Humour and incongruity

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The first in aseries of articles on the philosophy of humour and laughter looks at attempts made to explain humour in terms of incongruity.

Introduction

The philosophy of humour and laughter is a rarely studied field. This is despite the fact that many of the West's most celebrated
thinkers-Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud-have advanced views on the
subject; and the fact that interdisciplinary research on humour has grown enormously in the recent past. This series of articles will
attempt to offer a survey of some major views on the nature of humour and laughter. Throughout, in line with contemporary humour
research, 'humour' will be used as an umbrella term to cover all categories of the funny; the general term of which wit, satire,
jokes, etc., may be viewed as subcategories.
Contemporary humour researchers often divide accounts of humour into three main theoretical traditions, focusing on, respectively,
incongruity, superiority and the release of energy. We will consider one of these traditions in each of the first three articles. This
first piece will examine the 'incongruity' tradition; it will offer a critical analysis of attempts made to argue that the nature of
humour is to be explained in terms of incongruity. By far the most commonly discussed comments in this tradition are those of Arthur
Schopenhauer, and we will turn to these shortly. But a brief comment from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* will be useful to get us
going. Kant claims that: 'Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be
present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. *Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly
reduced to nothing'.*
Though Kant fails to make clear exactly what being 'reduced to nothing' means, one interpretation of this claim makes possible a
plausible account of what happens in our reaction to some jokes. In many such jokes or comic anecdotes, the beginning of the joke
sets up the mind to follow a particular path. The outcome suddenly makes us realize that we have followed completely the wrong path:
the one we have followed turns out to lead nowhere; or at least, not to the same place as the punchline of the joke. This is the sense in
which our 'expectation' is 'reduced to nothing'. For instance, consider this joke from *Cheers.* The bar slob Norm, after yet another

evening's sitting around drinking, announces that he is leaving, since he has promised his much neglected wife that he will pick up
some Chinese food. 'That's nice of you', someone comments, surprised. 'Yeah, well', says Norm, 'I spilled it on the carpet this morning'.
Here, Kant could argue, we have followed the wrong path; the one that leads from a mistaken assumption about the way the phrase
'pick up' is used in this sentence.

Schopenhauer's formulation

An idea of this kind is outlined more explicitly by Schopenhauer. The best way into this formulation is through one of his examples.
(Schopenhauer himself does not make life so easy for his readers, however; after an abstract statement of his formula, it is not
until a supplementary chapter that he grudgingly offers some examples 'in order to come to the assistance of the mental inertness of
those readers who always prefer to remain in a passive condition'.) Schopenhauer's jokes would have been unlikely to get him top
billing at nineteenth-century Germany's equivalent of The Comedy Store. One tells of a king who comes across a peasant dressed in
light summer clothing in the depth of winter, which greatly amuses the king. The peasant says: 'If your majesty had put on what I have,
you would find it very warm'. The king asks what he has put on, and receives the reply: 'My whole wardrobe! '
How does this illustrate Schopenhauer's general theory? His central claim is as follows:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity
between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter
itself is just the expression of this incongruity.
It often occurs in this way:
two or more real objects are thought through one concept, and the identity of
the concept is transferred to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from
the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was
only applicable to them from a onesided point of view. It occurs just as
often, however, that the incongruity between a single real object and the
concept under which, from one point of view, it has rightly been subsumed, is
suddenly felt. Now the more correct the subsumption of such objects under a
concept may be from one point of view, and the greater and more glaring their
incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect
which is produced by this contrast. All laughter, then, is occasioned by a
paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed
in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous
[lächerlich]

In the example quoted above, we are told, under the concept of a 'whole wardrobe' is subsumed both the king's vast selection of

clothes and the peasant's single summer coat. The humour arises, Schopenhauer claims, from the incongruity of the latter with the
concept.

What is 'incongruity'?

Schopenhauer's own claim for his theory is bold; he describes it as 'the true theory of the ludicrous'. Indeed, the notion of humour as
being dependent upon incongruity has been very influential in humour theory, and the term crops up regularly in contemporary discussions
of the subject. But an important challenge facing any incongruity theorist .,is the necessity of defining more clearly what is
meant by 'incongruity'; and many researchers who use the term fail to do so. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives such definitions as:
'disagreement in character or qualities; want of accordance or harmony; discrepancy, inconsistency ... want of accordance with what
is reasonable or fitting; unsuitableness, inappropriateness, absurdity ... want of harmony of parts or elements; want of self-consistency;
incoherence' .
A previous commentator, Marie Collins Swabey, agrees that theorists in this tradition have meant something corresponding to just
about all of these terms: 'sometimes the notion that things are incongruous emphasizes chiefly that they are markedly dissimilar or in
contrast to one another; sometimes that they are inappropriate or unsuited to their situation; again that there is a lack of relevance
between them; again that there is a clear-cut incompatibility or inconsistency between them (as indicating that they are mutually
exclusive, without necessarily mutually exhausting all possibilities). And lastly, incongruity may plainly mean contradictory:
that two propositions, properties, or states of affairs are opposites in the full sense, so that the denial, absence or falsity of one of them is
equivalent to the affirmation, presence, or truth of the other, since between them they exhaust the range of possible alternatives.
Some examples might aid clarification here. Swabey distinguishes between 'logical' incongruities, 'which appeal strongly to our sense
of rational form', and 'factual' incongruities, 'which appeal more obviously to our sense of incompatibilities in their matter'.
'Logical' incongruities involve the violation of logical laws. For instance, this schoolboy howler: 'Abraham Lincoln was a great Kentuckian.
He was born in a log cabin, which he built with his own hands'. Or the story of the man who returned a borrowed kettle with a
hole in it. He denied responsibility on three grounds: firstly, he had not borrowed the kettle, secondly it already had a hole in it when
he borrowed it, and finally, he had returned it without a hole.
Humour based upon 'factual incongruities' is more common. Major classes here include what could be brought under the heading of

'ambiguity', and what has been called general 'inappropriateness'. *Doubles entendres* serve as examples of ambiguity, as do jokes in
which the literal meaning is taken of a phrase meant as a figure of speech. (For instance, Steven Wright's one-liner: 'I woke up one
morning and my girlfriend asked me if I slept good. I said, "No, I made a few mistakes" '.)
'Inappropriateness' is a blanket term used by D.H. Monro to cover 'the linking of disparates. .. the collision of different mental
spheres ... the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another'. Many examples could be brought under such a heading; 'the
obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another' is quite a neat summary of Schopenhauer's central idea. For instance, take a
cartoon in which a bug exterminator explains his technique to a client: Their first reaction is one of fright and hysteria. Then a strange
apathy seems to seize them and they lose all will to live'. Here, the attitude of the psychologist has been imported into the context of
bug extermination. We can begin to see that the range over which the term 'incongruity' has been applied is a wide one; ranging from logical contradiction
to Monro's mere 'inappropriateness'. We shall return to this fact later.

Inherent and perceived incongruities

Before going any further, an important point needs to be cleared up. The incongruity theorist need not necessarily make the dubious
claim that anything is *objectively* incongruous; that there are inherent incongruities which transcend cultural boundaries. What
matters, as Schopenhauer saw, is that something should be *perceived* or *thought of* as incongruous. A more accurate version of the
above quote from Monro would, therefore, talk of 'the obtrusion into one context of what is *felt* or *held* to belong, or is recognized as
being felt or held by certain people to belong, in another'. This avoids the problem of incongruities being dependent upon cultural
factors, and might also explain certain cases of some people being amused by things which do not amuse others.
For instance, consider the following joke. 'A man and woman are making passionate love in the bedroom. Suddenly the apartment door
opens and a man comes in: "Darling! I'm home, my love". He walks into the bedroom, looks at the naked couple and says, "What is
she doing here?" ,
To find this joke funny, one needs to believe that homosexuality is abnormal, or to recognize that it is generally felt to be so by our
society at large, or at least by a group of people of which the joke-teller is probably a part. If none of these beliefs are held, then it
will not be possible for the hearer to perceive or understand the intended incongruity of the joke, and so he or she will be unable to find
the joke amusing. Of course, to point out the importance of perceiving or understanding such intended incongruities is not to deny

that there may well be vitally important additional factors which affect someone's being amused or otherwise by such a joke. (This is a
fact to which we shall return.) If the hearer is gay, his or her reaction to it is likely to depend upon whether or not he or she regards the joke
as ridiculing gays: this reaction will be heavily dependent upon his or her perception of the attitude of the joke-teller and the context
in which the joke is told. Nevertheless, the point is that the perception or understanding of the intended incongruity is what is required
for the hearer to recognize it as a joke: to recognize that it is supposed to be funny.
On the planet Zog, where homosexuality is the norm, it would not be possible to perceive an incongruity in the punchline, and so it is
difficult to see how this punchline could even be recognized as such. (If anything, it would be the first sentence of the joke that is funny to
the Zogites.)

Objections to 'humour as incongruity'

Incongruity, congruity and incongruity-resolution

One writer who has disputed that humour should be explained in terms of incongruity is Roger Scruton. Scruton mentions the comedy
of a character's acting 'true to himself', and argues that what is amusing in such a situation is 'the total *congruence* between the idea
of the man and his action'. But this is not so much of a spanner in the works as Scruton appears to think. To be amused by the character who acts true to
himself or herself, we need a frame of reference outside that particular individual: to chuckle and say 'just like old Ned', there must
be something rather idiosyncratic about a particular aspect of Ned's character or behaviour. What amuses us is precisely the incongruous
nature of *Ned's* behaviour when compared with 'normal' people and how we expect them to behave in that respect.
In discussing caricatures, Scruton remarks that if one wishes to describe such humour in terms of incongruity, 'it must be added that it
is an incongruity which illustrates a deeper congruity between an object and itself'. A similar point is made by theorists who subscribe
to the view that it is not incongruity, but rather the resolution of incongruity, which makes something funny. Resolution involves
what John Morreall describes as 'the fitting of the *apparently* anomalous element into some conceptual schema'. (We could recall
Monro's 'linking of disparates' in this connection.) Patricia Keith-Spiegel has labelled such viewpoints 'configurational theories' . In her
terminology, for incongruity theories proper, it is the perception of 'disjointedness'; the lack of 'fit', which amuses; whereas for
'configurational' theories, it is the 'falling into place' which does so.
Some humour is clearly well-explained by configurational theories. For instance, the anecdote of John Sparkes's character Siadwel,

about his grandmother's fear of the floor. When asked by a bemused psychiatrist why she has such a strange phobia; why she isn't
instead afraid of 'something sensible, like heights', she explains that 'it isn't heights that kill you: it's the floor'. Parodies, too, are often
explicable in terms of seeing some congruity beneath the incongruity. An important part of the fun of the *Viz* cartoon strip 'Billy the Fish',
a parody of boys' football comics, in which the crowd makes comments like 'Tremendous reflexes from the cat-like man-fish wonder!',
depends upon the reader's being aware of the fondness of commentators and interviewed footballers for this bizarre kind of cliche-ridden
language. Attention is thereby drawn to the absurdity or incongruity of the language (when compared with 'normal' modes of
speech); but beneath this lies its congruity with the language used by such journalists and soccer players.
But 'configurational theories'; or 'resolving incongruity'; or seeing a hidden congruity, cannot explain humour such as the opening
verse of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky:*

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves,
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.'

What is amusing about such nonsense verse is precisely our failure to 'resolve the incongruity': try as we might, we cannot make any
sense of this poem; there is no conceptual schema which will allow us to do so, despite the fact that the ingenuity of Carroll's choice
of words and rhythm is that they sound as if they *ought* to mean something. The same point can be illustrated by nonsense riddles
such as: 'What's the difference between a duck? One of its legs is both the same.'
It seems that neither what Keith-Spiegel calls incongruity theories nor what she calls configurational theories can offer an all-encompassing
explanation of humour. Moreover, in many jokes, some will find the incongruity itself amusing, while others will
be amused at the deeper congruity. Perhaps Monro recognizes this in including both 'the linking of disparates' (which sounds similar to
'configurational' theories) and 'the collision of different mental spheres' (which sounds like Keith-Spiegelian incongruity theories) under
the same heading of 'inappropriateness'.
So the notions of congruities beneath incongruities and of incongruity-resolution are not fatal to a theory which argues that humour is
to be explained in terms of incongruity. I suggest that there are, however, two more serious objections which now need to be
considered.

Problems with range of usage

The first of these concerns the point made earlier, that the term 'incongruity' has been used over a very wide range of meanings. This
is necessary, the incongruity theorist would argue, in order to account for the wide range of humour. But this does raise a serious problem:
is the concept of 'incongruity' being stretched so far that to claim that humour is based on incongruity ceases to be particularly
informative? If incongruity can mean so much, to tell us that humour results from incongruity is not as clear-cut a solution to the
problem of providing a 'true theory of the ludicrous' as Schopenhauer would have us believe.

Is incongruity the real root of funniness?

The second point is arguably the most important objection to explaining humour in terms of incongruity. This is: even if one accepted
the extended understanding of incongruity outlined previously, and if it were possible to identify an incongruity in all instances of humour,
is it really that incongruity itself which is the sole or predominant reason for amusement?
I suggest that often the answer is no. Some support for this claim comes from a workshop recently conducted at Indiana University.
It is commonly observed that there are certain recurring types of joke, or 'joke skeletons'
(doubles entendres, literal interpretations
of figures of speech, etc.) But the perceived funniness of different individual jokes with the same joke skeleton can vary
massively. For instance, consider, from the Indiana workshop, three versions of essentially the same joke.

(1) A man in his fifties goes to the doctor and says, "Doc, I've got a problem. You see, when I was younger I always used to get erections that I couldn't bend with my hand. Now, though, I can bend every erection I get. What I want to know is, am I getting stronger or weaker?"
(2) A woman goes to the psychiatrist and says, "Doctor, I've got a problem. You see, when I was younger I loved making puzzles for myself and then trying to solve them. It used to be that the puzzles I invented were so difficult that I couldn't solve any of them. These days, however, I solve every puzzle I make up. The question is, am I getting smarter or more stupid?"
(3) God goes to the doctor and says, "Doc, I've got a problem. You see, I used to be able to make stones that were so heavy that I couldn't lift them. But now I can't make a stone that I can't lift. The question is, am I getting more or less omnipotent?"

It is clear that these three jokes all have essentially the same skeleton. Yet unsurprisingly, members of the Indiana group did not rate all
three versions as equally funny. (Apparently, the third proved most successful.) But this raises a serious difficulty for an incongruity
theorist. If different versions of the same joke achieve widely differing responses, we are surely entitled to have very serious doubts

about attempting to analyse jokes entirely in terms of their structures; and hence about focusing all our attention upon a structural
factor such as incongruity. To do so is to stress the formal side of a joke to the exclusion of its content. As suggested at Indiana, certain topics-
sex, death, politics, religion, etc.-seem to have a tension associated with them, so that jokes with such subject-matter are likely to
prove more successful than structurally identical jokes with more neutral subject-matter.

Bain's criticism, context and attitude

A connected point relates to other vital factors in humour appreciation. Probably the most often quoted objection to the incongruity tradition
is Alexander Bain's remark: 'There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. A decrepit man under a
heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of
tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing,
a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything of the nature
of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of vanities
given by Solomon-are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth'.
Bain's point is an important one. Some incongruities are perceived as funny, whilst others are not. There are many different possible
reactions to incongruity, amusement being but one, alongside puzzlement and the kinds of negative emotion mentioned by Bain.
(This is discussed at more length by Morreall in his above-mentioned article.) And this raises the question: why do we find some
incongruities funny, and not others? The incongruity theorist cannot adequately meet Bain's criticism by attempting to distinguish
between intrinsically humorous and non-humorous incongruities, because of the non-universality of what people find funny.
And this fact focuses attention upon a closely related question: why are some people amused by a particular incongruity, whilst
others are not?
These two questions highlight an important fact, seemingly overlooked by Schopenhauer and others in the incongruity tradition. This
is: even if it were possible to locate an incongruity in all humour, there would still remain many other factors, as well as the incongruity
itself, which exert a powerful influence upon whether or not a person finds a particular incongruity amusing. We have already suggested
the importance of taking into account the content or subject-matter. Other major factors affecting humour appreciation are the

context within which the humour is set and the attitude of the hearer. We have already touched upon this fact in relation to the homosexuality

joke mentioned earlier. The point can also be illustrated by the *Cheers* gag mentioned in the introduction. Although it is true

that the mind *is* here being led along a certain path from which it is then diverted, such an explanation only deals with part of the reason

for this joke's funniness. Much has to do with what the viewer knows about Norm; his or her attitude to the good-for-nothing husband that

he represents, and the views he or she brings to questions concerning marriage and male/female relationships in general.

This point about the importance of context and attitude may be further illustrated by some of the examples from Bain's list. Bain

claims that these all fail to produce 'mirth'. But this is not necessarily true. Whether one finds such things as 'gross disproportion' and

'parental cruelty' funny depends entirely upon the context within which they are presented, and one's attitude thereto. (Think of

the numerous Quasimodo jokes, for instance.) Other members of Bain's list have humorous potential, too: we could even go so far as to

say that there is nothing on that list which cannot be perceived as humorous, given the appropriate attitude on behalf of the perceiver.

These points about the importance of content, context and attitude may seem obvious, but they do not seem to have been so to

Schopenhauer and many of those who follow him in the incongruity tradition. And since incongruity is the most influential of the three

main humour theoretical traditions on contemporary humour research, it remains necessary to point them out.

Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, then, what can we say of the notion of humour as incongruity? The central idea behind the incongruity tradition has a

certain plausibility; it does seem possible to pinpoint incongruities of various sorts in many examples of humour. However, we have

seen something of the very wide range over which the term 'incongruity' has been applied, and questioned whether so wide a

stretching of the concept of incongruity reduces that concept's explanatory usefulness. Most significantly, however, even if it were

the case that incongruity were involved in all humour, this is often not the factor in virtue of which this humour is funny; the same joke

structure can produce different jokes, some of which are perceived as funnier than others. The incongruity tradition puts an excessive

emphasis upon the structure of jokes and the cognitive side of humour, at the expense of other important factors, such as subject-matter,

and the attitude and feelings of the laugher.

In the next issue, the second article in this series will look at a tradition in which the attitude and feelings of the laugher are central:

the tradition which has aimed to link humour to superiority.

Notes

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