

# Further Arguments against Incongruity Theory

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Take a case in which the stimulus side of the humor process may be said to manifest an incongruity (from a certain point of view). Incongruity theorists maintain that the humor process commences with a recognition of that incongruity (or some other incongruity the stimulus side manifests), and maintain that this recognition is by no means irrelevant to the experience of humor, that, on the contrary, given the requisite circumstances, it (somehow) precipitates the entire humor process, as it were. But this implies that there is a substantial degree of identity between the process of registering the incongruity on the one hand and the humor process in its entirety on the other, that to a substantial extent, the former *is* the latter, and that even from the point in time at which the latter goes beyond the former, if it does, the two processes form a coherent whole. Thus if incongruity theorists are right about the way in which the humor process commences and proceeds, it is to be expected that there will prove to be no significant discrepancy between the process of registering the incongruity in the case, on the one hand, and the humor process on the other. This expectation is not, however, born out. Incongruity is a reciprocal relation: if *A* is incongruous with *B*, then by the same token and equally, *B* is incongruous with *A*. Essentially, then, an incongruity is a unit; it is something registered all at once. In surveying an incongruity, one might perhaps focus first on one term then on the other, but this shift in focus has no essential direction; one might shift attention from *A* to *B* and from *B* to *A* and back and forth any number of times, but if the one slips entirely from mind while the focus is on the other, then no incongruity is perceived, for to perceive the incongruity is to see that *A* and *B* don't go together. The rub is that the humor process in the relevant cases—those in which the stimulus side may be said to manifest an incongruity and there is clearly a shift in focus of attention from one term to the other of that incongruity—lacks, for the most part anyway, this feature of reversibility. In most if not all cases of this type, to obtain a humorous effect, or at any rate just the humorous effect that is obtained, the subject must shift attention from *A* to *B*: shifting from *B* to *A*

does not bring the effect in question. To put it abstractly, the process of registering an incongruity shows a certain characteristic, the humor process, in those cases in which it is possible to ask whether it shows that characteristic, in fact shows, for the most part at any rate, a contrary characteristic, and thus, contrary to incongruity theory, it cannot be that the process of registering an incongruity constitutes the initial, determinative stage or an integral, substantial part of the subject's mental processing.

An example might serve to make this clear. Consider John Allen Paulos's claim in his *Mathematics and Humor* (Chicago, 1980) that the dignified movements of Charlie Chaplin "clash humorously" with his appearance as a powerless little man. It may be granted that Chaplin's dignified movements on the one hand and the various indications which give away the fact that he is a powerless little man—his shabby clothing, childlike gaze, slight physique, etc.—on the other do present an incongruity from an analytical point of view. It's essential to note, however, that in the process of registering this incongruity, in discovering it and confirming its existence, it makes no difference whether one shifts attention from the dignified movements to the factors which indicate powerlessness or vice versa. The question is whether the same may be said of a subject who wishes to enjoy the humor in the case. On the one hand, if the subject first notes Chaplin's dignified movements and then notes his shabby clothing and the like, there is of course a considerable chance that he will be amused. This is comparable to the case Koestler describes in which a person first sees a fiercely barking dog as dangerous and then suddenly sees that in fact it's just a harmless puppy at play. On the other hand, it's more or less clear intuitively that if the subject happens to fasten first on the fact that the Chaplin-character is a powerless little man, and then shifts attention from this to the dignified movements *and doesn't shift attention back* to the shabby clothing and the like (as he surely would if he were simply watching a Chaplin movie for pleasure), he will not experience humor. This case is comparable to one in which a person first sees a fiercely barking dog as a harmless puppy and then suddenly sees that in fact it's a vicious, dangerous adult. The point, however, is that since the process of registering the incongruity in question shows reversibility in the sense described and the humor process in the case doesn't, it cannot be that the latter begins with the former.

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In many cases in which the stimulus side of the humor process manifests an incongruity (from a certain point of view), there is an obviously central cognitive switch,

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but the incongruity shows no connection with the cognitive switch of a sort that might satisfy the requirements of incongruity theory. In other words, the incongruity lacks any essential connection with that which is, quite obviously, the guts of the humor process. Examples: (1) In the case of the greyhound with a speeding bus tattooed on its side, there is only one incongruity the stimulus side may be said to manifest: its terms are the dog and the bus-tattoo. Now it is all but undeniable that in responding to this jest, the typical subject makes an effort, though perhaps only a brief one, to puzzle out the point of the tattoo, then sees the point, and then experiences amusement, and all but undeniable that these steps constitute the core of the humor process. (Cases in which the subject sees the point immediately, without puzzling, may be set aside for the moment. Let us consider the case in which the humor process unfolds in the way just described.) This process involves, of course, a cognitive switch. It's important, however, to identify the terms of this switch—that from which and that to which the subject switches—correctly. He switches from an orientation which might be expressed in the words “What’s the point of this tattoo?” to one which might be expressed “I see.” It is a cognitive switch *to* “I see,” that is, to the realization that the puzzle has been solved, which brings a laugh, but the preceding, corresponding state is a state of puzzlement over the question “What’s the point?” It is clear, then, that in this case the terms of the incongruity (the dog and the tattoo) and the terms of the cognitive switch which brings a laugh (the two orientations just described) are entirely different. To make the cognitive switch is not to shift attention from the dog to the tattoo or vice versa: it is to do something quite different. What connection, then, might the incongruity have with the cognitive switch? The obvious reply is that it is a recognition of the incongruity which stimulates the subject to puzzle as to the point of the tattoo—that is to say, which sets off the process which leads to the cognitive switch. This, however, won't do. If that which lies at the core of the humor process in this case is a shift from puzzlement to insight, as it clearly is, then it is inessential that the subject start by recognizing the incongruity in question, for his puzzlement need not stem from a recognition of this incongruity. He can begin, and indeed may be expected to begin, with the assumption that there is no incongruity. That which sets off the process of puzzlement which leads to the cognitive switch which brings laughter in this case is not the thought “This is incongruous,” but rather the question “How is this congruous?” The thought “This is incongruous,” if it suggests any question at all, suggests the question “Why has this incongruity been

concocted?" This, however, is the wrong question. The correct reply to it is "Forget about incongruity and look for the point." The upshot, then, is that the incongruity in question has no essential connection with the core of the humor process. Hence it cannot be that the subject must recognize this incongruity in order to perceive the humor in the case.

(2) Now consider the example from Sherlocke Holmes: "Did you hear a woman howling in the night?" Here the subject makes a cognitive switch from absorption in the story to an uninvolved stance, and it is, all but undeniably, this shift that brings a chuckle. It is a case of "falling out of context." It is to be noted, incidentally, that falling out of context in this sense does not necessarily entail taking a critical stance; indeed, to take such a stance is to put oneself in a serious frame of mind which hinders amusement. Now let us ask: if there may be said to be an incongruity here, what are its terms? They are not the terms of the cognitive switch just described, for the terms of this switch are not mutually incongruous: there is nothing in the least incongruous in being engrossed in the story one moment and uninvolved the next. There is indeed a discontinuity in this sequence, but a discontinuity is not an incongruity. Is it incongruous that person was alive ten seconds ago and is dead now? Not if he just fell off a cliff. The terms of the incongruity the present case may be said to manifest are, rather, the preceding pages of the story (and, irrelevantly, the following pages), and the short passage in question. These are incongruous in that the former are skillfully written and the latter unskillfully. To recapitulate, then, the terms of the effective cognitive switch are engrossment and uninvovement and those of the incongruity the preceding pages and the passage in question. Now it is due to the excellence (the modest excellence at any rate) of Conan Doyle's writing in the preceding pages that the reader becomes engrossed in the story, and due to his momentary failure to maintain this standard at the point in question that the reader falls out of context. The terms of the incongruity, the preceding pages and the passage in question, then, do figure in the humor process (as might be expected in this case); it is the transition the reader quite literally makes from the former to the latter in the course of reading which prompts him to make the effective cognitive switch from engrossment to detachment. It is, however, one thing for the terms of an incongruity to figure in the humor process in a given case, and quite another for that incongruity itself to figure there. In this case, there is no reason to suppose that a recognition of the incongruity in question contributes in any way to the effective cognitive switch. This incongruity appears only from

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a critical point of view: anyone who notes that the preceding pages are skillfully written and the passage in question unskillfully has put himself in the position of a critic. But this critical observation is utterly sober and not in the least funny, and the corresponding critical point of view not at all conducive to the experience of humor. How can it be, then, that a recognition of the incongruity in question figures essentially in the humor process? Clearly, it doesn't.

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The thesis that the basic humor process, and hence the humor process in every particular case, involves the recognition of an incongruity as an essential component stands in isolation: no facet, or hardly any, of the phenomenon of humor can successfully be traced to or from it. This entails, of course, that it has little or no explanatory value. Here are a few questions, out of very many, which it is impossible to answer plausibly by reference to this thesis but possible to answer quite naturally in terms of the cognitive-switch theory. Since the main point is the vacuity of the usual incongruity thesis, the explanations in terms of the cognitive-switch theory shall merely be outlined.

(1) Why is it that, typically if not always, the humor process in a particular case ends in or at any rate leads to laughter of some form? Explanation by reference to the usual incongruity thesis: The problem here is to connect the recognition of an incongruity with the occurrence of laughter. The simplest explanation runs as follows: The subject must be in the right mood, or at any rate not in the wrong mood, and the incongruity must be of the right type, or at any rate not of the wrong type—for example, it must not be terribly threatening. The subject recognizes the incongruity, finds it funny, and laughs because laughter is the natural expression of the feeling of amusement. —This, however, won't do at all, for several reasons. The main objection is that incongruities simply aren't funny: the point of view from which an incongruity appears is serious and unconducive to the experience of humor. Thus the idea that a person might simply find an incongruity funny is not to be accepted. In cases in which an incongruity does genuinely figure in the humor process, that which brings a laugh must be something more than the mere recognition of that incongruity (and in fact this "something more" will be found to be a cognitive switch). Moreover, if this objection be set aside, the following question must be answered: How is it that a person might simply find an incongruity funny? This calls for an explanation. It will not do simply to say that it happens. Is it possible that a person might simply find a regular hexagon

funny? If so, then the usual incongruity thesis is false, and if not, what are the relevant differences between an incongruity and a regular hexagon? Moreover, the laughter of humor (not to mention other types of laughter) is not an expression of the feeling of amusement. The relation between laughter and the feeling of amusement is quite different. As an experiment, read the following passage, from Woody Allen, and make the utmost effort to avoid showing the slightest outward sign of amusement:

I was sitting in my office, cleaning the debris out of my thirty-eight and wondering where my next case was coming from. I like being a private eye, and even though once in a while I've had my gums massaged with an automobile jack, the sweet smell of greenbacks makes it all worth it. Not to mention the dames, which are a minor preoccupation of mine that I rank just ahead of breathing. That's why, when the door to my office swung open and a long-haired blonde named Heather Butkiss came striding in and told me she was a nudie model and needed my help, my salivary glands shifted into third. She wore a short skirt and a tight sweater and her figure described a set of parabolas that could cause cardiac arrest in a yak. (*Getting Even*, Vintage, 1978, p. 103)

If you allow yourself to become engaged in this narrative, it's very difficult to avoid showing any sign of amusement (provided, of course, that the humor is to your taste and that you're in a mood for it). For present purposes, however, the important point is this: if you succeed fully in stifling laughter of any form, including low-intensity forms such as smiling, you don't experience the pleasure of humor. A qualification is perhaps called for: in order to kill the pleasure of humor entirely, it might be necessary strictly to avoid imagining yourself laughing. However this may be, the laughter of humor does not *express* the pleasure with which it is associated: it *brings* this pleasure. It's possible to explain this in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: initial-stage unrelaxation does not entail pleasure more than pain, and, just as a cognitive switch in a nonhumorous case does not itself entail pleasure, or at any rate not pleasure of the intensity that is in question in humor, neither does the effective cognitive switch in a humorous case; rather, it is final-stage laughter which brings the basic pleasure of humor, which it does by many different mechanisms. Moreover, setting this objection aside, it will not do simply to say that laughter is the natural expression of the feeling of amusement, for the fact that this is so, if it is a fact, calls for explanation.

A second, quite different account is to be found, at least implicitly, in the writings of incongruity theorists. It runs as follows: The subject recognizes an incongruity, puzzles

over it, suddenly sees the point or meaning, and laughs. —But this won't do either. This account implies that a cognitive switch is crucial to the humor process and the recognition of the incongruity inessential, for the sequence puzzling-insight by no means need start with the recognition of an incongruity. Moreover, this account does not explain why the subject laughs when he sees the point, and it is possible to explain this plausibly only by reference to the cognitive switch in question—that is, only in terms of cognitive-switch theory. If, however, incongruities are not funny in themselves, and if the attempt to explain humor in terms of a process wherein an incongruity is recognized and then resolved fails, it becomes very difficult to see how it is that the recognition of an incongruity leads to laughter in every case in which humor is experienced and laughter occurs.

Explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: In any of a number of ways, a virtually unlimited number, the subject becomes unrelaxed to a greater or lesser extent. Then, due to a stimulus factor, which might take any of a virtually unlimited number of forms, he makes a more or less sudden cognitive switch, as for example in interpretation, orientation, or expectation, a cognitive switch which, again, might take any of a virtually unlimited number of forms but renders the just-mentioned state of unrelaxation pointless in whole or in part. Then he relaxes more or less explosively through laughter of some form, through laughter because laughter is the most efficient means of relaxation available at the moment in question. —This account, true or not, is at least essentially complete and sufficiently plausible to warrant testing.

(2) Humor tends strongly to bring relaxation, though it does not always do so. This is one of the most obvious and from a practical point of view most important things about it. But just how does humor bring relaxation, when it does? Explanation by reference to the usual incongruity thesis: The problem here is to describe a humor process which in one way or another brings relaxation, and in which the recognition of an incongruity plays an essential role. The most tempting approach, perhaps, is to try to show how it is that the recognition of an incongruity constitutes an essential step in a process which leads to laughter, and then explain how laughter brings relaxation, for it is quite plausible to claim that laughter brings relaxation. The upshot of the argumentation of the previous section, however, is that it's extremely difficult if not impossible to explain the first of these linkages. But until this has been explained, it is of course illegitimate to appeal to the relaxing effects of laughter. A second approach is simply to postulate that the perception of an incongruity is in itself relaxing. This,

however, clearly won't do. In the first place, this postulate does not relate the perception of an incongruity with humor with relaxation, but only the first and third of these terms. In the second place, it relates these two terms incorrectly, for the perception of an incongruity, if it has any effect on level of unrelaxation, tends to increase rather than decrease it. Incongruities aren't funny and they aren't relaxing either. In the third place, it's clear intuitively that it is laughter which carries the primary relaxing effect of humor. Incongruity theorists, furthermore, appear not to have mentioned anything else reference to which might explain how the recognition of an incongruity is connected with the relaxation humor undoubtedly can bring. And with good reason: the problem is essentially unsolvable.

Explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: The basic humor process as described by the cognitive-switch theory culminates in laughter, but this culminating laughter brings relaxation in various ways—for example, in that it is a form of physical exercise, produces distracting auditory and kinesthetic sensations, yields pleasure, which it does primarily, perhaps, in that it yields relaxation, and serves as a signal, even to the laugher himself, that relaxation is in order. Moreover, the subject might well begin to relax even before he starts to laugh. If he is engaged in a more or less difficult task, then simply in consenting to listen to a joke, he takes a vacation, as it were, from that task. Also if the joke-teller is in a light-hearted mood, the subject, in consenting to listen, opens himself to the influence of that mood. Also, he might well anticipate that he will relax on hearing the punch line, and this anticipation of relaxation might itself be relaxing. In addition, in a particular case, a humor process of a sort recognized by the cognitive-switch theory might bring relaxation in any of innumerable other ways, many of them comparatively complex and indirect, as by fostering emotional detachment.

(3) The psychologist Thomas R. Schultz writes:

...The case of humour is somewhat paradoxical in that a relatively mild stimulus is capable of eliciting a rather violent, stereotyped emotional response in the form of laughter. Perhaps the pleasure experienced in humour is greatly intensified by the suddenness with which the sequence of arousal induction and reduction occurs. Perceiving and then resolving the incongruity in a joke probably occurs within a second or less, certainly much more rapidly than the arousal and satisfaction sequence in most other motivational systems. (*Humour and Laughter*, ed. Chapman and Foot, Wiley, 1976, pp. 16-17)



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The question Schultz raises here is: How is it that a low-intensity stimulus such as a single word spoken softly, a slight gesture, a faint sound from a mechanical device, etc. can elicit such a high-intensity response as convulsive, roaring, thigh-slapping laughter? This, of course, is one of the ancient "paradoxes" of humor. It's not entirely clear from the passage just quoted exactly how Schultz proposes to resolve it, but his thinking appears to run along these lines: The subject perceives an incongruity. This induces arousal, and hence, perhaps, brings pleasure. Then he resolves the incongruity. This reduces arousal and hence brings pleasure. But this sequence of arousal induction and reduction occurs very rapidly, and this factor of rapidity greatly intensifies the pleasure. This intense pleasure is expressed in intense laughter. —The fundamental objection to this account is this: Any incongruity-and-resolution theory of humor is profoundly incoherent in that the thesis that the subject must "resolve" the incongruity in question, that is, find an underlying congruity, if he is to experience the humor in the case renders untenable the thesis that he must, in the first place, recognize that incongruity, for again, if it is finding a congruity which brings laughter and feelings of amusement, there is no reason why the humor process must start with the recognition of an incongruity: it can start with the question "Where's the congruity?" and proceed through a process of puzzling to the effective cognitive switch, and if it does in fact start with the recognition of an incongruity, this is a false start which leads nowhere, unless it happens to lead to the true start.

The objection just brought is fatal to Schultz's account. It is not, however, the only fatal objection that can be brought. Schultz postulates that the arousal-reduction phase of the humor process runs its course in just a fraction of a second. One wonders how he conceives of this phase. Most people, surely, have had the experience of seeing or hearing something funny and laughing hard in response for five or even ten minutes (though of course it is to be expected that this does not apply to social groups in or for which such behavior is severely discouraged). If arousal-reduction, however, takes just a split second, then how is the occurrence of five minutes of laughter to be explained? Is it possible that a split second of arousal-reduction might bring five minutes of pleasure—in which case it might be possible to maintain that the five minutes of laughter functions to express this pleasure? This appears most unlikely: with, perhaps, minor qualifications, arousal-reduction brings pleasure while it lasts. Bouts of laughter which occur in response to a single witticism, funny sight, or whatever and last five or ten minutes tend to occur among people who are greatly in need

of relaxation. It's reasonable to hypothesize that in such cases, laughter lasts for minutes on end precisely because it takes minutes on end for it to fulfill its function of bringing the level of arousal (unrelaxation) down to a normal level, whatever it might be that determines that level, that it brings pleasure in the process, and that this pleasure functions at least in part to motivate continued laughter, which is to say, to motivate a continuation of the healthful process of relaxation through laughter. A further consideration supports this line of reasoning: It's clear that "resolving the incongruity" or "seeing the point," that is, recognizing the underlying congruity, whatever precisely this involves, does not in itself suffice to reduce arousal. Arousal-reduction follows insight and is effected by some mechanism which is not to be identified with the process or event of recognizing the underlying congruity. Now the arousal reduced by humor, in many if not all cases, is what might be called bodily arousal—that is, it is not confined to the central nervous system. It's especially clear that this is true of those cases in which the arousal is intense. It stands to reason, then, that in many cases at any rate, and in all those in which the arousal is intense, the mechanism of arousal-reduction involves the body in a more or less gross and outward way. The question arises what this mechanism might be. The obvious candidate, of course, is laughter. Laughter, then, once again, does not function primarily to express the pleasure with which it is associated, but rather reduces arousal and hence brings pleasure. It appears that in effect, Schultz proposes the following schema: insight leads (somehow) to arousal-reduction which brings pleasure which leads to laughter. But the following schema is more plausible as an explanation of cases of the type he has in mind: insight leads to laughter (in the way described by the cognitive-switch theory) and laughter brings arousal-reduction which brings pleasure. For present purposes, however, the important point is this: Typically, the arousal-reduction phase or the humor process lasts longer than the fraction of a second Schultz envisions, and not uncommonly it lasts for minutes on end, and in cases of this latter type, with few if any exceptions, laughter and pleasure are especially intense. Furthermore, it's clear that the arousal-induction phase often takes longer than the split second Schultz envisions. The arousal reduced, which might, for example, take the form of anxiety, might well be hours and might indeed be decades in building, and once again, laughter and pleasure are likely to be intense in these drawn-out cases. How, then, can it be that the intensity of the laughter and pleasure associated with humor is to be explained by reference to "the suddenness with which the sequence of arousal induction and reduction

occurs"? Clearly, this explanation doesn't work. Schultz links the arousal-induction and arousal-reduction which figure in the humor process far too closely with, respectively, the stimulus provided by the joke or more generally the humorous material itself, and the cognitive switch to insight: the full stimulus to arousal often goes far beyond any provided by the humorous material itself, and the process of arousal-reduction goes far beyond the cognitive switch to insight.

The question under discussion, to repeat, is this: How is it that a low-intensity stimulus can elicit such a high-intensity response as convulsive laughter? Schultz fails to resolve this "paradox" within the context of incongruity theory. But perhaps a simpler approach will work: A low-intensity stimulus in the form of an incongruity can quite simply trigger high-intensity laughter. But this, of course, is nonsense, for incongruities are not funny. The cognitive-switch theory, in contrast, suggests a promising explanation: A low-intensity stimulus, one which in itself appears most unimpressive, might well, for all its lack of intensity, lead in one way or another to a cognitive switch of one type or another, as for example a shift from puzzlement to insight, and this switch in turn might well prompt explosive relaxation in laughter of any degree of intensity, which laughter can bring pleasure of any degree of intensity. The intensity of the laughter depends largely, though perhaps not entirely, on the intensity of the arousal which is rendered pointless by the cognitive switch. It does not, however—and this is the crux of the solution—depend on the intensity of the stimulus factor or factors which lead to or prompt the cognitive switch. In sum, a low-intensity stimulus can set in motion a process which leads indirectly or directly to a cognitive switch which precipitates intense laughter the intensity of which derives largely from the intensity of the state of arousal at the moment of the switch.

Once again, then, simple incongruity theory, the idea that incongruities of certain types simply are funny under certain conditions, offers no plausible explanation, the only "sophisticated" incongruity theory that has been proposed, incongruity-and-resolution theory, offers no plausible explanation in terms of incongruity, if only because it must itself be regarded as an abandonment of incongruity theory in favor of cognitive-switch theory, and cognitive-switch theory offers a plausible, unforced explanation.

(4) Why is it that a joke usually isn't as funny the second time around? Explanation in terms of simple incongruity theory: The second time one hears a joke, the incongruity is familiar and stale and hence not as funny.—But this fails for several reasons. To

begin with, in itself, an incongruity isn't at all funny even the first time around. Moreover, in effect, this explanation merely restates a presupposition of the question—viz., that a joke isn't as funny the second time—and hence goes no distance towards answering it. Moreover, the beauty of a beautiful painting or piece of music is often felt even more deeply on the second or third exposure. Why shouldn't it happen frequently that the funniness of a funny incongruity is felt even more intensely the second or third time around? This question stands, of course, even if the comparison with art and music falls. The answer must be drawn from the nature of incongruities: it is, of course, illegitimate to appeal to the fact that a *joke* is, generally speaking, funnier the first time. In short, simple incongruity theory offers no plausible explanation. Explanation in terms of incongruity-and-resolution theory: The second time around, the subject is aware of the resolution from the start and hence lacks any reason to go through a process of puzzling and does not experience sudden insight.—But, since the “resolution” in question, the discovery of an underlying congruity, need not proceed from the recognition of an incongruity, this explanation cannot be said successfully to incorporate the usual incongruity thesis. It is not an explanation in terms of incongruity but rather, in effect, an explanation in terms of a limited, narrow cognitive-switch theory.

Explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: As for those cases in which the subject puzzles through to an insight which precipitates laughter, since he already knows the solution to the puzzle the second time around, he has no occasion to puzzle further and hence unrelaxation doesn't build. Moreover, since he has already made the cognitive switch to insight, no cognitive switch occurs of the type which tends to bring laughter, of the type which brought laughter the first time around. This, to be sure, is only one type of case out of indefinitely many, but the explanation can readily be generalized to cover the entire field of humor, as follows. The effective cognitive switch is a shift to a perception, interpretation, orientation, or whatever which does not support unrelaxation at a high level; it follows that the post-switch stance is one which doesn't support unrelaxation at a high level. The subject, however, having already heard the joke, is already in this stance, and so the conditions under which unrelaxation might build, under which it did build the first time around, do not exist. Moreover, the subject fails to make the effective cognitive switch, for the simple reason that he has already made it: he doesn't make the transition from stance *A* to stance *B* because he's already in stance *B*. The point is that in very many cases, one or

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the other or both of these circumstances more or less kills the humor the second time around. In addition, if the subject laughs hard at a joke the first time he hears it and that same joke is then repeated immediately, there is little or no occasion for him to relax, for the simple reason that he has already done so.

In this as in many cases, incongruity theory fails to yield even one plausible explanation whereas the cognitive-switch theory yields several complementary ones.

(5) The ethologist Konrad Lorenz observes:

...Barking dogs may occasionally bite, but laughing men hardly ever shoot.

His point is that "laughter—even at its most intense—is never in danger of regressing and causing the primal aggressive behaviour to break through." (*On Aggression*, Methuen, 1979, p. 254) His observation about laughing men, however, brings to mind a different point: Laughter tends to render a person incapable, for better or worse, of deliberate action. But just how does it do this? Explanation in terms of incongruity theory: The laughter of humor brings pleasure, but the possibility of gaining this pleasure motivates focus on the funny incongruity in the case, for this tends to prolong laughter; this focus, however, amounts, if only momentarily, to a powerful distraction. Moreover, the sounds and other sensations produced by laughter are also highly distracting. Moreover, on a physical level, laughter tends to be paralyzing, both while it occurs and shortly thereafter.—It appears to be true that focus on an absurd image, witty remark, or the like can have the effect of prolonging laughter. This stimulus, however, need not take the form of an incongruity; in fact, since incongruities are not at all funny in themselves, it may be assumed that it very seldom does. To take just one example, Adlai Stevenson (clearly playing upon the Socratic dictum "The unexamined life is not worth living") one remarked, "Life without laughter is not worth examining." Running this material through one's mind repeatedly might well prolong laughter, but there is no incongruity in it: neither Socrates' nor Stevenson's statement is at all incongruous in itself, and by logical principles, of course, the two are perfectly consistent. That the latter is a skillful play on the former makes it clever and funny, not incongruous. Thus the reference in the explanation in terms of incongruity theory to "focus on the funny incongruity in the case," which might appear to establish a connection between the usual incongruity thesis and the distracting effect in question, is unacceptable and this connection illusory. Moreover, the proposition that laughter brings pleasure, while true, lacks any connection with the usual incongruity thesis and hence with incongruity theory. The same goes for the observation

that the sounds and other sensations produced by laughter are highly distracting: this is true, but it does not fit into any plausible picture of which the usual incongruity thesis forms an integral part. The same goes also for the observation that laughter tends to be paralyzing on a physical level. This, moreover, calls for explanation: why is laughter paralyzing on a physical level?

It bears stressing, though it's obvious, that to explain how laughter inhibits deliberate action, and to explain this in terms of incongruity theory, are two quite different things. It might be felt that since this inhibitory effect has to do specifically with laughter, it is illegitimate to demand that it be explained in terms of incongruity theory. A moment's reflection, however, shows that this isn't so. If the usual incongruity thesis is true, then it must be possible to fit the recognition of an incongruity, laughter, and the inhibitory effect of laughter into a single coherent picture, and hence it is quite legitimate to demand that this be done. Similarly for everything else that relates to humor.

Explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: The laughter of humor brings pleasure, but the possibility of gaining this pleasure often motivates focus on an absurd image, witty remark, or the like, and in many cases this focus amounts to a powerful distraction. Moreover, the sounds and other sensations produced by laughter are also highly distracting. Moreover, precisely in that it brings relaxation, laughter tends to be paralyzing both while it occurs and shortly thereafter. In sum, it is difficult to take vigorous deliberate action while one is distracted and undergoing rapid relaxation or thoroughly relaxed.—This, of course, is more or less the same explanation as that given above. It is not open to the same objection, however, and this, in large part, is because laughter itself fits neatly into the picture painted by the cognitive-switch theory.

(6) Jokes, witticisms, and so on which elicit hostility or thoughts of sex tend to be especially funny (to people who don't object to them on moral or other grounds, at any rate). Why is this? In this connection, the incongruity theorist McGhee writes:

...Very few people really break up laughing at pure incongruities, but the addition of allusions to sex or aggression may produce this effect. Readers can draw their own conclusions about how funny the following jokes would be without the contribution of sex or aggression.

One bachelor asked another, "How did you like your stay at the nudist camp?"

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“Well,” he answered, “It was okay after a while. The first three days were the hardest.”

MR. BROWN: “This is disgusting. I just found out that the janitor has made love to every woman in the building except one.”

HIS WIFE: “Oh, it must be that stuck-up Mrs. Johnson on the third floor.”  
(*Humor*, Freeman, 1979, p. 9)

Clearly, McGhee assumes that in cases like these, once “the contribution of sex or aggression” has been subtracted, as it were, there remains the same incongruity and, fundamentally, the same joke, and that the joke is the same because it is based on the same incongruity—in the same way, it might be best to add. He assumes that the recognition of an incongruity constitutes the core of the mechanics of any such case, as it were, that the allusions to sex or topics which elicit hostility serve merely to heighten the level of arousal—as if any other set of allusions, to any subject, that would heighten arousal without inducing a mood inimical to humor would do as well—and that this high level of arousal accounts for the intensity of the response. It is not McGhee’s purpose in this passage to answer the question at hand, but, in effect, he does offer an answer. His answer is this: Basically, the experience of humor in any given case develops from the recognition of an incongruity, but a joke which elicits hostility or thoughts of sex on a given occasion thereby arouses the subject, and this high level of arousal accounts for the intensity of the laughter the joke elicits.—This answer, however, is unacceptable for several reasons. To begin with, it fails to explain how an experience of humor might develop from the recognition of an incongruity. Moreover, it fails to explain the connection between a high level of arousal and intense laughter. Moreover, in several ways, the analysis it entails fails to apply to McGhee’s own examples.

Consider first the joke about the nudist camp. To begin with, precisely what incongruity is in question here—that is, in the original? This is by no means easy to say. It’s tempting to propose that the second bachelor’s reply (henceforth “the reply”) is incongruous with the first bachelor’s question (henceforth “the question”) in that at first sight it doesn’t make any sense. But just what does it mean to say that it doesn’t make any sense? To the question “How did you like your stay?”—at the nudist camp, at the boy scout camp, in Chicago, on the moon, or anywhere else—surely it makes perfectly good sense to reply “Well, it was okay after a while—the first three days were the hardest.” The reply, then, is not in the least incongruous with the question.

Nevertheless, it's true that at first sight it doesn't make sense. That is, it doesn't make sense as a joking reply: it isn't funny. Clearly, this is what gives rise to the impression that an incongruity figures in the case. The question to consider, then, is this: The typical subject doesn't get the joke immediately. Does this imply that he perceives an incongruity? Does he, for example, perceive an incongruity between the message "This is a joke" and his failure to see any joke? Compare this with a similar case. You face a column of five three-digit numbers. Your task is to add them up. You don't know the sum at the moment because you haven't set to work yet. Does this imply that you perceive an incongruity? Of course not. You know that there's a solution and you know you don't have it yet; incongruity has nothing to do with the case. The same holds for the joke about the nudist camp. The subject believes that there's a solution, for he knows that it's a joke, and he knows that he hasn't found any solution yet; it's absurd to claim that this implies he recognizes an incongruity. In fact there is no incongruity between the message "This is a joke" and the subject's failure to get it instantly. Hence it's not surprising that he doesn't recognize any incongruity in this. A person might indeed come to the conclusion that there simply is no joke here—if, for example, he's not clever enough to get it, or, being a young child, he doesn't know anything about sex, or he feels such a horror of sex that his recognition of the secondary, insightful interpretation of the reply ("My erection was hardest the first three days") is totally repressed. It might be said that to such a person, an incongruity appears between the message "This is a joke" and the fact that no joke manifests itself. By hypothesis, however, he fails to experience the humor in the case, and so his viewpoint is irrelevant. Initial impressions notwithstanding, there is no incongruity here that might be considered relevant by any stretch of the imagination.

Next, let us ask what remains of the joke once all allusions to sex, or at any rate all relevant, functional allusions, have been subtracted, as it were. There is no single way to perform this subtraction. One way to do it is to leave the wording unaltered and posit a subject who, for whatever reason, simply doesn't think of the secondary interpretation of the reply ("My erection was hardest the first three days"). This is tantamount to positing that the reply ("The first three days were the hardest") simply doesn't bear or even suggest this interpretation. But such a subject, of course, just doesn't get the joke—that is, the original joke. This should give one pause, however, for it implies that once this, the main or functional allusion to sex, to say nothing of any subsidiary allusions, has been subtracted, nothing remains of the original joke.



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McGhee assumes, to repeat, that once “the contribution of sex” has been subtracted, there remains the same incongruity and, fundamentally, the same joke. In fact, however, there is no incongruity in the first place, and to subtract the relevant allusion to sex is to subtract the entire joke: what remains is, at best, an entirely different joke, or an unhumorous formulation.

Another way, perhaps more thorough, to subtract the allusions to sex is to substitute carefully for the expressions “bachelor” and “the nudist camp,” which support the sexual pun of the original and are, quite apart from this, likely to bring sex to mind, and for “hardest,” in order to make it more certain that the subject will not think of erections. This yields, for example, the following:

One boy asked another, “How did you like your stay at swimming camp?”

“Well,” he answered, “It was okay after a while. The first three days were the toughest.”

or even better

One little girl asked another, “How did you like your stay at camp?”

“Well,” she answered, “It was okay after a while. The first three days were the most difficult.”

The trouble, of course, is that these formulations aren’t jokes (or more accurately, they don’t function as jokes unless joke-teller and audience are clever enough—fiendishly clever—to see jokes in them). This outcome is not surprising. Contrary to McGhee, the core of the psychodynamics of the original joke is not the recognition of an incongruity, but rather a cognitive switch from puzzling to a certain insight, and the circumstances which make this switch possible have been eliminated. It is merely to be expected, then, that no joke remains. Thus, once again, contrary to McGhee, to eliminate the allusions to sex is to eliminate the joke entirely.

In favorable circumstances and with the aid of co-conspirators, one might present the formulation concerning the boy who went to swimming camp as a joke, encourage the subject/victim to struggle through to a solution, choose just the right moment to inform him that in fact there is no joke, and thus induce a mild experience of humor—though of course the entire effort might backfire. For this purpose, this formulation is better than the one concerning the little girl who went to camp, for the latter fails almost entirely to support the pretense that there is a solution. In the course of puzzling, the subject might well come to feel that there’s an incongruity between the message “This is a joke” and the fact that no joke appears to him. There are three

things to notice, however. First, this incongruity is not at all funny, and it's not necessary that the subject recognize it in order to experience the humor in the case: what is necessary is that he make at least a small effort to find a joke. Secondly, it is not the same incongruity as appears in the original, for no incongruity appears in the original. Thirdly, this jest, however it is to be analyzed, clearly is not to be identified with the original joke.

Now consider the joke about the janitor. The same considerations apply here. The wife's response ("Oh, it must be that stuck-up Mrs. Johnson on the third floor") is perfectly congruous with her husband's comment ("I just found out that the janitor has made love to every woman in the building except one"). The typical listener doesn't get the joke instantly, but this by no means entails that he recognizes an incongruity: there is, again, no incongruity between the message "This is a joke" and one's failure to get the joke instantly. The crucial allusion to sex is, of course, the logical implication that the janitor has made love to the wife. According to McGhee's analysis, a listener who fails to perceive this implication might yet enjoy the joke, though less intensely, probably, than he would have if he had perceived it. But this isn't so. In fact, a listener who doesn't perceive this implication simply doesn't get the joke at all.

To repeat, it's clear that jokes and so on which elicit hostility or thoughts of sex tend to be especially funny, and the question is why. McGhee's explanation in terms of incongruity theory fails several times over. It's possible, however, to give a simple, unstrained explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: Usually, in cases of the sort in question, the allusions which elicit hostility or thoughts of sex thereby elicit arousal of a relatively high level, and hence the drop, as it were, to a normal level of arousal is long. Hence the laughter which functions to bring about this drop tends to be of relatively long duration or high intensity or both, and hence, too, the pleasure which this laughter brings tends to be of long duration or high intensity.

(7) As the early incongruist Hutcheson notes, as a general rule, a light-hearted, happy mood predisposes a person to find things humorous. On the other hand, people tend to be disinclined to joke or to lend their ears to jokes about things they are trying hard to accomplish, or about things, as for example religious tenets, which they take very seriously. But why is this? Explanation in terms of incongruity theory: A person is more likely to notice incongruities, and hence more likely to experience humor, when he's in a light-hearted mood than when he's in a serious mood.—But this won't do at all. To begin with, it simply isn't true that a person is more likely to notice

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incongruities when he's in a light-hearted mood. There is no relevant difference in this connection between incongruities and, say, hexagons, or coins of a certain denomination. To say that a person is more likely to notice incongruities when he's in a light-hearted mood is like saying that he's more likely to notice hexagonal configurations when he's in a light-hearted mood. Perhaps, then, the explanation ought to be amended to read as follows: A person is more likely to notice incongruities of the type which make for amusement, and hence is more likely to experience humor, when he's in a light-hearted mood.—But this fails too. It presupposes that incongruities of a certain type make for amusement, but this cannot be true, for the incongruities which humor stimuli manifest (from certain points of view, which are in fact irrelevant) are of no single, particular type. In addition, neither version of this explanation addresses the fact that a person who is trying hard to complete a certain task, or who takes a certain body of doctrine very seriously, tends actively to resist joking about that particular task or body of doctrine. But perhaps it is possible to meet this objection by adding: A person deeply committed to completing a task, or to a body of doctrine, is disinclined to find incongruities in it and hence may be expected to resist joking about it.—It isn't true, however, that a person deeply committed to a task or doctrine is disinclined to find incongruities in it, for as often as not such a person is eager to find and repair incongruities. Moreover, it's clear intuitively that in many cases in which a person does resist joking about something he takes very seriously or holds dear, his resistance is specifically a resistance to joking about it. A disinclination to recognize incongruities, however, is a disinclination to recognize them however they are presented: in sarcastic remarks, in balanced criticism, etc. In other words, this explanation does not capture the phenomenon of resistance to joking in particular.

Another attempt at an explanation in terms of incongruity theory: A person in a state of depression lacks initiative, and hence lacks the initiative it takes to recognize (or recognize and resolve) incongruities; moreover, he might well be motivated to remain depressed, and thus might well resist engaging in humor, which is to say he might resist engaging in any effort to recognize or resolve an incongruity if he perceives that to do so might bring an experience of humor.—The fact that a depressed person lacks initiative and the fact that he might resist humor in order to stay depressed probably enter into the true explanation, whatever it is. These facts, however, can be integrated quite readily into any explanation, and thus to demonstrate that they can be integrated into an explanation in terms of incongruity theory is not to

show incongruity theory to any particular advantage.

Explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: First, consider the case of the person who is intent on completing a task. He has several reasons to refuse to engage in joking about anything. To begin with, obviously, any time and energy devoted to joking is diverted from the task at hand. But joking brings laughter (in the way described by the cognitive-switch theory), and laughter brings pleasure (in ways described by the theory), and thus humor diverts attention seductively, with a promise of pleasure, and hence determined resistance is in order. Less obviously, even if the subject matter of the joke is precisely the task at hand, the process of following the joke (or making and following it) entails making a cognitive switch which consists in a sudden shift in point of view, interpretation, or orientation (as from making an effort to abandoning it); such a shift, however, is almost certain to prove distracting and interruptive. Moreover, (as postulated by the cognitive-switch theory and in ways described by it), laughter functions to bring relaxation and hence drains the arousal requisite to further effort. Moreover, in most cases at any rate, the sounds and other sensations produced by laughter, one's own or that of others, are highly distracting.

Next, consider the person who is determined to hold a certain individual, institution, or body of doctrine—a certain object—in awe. He has reason to resist joking about that object, for humor often diminishes respect or awe. The question is how. Respect may be said to have two components: an emotional one (e.g., fear or excitement), and an intellectual one (e.g., the belief that he/she/it is very great). A joke about a given individual or other object, however, brings relaxation (in the way, or more accurately the ways, described by the cognitive-switch theory) precisely while the subject's attention is focused on that object, and hence diminishes, at least momentarily, the emotional component of respect for that object. Moreover, during the moment he is relaxed, the subject is likely to be relatively open to information (or misinformation) tailored to diminish the intellectual component of respect; a hostile joke, however, can deliver such information just before that moment arrives—in the form of the stimulus factor which prompts the cognitive switch which precipitates the laughter which brings relaxation. Moreover, in some cases at any rate, a person who laughs at a joke which ridicules thereby signals that he accepts, or at any rate is willing momentarily to entertain, an unfavorable image of the object of ridicule. But this signal can do two things: it can mark him in the eyes of others or in his own as a person who does not hold that object in reverence, and it can encourage those others to follow his example, that is, to

cease holding it in reverence.

Finally, consider the person who is for the moment unfocussed, i.e., not deeply engaged in a task, open, i.e., not defensive, and carefree. By hypothesis, he is free to devote time and effort to the work of inventing, delivering, or following a joke. This includes following an unintended joke: that is, he is free to devote time to scanning for circumstances a recognition of which would in his case prompt a cognitive switch which would precipitate laughter. Also, he is free to allow himself to undergo a cognitive switch, or one cognitive switch after another, however distracting or interruptive this might be, and free to allow himself to lose respect or to cause others to lose respect for this or that object. In a word, he is free to engage in humor.

(8) In many cases, perhaps most though certainly not all, the element of surprise is more or less essential to the humorous effect. But just why is this? Explanation in terms of simple incongruity theory: The perception of an incongruity is arousing, but surprise heightens arousal and thereby heightens the humorous effect.—But this won't do. To begin with, it's woefully incomplete in that it doesn't explain how surprise enters into the humor process or how arousal translates into an experience of humor. Moreover, it addresses the question how surprise augments the humorous effect and thus fails to address the question at hand: how it is that surprise is essential to the humorous effect (in those cases in which it is). Another attempt: The perception of an incongruity is essential to the experience of humor but arousal is also essential, and in the cases in question it is surprise, not the perception of an incongruity, which generates arousal.—But this fails too. To begin with, once again, it doesn't explain how surprise enters into the humor process or how arousal translates into an experience of humor. Moreover, if surprise generates arousal which translates into amusement and the perception of the incongruity in the case doesn't, then what role does the recognition of that incongruity play in the humor process? Why is it also essential? There is no good answer to this question. Explanation in terms of incongruity-and-resolution theory: An incongruity which surprises the subject thereby generates heightened arousal which translates into heightened amusement when the subject resolves the incongruity.—To begin with, this is open to objections very similar to those just detailed: it fails to explain just how arousal translates into amusement when the subject "resolves the incongruity," etc. Moreover, it collapses into an explanation in terms of cognitive-switch theory. If arousal translates into amusement at the moment the subject "resolves the incongruity," that is, finds a hidden congruity, then

the cognitive switch which consists in or begins with the recognition of the hidden congruity is essential to the humor process, but the perception of an incongruity is not. Another attempt at an explanation in terms of incongruity-and-resolution theory: If the resolution is something clever and surprising, then it's likely that the subject will discover it suddenly after arousal has built to a maximum, or, if he isn't able to discover it at all, the joke-teller has an opportunity to reveal it to him at just the moment arousal peaks; but a maximum of arousal yields a maximum of amusement. —This, again, fails to explain how arousal translates into an experience of humor. It is, however, a more or less reasonable explanation as far as it goes. The rub is that it collapses into an explanation in terms of cognitive-switch theory, for it puts “the resolution,” that is, a cognitive switch, at the center of the picture, and fails even to hint at a reason why the perception of an incongruity ought to be considered essential to the process.

Explanation in terms of the cognitive-switch theory: If the cognitive switch occurs prematurely, which is to say before arousal builds sufficiently, then of course laughter and amusement will not result or will lack intensity. But if that which prompts the cognitive switch is something surprising, that is to say, something unlikely to occur to the subject unless he exercises his imagination strenuously, but yet immediately and thoroughly comprehensible once conceived, this greatly increases the likelihood that the cognitive switch will not occur prematurely, but rather suddenly and cleanly at the moment of peak arousal. But this, of course, makes for the most intense laughter and amusement. If in addition it is admirably clever, the pleasures of intellectual stimulation and ungrudging admiration may well augment that of amusement proper.— This explanation is not open to the objection that it is incomplete in any fundamental way, for the cognitive-switch theory spells out, quite plausibly, all the relevant connections: among arousal, the cognitive switch, laughter, the experience of amusement, etc.

There is, then, a striking contrast between the cognitive-switch theory on the one hand and incongruity theory in general on the other in that the former readily suggests plausible explanations of the various facets of the phenomenon of humor whereas the latter doesn't.

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To the present day, humor continues to be a deep mystery. This is because humor theorists have not yet observed with any success that which goes on when a person experiences humor. This in turn is because that which goes on is, for some reason,

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most difficult to observe. This very circumstance, however, poses serious difficulties for incongruity theory. The incongruities which humor stimuli manifest—that is, manifest in most cases, from certain points of view—lie fully open to observation, in very many cases on the printed page or on videotape, where they can be examined minutely and at leisure. They are not particularly difficult to identify. If a humor analyst concludes that such and such constitutes an incongruity—that is, in the dictionary sense, from such and such a point of view—it's unlikely that he will encounter much disagreement. The phenomenon called recognizing an incongruity is not particularly problematical—or at any rate is not so in the context of the theory of humor. Likewise, in this context, the process of seeking and discovering a hidden congruity (“resolving an incongruity”) is not very problematical. In a word, the incongruities which humor stimuli manifest and the mental processes which relate to them are not at all mysterious: they can be observed quite easily. In contrast, that which lies at the core of the phenomenon of humor is, to repeat, something quite mysterious, something most difficult to observe, and this suggests that it is something quite other than incongruity. It stands to reason, moreover, that if the key to an understanding of humor did lie in incongruity, or in anything else so readily accessible to full and accurate observation, then humor would not be a mystery.

This argument applies to all stimulus-side theories: It is not notably difficult to observe the stimuli to humor accurately and fully. In contrast, the essential features of the basic humor process, whatever they might be, are, for some reason, very difficult indeed to observe accurately. This suggests that nothing in the former is to be identified with the latter. If certain elements or processes on the stimulus side did constitute the essential features of the basic humor process, moreover, then, since the stimulus side lies fully open to observation, humor, though it might present questions, would not present a mystery as it does.

The fact that humor is a mystery poses no difficulties at all for the cognitive-switch theory. In fact, it makes possible a minor confirmation, for this theory explains this fact quite neatly. The cognitive-switch theory is a response-side theory: according to it, the essential character of humor lies in the full humor response. Laughter constitutes the final step in this response. It is only this final step, however, which lies quite open to observation. The initial portion of the full humor response, and especially the cognitive switch, is both complex and more or less hidden from view, i.e., difficult to observe accurately, and for precisely this reason it remains elusive. It is hidden in

the way silent thoughts are hidden: it consists of complex, largely unexpressed mental processes the exact description of which is precisely the vital question. Both the stimulus side as a whole and the final step in the full humor response, to repeat, lie quite open to observation. If the initial portion of the full humor response were just as easy to observe—if, for example, it were always expressed out loud in words or in unmistakable gestures—there would be no mystery to humor. It is ignorance of the nature of the initial portion of the full humor response which renders humor a mystery.