The Philosophy of the Funny

A thesis by

Rory Wood-Ingram

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School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry
The University of Melbourne
Abstract

This thesis examines comedy and humour as they are seen in everyday life, and contends that they play a unique role in forming our outlook on the world. There is nothing quite like humour: it requires seriousness but it is silly; it uses rational constructs but creates something irrational; it seems to make fun of things which paradoxically we end up caring about even more. Through an exploration of the different ways comedy and humour are used, both in everyday life and popular entertainment, this thesis aims to determine the value of having a sense of humour. It proposes that through an active participation in making fun – of ourselves, of each other and of the world – we realise a potential path to enlightenment.

The forms that comedy takes in our lives are numerous and varied. We consume comedy regularly from major entertainment producers. We comment upon events in the world between ourselves, often looking for a humorous angle. We gather at social events and parties and engage in very structured activities of comic free-styling. Amongst friends and family, we relentlessly “take the piss” out of each other, sending up each other’s pretentions and identities in a ruthless comic game. Our sense of humour is wedded to each of these pastimes.

Through an active participation in comedy our sense of humour grows and matures, enabling us to cope better with whatever life might have in store for us. We are better equipped for dealing with the ongoing comic games we encounter in everyday life, which function as very real capability and aptitude tests. We are better equipped for dealing with whatever disaster may befall us next, for seeing the funny side of it. We are even better equipped for dealing with the imminent spectre of death, wherever it may lay its hand. Being able to recognise the logic and manifestations of comedy is a vital tool for engaging with life. This thesis argues that we should actively better our
comic skills wherever appropriate and take time out from seriousness every now and then.

Declaration

This is to certify that
(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is 23,795 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables and bibliographies.

Rory Wood-Ingram
November, 2010

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Introduction

One of the funniest moments in *Fawlty Towers* has Basil the hotelier being discovered sans pants by his guests, seated astride the backside of Manuel the Spanish waiter, whacking him over the head with a fry-pan. Basil has spent the entire episode trying to catch out his guests’ swinging shenanigans and fending off the advances of Mme Peignoir, making his midnight ‘tryst’ with Manuel all the more ironic. The guests shuffle off, remarking they’d “best leave them to it” and Basil is left undone, with nothing to do but beat Manuel some more. It is not hard to see that this scene is funny, but what is its value? Is it important and if so, why? This thesis says that it is. We need to know if this piece of comedy has any value, moral or aesthetic. If it is pleasurable, is this because of its intrinsic worth, or does our enjoyment of it debase us in some way? It is certainly a little bit malicious to enjoy Basil’s frustrations and Manuel’s clowning so much. But this does not necessarily mean we are bad people. If we examine the pleasure it affords us we may come to grips with the devil of humour.

Why is comedy important? Why should we cultivate our sense of humour? We know we like comedy, but is it an important aspect of life? I argue that one result is taking oneself less seriously and thus taking a step towards enlightenment. It is only a step but coupled with wisdom, we have a good chance of getting there. Humour is an important part of our project of enlightenment, so much so that it makes us better people. By enlightenment I mean letting go of the complex and burdensome issues, to do with our friends and foes, family and loved ones, which afflict us. We need a way of dealing with such things without taking them too seriously. So, comedy has a therapeutic value with respect to certain ‘existential’ burdens. I also define ‘enlightenment’ as living in harmony with the world, having an even keel and an open mind, which are very desirable qualities. If comedy helps us cultivate these important virtues, then it must be a good thing.
The activities that lead to those good results of enlightenment, such as the process of cultivating those virtues, should be given a lot of attention. In so far as comedy is a major, but not strictly necessary, way of reaching these goals, then it is obviously important, because the goals are so important. The key to making comedy work for us in a positive and constructive way is to be alert to the processes and instruments that our sense of humour habitually makes use of. As it happens, this is also the object of this thesis; wanting to know what comedy is good for. We have a rational and conscious mind that examines such things as the nature of humour, of art, and experience; the enquiring mind. But it is another part of us that brings the emotive content to that experience. There is a connection formed at the juncture between our rational frameworks and our psyche, a connection that thrums with the inflow of emotive content mediated by our conscious rationalisation of the experience. Humour, at its most basic, is an enlivened focus on that connection. It keys in on those most amusing, bizarre and odd things that come out of our scrutiny of that connection. It is a highly sophisticated instrument of judgment that seeks out the gaps and contradictions between our expected rational conception of the world and our lived experience of the world.

Humour uses rational frameworks but causes these frameworks to break down and create a blankness of the mind when the joke is sprung. I have termed this phenomenon the Annihilation of Meaning. Humour navigates a form of thought that is inexpressible, and paradoxically, allows its expression. This is the transcendent quality of humour, in that it can roam beyond the totality of what is expressible or describable, but bring that experience to the fore of our conception. Humour is simultaneously within and without the totality: its essence is the resolution of this contradiction. We do well to nurture the contradictions and paradoxes humour seeks out for us. By embracing them with good humour we are relieved of the need to try to resolve them. A good sense of humour allows us to keep these contradictions close and devise an understanding of the world that embraces the flaws of rational thought.
My analysis of humour doesn’t aim to discover what is inherently, or intrinsically, amusing. It is rather concerned with our ability to find things funny; to make a joke out of material which, regarded in other ways, might not be a laughing matter. The skills that allow us to enjoy a comic understanding of the world are also, and unexpectedly, fundamental to our ability to reason and create. For the comic trades largely on a deep contradiction at its heart; that it is serious and yet not serious at the same time. The humorist’s role is to mine the seam of comic gold to the point that most of us not only find it funny, but that we are convinced of its reasonableness. I aim to describe the attitude that is so crucial to the ability to find something funny, that particular mood which treats everything as a joke. It is a serious exploration of something that is perhaps, at heart, founded on our deepest immaturities. Perhaps the fact that it is at odds with serious investigation is why, in my opinion, there is a scarcity of successful serious analysis on the subject. An overview of this analysis reveals this, but one thing these works have in common is the conviction that a sense of humour is an important and wonderful thing to nurture. In Chapter 1 I examine a selection of humour theorists I view to be either successful or important.
Chapter 1: The Theory of the Funny

There are three traditional styles of explanation for humour and comedy: Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory. These theories have been enshrined in John Morreall’s compendium, The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour (1987). A fourth theory, Play Theory, is a more recent addition to the ranks. In his examination of the theories of humour, Smuts contends that classification is problematic as the theories should not be viewed as rivals, but as parts of the theorisation of humour as a whole.1

The Superiority Theory is the original theory and proponents such as Aristotle and Plato were inadvertently responsible for bringing humour and laughing into disrepute, due to their view that finding something funny is a product of feeling superior to it. It is really rather simple. “I am so superior to those ants,” we say. “Hah! They are so funny, the way they run around! Hah!” So this could also be known as the Self Satisfied Theory or the Supremely Smug Theory. Both Aristotle and Plato were concerned that lauding it over something inferior and ridiculous was not very becoming. In Plato’s Philebus, Socrates formulates an argument that humour should be avoided altogether: “When we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, our pleasure, in mixing with malice, mixes with pain… and on these occasions we both feel malice and laugh.”2 Aristotle took a tactful approach in his Ethics and regarded the ideal character to be somewhere between the buffoon and the boor, those who “cannot resist any temptation to be funny,” and those who “contribute nothing and take offense at everything.”3 This would seem to be a rather wise and responsible tack to adopt. It recognises the power of humour to dictate the terms of normality, which we will see later in Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter.4

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3 Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), Book IV, chapter 8, p 105.
Our desire for superiority appeals to that part of us which wants to denigrate other people, because they are dorks, nerds, snobs, pricks or complete nincompoops. So we hone in on some aspect of them which we can ridicule. Thomas Hobbes described it as a “Sudden Glory” responsible for “those Grimaces called laughter.”⁵ He claims it is “caused by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.” This is brilliant. It makes me think that back then people really had a handle on things. I can just imagine a buffoon of an aristocrat suddenly apprehending his own “glory” and throwing back his head with laughter, a singular satisfaction. He would laugh and laugh as the peasants scurried around below. On the other hand, Lord Chesterfield thought that “loud laughter is the mirth of the mob, who are only pleased with silly things; for true wit or good sense never excited a laugh . . .”⁶ Well, obviously Lord Chesterfield was either a tool or a genius. Being silly in itself, like being incongruous, is not sufficient to elicit a laugh and possibly this is what Chesterfield was trying to suggest. For the mirth of the mob is probably a good indicator of why comedy is good for us. Revelling in one’s superiority is certainly the best way to enjoy oneself. It’s fun and it feels really good. Like this joke:

“What do you teach a dog with no legs?”
“Stay.”
“What else do you teach a dog with no legs?”
“Roll over.”

This joke is funny and cruel and just a wonderful way to laugh at amputee dogs. It is funny because the dog really only has the capacity to stay or roll over and therefore it is either idiotic or condescending to teach the dog these things, the first of which it cannot help but do, the second of which actually would be an accomplishment if it could be

performed on cue. To applaud seems only to mock the physical disability of the dog. This side of humour recognises the innate wonderfulness of being who we are, in that we are not dogs without legs. It is an easy way to start laughing. The Superiority Theory certainly does account for the enjoyment of this kind of humour.

The struggle for superiority and the conceptual and creative tools we have developed to this end are expressly serious occupations. But the emotional content of success reaches back to join with our sense of humour. We could say that the Superiority Theory has identified something about humour, this Sudden Glory, which has an intense emotional impact on us, that is to say, it makes us feel really good. And whether or not it is about measuring us favourably against an inferior thing, it is possible that this feeling of elation is what the theory was really driving towards. The suggestion that humour is ultimately a positive expression of humanity should allow us modify the theory, so that the enjoyment comes out of the sheer excellence of the world. Superiority Theory involves an emotive outpouring, something beyond the syntax and logic of language. This has nothing to do with rational thought. It is tapping into deep instinctive elements in the human mind.

The Relief Theory serves those forms of humour related to the release of tension. It helps us identify our inhibitions and find ways of getting around them. If something threatening to our sense of self approaches and then diminishes we are relieved, so relieved that we let off all that energy we were storing up for running away by exercising our intestines, or laughing. We get such a relief from the diminishing threat that we feel great, so great that everything seems funny in comparison, as though our seriousness was made silly. Jokes place the listener in a submissive position, as they are kind of a story and kind of a lesson. According to this view we must submit to the authority of the joke teller. The joke has the form of imparting wisdom. It tells you what you can teach a dog with no legs, or why a chicken crossed the road. We will listen
to the joke and participate by asking “what?” on cue, because we are rendered helpless by the joke form.

There are lots of things that may provoke (in multiple ways) unacceptable thoughts, unacceptable anxiety or unacceptable excitement and therefore we joke about them. People joke about sex and death because they are anxious about these topics. People deride blondes, gays, dwarves and the Irish because they get a kick out of their feelings of superiority to them. People include characters like nuns, priests and rabbis because they represent the authority they would like to rebel against. Presumably in targeting these highly sensitive and specific subjects, jokes dissolve our fears and bring us relief, giving us some freedom from authority. Listening to these jokes can be hard work due to fact that the joke form has an expectation that we will laugh at the end. When the punch-line finally comes we experience a relief, due to the resolution of the joke and our understanding of that resolution.

Relief Theory reaches its pinnacle with Freud, whose highly intricate theory was developed in the light of his work on dreams and the psyche. “Relief comes in and through the sudden event, the point, the punch line,” in which “desires and erotic and aggressive wishes are satisfied by the laughter.”7 Freud sees the pleasure of joking as lying in its “capacity to subvert the norms of adult rational thought.”8 It’s all about “letting the cat out of the bag,” meaning that our repressed wishes get an airing via the socially acceptable form of the joke.9 Freud’s insight is that there is something unexpected about us that humour satisfies. He argues that humour offers a way for the contents of the unconscious to be expressed in an acceptable manner, circumventing the watch of our self-imposed censorship.

The best joke in Freud’s book is the salmon mayonnaise joke:

An impoverished man borrowed 25 florins from a well-to-do acquaintance, assuring him at some length of his distress. On the very same day, his patron comes upon him in a restaurant with a plate of salmon with mayonnaise before him. The rich man storms in and demands to know what kind of dupe he takes him for, spending his money in this extravagant fashion. The accused slaps the table and exclaims indignantly – “So, when I have no money, I cannot eat salmon mayonnaise. When I have money, I cannot eat salmon mayonnaise. When, then, am I to eat salmon mayonnaise?”

It is an excellent joke because we see the rascal assert himself with such certainty and self-belief that he creates an alternate reality in which he is right, contrary to the norms of society. His indignant response is both logical and illogical – “When am I to eat salmon mayonnaise?” The truth in his argument is balanced by the falsity, and a contradiction is observed, one which would be laborious to explain to him. Freud observes “that the joke-work makes use of departures from normal thinking, of displacement and absurdity.” But the absurd goes many ways towards looking at what life is about. The man wants to eat salmon mayonnaise. He has discovered that he can do so by borrowing money from the rich benefactor. We enjoy the fact that he has duped the rich man into caring for him enough to lend him money, supposedly to help him back onto his feet, and he indulges his appetites with it, thus exposing a kind of hypocrisy and paternalism in the rich man, and the fact that his weakness is salmon mayonnaise.

We can see elements of the Relief Theory in Henri Bergson’s seminal text Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, in which he introduces the idea that humour is useful as a means of keeping us in line with the demands of society, that is, as a social

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11 Ibid., p 51.
Comedy identifies the boundaries of good taste. There is a line, and we know where the line is when we cross it. Bergson identifies the way that comedy is formed from anything that is outside of the ideal, and therefore helps us see what it is that is not conforming to the ideal. Because we laugh at the things that are rigid and mechanical, inferior versions of themselves, we are kept on our toes. However, it just so happens that we are all prone to behave in ways which other people can make fun of, as there is no ideal state of being, and nobody is perfect. Therefore we should all expect to be made fun of, some of the time. The experience of being made fun of is actually rather good for us. George Mikes states that “whatever else a sense of humour means, it must include the readiness to laugh at oneself.” He goes on: “A sense of humour always contains an element of self-denigration, acceptance of one’s own weakness. To see your own foibles, silliness, weakness, vanity, erratic nature and be genuinely amused by them is a true test of a sense of humour.” Humour is a test for our egotistical self, that part of us which would tyrannically put down any threat to our status, but in the context of humorous fun, is unable to act as it would and must suffer the affront to its pride with good humour. Christmas Humphries suggests that “to laugh is a sign of sanity; and the comic is deliberately used to teach what cannot be taught in words. Nonsense is used to point to the beyond of rational sense.” This mode is an integral component of our third category.

The third of the great traditional views of funniness is the Incongruity Theory, a seemingly more sophisticated recognition of humour. It pertains to those funny things that also have an element of incongruity. The Incongruity Theory focuses on “the impact of humour on thought or perception, proposing that jokes incongruously unite two distinct interpretations or meanings.” But, of course, to be jokes, they need to be

14 Ibid., p 24.
funny as well. Some authors tend to write things like “humour relies on incongruous association” which is rather desultory and confirms a tendency for circularity when discussing the subject. At best we can claim that incongruity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for certain forms of humour.

“Why did the chicken cross the road?”
“To get to the other side.”

The chicken joke is funny due to a number of incongruities. It poses an incongruous question, enquiring about the thought processes of a chicken. Plus it is an incongruously bathetic answer to a question which had us expecting something more. It is an anticlimactic resolution to the joke. The chicken annihilates everything in its path. It has no raison d’être, but it refuses to go away. To get to the other side. Why did it want to get to the other side?! Surely the chicken had a purpose!

Each of us could approach the joke is different ways. A Superiority Theory-type personality would have the reaction: “That stupid chicken! Hah!” A Relief Theory-type of joking would be obsessed with the question of why did the chicken cross the road, in which case the joke’s absurdist conclusion nullifies the anxiety of needing to know. The cynical realisation that the joke is not funny prima facie is the response of Incongruity Theory.

The Incongruity theory is commensurate with my idea of the Annihilation of Meaning. To get the joke one needs to have a sense that somewhere in its logical assumptions a breakdown of meaning has occurred; the rules have been broken and the normal state of affairs upended. We were led one way only to be thwarted in our expectations. As Immanuel Kant put it in The Critique of Judgment:

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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.¹⁸

Kant argues for a reduction “at which, certainly, understanding cannot rejoice.” His thought here paves the way for my original conception of the Annihilation of Meaning, a theory I will outline in Chapter 4. He identifies a process of humour in which our expectation is thwarted and transformed into a ‘nothing.’ This is an experience which does not please the understanding, but is nevertheless enjoyable. What is most significant here is that he identifies a reduction in understanding to be the key to humour. He recognises the limits of our understanding in his formulation, stating that the end result of humour is a nothing. We could conjecture that this nothing is exactly the kind of blankness produced by the Annihilation of Meaning, the inability to make sense of it at all.

However, it is not generally recognised that Kant really meant ‘nothing’ to be nothing. Rose states that “while Kant describes that which replaces the X as a ‘nothing’ [...], it is, however, still ‘something’ from the point of view of the humorist or parodist, and something which has been specifically chosen to create a comic rather than non-comic contrast.”¹⁹ This great transformation into nothing should not be so easily recast, and in doing so Rose mistakes the object of humour for its subject. There is a resistance here to recognise the kernel of humour that Kant is trying to explicate. Kant has explicitly stated that it dissolves into nothing and there is little reason to think that he meant otherwise. Monro formulates Kant’s frustrated expectation to mean: “Meaning is snatched away from us just as we were about to grasp it.”²⁰ The humour accesses something beyond the limits of ordinary understanding. It may well be that this

something is best characterised as “nothing” because any attempt to describe it directly will misrepresent it.

Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Idea*, also subscribes to the Incongruity Theory. He argues that “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 reaction; and laughter is just the expression of this incongruity.”\(^{21}\) He sees humour as a result of framing something in respect to something else, and thereby making it incongruous. Monro calls this process “the linking of disparates: the importing into one sphere, of ideas which belong in another.”\(^{22}\) This is a fairly satisfying conception of humour. We take something from one sphere and frame it in respect to another, which may result in either silliness or recognition or both. We gain new insight from this kind of perceptive juxtaposition. It hints at the fallibility of structured frameworks. Humour in this schema develops our abilities to reason and create, perform on different stages and cope with new situations. In this view, the rationality of humour is evident, for we can identify a reason for enjoying it. Really if something is funny then it is rational to laugh, but in my view this

In *The Immortal Comedy*, Agnes Heller argues that laughter is rational.\(^{23}\) She means that it is rational to laugh at something, if that something is genuinely funny. When we try to identify the steps we made in concluding that something is funny, however, it becomes apparent that the rationality in question is very suspect. However, as I argue in Chapter 4, the joke masquerades in rational forms to launch irrational, dangerous, and ludicrous conclusions. It consists in a contradiction, a lie, a *faux pas*, or a paradox. So we are dealing with something that is both rational and irrational, or better, a rational response to a rather irrational thing. Heller’s conclusion that “it is laughter that is the instinct of


\(^{22}\) Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p 238.

reason” captures the true universality of reason as something that can incorporate the funny and be comfortable with the irrational. It is perfectly rational to have a great sense of humour, and the rational world itself is constantly suggesting its inherent humour to us, if we choose to see it. Grant says that “the seemingly simple combination of the terms instinct and reason [...] suggests that the instinctive ground of the possibility of rational, logical thought can be directly experienced as laughter.”

Humour does, however, allow us to rush ahead and take great satisfaction from the intuitive understanding that comes with it. This is its instinct. It has an intuitive sense of process and logic, that keys us into the rightness and wrongness such that we know as soon as a deviation has occurred. The surgical precision of humour allows the landscape of reason to be laid out in front of us. We get the joke in the same way as we understand the world and our place in it.

Agnes Heller introduces this concept to us from a phenomenological perspective: “In my view, both laughing and crying are the elementary answers to Dasein, for they are triggered by the experience of the hiatus, that gap or abyss.” Her view here has a similar ring to my conception of the Annihilation of Meaning. She argues that laughter and crying are responses to the abyss that lies between our biological nature and the social/cultural conditioning we receive. To a certain extent there is a dovetailing of these two forces but it is never complete. “In the elementary outbursts of laughing and crying, the impossibility of the task of bridging the abyss is expressed.” She argues that laughter is a rational response to an elementary discordance in our nature.

The irrational nature of the comic can be seen in the work of Georges Bataille. Lisa Trahair, in The Comedy of Philosophy, argues that Bataille “envisages laughter undoing

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26 Heller, Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life, p 22.
27 Christopher Wilson, Jokes : Form, Content, Use, and Function, p 22.
the tenets of metaphysical philosophy, relating concepts to their own baselessness, subjecting them to ‘inner ruination,’ and inscribing a non-teleological method of ‘backwardation’ by referring the known to the unknown.”²⁸ The unravelling of rational thought seems to have little going for it, except on the proviso that we could rescue a concept from its own baselessness once it is time to be serious again.

The latest trend in humour studies, Play Theory, emphasises the difference between playing and being serious. This theory has roots in Freud, who argues that humour can be seen as a release from the responsibilities and seriousness of adulthood and a return to the liberations and joys of childhood. The Play Theory, as outlined by Brian Boyd, eschews intellectual and emotional rationalisations of humour and instead offers an answer more from the field of evolutionary biology than philosophy. It contends that the play engaged in by members of a group amounts to a form of training for the kinds of situations that may be encountered in a kill or be killed situation. It shows that various primates engage in forms of play which are accompanied by specific facial characteristics and ‘panting’ which they claim is a form of laughter. Humour, then, is the evolution of such forms of play.

The Play Theory is not so much a description of the causes of humour as a necessary condition required for the other theories to take effect. It is playing in a way that has an intelligent focus. When we recognise that it is all silly and that our earnest intentions are so easily undermined, we take solace in the funny. Play situations let us return to our roots, devolve our civilised ways and be ape-like. The realisation of the monkey moment, in which we are struck by the simian nature of humanity, opens our minds to our animalistic primal self. It lets us see the gap we have cultivated in becoming human. Our laughter is really the common social bond. The interaction with somebody who is being funny is just like our response to a play situation. Boyd suggests that in the play fighting of many animal groups “the active partner has a play face to signal that this is

mock aggression, while the passive partner wants to indicate ‘This is good fun, keep going,’ as the roles rapidly switch back and forth.”  

He argues that primates wear a relaxed open-mouth face when they are being mock-aggressive, and that their rhythmic pant can be seen as a type of laughing. Humans probably have gained more sophisticated ways of play fighting, so that we can recognise the simulation of many different emotions as a way of making fun. In Chapter 2, I explore the Play Theory as I see it manifested in various comedies and personal experiences.

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Chapter 2: Comedy is a Game

We laugh at comics who have serious faces because we are privy to the fact that they are not really being serious. There are all kinds of markers to indicate this. They might overplay a small facial tic or just appear a little strange in some way. They might be too serious, or sad, or anxious, all kinds of negative emotions which can be made into comedy. Howard and Vince from The Mighty Boosh take turns playing this game in which one is very serious and the other takes him apart:

Howard Moon: I can’t be hemmed in. People try, they try to put me in a box but I break free.
Vince Noir: Who’s tried to put you in a box?
Howard Moon: (continues) That’s the nature of me, that’s the nature of Howard Moon.
Vince Noir: Who’s tried to put you in a box?
Howard Moon: Well... people, you know, the man!
Vince Noir: Have you contacted the police about this?

Conversely they may appear very cheerful and silly, even in the most dire of situations. Every plot in The Mighty Boosh is essentially the same: Howard goes on an adventure and gets into trouble, Vince tries to help but gets caught too, and then Naboo and Bollo have to save them. With this simple formula they can explore Howard’s desire to be taken seriously as a real explorer-type and Vince’s desire to change his outfits a lot. We find it funny because we can relate all of these situations to our everyday life. They show not just that is normal to indulge in the respective narcissism of Howard and Vince but that their vanities are somehow endearing. We can visualise a way of being happier and avoiding the ill-effects of being seriously vain by observing how these comics make comedy out of them. Other than what the comedian can offer us, the accepted mode of dealing with ideas is to be serious, not silly. When we are very serious our ability to appreciate humour is limited and in turn we become a target of humour. But in those moments when it is acceptable to be silly, we are all comedians.
Playing and joking have a strong connection. Often jokes seem to involve intentionally avoiding the truth. They have a fictitious element. We make things up. We tell stories that are not true. This takes skill and the ability to play and make-believe. Funniness lurks in truth’s counterpart – the distortion and exaggeration of what really is. Sometimes we minimise the significant, maximise the insignificant, emphasise the irrelevant or pursue the reality behind the veil of convention. So while humour seems to involve a diversion from reality, the paradoxical achievement of humour is that we are left more in touch with reality.

*The Office*, for instance, seems to be a case-study for how not to behave in an office environment or in life in general. In David Brent we see a man desperate to be liked and to be a winner but on his terms only, as the funny man. And his ambitions are not bad, he wants to create a happy work environment, but his methods are so awful. He is a terribly weak-willed man, always succumbing to the first urge he has to be funny, no matter how inappropriate, and to promote himself as some kind of admirable man:

You see, the way I react to people ... I make them feel good. I make them feel like anything’s possible. If I make them laugh along the way, sue me. And I don't do it so people turn around and go “Ooh thank you David, for the opportunity, thank you for the wisdom, thank you for the laughs.” I do it so one day someone will go “There goes David Brent. I must remember to thank him.”

He is so tactless and his personality is so flawed that we have an allergic reaction to him and watch the show in a state of horrified excruciation. The actor, Ricky Gervais, excels at dealing with fiction and creating an alternate reality. Identifying the ways in which reality can be coaxed into being funny through telling lies and distorting the truth is the skill of the master comedian. He can show us the boundaries of acceptability by crossing them, and thus the boundaries that we should look out for. We are generally impressed with the comedian’s ability to lie, to pretend, and to act. They do imitations
that are a close fit to the real thing. They almost conform but they are mocking. The essence of the humour is always in the fact that it has failed to conform to an ideal. This in turn fuels our fascination with wrongness, things that have failed to get it right.

The serious approach to life calls for the systematic creation of meaning through reason and/or logic, intuition, belief, ideals, culture, superstition, i.e. anything which can be taken seriously. Humour turns this on its head. It confounds the serious attempt at meaning. It resists meaning and makes fun of serious things. It does so in a way which gives us an understanding of the aesthetic and moral condition in the situation presented to us by the comedy. We laugh at some situation but something about this act of laughing resolves the situation for us, if we are vexed by it. Comedy brings us revelations on many wonderful and meaningful aspects of life. And while comic discourse can have bearing on rational discourse, there is no way that rational discourse can ever be intentionally comic. Being silly is the counterbalance to being serious.

The defining feature of being funny is the fact that we are actually not being serious, no matter how we may be behaving. This shows when we indulge in playing the comic game with friends when we are telling stories and sharing banter. The jokes will pepper our conversation as we shift from seriousness to silliness and back again. In these playful moments we create positions, break the rules and often try to preserve our dignity whilst defaming our friends and rivals. It is a freewheeling game in which the players set out to defend their positions long enough to slander one another in an attempt to be the master joker, whilst also affirming their affection for each other. Derek Brewer claims “the nature of the jest is to promote the humour and harmony of the group who share it and its implicit assumptions.”\(^{30}\) Necessarily, these positions are ephemeral and are to be occupied only fleetingly. It is not wise to be wedded to any position while joking because this means that you care about the position.

Much of everyday banter is littered with allusions ranging from outright lies and contradictions to subtle exaggerations and distortions. In my experience people often say the opposite of what they mean in order to convey precisely what they mean. This kind of banter has a comic element, as well as acting as the filler, the background, the chaff. Comedy requires a whole invented world of lies and make-believe, distortions and exaggerations as background filler in order that we find a contrast between truth and non-truth. The joy of comedy and humour lies in navigating this boundary. In turn it hints at the beginning of enlightenment. We seldom laugh at anything until we have incorporated it in some way, held it out and identified it as something unusual or remarkable. Laughter is an integrating process. For example, Morreall is concerned to find the connection between laughter as a piece of behavior and the emotions it is connected with such as glee, scorn and giddiness. Our laughter shows that we have dealt with the situation. Thus the practice of humour provides us with the necessary skills to deal with life.

Keeping track of the banter requires paying attention to the subtle shifts and clues as to the context of the jest. The great comic duos are often based on this kind of banter. The routines of Lano and Woodley, for example, feature the two of them engaged in a constant to-and-fro. The dynamic of their friendship is tested by their rivalry. In one sketch Col and Frank are attempting to learn a new song to perform in their stage show, and Col cracks it with Frank for not being serious enough in his performance. This allows Frank to step out of his usual low-status role and perform an elaborate pantomime imitating Col’s seriousness. “I’m sorry Col, I didn’t realise we were being serious.” Frank and Colin are continually vying for position by working on the tension between seriousness and silliness. This calls for the need to continually change tack on what is the acceptable form of seriousness.

In another scene Colin, who is at the end of his tether, yells “Don’t touch me!” at Frank and stays frozen with his finger pointing at him. Frank then goes through an elaborate routine of almost but not quite touching this finger, dancing around it and doing everything but touch it until finally without warning he pops it into his mouth. The wonderful thing about the scene is Colin’s desire to be taken seriously which Frank immediately sets upon as a new way of tormenting Colin; by encroaching on this boundary in this elaborate way he creates a suspense, part of which comes from the question of whether or not he will touch Colin’s finger and part of which derives from the question of how long he will draw out the pantomime.

Another powerful moment oft repeated in their stage show is the point at which Frank has triumphed over Col and is doing a silly dance, only for Col to take a cricket bat and give Frank a very convincing blow to the back of the head. The audience is always shocked at the unexpected violence of this act. Part of you says it was just a pretend hit but another part of you is convinced. Suddenly it seems as if the game has gotten out of hand. Col is such an edgy character, slipping between serious and silly, that part of you really believes he lost it for a second there and actually hit Frank in the head really, really hard. But it was just a new game! Frank takes the bat off Col and hits him in the head!

Each new joke is a new game with new rules to learn and to break. Whenever we need to achieve something serious we need standard rules and truth, which humour is incapable of adhering to. Humour will tell a lie, and break the rules, such that we can not give a rule for comedy. This restriction means that comedy is always flirting with norms and expectations. Serious people get things done by playing by the rules. Jokers only amuse. Funniness occurs when we lose the capacity to take the object seriously. None of the original elements of the joke have recourse to the meaning-making structures we normally employ to make sense of the world. The most important point is the fact that we are not being serious. When we speak in an unserious way there are
still certain rules we follow in order to break the rules. Our jokes do accord to prescribed patterns. But in the end there is no formula for being funny. The authentic comedy relies on being genuine, not fake. This calls for us to play and be silly.

We choose the rules as we go. Rules do not dictate the play. They are guidelines only. We cannot predict the content of the play merely by reference to the rules. In life we need intuitive understanding of how to play, of how things work, without recourse to the rules. Similarly, our language is an imperfect expression of the content of our lives. It is an approximation of the many variables at play. Humour opens our awareness to the plurality of the content of experience.

The net effect of so much coming out of the powerful mis-en-scene of comedy is a condensation, a compression of meaning, wherein we are so much in tune with the idea behind the piece that we can understand it in one powerful comic idea. All the extraneous details become irrelevant, thanks to the Annihilation of Meaning. We start to incorporate the idea of that particular comedy into our own understanding of what it means to be, until we are brimming with delight in the human condition. When condensation occurs the signifiers become overloaded with meaning so that they are on the verge of collapse and the comedy is intensified as we watch these two comics carrying on, sure that disaster is imminent.

Frank will often be extremely naïve and completely immune to Colin’s over-the-top sarcasm. Col likes to say sarcastically “Oh yeah, I’m being sarcastic” whilst pulling his most sarcastic face. Frank points out that there is an anomaly in the logic there. The ultimate goal of this kind of joke-session is to be funny. The object is to undermine each other’s positions. By saying nothing we give nothing to attack. By attacking another’s position we leave ourselves open to attack. Therefore we are prepared to sacrifice our dignity in pursuit of this goal. We offer up our own position as a target for humour. In a way the humorous attitude sorts out the participants, their status and standing in the
group, more effectively and enjoyably than other sorts of social interaction, in brawling, for example. Humour provides an arena for the most civilised form of aggression. If ever the joke cuts too deep and a brawl ensues this represents a breakdown in common manners. It is a great loss of face to not be able to take a joke and to get angry. Comedy also exposes the immature aspects of our nature. If we can make fun of certain traits we know lie within us and we know are not virtuous, we discharge this aspect somewhat. These traits are irrational; we have a tantrum because we can’t get our way. Comedy is a way of expressing the truth of ourselves to others in a safe and contained way.

When we hear a certain kind of joke, a combative sort of joke, we start to process possible responses and discover that the path of least resistance results in a contradiction, a paradox or an incongruity. We realise that all rational responses to the joke are either untenable or result in a punishment. To get angry is to succumb to the double bind feature of playing the game. The double bind is a situation where a victim is presented with two conflicting demands or messages on different communication levels. The resolution is to ‘get’ the joke. The ‘getting’ of the joke will be to realise that the contradiction is not serious enough to affect us. It will mean stepping back and seeing the situation in context, the fact that we are playing, and this is the enlightenment.

When the joke is on us it presents a serious threat to our sense of security. To get the joke we will have to relinquish an aspect of our ego. We will have to place our trust in our fellow joke members and try to remember that they still like us. The double bind will be operating at its highest level in this instance. Our fellow jokers are daring us to react angrily and not get the joke. When we are taunted by our peers the temptation is to respond in an inappropriately aggressive manner or submit and be its victim. But the better response is to show our maturity and laugh it off. This response demonstrates our recognition that our friends have caught us in a double bind. The laughing response
is to choose neither victim nor aggressor and recognise the joke. In doing so we show that we do not take ourselves too seriously and that we can play the game.

The advantages of the multi-lateral, expanded, integrated and cross-referenced humorous mind are numerous. A joke session involves a continual trumping of the terms of reference being used by the players. A successful participant will not merely replicate the current terms of reference but will turn them around and upside-down in an escalating series of manoeuvres. The fastest mind wins out; the comedian who succeeds in the joke-session gains the status of master-joker in the pack. But there is always room for a shift to be executed, to cast the subject of humour in a different light, a new perspective and trump your opponent. The delicacy of keeping the humour afloat is testament to the skill of the players; their spontaneity, free-thinking and the art of being disingenuous are at top. The shifting grounds of the terms of reference define the humorous attitude.

This shifting ground means that metaphors and allusions help create the mix of the joking situation wherein uncertainty triumphs. Jokes and witticisms make allusions towards creating a literal meaning. They pretend to be about something as if they are going to let us know something we ought to know. Ted Cohen describes jokes as little stories.32 A joke is a kind of careful construction much in the same way as a poem, in which the wording is precise and has been honed to a point. It is a carefully and precisely worded construction, capturing a unique flavour of comedy. This is in keeping with an overall tendency in humour to consist of lies and fictions. We make fun of each other by exaggerating certain traits, picking out certain moments which show each other in unflattering ways. It may not be true, at least not in a serious way, or else it wouldn’t be funny, merely cruel.

The point of the joke-session is that nothing is sacred. We occupy a position only for long enough to undermine another person’s position, to be funny at their expense, to expose them. But out of respect for each other, we preserve certain fundamental aspects of our relationship. Amongst friends, we should be able to joke about anything, and know that the friendship is rock solid. We in fact use joking as a way of talking about serious and painful issues that we are confronting. There should always be an underlying kindness in our attitude. This is a necessary condition of our being silly, the fact that we are playing. “That confident sharing of expectations, so that there is as much room as possible for the unexpected within the rules of the expected, is essential to social play.”33 We do not seek to hurt each other because we do in fact care about each other. All we care about is honesty, kindness and the preservation of good humour.

There is a kind joke that finishes with a Mushroom exclaiming to a Cow who refuses to go on a date with him, “What’s the problem? I’m a Fun Guy!” This is a classic example of condensation in a joke. The condensation occurs in the overloading of the term “fungi” which in turn causes the displacement in the train of thought of the listener. This kind of absurd fiction demonstrates how jokes routinely use distortion and exaggeration to achieve their effect. But the essence of the joke lies in its complete and utter fiction and lovely humour, rather than the pun. We love the idea of the plucky Mushroom working up the courage to ask the Cow on a date, especially when the joke-teller performs this well. It is such an absurd premise but one which would resonate with anybody who has felt at all inadequate in their romantic endeavours. It may well be that the fiction is in fact very similar to something real. Or it may be completely outlandish, not true at all. Even if we are laughing at something that is very real it will be because it has not conformed to some ideal. Therefore we are looking for the non-ideal. Much of the time we need to produce fiction to create examples of the non-ideal,

either by distorting the truth of characters and events or creating fictional characters and events.

A common ploy of comedians such as Woody Allen, who gets the girls because he is such a geek, is to identify themselves as inferior and inadequate. This is somehow very appealing for everybody to see as it takes away the pressure to excel. A consequence of the Relief Theory is that comedy betrays that with which we are anxious about or pre-occupied with, but it also makes us feel better about it. For instance, Legman shows how ribald joking is concerned with sexuality in his remarkable volume *Rationale of the Dirty Joke*. He says the purpose of telling dirtier and dirtier jokes is “to absorb and control, even to slough off, by means of jocular presentation and laughter, the great anxiety that both teller and listener feel in connection with certain culturally determined themes.”  

Whilst we may expose ourselves through our humour, there is also a sense in which we declare ourselves invulnerable. Freud thought that the fine thing about humour is

the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.  

Freud acknowledges the suffering in life and the role of humour as a defence. His theory held that it is easier on us to conserve the energy we were saving for a negative emotion such as fear, pity or anger. We could wallow in sadness or anger, or we could get over it and laugh it off. These are the emotive reactions we have to the non-ideal, when things have not gone right.

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The joke shows that we have an intimate awareness of the potential for wrongness. Shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The Office* have tremendous appeal because they are so excruciating, so much so that many people find them too excruciating to even watch. They are excruciating because the characters say things that are true, but they are also hurtful and not socially acceptable. They are realistic comedies featuring awful things which could have happened to us. There is a sense when we have mastered the situation that we have arrived at the truth. But so often we are bound by social mores which prevent us from expressing what we really think. A tyranny of respectability exists which suffocates the truth.

Larry David, creator and star of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, in an interview with Ricky Gervais, creator and star of *The Office*, says “We all have the good thoughts and the bad thoughts but, you know, nobody expresses the bad thoughts, we just think ‘em and, you know... But the bad thoughts are funny.”36 Comedians are those who are prepared to say what nobody else will. He says “That’s how we live our lives, not saying what we really want to say[...] In my case I’m such a liar, in my life, keeping things to myself, not really telling my true feelings, that I feel like I want to go completely the other way, when I have the opportunity. I think if you’re any good you have to have a compulsion to tell the truth.” This comfort with the non-ideal is a process of becoming comfortable with ourselves. It is a process of coming to terms with all that the world can throw at us, no matter how offensive or unusual. It is a process of becoming intimate with our sense of wrongness, so that we can quickly and easily distinguish between right and wrong without the alarm which accompanies moral certainty. In *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David is funny because he has no respect for these social mores and says things that other people might only think. Larry David says of his own character – “That’s why I like that Larry so much better than this Larry.” Gervais agrees – “It would be great to be like him, wouldn’t it. The freedom, not burdened by conscience.” And David rejoins – “He’s happy, that guy.”

36 Larry David interview with Ricky Gervais, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWgVr545yNA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWgVr545yNA) [Date accessed: 18 November 2010].
Play situations give us non-rational, non-intellectual scenarios for expressing our innate desire for glory and relief. Humour is all about playing the game. Once we can let go and allow ourselves to be amused, we are more inclined to stay amused. Once we get in a good mood we find more things funny. We start to see the meaninglessness in everything. Heller makes this point: “We laugh at senselessness, but it is the sense in the senselessness that gives us pleasure, and this is something serious.”37 The joy in the game speaks to our human instinct for survival and prosperity. We begin to own the landscape having mastered the elements within it. In Chapter 3 I will discuss how humour can reveal the seedy side of human nature.

Chapter 3: Joking, Wrongness and Reality

A lot of things about humour seem to be categorically wrong. There are plays on the mistakes we make, the obtuse ways of getting things done, the disasters that befall us and the deficiencies in our character. In a lot of humour we have a sketch of how not to behave and the least productive ways of being. We get a kick out of watching losers be funny and inept. We don't like to see perfect people. There is nothing funny about things going perfectly or as they should be. We like to see the errors and pitfalls that beset other people. Non-ideal situations are required. Depravity is ideal.

If comedy involves a diversion from the real by riffing on things that are wrong then the joke is on something that has not conformed to an ideal. Consider Pierre, the Pig Fucker. A couple backpacking in the countryside of France arrive at a little village looking for a place to stay for the evening. There is no room anywhere, however, and they keep getting told “You might try Pierre the Pig Fucker.” A little tentatively, they arrive at Pierre the Pig Fucker’s and tell him they are Australians. “Nous sommes Australien?” he exclaims, “Ah, oui, bien! C’est magnifique!” Pierre takes them in for lodging and they enjoy a wonderful night of wine and food. They are delighted by his hospitality and the next day, upon leaving, they are compelled to ask, “Pierre, we just want to know, why are you called Pierre the Pig Fucker?” He indignantly responds:

“Huh! For six years during the war I fight in the Resistance. Did anyone ever call me Pierre the Resistance Fighter? No! And then, for four years I was a student at the Sorbonne. Did anyone ever call me Pierre the Student? No! And then after my studies, I worked the land for more than 40 years – did anyone ever call me Pierre the Farmer? No!”
(Pause)
“I fuck just one pig!”

He imagines he can counter the accusation of his title by telling the truth, a truth which nonetheless condemns him. Our attraction to this joke lies in our delight at the poor
man’s inability to escape his reputation. His arguments are very sound, but meaningless. He should be known for his better deeds and yet the cruelty of life is such that he will be forever condemned as an outsider. Our concern with what is normal is deeply wrapped up our relationship with truth. Humour deals with the line between normality and difference. Things which are outside the normal are the subject of humour and to show that we understand this we laugh.

Bergson introduced the idea that humour is useful as a means of keeping us elastic to the demands of society, that is, as a social corrector. He identified the way that comedy is formed from anything that is outside of the ideal, and therefore helps us see what it is that is not conforming to the ideal. 38 Because we laugh at the things that are rigid and mechanical, inferior versions of themselves, we are kept on our toes. Humour is an exploration of difference and thus becomes a site of learning and an opportunity to demonstrate our normality. We need to be seen to laugh at this joke because it is so obvious that we don’t want to be like Pierre, who just doesn’t get it.

Anything which is normal is not funny. Only the departure from the norm is funny. And this is the norm in its sense of the ways in which we should behave. Being able to riff consistently that particular type of wrongness that is funny demonstrates a certain mastery over the world. In turn it demonstrates the beginning of enlightenment. Comedy mediates our view of life. Monro argues that “The larger function of humour is to detach us from the world of good and evil and make us see it in its larger perspective.” 39 Comedy changes our perspective on things, it is not necessarily a force for good but it does offer a different way of looking. Possibly it is completely amoral; in itself comedy does not prescribe any ethical markers to chart a course. We are just compelled to search out difference.

The departure from the norm means that we cannot distil the essence of the funny from the study of jokes themselves. In a way, a rational perspective prevents us from appreciating why a joke is funny. The joke has an intangible quality which is in oppositional status to rational discourse. Analysis kills the joke, as they say. This does not mean that funniness cannot be present in rational discourse, as in the silly digressions that are an aside to the serious business at hand, but the funniness is present precisely because we have stopped being serious for a moment.

The mechanism of the joke should effect a transition from the rational to the funny. But if we resist this drive towards the funny we can quite easily refuse to laugh. We can be steadfastly serious. This will enable us to analyse the joke in a rational manner, and in the process lose the humour. It will also enable us to be boring tools. We can only “get” the joke, a mental act requiring intuitive understanding. Possibly there is a point in the serious discourse which actually generates a funny conclusion, as in when we arrive at a paradox or contradiction.

We delight in the funny because it is comfortable with the irrational. The funny presents rationality with ambivalence and disdain. And if rationality cannot be reconciled with this it faces a devastating force of paradox and contradiction, an annihilation of meaning. This force overcomes a critical portion of the sense rationality tries to impose on the joke, thus making it incoherent. The joke is anti-reason whilst simultaneously speaking to an intuitive sense that we possess, our sense of humour. Comedy calls for common sense, not necessarily the moral state arrived at through reason, but through intuition.

This comfort with the irrational is a process of becoming comfortable with ourselves. It is a process of coming to terms with all that the world can throw at us, no matter how offensive or unusual. It is a process of becoming intimate with our sense of wrongness, and appreciating the inexactitude hidden by moral certainty. A consequence of the
Relief Theory is that comedy betrays that with which we are anxious or preoccupied. Either we laugh too much at the allusion contained in the joke or we falter in our rejoinder.

Legman shows how ribald joking can function as a seductive or abusive process, in which the teller of the joke inspires you to be complicit in his thoughts. Legman says, “The telling of dirty jokes, like the whispering of bawdy words to strange women in the street or by telephone, or the chalking of genital monosyllables on walls, serves in its simplest form — as shown by Freud — as a sort of vocal and inescapable sexual relationship with other persons of the desired sex.” Crucially he goes on that “in many jokes on themes more taboo than simple sexuality, the person ‘denuded’ by the joke is really the teller himself.”

I have friends who delight in relating imagined lewd and disgusting sexual involving the other’s mother. I think it has something to do with the school they went to. As the joke session continues the more disgusting and debasing the remark the better. It is humorous in one instance for the mutual pain and corruption it causes to both the teller and the receiver, as there is only a slight advantage for the teller in that the other’s mother is more dear to him. But the discourse seems to deliver a cathartic response for those involved. The jokes issue a direct challenge to one’s dignity, even as you know it is not serious. As the paradigm shifts take place, it is not any particular mother being referred to anymore but the “imagined” mother. It is a non-serious world where literal meaning has no place, because everything that happens is bracketed as “fictional”. It is almost a place where anything goes, and consequently, the most depraved and fantastical images tend to dominate.

What’s pink and has seven dents? Snow White’s hymen.

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41 Ibid., p 14.
This joke pretends to tell us something that we didn’t know. But it lies. It is ribald and salacious. There is no reason to ever want to know anything about Snow White’s hymen. We certainly do not want to be exposed to the suggestion that the Seven Dwarves have tried to have sex with Snow White. The ribald joke has its own titillating effect which seems to transport us into a fantasy land.

The objectionable nature of this joke exposes an underlying and unconscious thought that many of us may have had, but never allowed to become conscious. Whilst this joke is incredibly impolite, it generates great enjoyment in the listener, (at least, in those who are not so offended they cannot bear it) as a result of transgressing a taboo but in a way which leaves things obfuscated and allows an element of confusion. The mechanism of the joke is orientated towards confounding of the literal content so that the aesthetic of the comic comes to the fore, an appreciation of pure humour, rich in meaning yet simultaneously indescribable, an annihilation of meaning.

Offensive jokes are funny precisely because they are so obnoxious. We are astounded that it is permissible for such expressions to come into the world. Wilson has noted that the ambiguity in the abusive joking, the fact that an offensive message is conveyed in joking form, helps a contentious message get through the censors without ruffling any feathers. He also notes that sexual humour allows us to introduce topics that are a focus of anxiety.42 This is very perceptive. The point of joking about Snow White’s hymen is to talk about Snow White’s hymen, a topic which would otherwise have no appropriate means for discussion.

Let us see where a rational analysis of the Snow White joke takes us. First we should note that it falls under the category of general ribaldry, in which “the content of the humour refers to imaginary people or those who are absent from the immediate

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interaction..." Next, a rationalist will insist that the joke is merely a means of suggesting something quite unacceptable, a way for men, perhaps, to communicate to each other what they are really interested in. But we are killing the comedy here. The joke has certain compelling reasons and alibis for existing, sure, but the humour is something different.

The Snow White joke can only be told in the most limited of circumstances, but providing the context is right, that being salacious is appropriate, an annihilation of meaning will result, due to the very fact that we are talking about Snow White’s hymen. The tastelessness of the joke is pointless and excessive. It seems to only be with us for the sake of sexual expression. The fact that we are being presented with this image as if it is funny is in itself funny and the bad taste of it compounds the humour through its sheer audacity.

The point is that we have social mores, which are not supposed to be transgressed. But the thing about humour is that it often works best when it is straying on the edges of such social mores. It pushes the boundaries. It makes some of us feel uncomfortable. We all know how we are supposed to be behaving, but watch out, there’s a Funny Man in the room! He’s going to say something crazy! He’s going to perform, gasp, a paradigm shift!

The final episode of season 3 of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* features the opening of Larry and his friends’ new restaurant in Los Angeles. Their new chef has been recommended by an ill-tempered restaurant critic with a grudge. Larry David has a history of being deceived by the chefs who they keep trying to hire for this new restaurant, and here he has stuck up for this guy because he thought he was Holocaust Survivor, only realising his mistake when he discovers the chef’s ‘tattoo’ was actually a lottery number he had penned on in biro. The entire fortune of the restaurant is riding on the question of

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43 Ibid., p 173.
whether or not the chef, a sufferer of Tourette’s syndrome, will suffer an outbreak on the job, as he is poised working in front of the diners in very intimate surroundings.

The disappointment of Larry’s discovery is setting in as he does the rounds hobnobbing and cursing himself for thinking the number written on the chef’s arm was a death camp tattoo. But it seems all to be OK, they’ve gotten well into the evening and maybe they’re going to pull it off after all. He looks across at his friend Jeff and they smile and shrug.

The new chef suddenly lets forth with an execrable volley of swearing across the room. He shouts “Fucking shit-faced cocksucker, arsehole son of a bitch!” from his podium where he works, straight out into the restaurant, and then continues with his cooking completely unawares. The whole restaurant is in shock at what has happened. Larry looks like he is about to die. Everyone is silent, appalled at the curses still hanging in the air.

Larry saves the day, suddenly spluttering forth a volley of swearing of his own, “Scum sucking motherfuck whore!” and everybody turns to look at him, even more appalled. It is unclear whether he is just losing it, then Jeff catches on and shouts “Cock! Cock! Jism gribber cock!” The other investors look sick, but they also manage to join in with their own contributions. “Bum fuck turd fart cunt piss shit bugger and balls! Damn it hell crap shit!” One by one the diners start joining in, and all the tension dissipates, the mood returns and the restaurant is a success.

Watching this I feel an enormous surge of pleasure, at the success of the restaurant, at Larry’s daring feat, at the release of the tension involved in the swearing, and at the acceptance of the group of this poor man who suffers from such an awkward condition. The humour bites in many forms here but the pathos also is extraordinary: the feel-good
vibe, all these abrupt and rude people who seem to relish interacting in a highly combative mode, really just getting along and enjoying the moment.

The moment when Larry decides to yell swear words at the silent restaurant is an epiphany. In doing so he enacts change, transforming a moment of awkwardness into one of harmony. The entire fate of the restaurant, upon which he has staked so much, rides on this gambit. And he pulls it off. He saves the day. This is how Larry’s world works. He is either on top of it or not, grabbing the bull by the horns or getting stomped on. But there are so many nuances involved because the situation is chaotic. There are always too many factors to reliably predict what will happen. Anything might alter the outcome. And in the case of this restaurant, so much has happened, there have being so many variables to get to this point.

Larry is ‘in the groove’ when he has his epiphany. He is a very smart man, and yet he is highly flawed and frequently stepping ‘out of the groove.’ Larry always has a faux-pas to make or he will willingly hold out on social niceties if he believes there is something unreasonable about them, when most of us would just extend our graciousness. The absurdity of his position lies in the disjunct between his highly sociable lifestyle, significant degree of charm and etiquette on the one hand and his irritability, lack of grace, and panache for putting his foot in it on the other.

Being ‘in the groove’ means we act instinctively without reference to rational processes and pull it off under pressure. I think this capacity is integral to our success and wellbeing, supplying us with the tools for improvising and role-playing and enabling us to deal with the vagaries brought about by flux. Being ‘in the groove’ means attaining a deeper intuitive understanding of a part of the world and acting harmoniously whilst being ‘out of the groove’ implies a wrong way of being in touch with the world.
Comedy takes us to another realm, the realm of the funny. It is the world of drama and theatre, the dramatic, comedic representation of the world. When one of us apes around and makes a clown out of himself, we can see a particular type of humour that exists in the realm of performance. It is all about playing the game. Once we can let go and allow ourselves to be amused, we are more inclined to stay amused. Once we get in a good mood we find more things funny. We start to see the meaninglessness in everything. By goofing around and playing characters we generate our own humour, our own amusement, and exhort each other to join in. The comic establishes a concrete attitude towards the world. He makes us privy to a certain way of understanding the world which has fecundity and harmony.

We connect with the everyday world, the outlying ‘reality’, on a day to day basis and the quality of our connection fluctuates between good and not so good. When we are ‘in the groove’ we take stock of the way things are, adjust our pre-conceived notions, and continue the narrative that we have woven into the events of our lives. Our expectations are synchronous with the world. Somehow our common sense gives flexibility to our rationality and enables our interaction with the world by filling in the spaces between our rational constructs. In Chapter 4 I will discuss a state of mind that is crucial to mastering the elements of comedy, the Annihilation of Meaning.
Chapter 4: The Annihilation of Meaning

A cartoon in The New Yorker features two apes on the savannah, one wise ape is questioning a younger ape on his decision to wear a schoolgirl’s plaid skirt, saying “And in the event of an actual leopard attack the schoolgirl fetish would do exactly what?” I don’t even know why this cartoon is funny before I laugh, and the more I keep trying to understand it the more my laughter overtakes my mind. In this chapter, I shall focus attention on this striking fact. I don't understand the joke - yet I 'get' the joke. If someone asked me 'what does this joke mean?' I'd say it was meaningless. And from this I develop a particular claim: the power of this joke is tied to its being meaningless. The inability to define what happened and why is a characteristic of the joke. Furthermore I develop a more general claim: that as a general characteristic, jokes annihilate meaning - and that helps explain the delight we take in them.

The Annihilation of Meaning is the process in which meaning is destroyed. In other words, the joke is not just meaningless from start to finish. It necessarily masquerades as something meaningful, and typically begins in a sensible fashion. Comedy flirts with serious and pragmatic meaningful discourse. It is always suggesting that it is going to revert to seriousness again, continually renewing our interest, only to crack another gag. In this joke, we have the quizzical look of the wise elderly ape asking a question which often is very serious. We are not even sure if the ape is bemused or genuinely concerned that the young ape has committed to this strategy, which he suspects won't actually work. But this is exactly the form of thinking that is often really important to us - questioning our assumptions about practical effectiveness. He couches his question in the language of careful cross examination: ‘in the event of’, ‘would do exactly what?’ And in the context of speaking apes, ‘fetish’ has an ethnographic meaning: the monkey had the right idea but the wrong fetish.
An important feature of the Annihilation of Meaning is that it is temporary: serious meaning quickly returns. Comedy necessarily relies on the platform of serious rational discourse to take effect. The rapidly shifting the ground that we have seen at work in the joke session is continuously altering the platform from which we base our humour. Only once we are in possession of a framework that allows us an understanding of the situation the joke has presented us can we discover the humour. It is when the constituent meaningful components of the joke align so that the humour is sprung, that we can appreciate how the joke is composed. From this point, we have in our hands a rational structure which is going to be blown apart as the joke detonates.

But the situation is deeply mad. The 'getting the joke' requires entering into the spirit of the wise and sensible ape who is asking a very serious practical question. He is like a board member coming down a bit hard on a half-baked idea of his over-enthusiastic marketing executive. At exactly the same time, we have to hold in view the mad idea that the silly ape has either misunderstood what a fetish is or has given sublimated expression to his own sexual fantasies. We enter into a state of mind in which we have to weigh up something very silly (the ape in the school girl skirt) against the very serious scenario of the ape being mauled by a leopard as a result of his naivety.

The Annihilation of Meaning arises from the constant assault of contradiction and paradox on the structure of rational thought. The envelope of definitions becomes stretched as boundaries are no longer taken seriously. The undermining of the content of experience, due to mockery, silliness and mirth, causes the status quo to shift and territorial boundaries to be redrawn. Definitions become vulnerable to re-expression. This is the result of the discovery of humour, that elusive commodity. The Annihilation of Meaning entails an utter denial of the explicit values and ethical constraints of society and even the wilful rejection of reality, in order to impose a silly and contemptible meaning which nevertheless contains an inexpressible Truth. (You will notice that I am giving Truth a capital 'T' to suggest in a slightly ironic sense that the Truth is something
other than the truth. This also conveys my ill-advised scepticism about the ability of truth to ever be Truth, though I'm sure it can.)

The end point of the Annihilation of Meaning is a blankness of the mind, such that we can no longer confer sense on anything and the world appears to us freed from discursive meaning. This blankness is like washing clean the slate and describes the refreshing nature of comedy. So the blankness offers a kind of clarity, in which everything becomes clear. This is a temporary state, however, as meaning quickly reasserts itself and complicates things, but the process of constructing and annihilating meaning is in itself greatly rewarding and contributes towards our own enlightenment. It is rewarding in that it offers us a sharper appreciation of the human condition. The Annihilation of Meaning plays an important role in gaining an appreciation of meaning, though this may seem paradoxical, and ultimately in the attainment of enlightenment. Enlightenment should be the ideal state of being. And of course the question of knowing who are what we are. There is something about the ability of a man or woman to stand on the plains or in a room at a martini party, and laugh at someone else’s joke. To just reach out and embrace the quirks and funniness of our fellow human beings, that is the key.

The Annihilation of Meaning attempts to picture the way that two or more separate structures of meaning, or trains of thought, are in a way driven onto a collision course and a big bang occurs, followed by nothingness. The joke brings together two different constructions of meaning in an incongruent fashion, smashing them together so that we are left with nothing. Arthur Koestler’s bivalence theory of humour, which suggests that a joke leads us down two diverging paths which are then resolved, with a spark connecting the two being the “flash of humour,” can give us an idea of the mechanism involved.⁴⁴ Monro has an analogy similar to Koestler’s: “The mind is as it were wound up ready to proceed in a definite direction: it is suddenly wrenched off its path and

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turned in a different direction.” The punch line of a joke is so silly, fitting, apt, forgotten and remembered all at once that we experience relief. All these contradictory feelings are the essence of the joke. Manifestly they constitute a peculiar feeling which we identify as being the result of humour, which we remember has to do with feeling happy and laughing, but curiously has a nonsensical element.

Getting the joke requires us to let go of our rational framework, to stop trying to understand and give ourselves up to suggestion. Subsequently we can behold the Annihilation of Meaning. Getting the joke is a flash of intuitive understanding. It is an instinctive awareness of the truth of the contradiction or paradox involved. Graham Priest, in his work on dialethism, or true contradictions, shows how contradictions in infinity, God and the limits of knowledge can all be shown to be true. They all involve a totality and an operation that overcomes that totality. He defines closure as “a totality of all things expressible, describable,” and transcendence as “an appropriate operation that generates an object that is both within and without the totality.”

In the same way there is something in the joke that brings something new, outside the framework of the subject. A joke is also dialethic in form. It involves closure, in that it resolves two contradictory suggestions, and transcendence, in that the embrace of incongruity allows the creation of humour, an object that is both within and without the totality. We have two contradictory ideas in the following joke which are exploited to create something funny:

What did Tarzan say when he saw the elephants coming over the hill?
“Here come the elephants coming over the hill!”
What did Tarzan say when he saw the elephants coming over the hill with sunglasses on?
Nothing, he didn’t recognise them.

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Against all probability Tarzan fails to recognise that the elephants coming over the hill, with sunglasses on, are elephants, for the conceit of sunglasses is that when you are wearing them people don’t recognise you. We are given the suggestion that Tarzan, who only has the jungle creatures to hang out with, actually does not recognise these particular elephants and were they to have take off their sunglasses at some point, he would go, “Oh, it was you!” So we have two contradictory ideas: a) the joke suggests that if he can recognise elephants then he should be able to recognise elephants with sunglasses on, but b) the joke asserts that he can’t recognise elephants with sunglasses on because sunglasses hide identity. The struggle to accept both these facts causes an annihilation of meaning. We have a very precise construction of understanding occurring only to have it implode as the punch-line is delivered. It is as if we are given a structure and the keystone is removed, thus creating a spectacular collapse.

Tarzan has only identified the elephants as ‘elephants’ so why can’t he recognise elephants with sunglasses on as ‘elephants with sunglasses on’? Because in the Tarzan joke we have a concept of ‘Tarzan and his everyday life in the jungle’ framed as if it were just like ordinary urban existence, as if Tarzan is a cool urban dude and would be unconcerned by the presence of unrecognised elephants, plus the incongruity of his limited ability to describe elephants who are supposedly his friends. What is amazing is that there is so much to unpack in such a seemingly simple joke. By framing Tarzan as both jungle man and sophisticated cool dude in a few simple lines, we get a whole gamut of interesting suggestions and allusions. The joke combines the rules of two different schemas. It allows one set of rules to interfere with the other set, such that a form of silliness is encountered. This is a virtue, in my view. It allows us to see the fallibility of rules and the folly of being rule driven.

Whilst comedy seems to celebrate the silliness of life it also provokes feelings of profundity and great meaning. Things become clarified in the comic spotlight. It is as though a kernel of truth is revealed and captured in the elegance of the joke. The kernel
of truth is presented in such a way that it unfolds in the mind upon reflection, stimulating and inspiring whilst processing the implications of the joke. We delight in the funny because it uses rational processes yet it verges on the irrational. It produces an implosion whenever the constituent meaningful components of the joke align and cancel each other out. The joke does not make sense. It is told as a way to subvert standard methods of creating meaning. It either manages to show an inconsistency in the way our meaning system maps onto the world, or it manages to reveal the reality of a less than ideal situation. It is a result of our attempts to see the world as a system, to delineate the various parts, and what the joke does is identify a glitch in the system. Any serious person will question the rationality of the joke, even the rationality of the joker. The joke is anti-reason whilst simultaneously speaking to an intuitive sense that we possess, our sense of humour. Humour allows us to conceive of the world beyond the limits of rational structure.

Humour lets us key in to the way things are and identify that which is reasonable to believe. Terry Eagleton says in his defence of spirituality: “We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.” Accordingly with our sense of humour, we place our faith in a reasonable notion that we cannot explain. We delight in humour, place it on a pedestal, laud our comedians, yet it remains impossible to explain. The antipathy comedy has for expression and description can be likened to Keats' notion of negative capability. Keats described a “negative capability” as being “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” The Annihilation of Meaning is attuned to the idea of Truth in just such a negative sense. Through its exploration of the unreasonable and its obsession with that which is not true or ideal, humour delineates an outline of what really is the Truth and what really is

Ideal. We pursue the limits of Truth by creating humour. We seek to understand the nature of Truth by swathing ourselves in irony, mock-seriousness and the absurd.

When we create comedy we follow paths of logic which turn into contradictions and paradoxes. Everything real is left unsaid as we are not interested in statements of fact. Any solemnity is shown to be unreliable. The world is shown to be greater than our rational statements about it. There are too many unknowns, too many unexpected turns of events to have a ready-made analysis at hand for everything we encounter. We have to be prepared to be flexible; having a good sense of humour is one way of being ready. A “vital piece of psychological equipment” helping us to deal with the human predicament is how Howard Jacobson describes it. Comedy will fill in and smooth over those rough edges between our rational constructs and the world as we encounter it. Philosophers in general have great trouble communicating what they mean. The problem, I think, is identifying the point of philosophy, and many of us are working from very different assumptions about what philosophy is trying to do. In my opinion, the point of philosophy is about letting go of our desire to know things for certain. This is the great con, the illusion that things are knowable. But still philosophers try to mark out their territory and smugly announce that they know what they are talking about.

The various discourses that we create are all serious. They all rely on taking a certain perspective at the expense of certain others. In order to create certainty we must lock in the definitions for each term in the discourse, we must seek to know what was really meant when Plato talked about love, what the real definition was. Certainty means choosing a winner out of all the competing discourses. It is a search for the holy grail of certainty, by pegging down all the meaning in the world to ensure that nothing moves. The enlightenment of humour means a release from the tyranny of discourse. It means realising the vulnerability of all expression and belief to mirth and satire. If we can see our ape-like characteristics then all seriousness is rendered vain and pretentious. By

giving ourselves over to the comedy we can discover the world again in its non-systematised way of being.

In *Real Presences*, George Steiner shows that pegging down definitions is the death of language. He argues that we should not pretend that the words we use “stand for” the real world.\(^5^0\) The words *are* the point of using words and what they refer to are more words, and more words. The beauty is in the language that we use and the elaborate artifices that we construct, all of which decay into nothing once we have finished speaking.\(^5^1\)

Generally the meaning of things is clear; it is on the surface, there is no need to delve the depths to discover the meaning. At which point are we unsure what we mean in the everyday? At which point do we need a philosopher to come along and establish the basics? We know what we mean, just as Augustine knew what time was so long as nobody asked him. Resist the urge to start isolating concepts and proceeding along logical lines. The words are the point and what they refer to are more words, and more words. The beauty is in the language that we use and the elaborate artifices that we construct, all of which decay into nothing once we have finished speaking.

When we do not speak, all is well. We have made no claim on the world. Our relationship with the world is perfect but when we start to speak, we divide the world into things. These meaning-making acts are made in a spirit of seriousness, in order to be serious. When we speak or act meaningfully we intend to either communicate a message or alter the world in a meaningful way that will be considered appropriate and good. And by being funny we break down those divisions and return to the uncomplicated world. The various serious discourses all rely on engaging with a certain perspective, being concerned with the outcomes, at the expense of our carefree


\(^{51}\) Ibid.
relationship with the world. In order to create certainty we must lock in the definitions and create an identity for ourselves, grow up and be serious.

If humour is a drive towards meaninglessness, this claim must somehow be realised with the equally important claim that humour involves gaining an understanding of the world and achieving wisdom. Meaning collapses where humour is found, but wisdom emerges. We are compelled by a desire to find meaning in our interactions with each other and the descriptions of the world that we compose for each other. But what happens when we can’t settle on meaning? What happens when we discover the seam which cannot be contained or compressed in a rational structure? We laugh. We discover so many impediments to our meaning-construction intentions that we must laugh at the resulting collapse as we fail to make sense of the world. For in our intellectual culture, something rational is always correct as it is meant to attain a structure which mirrors the world. Supposedly, it discovers clear definitions and clear boundaries, which can be achieved with analytic language. It features surgical precision, which cuts through the unintelligible morass of the irrational. Analytic language is the language of science. It cuts and dissects the world into definable parts and then constructs a Truth. Seeking out the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the Truth such that we actively resist serious discourse is an anti-rational impulse, or at least it defies the assertion of absolute fact. It prohibits the formation of concrete ways of seeing. It precludes the possibility of knowing. Instead it revels in the ubiquity of unknowing.

In what way can we have certainty? "Possibility consists in the fact that a rhinoceros can be stuffed under the table. Russell can stuff it."\textsuperscript{52} Certainty is ephemeral. It can only last in the moment. Meaning acts also exist in the moment. The function of humour is to show us that meaning is a fleeting construct. It can only be found with great effort. Our joking destabilises the ordinary meaningful relationships in the world, introducing

this new element of the unknown. Nonetheless, our sense of humour compels us to inquire into the nature of things. It is a desire, born of *eros*, to be a part of the world, to be a fully living being in one’s own environment. Our laughter is recognition of truths in the world, even as our ability to determine their definitive *meaning* is reduced or even nullified. We understand the world, without being able to explain what it means. Perhaps it is the release from the unrelenting demands of the symbolic order which satisfies us. Humour propels us down a path in which meaning is emptied of content and the result is a wondrous release. We get a glimpse of ourselves as the incongruous little beasts that we are and all our certainties are called into question. It is no longer possible to be so serious about oneself.

The idea of the Annihilation of Meaning offers an important insight into the nature and value of comedy and humour. It suggests that whilst the causes and mechanisms of humour are so varied as to defy any unifying theory of humour, the result, achieved in various ways, is profound and enlightening. For I argue that the Annihilation of Meaning, far from destroying insight and comprehension, is in fact a source of deep appreciation of the human predicament. It holds that the experience of being unable to assimilate the constituent meaningful parts of the joke and, consequently, being overwhelmed by the irrational nature of humour, reveals to us certain mysteries which may or may not be accessible through rational means. Rational structures do exist and they do work for all the serious things. But a conception of rationality applying to all things must run into difficulties. Our lives obey rational structures, but spill out over the edge, endlessly curly and multiplying and dividing. So the problem about an analysis of humour, is that the intention of analysis is generally at odds with the true nature of humour, for analysis is serious whilst humour is silly. Hopefully the kind of analysis that I have given here reconciles the two. In Chapter 5 I will discuss the comedy of taking serious topics and making fun of them. This style of comedy, I argue, paradoxically increases our ability to care, pathos is invoked, and we touch upon a form of enlightenment.
Chapter 5: Seriousness, Pathos and Enlightenment

Comedy can foster enlightenment by forcing us to interrogate our attachment to certain assumptions and attitudes. There is a distinctive mode in which comedy does this. We can see it in Monty Python’s Life of Brian, set in biblical Jerusalem. It plays on a very silly kind of humour, yet it deals with the big issues – religion, belief, God, crucifixion – and ultimately makes us question the significance of these themes.

In Life of Brian many of the scenes in the movie feature very serious things happening in order to create comedy, such as the scene featuring a heretic about to be stoned to death for his crime of uttering the name ‘Jehovah’. All those present for the stoning are not men but women in fake beards. The seriousness of his predicament is offset by the silliness of the women so eager to stone him to death. As the official cleric tries to conduct the stoning of this man a certain amount of confusion amounts. The man complains that he only said ‘Jehovah’. This further compounds his guilt. But the absurdity of the event is inherent in the difficulty of prohibiting a word from use and yet identifying what that word is. In the end the official is stoned to death when he shouts “No one, and I mean no one, is to stone anybody until I give the command, even, and I mean this, even if they do say ‘Jehovah’!”

The constituent meaningful parts of the joke have come together to create a paradox. No one is allowed to say Jehovah, not even in order to enforce the prohibition. If we ask ourselves why it is we are laughing at this point we cannot really say why, except to re-describe what happened, explain that it was paradoxical and merely assert that they did it in a really funny way. It targets modes of thinking that are not easily accessible to standard modes of analytic thought. These are the assumptions and attitudes that constitute our everyday moral being and they tend to be below the threshold of immediate awareness. Essentially it is those parts of ourselves that we take for granted. Especially, it homes in on undesirable ways of thinking that are so easy to acquire, like
being a boorish prig, or sanctimonious, or hypocritical, or socially deviant. We get to see our assumptions and attitudes for what they are.

These attitudes are not founded on any rational thought, but on inherent and unconscious desire, and therefore they are not easily debunked by rational argument. Rather, we need the cutting edge of the funny to bring them down. Certain attitudes are obstacles to enlightenment. Humour targets the contradictions inherent in these non-ideal attitudes. The key, however, to our enjoyment of humour, is that it is never didactic. It’s because of the mode of comedy and the way in which it engages with our views on life that it can have an impact upon the sources of attachment to the assumptions and attitudes that lead us astray. Humour will ridicule and make a mockery of you but it is never sanctimonious. If we are not interested in being enlightened, we can still enjoy the humour just because it is plain silly and often not very nice.

The comedy of Monty Python is deeply infused with the quality of silliness and the absurd. Brian leads a life parallel to the real Jesus Christ, having being born in the manger next door. But he is a bumbling fool, an impulsive young man full of fear and insecurities as well as a desire to change the world. Much of the humour is to be found in the pitiful character of Brian, who just doesn’t seem equipped to deal with the messes he gets himself into. But we also feel for Brian and his brief success. Brian’s job as a terrorist requires him to briefly impersonate a preacher on the Messiah strip as he evades the police, but he is so nonchalant about the debate that he attains an uncharacteristic air of intrigue and charisma. So we get a credible, if unlikely, scenario for the incongruous event of Brian being mistaken for the Messiah. Absurdity arises in natural situations when one set of intentions and beliefs runs up against another, just as the Incongruity Theory asserts.
Brian flees into the desert, followed by a throng of supporters. There he faces them off and shouts at them despairingly “I’m not the Messiah!” This is interpreted by the indefatigable logic of the faithful to be a sign of his divinity, for only the true messiah would deny that he is the Messiah. The hopelessness of this logic provokes Brian to shout, “Alright, I am the Messiah” and the delighted crowd cheers at his affirmation. The comedy works courtesy of Brian’s ongoing state of high anxiety combined with the paradox he finds himself in.

The next day Brian rises from his bed, having won the girl, and throws open the window to his apartment, only to be confronted again by the roaring crowd shouting for the messiah. He is completely flummoxed by the misdirected adulation and promptly flees back to his bed. Brian’s mother rebukes the crowd: “He’s not the Messiah; he’s a very naughty boy!” This line somehow manages to achieve a compression of meaning. The common pursuit of the crowd fills the viewer with a sense of the vastness and purpose of humanity and yet the object of their adoration is so pitiful. We are presented with two conflicting views, that of the adoring crowd and that of Brian’s disdainful mother, providing a contradiction which must be resolved.

Brian tries to convince the crowd they need to be individuals if they want to be right thinking. He has them reciting the line “We are all individuals!” in chorus only to hear a lone voice pathetically intone, “I’m not.” At which everyone sssh’s him. The brilliance of this set piece lies in it being manifestly logical and yet confounding. The man is an individual because he alone thinks differently to the crowd, but his expressed form of homogeneity is his difference. The logic of the scene releases us from the urgencies of meaningful discourse. The constituent components of the joke achieve transcendence, the Annihilation of Meaning. In this we can discover a true appreciation of humour, when we are laughing so hard that we don’t even know what it is we are laughing at anymore.
The Annihilation of Meaning is the appropriate response to all serious lines of thought taken to their extreme. It is an expression of awe, a contemplation of the sublime, an apprehension of the profound, the infinite and the absolute. Any concept beyond the bounds of human understanding can cause an annihilation of meaning. But it is the serious aspects of existence, the profound nature of humanity that is its main effect. The Annihilation of Meaning can leave us feeling a renewed love for the world. I will use the term *pathos* to denote this quality, to express the appeal to emotion that resides within the process. The dismantling of the rational schema surrounding the subject of comedy, in order to express the inexpressible, combined with the inherent pleasure of the comedy means that we are imbued with a positive, non-intellectual, and emotive response. It causes us to indulge in pathos and nostalgia. The appeal to emotion is a recourse of humour because of its inability to follow reason and rationality. It cannot help itself but to be silly, thus it often finds its effect best by wiping out all sense, leaving an appeal to our feeling for humanity. In *Life of Brian* the struggles and yearning of humanity are continually set up only to be undercut by repeated instances of the silly. We truly do feel for Brian, in his hopeless situation, and yet we are encouraged to find the whole thing very funny. Enjoying the humour in *Life of Brian* allows us to have a sympathetic experience. We can relate to his travails and privations, the way he is confounded at every turn.

Brian’s mother tells him that his father is Nortius Maximus, a centurion in the Roman army, so “next time you go on about the ‘bloody Romans’, don’t forget that you’re one of them”, prompting this wonderful outburst:

I’m not a Roman, Mum, and I never will be! I’m a Kike! A Yid! A Hebe! A Hook-nose! I’m Kosher, Mum!
I’m a Red Sea Pedestrian, and proud of it!

Brian’s identification with derogatory terms for Jews is an intense moment heightened by Graham Chapman’s ferocity. He excels at playing this pathetic young man, so full of ideals and yet conflicted by his origins. In this example we can feel for Brian’s
sensitivities and also laugh at them at the same time. We can see here how comedy seeks out the contradictions in not only thoughts and argument, but also in our most fundamental attachments. The resolution will come eventually through the dissipation of the ego and the relinquishment of sacrosanct topics. The serious trajectory is to be sensitive to contradiction as the prelude to the resolution of contradiction. We are meant to be very serious about issues of race and identity, and if this were not a comedy, we would be very concerned about Brian’s outburst. But comedy fosters the capacity to cope well with unresolved contradiction at this level. These issues are brought out into the open, whilst normally we cope by not being intently aware of them. The ability to come face to face with fundamental issues is part of enlightenment, and since comedy gives us a means to do so, then comedy fosters enlightenment.

When the captured Brian is brought before Pontius Pilate to be charged, the seriousness of the scene is stolen due to the hilarious nature of Pilate’s speech impediment, his inability to pronounce the letter ‘R’. The revelation that he has a friend named “Biggus Dickus”, means that the Roman guards cannot contain their mirth and fall about the floor laughing, despite Pontius Pilate’s wrath. Pontius Pilate addresses the crowd from his palace, struggling with his ‘R’s’: “People of Jewusalem!” he says, “Wome is your fwiend. To pwove our fwiendship, it is customawy at this time to welease a wongdoer fwom our pwisons.” The crowd is falling over itself with laughter as they implore him to release “Woger”, “Wodewick”, “Weuben” and finally “Bwian”. As we laugh at this scene we struggle with anxiety over Brian’s plight hanging on the cross and the refusal of the movie to take it seriously. It is not just that it is silly, because we have been drawn into Brian’s story, enough to recognise his situation and his humanity. Vying for space between the silly and the pathetic here is the quality of the absurd. I am swept away by the pathos of humanity, as part of the crowd roaring for Brian to be the Messiah, or as part of the crowd mercilessly mocking Pilate’s speech impediment. The delight to be found in this scene is overwhelming.
There is a scene in *Braveheart* when Mel Gibson is riding his horse backwards and forwards in front of his reluctant warriors, imploring them to do battle with the English. His choking ferocity and intensity cause me to well up with emotion, a feeling that I attribute to the power of their undertaking and my identification with it. It is a seriousness which borders on silliness. Despite myself, I feel the need to laugh, or cry. We know we do care because we feel so much when we watch epic, even if we can see the funny side. I am generally affected by powerful scenes with armies standing on a hill, preparing to go forth and die. When Mel Gibson in *Braveheart* is riding about on the hill shouting “Freedom!” and razzing the troops for war, or when Peter O’Toole is shouting “No prisoners!” into the sands of the desert in *Lawrence of Arabia* – with his Technicolor eyes shining blue, spurring his army into battle – I am stricken by the tragedy of humanity, the sheer feeling I am presented with. And my chuckles and tears feel not dissimilar to overwhelming mirth and hilarity. It is just a quick step off to the side and we get from very, very serious to stupidly funny. Monty Python’s films are exercises in taking very important subjects and making them seem quite silly.

*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, for instance, makes a mockery of a very significant English myth, and *Life of Brian* parodies the rise of Jesus Christ. But the most telling feature of these films is the enjoyment to be found in them. In order to ‘get’ these movies, we need to let go of our stern desire for seriousness. We know that we are dealing with out and out fiction, where great events from history and culture have been manipulated so that they are plain silly. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are portrayed as fools. They ride imaginary horses, accompanied by Patsy, who plays coconuts to stand in for the sound of their horses’ hooves. There is a scene in which King Arthur and his men come across a French castle inexplicably located in the English countryside. They demand to be put up for the night but are rebuffed by an outrageous John Cleese as a Frenchman, who proceeds to hurl invective at them. Their attempts to attack the castle are cut pathetically short.
Immediately they are repelled by raining farm animals from over the parapets, crying as they go, “Run away! Run away!”

Of course it is idiotic. The knights are exposed as nothing like they are in the myth. Sir Galahad comes up with a brilliant plan. They will attempt to infiltrate the castle in a giant wooden rabbit. After cutting wood and building the rabbit in the nearby forest they wheel it up to the gates and run off. The French come out in classic fashion and wheel it in, just as the Trojans did. Arthur says to Sir Galahad, “It worked! Ok, now what do we do?” Sir Galahad replies “Well now you, myself and Sir Lancelot leap out of the rabbit, kill the guards and take the castle.” Just as Arthur realises that they would need to be inside the rabbit to be able to do this, the French exclaim in disgust and catapult the rabbit over the parapets, crushing Arthur’s knave.

This twist on the ancient Greek fable is terribly funny with its absurd premise that they would build a rabbit instead of a horse, then forget to get into this ‘war machine’ before it is deployed. The Wooden Rabbit! It looks funny because it is funny! They mock the entire history of Western art and literature. The Greeks who would exalt the mighty figure of the horse are mocked for their seriousness. The horse represents strength, nobility and potency and the wooden horse of Troy is a supreme strategic victory, yet here we are shown the ruse nearly succeeding with a ridiculous rabbit. Scenes of men attacking castles, or Galahad trudging through the rain and mud, or the army poised upon the hill, all make us want to laugh and cry at the same time. The mythic power of the quest for the Holy Grail is very evocative too. It primes us for laughs by having such a strong claim on our cultural identity. We get a great big surge of prideful nostalgia and we are ready suckers for the punch line: “Get on with it!” cries the army on the hill, thus deflating the pomposity. For is this not our secret wish when watching cinematic presentations of armies facing each other? We want the battle to begin. When it is transposed onto this portrayal of the ineptitude of King Arthur our longing becomes part of the joke.
They parody this Arthurian legend, one of the keystones of English lore, just as they parody the legend of Jesus in *The Life of Brian*. They layer on absurdity after absurdity, seriousness emptied of content, great deeds being left to inept fools. But we are still drawn to embrace these figures. The stories are still compelling and close to us. We laugh at Brian for being a figure who is *not* Jesus. Brian is a hopeless loser, a coward and a pissant. He is carried along by a wave of turmoil not really of his own making. He is continually oppressed and laughed at but the main joke of the movie is that he is mistaken for somebody relevant, i.e. the Messiah. The film lets us laugh at people like ourselves who are so gullible and desperate they will find solace in a figure such as Brian.

The persistent manoeuvre here is one in which we still identify with these meaningful and formative icons but position ourselves so that our very sophisticated and layered cultural understanding frames all these ‘legends’ as being somehow ridiculous. It may be that we are searching for an original seriousness. This idea is parodied over and over in Python’s work; the serious issue is held up for mockery by being presented in an exceptionally silly guise. But the silliness has its own seriousness. Mockery and parody are in a way modes of frustration and disappointment. It is as if they were saying: “I thought I’d find something really important here, but look, it’s all stupid.” The seriousness lies in that disappointment. If only we could purge our supposed seriousness of its actual silliness we could find the true seriousness we seek.

And this should not mean we lack respect for it. It is our ironic stance: we are composed of these things and yet we mock them. And we are touched by them and moved by the pathos. We are scared for Arthur and his men as the rabbit hurtles through the air at them, and then we realise, “Well lucky for them they didn’t get *in* the rabbit, because then they’d be stuffed!” I’m not sure how we start caring about such nincompoops but it happens.
Catharsis in comedy is a simple purging event that has similarities with Hobbes’ notion of Sudden Glory. Like catharsis and pathos, Sudden Glory has no rational underpinning. It is an emotion of wonder and pleasure, a basic expression of existence and an antidote for disappointment. The sheer delight we experience in our contemplation of the world is fuel for our sense of humour. Catharsis sheds us of the complex anxieties brought on by rationality and bestows upon us a simple assuredness in the world. The simplicity of superiority can be paired down to an uplifting feeling when confronted with the magnitude of the world in comparison to the trifling affairs of humanity.

The Annihilation of Meaning can be a morally rich experience. The joy to be found in sentimentality, nostalgia and pathos sits paired with the strength of feeling we get from the absurd and the incongruous. It may be because at the seat of things there is no real meaning to our lives. Nevertheless, we continue to live as if things do matter. Something compels us to continue striving and constructing the sensible mode of our existence, even though the original thought is lost. We cannot allow the absurd to take hold in any substantive form, or it will undermine our will to live, and we know, deep down, that really things do matter.

Humour reduces seriousness by putting things in perspective. The idea that humanity is so very, very important activates an overblown type of pathos, the sentimental yearning for humanity. The act of making comedy deflates this overly serious yearning for meaning and instils in us a capability to begin anew. The better our sense of humour is, the more people like us, respect us. They see our good intentions and the fact that we have moderated our desire to be taken seriously. In Chapter 6 I explore the performative nature of humour. Comedy is a realm that comes out of the world of drama and theatre, and consists of a simple desire to perform and be funny.
Chapter 6: Comedy as Performance

In the film *Napoleon Dynamite* Napoleon is a student who attends a small-town school in Idaho, USA. He has heaps of attitude which sits incongruously with the reality of his status as a nerd. But he really digs who he is and much of the humour in the movie comes from the way he embraces his uber-nerd reality. When a kid on the bus asks what he plans to do that day he exclaims, “Whatever I feel like I wanna do! Gosh!” He also has a really inflated sense of his martial-arts abilities. “This one gang kept wanting me to join because I’m pretty good with a bow staff.” But the climax of the movie features Napoleon performing a dance-routine to the entire school assembly to promote his friend Pedro’s tilt at school president. There have been hints that he has been getting dance lessons throughout the film but nothing prepares us for the incredible routine he has prepared and the *chutzpah* he demonstrates. His moves are so silky and deft, filled with emotion and self-belief that one cannot help but be impressed by his skills. Napoleon’s idea of skills is very nerdy: “You know, like nunchuck skills, bow hunting skills, computer hacking skills... Girls only want boyfriends who have great skills.” But they are funny skills because nerds are so inadequate. They represent a non-ideal form of life, inadequate yet extremely serious. But the moment where he comes to life on the stage is breathtaking: he has suddenly acquired the far more mature skill of expressive dance. We are swept away with pride as the nerd conquers the factions of jocks with one brilliant display of power, in which he sets aside all feelings of shyness and just goes for it.

The act of playing a part in the world means throwing yourself out there. It means being bigger than you really are and it is a truly liberating experience. It means throwing up an expression of your nature for all around us to see. It means letting go of your fear and just being, the total craft of the actor. It could end up being very demeaning, but it is necessary to play close to the edge and take risks, for without the freedom from negativity and self-imposed censorship we do not allow ourselves to be genuinely,
authentically creative. We make fun of things by playing characters with skill. We try on different roles, playing the parts of characters whom we find despicable or foolish. Getting into role is very important for creating humour. It is about suspending your serious attitude towards the world and just going for it, performing humour unashamedly. The best comics always have this ability to just ‘do’ the joke. They have a carefully honed sense of how to be funny and they get into the mode of being an actor, hamming it up, or just being free. They sense the humour in the material and want to communicate that humour to their audience.

So, if Napoleon can show us the way, and if we are true to the way of comedy, it can coax the ego to give up the grip it has over us. In our own lives, as in Napoleon’s life, we have to be able to cope with people making fun of us. This grip is rooted in the excessively fragile – often futile, but also often very powerful – need to be taken seriously by others. The need to be taken seriously to the point where we prohibit others making fun of us is a misconception of what it is to be in a good relationship with others. In his dance extravaganza, Napoleon overcomes his fear of being laughed with such conviction that he wins us over to his way of seeing the world. He has given up his ego and embraced his performing self, showing the whole school exactly what he is made of. He is no longer the nerdy teenager who has skills with the bow staff and an intense shyness of girls, but a man who dances and wins the day, helping Pedro become president and defeating those awful jocks.

Humour brings us face to face with our desire be taken seriously by others. In all things we have a need for those around to us to respect what we do, the reasons why we do them and to admire us in some way. It is the ‘jocks’ in life who laugh at us and undermine our confidence by testing our capacity to “take a joke.” They teach us that sometimes it doesn’t matter if someone makes fun of us. We shouldn’t take it seriously because getting angry is the worst possible reaction. Having the desire to be taken seriously is something which can be moderated by having a healthy sense of humour.
We recognise when humour breaks down the seriousness of things outside of ourselves. Therefore it can also help to dismantle our own sense of seriousness. A healthy sense of humour should be able to shed light on our motivations for wanting to be taken seriously.

I will return to Larry David’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to try to show what it means to be able to perform the self, to create one’s own identity in the world. Larry, the character, is completely confounding and hopelessly incorrigible; he is often drastically uncharitable. However, his comedy works because throughout it all we get the sense that he is on top of the situation, that critical point about being funny. There is a scene in which Larry and Cheryl are told by a close friend that there will be a terrorist attack in LA in which they could all be killed this coming weekend. Larry is adamant that they all should leave LA but Cheryl is reluctant, due to a charity event being held that she has organised. The scene was meant to end there, apparently, but continued as an improvisation, in which Larry quietly suggests the possibility that maybe he could go and leave Cheryl in the city. “And where are you gonna go?” asks Cheryl in disbelief. “I could go golfing, at Pebble Beach.” “If you feel good about one us dying and the other surviving and you can live with that for the rest of your life, then you should go golfing,” she says. “I’ll think about it,” replies Larry. It’s the bad thought that usually goes unexpressed.

The beauty of comedy lies in seeing somebody willing to put themselves on the line, at the mercy of the audience, and try to move this entire body of people by the sheer force of their personality. To be able to be on a stage discussing the taboo topics is, I think, one of the toughest tests available to us. “How could you say that?” asks Larry’s wife, Cheryl, incredulously, after Larry congratulates an acquaintance on the size of the penis of this man’s son. Understandably the man takes offence. “I took a risk,” Larry laments. We need to know what it is like to go too far so that we can gain insight from these experiences. As Bollas describes it, “for a brief moment the funny man defies the forces
of life and death." Comedy, or aiming for humour, is the here and now. It lives and dies on its feet. Comedy has nothing to fall back on, nothing from which to draw its authority. It starts with nothing. A man walks into a bar. Nothing is presupposed. The possibilities are limitless. The only thing it wants is the funny. It has to be funny.

The humour in *Curb your Enthusiasm* is so often dependent on the wrong thing happening; you begin to expect the worst. Larry always has a *faux pas* to make. He willingly holds out on social niceties if he believes there is something unreasonable about them, when most of us would just extend our graciousness. The absurdity of his position lies in the disjunct of his highly sociable lifestyle, significant degree of charm and etiquette on the one hand and his irritability, lack of grace, and panache for putting his foot in it on the other. But Larry David is also a masterful person. The improvised nature of his show demonstrates that he is perfectly at ease with the irrational, the way that he can pursue thoughts spontaneously and mine the vein of humour in them. He does so by being an overly concerned neurotic, sometimes, and being a realist, at other times, observing the inconsistencies in others. David says that he uses his show to get things off his chest that that he would not have been able to in real life. He says this because he's “not a sociopath” as only a sociopath could cope without humour. His inspiration comes from experiences he has in everyday life where he wishes he had said what he was thinking but didn't out of politeness, or, with the benefit of hindsight, that perfect rejoinder which would have shown that idiot exactly what an idiot he is. Rarely do we have the wit. Only a master of the situation can bring comedy to it. It demonstrates his or her skill and power. When we are in control of the situation we can play characters who actually tell the truth, who are prepared to wear the umbrage of our peers. Characters like Larry call it how they see it.

Larry has a fine vein of banter with his friend Jeff. They are comic partners, in the classic sense like Laurel and Hardy. They bounce off each other. They can talk about

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everything as if it is a game, and they need to find the correct attitude to take. This is their search for truth and meaning, analysing every situation to discover what the humorous response that enables the awkwardness to be assimilated into their worldview. All the awkward things that happen to Larry are but obstacles to be made funny and therefore normalised.

Being a master of comedy means being able to read between the lines, to divine the truth of the situation and mine the comic vein. It means being able to recognise lies and fabrication. It means being able to see through the morass of detail and focus on what matters. Knowing where that vein lies is the essence of being a comedian. Comedy exploits the margin, the perimeter between the bedrock of seriousness, logic, rationality and the ideal, on the one side and stupidity, silliness, the inane, the crass on the other. In between we have the hot spot. The margin is that which is funny: comic gold. Here we have David on his co-star, Cheryl Hines – “She’ll always know how to make a scene funnier …and she completely gives herself over to it, no ego at all, always knows where to take a scene to get it funnier.”

Comics are feted because of their ability to say things that no one else thinks of saying. David says “I want to do what nobody else can think of.” They think this way because they have brought a unique perspective to the situation. They can bring a special kind of wisdom to difficult subjects by framing them in just the right light. David says of his ability to work outside of comedy that he would be “completely lost, it would be laughable. I would have no barometer, I wouldn’t know. There’s no guide.” The comedian makes us privy to a certain way of understanding the world which has fecundity and harmony.

All the parts of comedy come together on the stage. Critchley highlights the importance of timing in the effectiveness of comedic delivery, with its control of pauses, hesitations
and silences. The Annihilation of Meaning is complete in the pure aesthetic appreciation of the dramatic form. We are left with a feeling, an impression of the world presented to us. Sitcom, in particular out of all the comedic forms, draw us into very elaborate, discrete and highly specific worlds. It defines its parameters and very neatly stays within them. In Flight of the Conchords Bret and Jermaine are two underemployed musicians from New Zealand in a funk-folk duo, trying to break the big time in New York. They are pathetically small in the vastness of the city. They inhabit an insignificant sphere, emphasised by the existence of their fan club, numbering just one, Mel, who stalks them mercilessly. Bret and Jermaine can’t get a gig, their band income amounts to fifty cents. They are living in poverty. Their desperation is bizarrely appealing, a testament to the Superiority Theory of comedy. We laugh at them because they are pathetic and unthreatening. Their manager, Murray, is the cultural attaché for the New Zealand embassy. He holds band meetings in his office, surrounded by terrible posters attempting to lure travellers to New Zealand.

As I watch the Flight of the Conchords I am struck by the work of art they have produced. Bret’s intricate woven jumpers with romantic representations of nature are just so aesthetically beautiful and absurd. They represent Bret’s keen eye for kitsch, his fine aesthetic sensibility of geek. When Jermaine and Bret are vying for the attentions of Sally, they work feverishly for days, each trying to produce the perfect handmade gift for her birthday.

The night of her party comes but when Jermaine arrives the glass butterfly he has made for Sally has being crushed on the subway and Bret has outwitted him and produced an artistic triumph. It is a spectacular ultra-real fantasy-kitsch painting of Sally as a warrior princess, with a wolf on a leash who looks suspiciously like Bret. We only get a glimpse of the work but it is comedy gold. It has captured the truth of their pathetic lives, especially when Sally produces her actual boyfriend, an awful Australian jock. This is

such a familiar truth and so knowable in our own lives, in the petty desires and conflicts we are faced with everyday.

This kind of comedy grows on you as you develop sensitivity for the characters. It appeals to our need for narrative and pathos. We are not interested in the pragmatic, effective functioning of Bret and Jermaine. It is their trials and failings that intrigue us, which draw us in; the musical interludes function as the ultimate meaning of *Flight of the Conchords*. Their mock ballad, “I’m not crying” sums up the cornball emotion they keep so tightly wrapped up in their daily lives. It is difficult to understand why it is funny; the material has just hit it.

Their manager, Murray, is funny because his performance rings true and yet he has not a trace of *acting* or trying for laughs. He holds a straight face. His performance incorporates a vast mixture of comic theories, all of which capture some aspect of ‘the truth’. They each bring the tragedy of their lives to play a part. We laugh because we find ourselves superior to Murray, but he also makes us feel okay about being dags. He is also absolutely incongruous. He captures a feeling we have with us, an urge for order which we are ashamed of but nonetheless cherish. The paradox of his incongruity is that he doesn’t fit in, he’s a real dork, and yet we can identify with his character. Therefore he can’t really be incongruous – he’s an everyman.

The fact that even Murray can get by shows us how we need to moderate our desire to be taken seriously in order to be happy. Conversely, having a healthy sense of humour sheds light on our motivations for wanting to be taken seriously. This connection should be able to curtail, to some extent, the more extreme consequences of being a rampant egotist. In all things we have a need for those around to us to respect what we do, the reasons why we do them and to admire us in some way. The better our sense of humour is, the better person we are – better in the sense that we are nicer, people like us, respect us, and see our good intentions and the fact that we have moderated our
desire to be taken seriously. They know that they can make a joke about us and we won’t get offended. Our approach to life is reflected in our sense of humour and our sense of humour can have a positive effect on our approach to life. If we are mired in ungenerous thoughts about our loved ones, wound up in petty and selfish concerns, we will have a bitter sense of humour, and people will be able to tell exactly where we are at by the kind of jokes that we make. Murray may be fairly incompetent and naïve, but his spirit is genuine and worthy.

Howard Jacobson makes an important revelation on comedy in his remark “that we resemble beasts more closely than we resemble gods, and that we make great fools of ourselves the moment we forget it.” Seeing ourselves as the monkey species that we are is very healthy in terms of keeping us grounded. It is very rarely commented on in our day to day lives that we are really are a kind of big hairless ape. We preoccupy ourselves with airs and pretentions to avoid being reminded of the fact. If we can see our own monkey-nature then all seriousness is rendered vain and pretentious. By giving ourselves over to the comedy we can discover the world again in its non-systematised way of being. Taking ourselves very seriously is something which calls for a great deal of piss-taking. The idea that humanity is so very, very important activates for me what I think of as pathos, a yearning for experience of humanity. Something about narrative calls in us a sentimental emotion full of pathos and meaning. The act of making comedy deflates this overly serious yearning for meaning and instils in us a capability to begin anew.

All the features of humour thus far discussed come together in a unified whole. Humour is a way of not only representing life, but of creating the very stuff of life. It frames and conceptualises the meaningful components of life in a digestible form, the aesthetic form. We need an aesthetic mode when we are musing, proselytising and framing our opinions on anything. Humour is an acknowledgement of an aesthetic

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55 Jacobson, Seriously Funny, p 2
realm which exists independently of tiresome rational labour. It is many different things in one, a compression of meaning, a vastness of difference, but in the end just a straight-forward thing. Comedy has always had trouble achieving the stature of tragedy, or even being taken seriously. Aristotle noted “the successive changes through which Tragedy passed, and the authors of these changes, are well known, whereas Comedy has had no history, because it was not at first treated seriously.” But comedy speaks to the soul with the same intensity as tragedy, realising the same emotions. To enjoy humour is to be an aesthete. It is to revel in a form of beauty and the sublime in the everyday. We have this overwhelming need to mix things up, to bring humour into our lives and make things less serious. Humour is an essential component to this. We seem to have this compulsion to develop more and more sophisticated and subtle permutations of humour. The merest thing becomes funny and as our understanding of the comic expands so too does our understanding of the world.

Conclusion: The Enlightenment of Comedy

Why should we cultivate our sense of humour? I have made a claim that to do so will be good for us. I have shown, through the example of Lano and Woodley, that we play a particular type of comic game in which we tell stories and create positions, break the rules and try to preserve a shred of dignity whilst defaming our friends and rivals. It is a freewheeling game in which the players set out to defend their positions long enough to slander one another.

I have argued that one result of this game is taking oneself less seriously and thus taking a step towards enlightenment, one step away from the complex and burdensome issues which afflict us. It is about discovering how to live in harmony with the world, having an even keel and an open mind. The process of enlightenment should be at the forefront of human endeavour and of philosophy in particular. It is a task which we must turn ourselves to on a constant basis, one which we must remember again and again until it becomes a habit. In so far as comedy is a major, but not strictly necessary way of reaching these goals, then it’s obviously important, because the goals are so important.

The role of humour in this is that it interrogates our assumptions and attitudes. When we use humour to pick apart these potentially misguided assumptions they are made painfully visible to all. Humour seeks out the contradictions in thoughts and arguments, without necessarily resolving these contradictions. It provides us with a means to cope well with these issues while the faults in our logic are intimately and openly recognized. And since such coping is part of an increasing awareness of our relationship with the world then comedy fosters enlightenment.

There is something good about enjoying the laughter of friends and acquaintances whilst being able to reveal our true nature. Comedy allows us to express parts of our identity we would not normally feel comfortable with. It allows us to explore ideas that
are taboo and deviant, unacceptable sexual scenarios and violent imaginings. The ideas that are plain ‘wrong’ to entertain are allowed under the rubric of comedy.

Ultimately, if we are true to the way of comedy, it demands that we give up our grip on ego and self. By taking a joke gracefully we relinquish the best part of our pride and acknowledge our humble lot. The best sorts of people are those we can make fun of without fear of making them upset or angry. Being like those people should be something we all aspire to. If humour can break down the seriousness of things on the outside, then it can also help to dismantle our own sense of seriousness.

Comedy not only fosters the capacity to cope well with unresolved contradiction but provides a means of approaching and overcoming the intrinsically paradoxical nature our conception of reality. The apprehension of the funny thing is an act of emptying one’s mind of literal and rational constructs. The Annihilation of Meaning is a frame of mind in which definitions break down, roles are reversed and nothing is as it seems. The Tarzan joke demonstrates how two contradictory statements can be accommodated in humour. The humour is created through the blurring of boundaries and frameworks and the incongruous association of jungle man and urban scenario. Becoming skillful at negotiating the Annihilation of Meaning is a sophisticated and worthwhile endeavor. Humour is a skill. It’s a way of looking at things from a different perspective and discovering aspects of life that are otherwise obscured.

Humour involves the creation of a new meaning. It destroys serious meaning and produces comic meaning. In the examples of the Monty Python movies, I have shown how serious topics are taken and tested for integrity. But the urge for these comedians is to discover something that is worthy of seriousness. Much humour is a product of the silly approach to life as opposed to the serious. It celebrates the farcical and the obtuse. Almost anything serious can be made silly if we choose, once we have the skills. I have argued that becoming a good comedian requires letting go of one’s inhibitions and
making a performance of oneself, as shown in the example of Napoleon Dynamite. This is a process which allows us to experience freedom from rules and rational constructs and invites us to use our intuitive sense to determine what we find funny.

I believe that the stupidity of humour has always been at the heart of my account. I regard the Annihilation of Meaning as an elevation of the ‘dumbness’ and irrationality that are the key aspects of the humorous mind. There is delight in paradox, contradiction and the blurring of distinctions. There is delight in the camaraderie between fellow beings wherein everything becomes clear as if the veil of structured thought is taken away and just the fact of our being is apparent to each other. We stand there stupid before the unstructured idea of reality. The enlightenment of comedy comes about as a result of considered engagement with the Annihilation of Meaning. It is a meditation on comedy that paves the way for blankness of the mind, giving us an uncluttered landscape on which to consider the world anew.

We really do laugh maliciously as people are brought undone, as their status is reduced, and I think this is to do with a delight in seeing the social structures dismantled, just as we get a secret tinge of pleasure when we hear of disaster in the news and terrible things happening to complete strangers. There is no denying the jealousy, anger and maliciousness that accompanies so much of our humour. We are none of us by any means very enlightened and we will always remain unenlightened for the most part, except for small glimpses of enlightenment.

The Annihilation of Meaning is a description of being taken to a safe place under the spell of comedy. Comedy brings rushes of delight and clarity of the mind. It is a supremely enjoyable pastime, in all its maliciousness, pettiness and wisdom. Giving over to these baser instincts in us is the point of comedy. We are not better than the objects of our amusement, we are even worse! It is this supreme satisfaction that gives us the Superiority Theory of Humour, allowing us to shield ourselves from threat and creating a common identity.
I could indeed support Incongruity Theory as the best and most cogent theory of humour. I found the treatment of it by authors to be true and correct, however, I have raised the concern that it doesn’t actually say that much, merely asserts that humour is incongruous and incongruity is humorous. It does not adequately account for humour, i.e. there still has to be something funny, some joie de vivre that turns the incongruity into something funny. There are many cynics out there who find the everyday world of serious endeavour, those things that serious people would never find incongruous, to be a great source of humour. Does then the normal slip into the incongruous for the cynic? We are left with a deflation of the idea of funny into the idea of the incongruous.

There truly is a moment in the Annihilation of Meaning where everything seems to make sense. It is the complex interrelatedness of being able to explain what is funny, why the world seems nice or tantalising at that moment, and it all making sense. Just as so many things need a particular discourse to bring about their essence in the mind of the reader, so it was necessary to write a funny account of humour to bring about the idea of humour in your mind. But I did not so much explain humour as create it on the page.

Comedy tolerates no pretensions. On the contrary, it loves a fool. Whereas philosophy dismisses the fool, comedy instructs us to play. There is no pretence in comedy and no castles in the air. It does not allow you to hide behind an enigma, or an impressive schema. It does not privilege inner knowledge, fraternities or cloisters. It is the opposite of rationality. And best of all it is funny.
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