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## 11. Objectively Funny Jokes: Comedy's El Dorado or a Simple MacGuffin?

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## 11. Objectively Funny Jokes: Comedy's El Dorado or a Simple MacGuffin?

### Abstract

Could there ever be an objectively funny joke or bit of humor? With the popularity of certain forms of humor, with the appearance of puns as consistent stages in the development of humor in children, this seems a reasonable query. Further, give recent developments in humor theory, and depending on what stance you take on what is essential to the funny or humorous your answer could be yes or no. [*excerpt*]

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**Objectively Funny Jokes:  
Comedy's El Dorado or a Simple MacGuffin?**

Mike Cundall

Could there ever be an objectively funny joke or bit of humor? With the popularity of certain forms of humor, with the appearance of puns as consistent stages in the development of humor in children, this seems a reasonable query. Further, give recent developments in humor theory, and depending on what stance you take on what is essential to the funny or humorous your answer could be yes or no.

Historically, given the prevailing theories of humor to date, the answer would have been a resounding 'no'. Whether you were a Hobbesian leviathan superior to all, or a Freudian fellow with your mental plumbing bound up like your mother's panties (apologies for mixing my metaphors), or a callous incongruist, the answer has to be nopety-nope. The unifying thread through these disparate theories, and others in the incongruity family, of which our esteemed Richard C. Richards is an elder statesman, who certainly won't find this essay a worthy honor, is that humor is a consumer-sided event—a demand side theory. Humor is in the mind of the experiencer. If it turns out that arrangement of elements on the side of a building looked like a funny face, then it was funny. The very fact that

there is a needed cognitive appreciation by the receiver of the joke in order for humor to occur, settles the case. To imagine a universal joke that would elicit mirth from an individual is to tilt at windmills. It's, in the immortal words of Vizzini, "inconceivable." What one might find incongruous, or illustrative of superiority, or redirects my mental or neural plumbing to release laughter and humor, is specific to the individual. Cultures, individual histories are all too vast, too varied, dare I say, to incongruous, to expect that there be a joke pulled from the bowels of the comedy club that bestows upon the teller, like Excalibur to Artie, a guaranteed laugh.

But there are new players on the field and we shan't be bound to the mistaken theories of our forebears no matter how august the thinker (looking at you, Richards). So, let us give heed to a new brand of humor theory—a demand side approach. An approach that favors the would be joke creator, as opposed to the plebian audience. One, if accurate, would offer up an answer to our leading question in the positive. One that would not only tilt at the windmills, but actually knock 'em down. One that finds the fountain of youth, and lays claim to the comic grail of the universally funny joke: an answer that would pierce the incongruous heart of darkness and bring forth the heart of gold. And what upstart could propose such a radical turning of the humor

theories on their respective ears? Why none other than our own Steven Gimbel. A man whose august status is rivaled only by the length of his hair.

Exorbitant as Gimbel's recent book, *Isn't that Clever?* is, (he does claim to find El Dorado, so maybe it's worth the gold) is a healthy and needed look at humor theorizing that incorporates philosophy of science (Hempel is grinning right now, though the irony is lost on Popper) and a careful attention to those who craft jokes (Gimbel is a studied and practiced comedian). Gimbel's novel addition to humor theory is his focus on a shortcoming in the dominant theory of humor, the incongruity theory and his alternate theory of humor. Gimbel explores the worry that incongruity becomes a vacuous term or one that is drawn out so broadly as to be trivially true. It is what it is after all. Gimbel then presents an alternative theory that wants to focus not on the perception of humor, but on the object of humor itself. Instead of relying on some audience dullard to note the incongruity presented to them, Gimbel argues that humor is "An act is humorous if and only if it is an intentional, conspicuous act of playful cleverness." (Gimbel, 2017) This theory is of great relief to all failed comics out there (perhaps Gimbel is sublimating his rage?). For me, I now realize that I am damn humorous and my wife and all those students who heretofore have not "gotten" my jokes in class, well phooey on them.

Much of the power and support to be found for Gimbel's approach comes from the attention he pays to how people discuss humor. He cleverly notes that many people recognize humor as such even when they do not find the humor on offer mirthful. To Gimbel's mind, and rightly so it seems, this is a tacit recognition that while one didn't find it funny, it still is humor, and hence humor is not simply a demand side event. To recognize something as humor, but a failed attempt, already shows that humor is not simply reliant on a chortle or guffaw to be real humor. And while laughs may pay the bills, humor is more indigent, or perhaps indignant. Apparently, I have been making jokes for a very long time.

It's worth exploring more what Gimbel notes about our language when we discuss humor. In the semi-rhetorical query "You're joking right!?" one sees a glimmer of what humor really is. Gimbel notes that either way one answers supports his view that humor is a supply side phenomenon. If you respond in the negative, then it isn't a joke, my mirth or laugh were it present is inappropriately placed. If I answer in the affirmative, then the laughter is proper. Were it the case that humor was truly subjective, then the answer given by the interrogated wouldn't matter. My laughter or lack thereof would be proper only insofar as I found it funny or not. Come to think of it, this would make

current White House press briefings a whole lot easier. But to return to Gimbel's point, the fact that it is perfectly sensible to discuss and assign a proper or improper response based on whether the utterance was taken as a joke or not, indicates that there is a whole lot more than simple subjectivity in humor. Humor is more than the cognitive achievement of the perceiver. There is an important and totally ignored part of the attempt at humor. A thing agreed upon, but sometimes failed to achieve. Kudos to Gimbel for this work.

Now we're running short of time and space for a Feschriften sort of article; well at least an LPS Feschriften. But, if as Gimbel notes, the study of humor is really now working as a mature science and is really into the puzzle solving phase, what we have here is a genuine puzzle. Humor is either a supply side, objective sort of phenomenon, or it's a demand side, subjective phenomenon? I think there is some philosophical legerdemain in the way that Gimbel casts incongruity theorists as subjectivists, though I cannot for the moment clearly define why. But the truth is, his points about the recognition of failed humor are strong, which strongly indicates that there is something of great importance in the attempt to be funny.

What I will suggest, in a hand-waivy, I-can't-be-held-responsible-for-clearly-saying-why-at-the-moment sort of way, is that our discussions of

humor may be enriched if we approach humor as a success term. The best possible exemplar, paradigmatic humor if you will (damn you Tom Kuhn), would be a case where someone intends to be funny, using cleverness, and that the audience does indeed find the act to be humorous. If we set this as the best of all possible humor, then we can preserve elements of the incongruity theory worth preserving, as well as bring aboard Gimmel's insight. The upshot of this is that this approach is supported by some of what is taken as a good characteristic of scientific theorizing, broad range. A theory that brings under one tent the supply side and the demand side covers more of the phenomena of humor. And this is a step in the right direction. Our honoree would surely applaud the maintenance of the need for incongruity, and our man responsible for the honors will be pleased. It also has the benefit of widening the scope of our research and maintaining some of our intuitions on what humor is. And if science has ever liked anything, it certainly has to be explanations that cover more. Am I right?