, may result in overly narrow and biased conclusions. Moreover, as Parker Palmer (2007) notes, despite all of the power provided us by analytical thinking in fields such as science, technology, and medicine, it has also given us "a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life" (p. 64). Palmer correctly calls our attention to the fact that while rational thinking is great at analyzing problems, it often falls short when we need to view issues in paradoxical and more holistic ways.

My critique of rational thinking is not intended to diminish this faculty or to dismiss the tremendous powers and advancements that it has brought us. Rather, my intention is simply to contrast this capacity with humorous thinking in order to highlight that which is unique to humor. The point I wish to stress here is that while it is true that analytical thinking has enabled us to reach great insights and technological advancements, it is also true that reason has been used to develop dangerous weapons and ideologies that attempt to justify their use. Comedians such as George Carlin, Bill Maher, and Jon Stewart have used jokes and humor to poke fun at faulty analysis and the misuse of logic. Since humorist thinking can easily shift perspectives or hold two diametrically opposed views simultaneously, it can help us avoid becoming rigid or dogmatic. In short, humor can be used to keep our beliefs and theories in check so that we don't become uncritically attached to them.

Third, humorist thinking is based on a different relationship to truth than the one involved in serious discourse. In serious discourse, the words are meant to convey certain messages, truths, or directions that are supposed to be clear and factually accurate. Thus when we find instructions in a cookbook on how to make apple pie or receive a message in our voicemail that a friend is on her way to visit us we can safely assume that that these statements are correct. However, in humor comedians typically use language and cues to suggest something different or even the exact opposite of what the words or cues mean. In serious discourse the words and ideas are organized in a logical and linear manner whereas in humor they are organized in a way that is meant to be circular, confusing, and playful.

For instance, when the comedian Stephen Colbert announced that he was endorsing an obscure and wacky politician for President of the United States because of his nonexistent domestic and international experience the audience understood that they were not supposed to take his words seriously. Likewise, when Jon Stewart characterizes a particular shady business executive as "a person of high integrity" we can easily detect the irony in his message. Still, these

comedians' words contain certain truths about the politician (his ineptness) and businessman (his complete lack of a moral backbone) in question and perhaps even some general insights about politicians and executives. In our context it is important to remember that the truths and insights that comedians convey usually cannot be taken literally and are meant to be interpreted with a great deal of irony, satire, mockery, or plain lightheartedness.

2.4 Humor, Truth, and Absurdity

In the previous section, I showed that comedians will often use humor to convey truths about politicians, business executives, celebrities, and human existence in general. In the next part of this chapter, I would like to further develop the unique relationship between humor and truth. In particular, I explore in-depth the kind of jokes that point to something fundamental about human existence. The preliminary hypothesis that will be examined below is that: *we have a special affinity for jokes that highlight some fundamental fact of our existence because such jokes enable us to confront these truths in a non-threatening, amusing manner.*

In order to test this hypothesis, consider the following four short jokes:

*What do Alexander the Great and Winnie the Pooh have in Common?
They have the same middle name.*

What is Sacramento? It is the stuffing in a Catholic olive.

A College is a fountain of knowledge...and the students are there to drink.

An eighty-five-year-old says to some of his pals, "You know, I have sex almost every night."

"Really?" asks one of them.

"Yes," replies the man, "for instance this week I had it almost on Monday, almost on Tuesday, almost on Wednesday..."³

The first two jokes, I would argue, will typically produce only a chuckle or, at best, very mild amusement, whereas the latter two are funnier and will generally result in a more hearty kind of laughter. The difference between the first two jokes and the last two is that the former are merely play on words, whereas the latter address some fundamental problems in U.S. society or human existence. More specifically, the joke—*a college is a fountain of knowledge...and the students are there to drink*—speaks to the issue that many students in the United States take advantage of the opportunities they have when they leave home and go to college to consume alcohol and get drunk. The joke about the 85-year old who claims that he has sex almost every night is funny because it reminds us of the unfortunate truth that most 85-year olds can, at this point in their life, only fantasize about sex.

³ These jokes were brought to my attention by Ted Cohen in his book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Thus, jokes that make fun of some difficult or problematic human situation seem to be very appealing to us. That is, jokes that attempt to address a particular “tragic” or absurd aspect of our existence appear to move us emotionally more than jokes that do not. For this reason the joke—*one good thing about Alzheimer’s disease is that if you get it, you can hide your own Easter eggs*—is funny.⁴ Although some people may find this joke disagreeable, Ted Cohen argues that it is likely that many people who suffer from the disease and those that tend to them will be amused by it. This is because the joke provides Alzheimer patients and their loved ones with a way of looking at themselves humorously rather than simply dwelling on the negative effects of this illness. It provides them, in other words, with a temporary relief and an uplifting outlook on this rather debilitating condition. As Simon Critchley (2002) asserts, “humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity” (p. 102).

Consider also the following joke that Cohen (1999) includes in his book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*:

Abe visits the doctor for a routine examination and gets the devastating news that he is mortally ill, with no treatment possible, and that he will die within a day. He goes home, tells his wife, Sarah, and after they have absorbed the shock of the terrible news, Abe says to Sarah,

“Since it is my last night, Sarah, do you think that we could go to bed and fool around?”

“Of course,” says Sarah. And so they do.

Later at about 1:00 a.m., Abe wakes up, prods Sarah and asks, “Do you think we could do it again?”

“Certainly, Abe, it’s your last night.” And so they do.

At 3:00 a.m. Abe is awake again, and again he asks Sarah for her attentions. For God’s sake, Abe, *you* don’t have to wake up in the morning. (p. 41)

This joke is quite amusing, I believe, since it depicts a tragic situation and a rather feeble attempt to deal with this situation—using sex to cope with imminent death. It also makes us laugh because it portrays typical male and female responses to the difficult condition, namely, Abe seeking comfort in sex and Sarah trying to appease Abe’s wishes. Their responses seem somewhat absurd to us since both Abe and Sarah choose to focus on their immediate physical needs (sex and sleep) rather than confront the emotional loss in the face of his imminent death.

Absurdity, in the sense that many aspects of our lives are incongruous and do not make sense, is an integral part of the human condition. Thomas Nagel argues that absurd situations are ones that entail an obvious discrepancy between pretension and reality, that is, a contradiction between our ambitions and the actual conditions that govern our world. Nagel (1971) provides the following examples to illustrate this notion of absurdity:

⁴ Cohen 1999, p. 43.

Someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down. (p. 718)

Most people feel that life is absurd at some point in their life and some people even have a strong and continual sense of absurdity. Nagel claims that this sense of absurdity is a particularly human quality since only human beings have the capacity to step back, critically evaluate their actions and appreciate the incongruity of a situation. The life of a mouse, he writes, is not absurd since it “lacks the capacities of self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse” (Nagel 1971, p. 725). Since unlike all the animals on Earth only human beings have the capacity for self-consciousness and self-transcendence, only the life of humans can properly be considered absurd. As Nagel (1971) eloquently writes,

absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics. Like skepticism in epistemology, it is possible only because we possess a certain kind of insight—the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought (p. 727).

People’s responses to the notion that a particular situation or life in general is absurd can vary widely. Some people may become depressed and led to despair by the realization that their lives are meaningless and don’t really make much sense. Others might become defiant and choose to resist the sense that their lives seem to be incongruous and absurd. Some people may elect to extricate themselves from the absurd situation or to change their behavior or attitudes, thereby making their life less meaningless. Still others may opt to laugh at the situation or themselves and accept the absurdity as an integral part of their life. To the extent that we accept Nagel’s assertion that a sense of absurdity is one of the most human things about us, then humor and laughter may be the most beneficial responses of all the alternatives mentioned. That is, if absurdity is an integral part of human existence, it follows that despair, defiance, or avoidance of the situation do not make much sense. Much more plausible and healthy, it seems to me, is to approach the absurdities and little misfortunes of our lives with a little humor and laughter. As Cohen (1999) suggests, “when we laugh at a true absurdity, we simultaneously confess that we cannot make sense of it and that we accept it. Thus this laughter is an expression of our humanity, our finite capacity, our ability to live with what we cannot understand or subdue” (p. 41).

Aside from a sense of absurdity, human existence is often characterized by the intermingling of the comic and the tragic. Consider, for instance, some of Woody Allen’s great films from *Annie Hall* to *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and from *Zelig* to *Midnight in Paris*. In these movies, the protagonists inevitably endure a great deal of sadness and pain even as the audience is amused by their foolish acts. Part of the greatness of these films is that the main characters’ ordeals mirror our own trials and tribulations, and so when we laugh at their foolish words and deeds we are also laughing at our own. In addition, Allen’s films as well as many other great comedies illustrate that, in life, the comic and the tragic are closely related and

mutually dependent. Comedy needs tragedy since so much of what we laugh at and consider funny has to do with our own misfortunes and those of others. And tragedy needs comedy because one of the best ways to help us cope with heart-break and adversity is to approach the unfortunate situation with a sense of humor.

Imagine what human existence would be if we had perpetual tragedy to deal with and no possibility for laughter, humor or comic relief. This situation is very difficult to envision precisely because we are so used to looking for “the light at the end of the tunnel,” for a little hope that will break up the periods of darkness and despair in our lives. In fact, seeking promise and hope is natural to the human condition and several humor theorists have demonstrated that even in extreme situations like life in concentrations camps the prisoners created jokes and humor to help themselves cope. As Morreall (2009) points out, one of the important functions of humor during the Holocaust “was that it helped oppressed people cope with suffering without going insane” (p. 123).

Just like a world without humor and laughter is difficult to imagine, so is one in which there is no pain, suffering, and tragedy. For one, virtually every human being has personally experienced pain, suffering, and loss of loved ones. Moreover, tragedy, suffering, and failure are major themes in numerous ancient legends, more modern stories, and other cultural artifacts. Tragic heroes such as Oedipus, Ophelia, and Hamlet are ones that we continuously return to because their struggles and faults are still relevant for our own lives. Finally, death is both the outcome of many tragedies and something that no human being can escape.

Hence tragedy and comedy are essential characteristics of the human condition; both are necessary but neither one has a complete hold on our lives. We need not only humor and laughter but also suffering and pain in order to thrive and live rich, textured lives. Humor and suffering are one of the central paradoxes of human existence, which means that if we want to genuinely understand ourselves we need to embrace both comedy and tragedy as one. In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (2007) describes the concept of paradox:

The poles of a paradox are like the poles of a battery: hold them together, and they generate the energy of life; pull them apart, and the current stops flowing. When we separate any of the profound paired truths of our lives, both poles become lifeless specters of themselves—and we become lifeless as well (p. 67).

Comedy and tragedy, humor and earnestness, are like the other paradoxes that Palmer identifies (e.g. emotion and intellect, solitude, and community) that should not be conceived as either/or and as mutually exclusive. Rather, as Palmer asserts, the seemingly opposite poles need to be viewed as *both-and*, as different dimensions of the human experience that are equally important and that often work together. Those who live life only in pain and suffering frequently end up in despair or in premature death, whereas those who make fun of everything are considered buffoons or plain crazy. A complex and holistic view of the human condition recognizes that humor and suffering, laughter and pain are integrally connected, and that to the extent that we can view these opposites together, we view ourselves more clearly.

2.5 Conclusion: Learning from Humor About Human Existence

In this chapter, I tried to make the case that since humor is a phenomenon that is unique to human beings it deserves the kind of serious examination and debate given to other human phenomena. One of the advantages of studying humor is that it provides us with a different way of knowing and relationship to truth than that of conventional rational discourse. Specifically, I showed that, unlike rational discourse, comedic thinking is very comfortable with ambiguities and incongruities of language and meaning. Further, since comedic thinking is consistent with open mindedness and mental flexibility, it can frequently help people avoid the tendency to become rigid and dogmatic. Finally, my examination of humorist thinking has demonstrated that it is characterized by a different connection to truth than that of rational thinking, one that is circular, confusing, and playful.

In the second part of this chapter, I proposed a preliminary explanation to the question of: why are we attracted to jokes and humor that highlight some fundamental fact of human existence? My examination suggests that such humor is appealing to many people because it serves to remind us that our lives often feel absurd and that we can never completely escape this notion of absurdity. In addition, this kind of humor amuses people because it highlights the essential connection between tragedy and comedy in our lives. Humor, in other words, is powerful when it calls our attention to the comical aspects in those situations that are really sad or disturbing. Moreover, jokes that point to human greed, hypocrisy, dishonesty, and infidelity tend to be very funny since they provide us with a non-threatening way of pointing out that human beings often fall short of behaving in ways that are emotionally, intellectually, and morally correct. They remind us of our flaws and weaknesses in a manner that is more palatable and easier to swallow than when we are being criticized or judged by others.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to briefly explore the following questions: aside from being healthy responses to the absurd nature of our existence, do humor and laughter have any educational significance? Specifically, what is the educational value of the type of humor that is directed at making fun of human existence? In other words, what can we learn about ourselves and our relations to others from this type of humor? In order to address this question, let us return once again to the joke about Abe and Sarah cited above. Earlier, I mentioned that this joke is funny because it captures fairly characteristic male and female responses to an absurd situation—Abe seeking comfort in sex and Sarah trying to appease his wishes in the face of his untimely death. I would argue that this joke has a twofold educational benefit: raising awareness and inspiring change. First, is the fact that the joke calls our attention to the rather common, though problematic, male and female responses to various delicate situations. It underscores the fact that men sometimes use sex as a way to avoid dealing with difficulties more seriously, while women occasionally try to appease men's wishes in order to dodge a confrontation. Second, is the possibility that in hearing this joke, people might be moved to

question and perhaps even modify their typical reactions to some challenging situations. Thus, my contention is that jokes and humor in general can function as a form of educational therapy. They do so by highlighting those actions or attitudes that do not make much sense as well as by getting people to think of alternative ways of responding.

Much like jokes that poke fun at various problematic aspects of the human condition, other types of humor such as satire and irony can also have a significant educational impact. For instance, when Stephen Colbert sarcastically defends the argument that *having guns at home make us safer* by insisting that “it’s a price worth paying for being *less* safe,” the viewers are being educated in the sense that they are *informed* about these important issues and prompted to *think critically* about them. Likewise, when Conan O’Brien states that “now that horse meat has been discovered in the Swedish meatballs of IKEA many American families will think twice about taking their kids to have dinner in a *furniture store*” some people might be moved to question their eating habits. Although the coverage of these social, political and moral issues is not meant to be serious, the viewers are challenged to consider them in ways that are simultaneously analytical, complex and subtle. As such, political satire can lead people to develop more sophisticated ways of thinking and questioning.

Like satire, irony that is used judiciously can have a profound educational impact. Writing about irony in the context of morality, Ruth Smith (1998) writes that “when using irony, theorists one way or another identify positions, power relations, speech communities, and contested epistemologies of who knows what, what counts for knowledge, whose knowledge counts, what that knowledge is for, and how it is expressed” (p. 386). Following Smith, I would argue that when comedians, writers, or theorists use irony successfully they are conveying a host of messages about human existence and our world that the attentive reader or viewer can discern. For example, several commentators have utilized Fox’s slogan “fair and balanced reporting” in an ironical sense to question this organization’s hidden agenda, ideological commitments, and standards of covering the news.

Moreover, the effective employment of irony can get people to think deeper about issues that they would normally dismiss or take for granted. Irony can prompt people to reflect since it is often used to highlight ambiguities and juxtapose things that generally do not belong together. Examples of ironical humor that can prompt people to think critically are: “making a case for waging a war in order to achieve peace,” telling one of your rivals that you “love to hate him,” or claiming that you are imprisoning political opponents “for their own protection.” To be sure, irony might also be used to encourage evasion and discourage self-reflection about oneself or other important matters. The point, however, is not to defend irony per se, but rather to suggest that, as a discursive tool, it can educate people to become more informed and think critically.

Lastly, I would argue that when used appropriately humor has much to teach us about human existence because it opens up a unique perspective toward ourselves, our relations to others and the world around us. Humor helps us appreciate that human existence is often absurd and incongruous, and that rather than approaching

this sense of absurdity with defiance we should embrace it. A life lived without humor can easily lead people to become grave, bitter, or depressed. Simply put, humor and laughter not only help us cope with those moments when we feel that life is meaningless but also enrich our experience of being fully human. They teach us that being human includes the ability to view ourselves and the world around us in playful, comedic, amusing ways.

References

- Bradford, A. L. (1964). The place of humor in teaching. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 42(2), 67–70.
- Cohen, T. (1999). *Jokes: Philosophical thoughts on joking matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Critchley, S. (2002). *On humor*. New York: Routledge.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Koestler, A. (1964). *The act of creation*. New York: Dell.
- Marmysz, J. (2003). *Laughing at nothing: Humor as a response to nihilism*. Albany: SUNY press.
- McGhee, P. (1979). *Humor: Its origin and development*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Morreall, J. (2009). *Comic relief: A comprehensive philosophy of humor*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Morreall, J. (1987). *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Mulkay, M. (1988). *On humor*. New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.
- Nagel, T. (1971). The absurd. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68(20), 716–727.
- Nietzsche, F. (1968). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Fourth Part, The Portable Nietzsche*, (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Penguin Books.
- Noddings, N. (2003). *Caring : A feminine approach to ethics & moral education*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Palmer, P. J. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1964) *The World as Will and Idea* (R. B. Haldane, J. Kemp, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kagan Paul.
- Smith, R. L. (1998). Morals and their ironies. *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 26(2), 367–388.

Humor, Laughter and Human Flourishing
A Philosophical Exploration of the Laughing Animal

Gordon, M.

2014, XIII, 100 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-00833-2