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COMIC IMPOSSIBILITIES

Jason Leddington

Department of Philosophy, Bucknell University
Centre for Philosophical Psychology, University of Antwerp

As a conjuror in the popular sense of the word, he has indeed few rivals; but as a humorist and conjuror combined, he certainly stands alone. Shunning alike the pompous air which is assumed by some of his competitors, and the extreme urbanity which is affected by others, he talks in a quiet, sarcastic tone, as if intending to convince his spectators that, much as he may desire them to admire his feats, he is by no means astounded by his own proficiency.... Pretending that the air is charged with coins, English and American, he makes a clutch with an empty hand, in which he invariably displays a dollar or a shilling, flinging every fresh acquisition into a hat.... There is something in the performance of this feat—in this industrious realization of something out of nothing—that belongs to the spirit of true comedy.

- John Oxenford on magician Robert Heller in *The Times* (1868)

I believe that one of the reasons scientists and other intelligent audiences so delight in smart and stylish conjuring (as has consistently been my professional experience) is because they view magic as a burlesque of their own work.

- Jamy Ian Swiss (2002b, 269)

I have the rare and most excellent honor of being able to call [magician] Jamy Ian Swiss my good friend. I have learned much from my association with him: that I can still be fooled, repeatedly it seems; that watching impossible things happen in front of me makes me laugh uncontrollably; and finally, that secret arts and mystery still have an important and vital role to play in the world.

- Adam Savage, co-host of *Mythbusters* (Savage n.d.)

I'm Steve Martin, and I'll be out here in a minute. Uh, while I'm—while I'm waiting for me, I'd like to jump right into kind of a socko-boffo comedy routine. This has really been a big one for me, it's the one that kinda put me where I am today. I'd like to start right off—this is really a big one: the fabulous glove-into-dove trick.

- Steve Martin on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1968)

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In his 1968 TV debut, Steve Martin appears on stage next to a small table draped with a gold-fringed red velvet cloth. The table holds what are obviously magic props, including a white glove, a tall candle, and a silver ball. After promising to “jump right into a socko-boffo comedy routine,” Martin takes the white glove from the table and announces a magic trick. This may seem like a non-sequitur, but the audience knows the schtick: in a pattern familiar from performers such as Carl Ballantine and Tommy Cooper, the comedian will make a mockery of the magic: his tricks will all fail in some amusing way. But here’s what happens: first, Martin throws the glove into the air and it lands lamely on the table; next, without skipping a beat, he does “the napkin trick,” in which he pokes his tongue through a paper napkin. The audience realizes: this isn’t Ballantine-style failure magic; it’s pure absurdist comedy. However, Martin’s third trick, “the candle trick,” shifts gears: it seems to be a legitimate magic trick in which a two-foot candle vanishes from under a handkerchief. Again, however, things aren’t quite as they seem: after receiving the audience’s applause with both arms extended, he drops only his right arm. His left arm remains aloft, rigidly—and hilariously—sticking out from his side. Obviously, the candle is up his sleeve! It’s failure magic after all! But Martin *still* isn’t through with us: as he turns back toward the table for the next prop, he suddenly drops his left arm, bends it sharply while making a fist, and grabs his left bicep with his right hand: it’s a *bras d’honneur*. This gesture—which reads as an aside, a piece of meta-performance delivered on an off-beat—serves two purposes: (1) it proves that he didn’t sleeve the candle; and (2) it tells the audience—and their expectation that they’ll always be one step ahead of the bumbling magician—to “fuck off.” Through a series of rapid reversals, Martin shows that he is not what he initially seemed to be: a failure-magician in the Ballantine-Cooper mold. There’s

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actual magic in his act—and it’s good, too. While Ballantine and Cooper mock standard magic performance with funny failures, Martin’s tricks are either absurdist non-tricks—as in the glove-into-dove and napkin tricks—or strong pieces of magic: first, the vanishing candle; and second, his closer, “the toilet-float trick,” in which a silver ball floats magically around the stage until it disobediently drags Martin from the theater, “headed for the john.”

Within the scope of comedy, Ballantine’s and Cooper’s performances are instances of “punching up.” Canonically, the magician is an elegant, dextrous, and self-assured white man who uses secret knowledge to fool us. This makes for easy comedy: portray the white male magician as an idiot whose deceptive stratagems fail spectacularly. But Martin is up to something else—something more difficult. His absurdist routine is *also* a real magic act, and it neither encourages nor supports the sort of easy derision toward magic and magicians that animates Ballantine’s and Cooper’s performances. The latter do standup comedy *about* magic; Martin is doing standup comedy *and* magic—or better, *standup comedy magic*.

This difference deserves attention. A performance in the Ballantine-Cooper style requires no special relationship between comedy and magic. The magician is a just one of many possible comic targets. On the other hand, by seamlessly integrating comedy and magic, Martin’s performance raises the question whether comedy and magic have a special relationship. The goal of this article is to show that they do. I will argue for the perhaps surprising conclusion that magic is a form—or, at least, a limit-case—of standup comedy. If I’m right, this will help to explain the easy integration of magic and comedy in Martin’s act—and a great deal more besides.

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The article has five parts. Part 1 motivates the argument with five points in favor of thinking that magic and standup comedy are deeply, essentially related. Part 2 secures the argument's conceptual foundations with definitions of both 'standup comedy' and 'magic'. As it turns out, whether magic counts as a form of standup will depend on whether successful magic performances count as objects of comic amusement. Part 3 shows that they do—at least according to one prominent contemporary philosophical theory of humor. Part 4 considers objections. Part 5 concludes.

————— 1 —————

Why think that magic and standup comedy might be deeply, essentially related? Here are five reasons.

(i) It is widely believed that, before the rise of modern magic in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, audiences regularly mistook magicians for real wizards. But, according to historians Peter Lamont and Jim Steinmeyer, there is little evidence for this view (2018). They argue convincingly that magic tricks (pretty much as we know them) have been enjoyed (pretty much as we enjoy them) for a long time. In fact, even “throughout the age of witchcraft, jugglers performed magic tricks without persecution, because their audiences understood that they were watching tricks” (2018, 24). Thus, consider Hocus Pocus (né William Vincent), the big name in 17th century British conjuring. In 1634, he published the first book in English dedicated entirely to teaching magic, and his readers would not have been surprised to find the following passage near the beginning of his text:

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The end of this Art is either good or bad, accordingly as it is used: Good, and lawfull, when it is used at Festivals, and merry meetings to procure mirth: especially if it be done without desire of estimation above what we are. Bad, and altogether unlawfull when it is used on purpose, to cozen, deceive, or for vain glory to be esteemed above what is meet and honest. (1634, 2)

In other words, the use of the magician's techniques is illegitimate ("unlawful") if they are deployed to mislead the audience about, say, the real powers of the performer. By contrast, in a legitimate ("lawful") use, the performer aims not to convince but "to procure mirth." The former is charlatantry. The latter is conjuring. It is good clean fun, and it requires being honest about what's happening—at least to the extent of admitting that it's trickery. But what's most important here is how Vincent—one of the most successful early performers of magic—characterizes its end-goal: *mirth*. Not wonder, nor amazement, but *mirth*: apparently the same end as comedy.¹

(ii) Laughter is one of the most common responses to strong magic. Neuroscientist Susana Martinez-Conde explains:

Magic audiences not only laugh at the magician's jokes, but also at the magical effects themselves: the reading of a spectator's mind, the disappearance of a coin into thin air, the transmutation of the ace of spades into the queen of hearts, all provoke hilarity. (2015)

This fits neatly with Vincent's description of the proper goal of magic performance; and if Lamont and Steinmeyer are right about the history, then people have probably been laughing at magic tricks for centuries. That said, laughter can express many things, including anxiety. (And magic tricks *do* make some people anxious.) So far, then, it's not clear that we're entitled to describe the audience's laughter as an expression of "hilarity."

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(iii) Magic and standup comedy have a very close historical relationship. For example, standup has its origins in vaudeville (in the US) and music hall or “variety” (in the UK), which were also primary venues for magicians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.² Later, in the 1970s and 80s, when modern standup came into its own and comedy clubs sprang up around the United States, magicians turned to those clubs for work. Despite being tagged as “prop comics,” some of them achieved substantial success. Harry Anderson’s act was eventually recorded for a 1986 Showtime special, and many of today’s top performing magicians started out on the comedy circuit. For example, Mac King—arguably “the best comedy magician in the world” (Maven 2008, 64)—did comedy clubs for 20 years before landing his Las Vegas show, now in its 20th year at Harrah’s (King 2017, 39). Even today, magicians commonly work comedy clubs. And, then, of course, there are the standup comedians who started out as magicians, most notably Johnny Carson and Steve Martin.

(iv) To say that magic acts standardly incorporate comedy would be a serious understatement. It’s fair to say that comedy is the performing magician’s primary theatrical mode.³ There are, of course, magic acts with serious moments that don’t aim to amuse, but the same can be said of standup comedy. (Consider, for instance, the recent work of Hannah Gadsby.) The fact is that—at least in contemporary magic—a comic tone is overwhelmingly more common than, say, a dramatic or didactic tone. Perhaps this is merely a historical accident; but I doubt it—and I think this is reflected in the fact that “serious” magic shows seem to run a special sort of theatrical risk: namely, of becoming ridiculous, acts to be laughed at rather than laughed with. It’s as if they’re in danger of forgetting what they are.⁴

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(v) The dominant contemporary account of humor holds that comic amusement is a response to incongruity. A successful magic performance apparently presents an impossible event. What could be more incongruous than this? Still, not all incongruities are humorous—even among those that elicit laughter. Consider again the nervous laughter sometimes provoked by anxiety-inducing incongruities. Perhaps magical incongruities are of this sort.

These points do not by themselves establish this article's thesis.⁵ However, they are suggestive, and they require explanation. Of course, I think that the best explanation is that magic is a form of standup comedy, and I turn now to direct arguments for this claim. My primary argument primarily develops point (v): I will show that magic tricks plausibly satisfy all of the conditions on humor laid out in one of today's best-developed philosophical theories of humor. First, however, I need to say a bit more about what both standup and magic are, and what it's like to experience the latter.

———— 2 ————

Standup comedy is two things: *standup* and *comedy*.

A performance or work is a piece of *comedy* if and only if comically amusing its audience figures among its primary aims. It follows that being funny is neither necessary nor sufficient for being comedy. Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* is hilariously bad, but this does not make it comedy; and the nervous first-timer at the open mic is doing comedy even if their act is excruciatingly unfunny. In general, a piece of comedy succeeds (or fails) as comedy *only* by being (or failing to be) funny. (It can of course succeed (or fail) in other respects at the same time—say, by being

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morally praiseworthy (or repugnant)—and this may have consequences for the comedy (see Smuts 2009; Anderson 2015; Olin 2016; Lintott 2017, 363–4.)

As I use the term, a performance is a *standup performance* if and only if it presents the performer as *genuinely present* to a live audience. To be presented as genuinely present to a particular audience is to be presented as someone who is *now* in front of *this* audience, and so, available to them for real-time interaction. In this respect, even if the performer “plays a role” or “adopts a persona,” it is the role or persona of someone present to precisely this audience, in this space, at this time. As a standup performer, when you walk out on stage, you purport to present your “real world” self, even if it’s not your “real world” self that you present.⁶ In short, in standup performances, there is no “fourth wall.” The audience sees *you*, and you see *them*. This is why, as a standup performer, even if you adopt a persona, you can’t avoid acknowledging your audience.⁷

Thus defined, most “standup performances” are not instances of standup comedy. For example, most musical performances count as standup performances, but most musical performances don’t have the production of comic amusement among their principal aims. Furthermore, as I’ve defined it, standup comedy is a very flexible thing. Any standup performance that has the production of comic amusement among its principal aims will count as standup comedy. This means that some of what I count as standup comedy will not be conventionally recognized as such. It doesn’t have to be one person, one mic in a comedy club. It doesn’t have to involve joke-telling, or even telling at all. It may be all music, or gesture, or whatever.⁸

Clearly, then, the point of my definition of ‘standup comedy’ is not to capture conventional usage. (If conventional usage were the issue, it would be obtuse—and a non-starter—to argue that

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magic is a form of standup comedy.) The point of the definition is rather to identify an important concept, one that helps us to parse reality in useful and interesting ways—perhaps in part by revealing connections we might have otherwise failed to notice. In this respect, the definition has metaphysical import (cf. Lintott 2017, 363). It is in this same spirit that I argue elsewhere for the definition of ‘magic’ to which I now turn.

As I understand it, “[m]agic is a form of theater that apparently presents impossible events *and at the same time* represents them as impossible. In other words, magic apparently presents impossibilities—*as impossibilities*” (Leddington 2016, 256). This definition incorporates three main ideas.

First, the point of a magic performance is to give the audience the experience of *apparently witnessing* the impossible; to this end, the performance must do more than represent an impossible event: it must actually *appear to present it*. In this respect, there is no “fourth wall” in magic performance, which depicts impossible events as really happening before—and perhaps even *to*—the live audience. By contrast, in conventional theater, the “fourth wall” that separates us from depicted events prevents us from (even apparently) witnessing them; instead, the action on stage functions as an invitation for us to *imagine* them. This is why seeing the “mechanics” of a play—say, that Hamlet’s sword is actually made of wood—doesn’t interfere with our experience of the performance, because it doesn’t interfere with our imagination. But when magician Helga Moretti invites audience members to thrust fourteen swords through a cardboard box barely large enough to contain her husband, we must be convinced that the swords are genuinely sharp and deadly (they are). Anything less than conviction ruins the performance because it destroys the illusion. So,

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unlike conventional theatrical performances, magic performances are essentially standup performances: absent the fourth wall, the magician stands before the audience and addresses it directly—just like the standup comedian (Leddington 2016, 255).

Second, the magician must *present* what he or she does as impossible. When pseudo-psychic Uri Geller pretends to bend spoons with his mind, he tells the audience, “I’m doing it, so it must be possible.” This is charlatanry. By contrast, the magician says, “It’s impossible, it can’t be done—but watch,” and then appears to do it, anyway. While the charlatan aims to mislead us about what’s possible, the magician openly uses our shared knowledge of the limits of the possible to create an experience as of the impossible. This openness is ethically significant, but it also matters theatrically and aesthetically. The performer’s honesty is part of a theatrical frame within which otherwise potentially threatening experiences can be had in safety, and so, enjoyed.

Third, the audience’s active *disbelief* is essential to a magic performance. If magician Amélie van Tass of *The Clairvoyants* presents a pseudo-psychic routine to an audience that believes in psychic phenomena, they will marvel at her abilities, but they will not experience her performance as magical. Magic performances are not demonstrations of unusual or impressive abilities—even as possessed by magicians. So, when Ricky Jay appears to make things vanish, he’s doing magic; but when he displays his extraordinary ability to throw (or “scale”) playing cards, he’s not. When David Blaine appears to bite a piece out of a quarter (and to restore it by blowing on it), he’s doing magic; when he demonstrates that he can hold his breath underwater for 17 minutes, he’s not. Such feats are impressive, but we don’t think they’re impossible, so we don’t experience them as magical. In order for a performance to count as magic, the audience must

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believe that the events the magician appears to present are impossible, and therefore, not actually happening. In other words, the audience must be aware of, and accept, the theatrical frame discussed above.

What's it like to experience a magic performance, so understood? A great magic performance puts you in a state of mind you can express by saying, "I know it's a trick, but I don't see how it could be." You know it's a trick because you know (and the magician admits) that what seems to happen in the performance is actually impossible. If it nevertheless *seems* to happen, there must be trickery. At the same time, however, you don't see how it *could* be a trick because the performance is structured to deprive you of any plausible explanation for what you've witnessed. To this end, the magician aims not only to conceal the method behind the trick, but to conceal this concealment. During a good magic performance, it should feel that everything is "fair" and in view, that the magician has no opportunity for deception. Thus, it's common for people to exclaim, "No way!" in response to strong magic; they mean it literally: they see no way for *that* to be done.

Returning now to our question: how does magic, so understood, relate to standup comedy, so understood? Well, like standup comedy, magic performance is essentially a standup affair. So, whether magic counts as standup comedy depends on whether magic essentially aims to produce comic amusement. Part 3 presents an argument for this conclusion.

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Comedy is—or at least aims to be—funny, and so, to evoke comic amusement. Arguably, however, magic aims at something quite different: a type of aporetic experience that I call “the experience of magic” (Leddington 2016; 2017). Still, there’s reason to think that, when successful—and when properly appreciated—magic performances are objects of comic amusement. In other words, there’s reason to think that magic performances essentially aim to comically amuse, and so, that comic amusement is an ingredient in the experience of magic, broadly conceived. In what follows, I’ll argue for this claim by showing that the responses that magic performances aim to produce satisfy all of the conditions for comic amusement in one of the best-developed contemporary philosophical theories of humor.

According to Noël Carroll,

creatures like us are in a state of comic amusement just in case (i) the object of one’s mental state is a perceived incongruity which (ii) one regards as non-threatening or otherwise anxiety producing, and (iii) not annoying and (iv) towards which one does not enlist genuine problem-solving attitudes (v) but which gives rise to enjoyment of precisely the pertinent incongruity and (vi) to an experience of levity. And humor then is the response-dependent object of comic amusement, characterized thus. (Carroll 2014, 49–50).

I claim that the audience response at which magic performance aims satisfies all of these conditions.

(i) *Perceived incongruity*. In a successful magic performance, the audience is apparent witness to an impossible event. But to experience an event as impossible is precisely to experience it as *not fitting in*—in the strongest possible way—to the causal order of everyday experience. Thus, as Teller puts it, “you experience magic as real and unreal at the same time” (Stromberg,

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n.d.). Clearly, then, in the experience of magic, the object of one's mental state is a perceived incongruity.

(ii) *Non-threatening or otherwise anxiety producing*. When something you otherwise believe to be impossible seems to happen, context is everything. In a marketing stunt for the 2013 remake of Brian De Palma's 1976 cinematic adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie*, viral video agency Thinkmodo created a fake psychokinetic event in a New York City coffee shop.⁹ Unwitting customers were "scared shitless" ("Coffee Shop Customer in 'Carrie' Viral Video Speaks Out" 2013). But not even the most convincing piece of pseudo-telekinesis in a magic show will inspire fear, be perceived as dangerous, or produce anxiety, *unless* the audience misunderstands or rejects the theatrical frame within which it is presented.¹⁰ As mentioned above, the magician's openness about the use of deception to create the illusion of the impossible is essential to this theatrical frame. (Note, too, that humorous incongruities display a similar context-sensitivity. An utterance that's hilarious in a joking context can be brutally offensive—and threatening—outside of it.)

(iii) *Not annoying*. A good magic performance makes you apparent witness to an impossibility. While you *know*—and the performer admits—that it is "just a trick," it remains the case that, if the performance is fully successful, you can't even begin to explain it. This can annoy in two ways: first, being fooled by the magician can feel like being made a fool of; and second, being unable to explain something can be frustrating. Fine. But this just means: magic is not for the epistemically uptight. Compare tastes in humor:

Imagine the cutlery laid out for a formal dinner. Suppose that the salad fork is in the wrong place. If you are the sort of person who is disturbed by such deviations from the norm, you will not be capable of finding this amusing. One the other hand,

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if you are more easy-going about such matters and also aware of the incongruity, it may elicit a chuckle. That is, you may find the error amusing or not. But if you find it genuinely amusing, you cannot find it annoying. Moreover, if you find black humor amusing, you can be sure that there are others who will find it annoying, even extremely so. And you revel in their discomfort. (Carroll 2014, 34)

So, just as you may or may not have a taste for black humor, you may or may not have a taste for magic.¹¹

(iv) *No genuine problem-solving attitudes.* One way to appreciate a magic performance is to shut down your critical faculties and simply enjoy the spectacle. But to do so is to miss the point: you might as well just watch a visually stunning movie. To experience the performance as the magician wants you to experience it—namely, as the apparent presentation of an impossibility—requires that you both *try* and *fail* to explain what you witness. Magician Darwin Ortiz writes:

Magic can only be established by a process of elimination. There is no way that you can directly apprehend that you're witnessing magic [viz., the presentation of an impossible event]. You conclude that it's magic because there is no alternative. Therefore, the primary task in giving someone the experience of witnessing magic is to eliminate every other possible cause. (Ortiz 2006, 37)

We try to explain what we see and discover we have no grip on how to do so; only thus do we experience it as if it were impossible. So, having the experience of magic *requires* that we deploy problem-solving attitudes. At the same time, however, those attitudes aren't *genuine*. We *want* the performance to withstand our best efforts to figure it out, and we'll be disappointed if it doesn't. True, many will ask the magician, "How did you do that?" and occasionally they mean it. Typically, however, even if an explanation is offered, they will refuse it: "No, wait—I don't want to know!"

(v) *The pertinent incongruity is enjoyed.* So, good magic leaves us at a loss, and even when the explanation is offered, we typically refuse it. Why? Not (generally) because we want to figure

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it out for ourselves, but because we want to *preserve* and *enjoy* the incongruity itself. People who enjoy magic *savor* the incongruities that it delivers. Moreover, magical incongruities seem to be especially memorable. Witnesses to a strong piece of magic can often recall the experience in surprising detail—and relish recounting it—many years later.¹² In this way, magic tricks can be enjoyed long after we first experience them, much in the same way that we can crack ourselves up by bringing to mind the punchline to a good joke.

(vi) *It gives rise to an experience of levity.* That magic provides an experience of levity, of lightness and play, is incontestable. Recall William Vincent, Hocus Pocus himself, who describes magic's goal as the production of *mirth*. If magic wasn't fun, it would be hard to understand why we would hire magicians to perform at parties, see their shows when we're vacationing, or feature them on light-hearted TV.

In sum, magic performance aims to produce a response that satisfies all of Carroll's conditions on comic amusement. Thus, if we have good reason to accept those conditions, then we have good reason to accept that successful magic tricks are humorous, and so, that magic is a standup art that aims essentially at the production of comic amusement; in other words, we have good reason to think that magic is a form of standup comedy. But *do* we have good reason to accept Carroll's conditions?

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Perhaps not. Perhaps Carroll is wrong, and perhaps I've just shown it. Someone antecedently convinced that magic is not humorous might treat the argument of Part 3 as the

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production of a *counterexample* to Carroll's conditions, if not to incongruity theories of humor in general. What's to prevent someone from taking this tack?

To begin with, I don't think there is a non-ad-hoc way simply to reject the conclusion that magic aims at comic amusement. Magic may not be canonical comedy, but the similarities are striking. And while it is surely good philosophical practice to be cautious about the dangers of oversimplification—the ways a single label can obscure diverse phenomena—it is equally necessary to question hard lines and dichotomies where we might instead find fuzzy boundaries and continuities.

Furthermore, the present argument doesn't require that we accept Carroll's theory *full stop*. It requires only that satisfying Carroll's conditions be *sufficient* for comic amusement. Thus, we can follow Jerrold Levinson and adopt a more catholic stance, one open to the possibility that comic amusement might sometimes be a response to something other than perceived incongruity (2006, 392, 395–7). Nevertheless, as Levinson points out,

[e]ven if...incongruity is not a necessary condition or component of humorousness, no account of humor can fail to accord it a special status. Beyond the fact of being the most common focus of humor, its special status may consist in the following. First, there is reason to think that *superior* forms of humor—those which are most satisfying, intellectually and emotionally—all rely on incongruity in one way or another. Second, there may be categories of humor, for instance, that of *jokes*, which are unthinkable apart from incongruity.... (2006, 398)

The present account suggests that magic is one such category.

Still, you might balk. You might think that, *ceteris paribus*, we should prefer not to count magic as a form of humor. So, you might hold out hope for a theory that carves responses to incongruity a bit more finely than Carroll's. And perhaps there *is* such a theory. In the course of a

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recent book-length defense of a novel version of incongruity theory, Alan Roberts claims that “astonishment at magic tricks” is one of several “cases of non-amusement” that constitutes a “potential counter-example” to his view (2019, 118–19). While he “concede[s] that astonishment at magic and amusement at humor are closely related, after all, magic tricks often elicit smiles and laughter,” he nevertheless seems to think it’s obvious that we should exclude magic from the domain of humor (2019, 119). So, he seeks grounds for doing so: he claims that “magic tricks do not create cognitive dissonance in the same way that the cognitive component of amusement does” (2019, 119). However, it’s hard to see how Roberts’ argument is supposed to go. According to his theory, humor works by activating in the subject “two inconsistent interpretations [of the object] via unsound reasoning” (2019, 116). This is *precisely* what happens in magic. A successful magic performance uses deception to compel the audience to reason to the conclusion that an impossibility has just occurred. Of course, the audience *knows* that impossibilities can’t happen, and so, *knows* their reasoning is unsound. The trick is (literally) that they don’t see how it could be. Magician Whit Haydn writes:

All magic is based on creating a logical argument in the spectator’s mind. The argument...is false. If we can get the audience to agree step by step with each premise of the argument, even the false ones, we have created a sort of illogical box or prison from which escape is difficult.... [T]he audience is forced to agree with the conclusion. But they know the conclusion is impossible. The result is a feeling of *cognitive dissonance*—“I know there is no such thing as magic/There is no other explanation.” (2009, 5–6; cf. Ortiz 2006, 37)

In this respect, the performance leaves the audience with two inconsistent interpretations of the same event—just as Roberts’ theory requires.¹³ So, the right thing to say is that both Carroll’s and

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Roberts' theories count magic as a form of humor. And contra Roberts, we should not treat this as a counterexample; we should treat it as an insight.

Why? Because philosophical theories should aspire to do more than mirror our intuitions. There is no reason to think that our pre-philosophical ideas about humor and comic amusement are free of blindspots. So, a good theory should not only regiment existing judgments, it should also correct them when necessary. In other words, a good theory will do more than organize old knowledge, it will generate new insights—some of which might require rejecting otherwise firm intuitions. Of course, to abandon a particular intuition may strike us as ill-motivated absent any explanation of *why* intuition and theory diverge in that particular case. In this spirit, then, let's consider why magic might not seem to fit neatly in the domain of humor even though it satisfies plausible sufficient conditions for doing so. Ideally, this will both help to situate magic in relation to canonical forms of humor and to relax residual resistance to the idea that magic is a form of standup comedy.

A question for any incongruity theory of humor is whether we enjoy the incongruity *itself* or only its *resolution*. As John Morreall notes, the enjoyment of unresolved—or unresolvable—incongruity has seemed “perverse or immature” to “a number of respected philosophers and psychologists.... According to Thomas Schultz, for instance, children over the age of seven and adults require not just incongruity in order to be amused, but the resolution of that incongruity” (Morreall 1987, 196–97; see Schultz 1976). If this were true, then magic's unresolved—and seemingly unresolvable—incongruities could not be a source of genuine comic amusement for adults. Fortunately, it's not true. Perhaps “[i]n most jokes...the incongruity is resolved on some

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level,” but when it comes to thinking about humor “we should not limit ourselves only to jokes, as many psychologists have done” (Morreall 1987, 197). And once we cast the net more broadly, we see that “[h]umor based on unresolved incongruity” is widespread, “not only in jokes and cartoons, but also in real life” (Morreall 1987, 199). Indeed, it is at the heart of Steve Martin’s act described at the beginning of this article. His glove-into-dove and napkin tricks are incongruous, but their incongruity is never resolved; they remain “simply absurd” (Morreall 1987, 199). In this way, they implement an idea that, according to Martin,

revolutionized my comic direction: What if there were no punch lines? What if there were no indicators? What if I created tension and never released it? What if I headed for a climax, but all I delivered was an anticlimax? What would the audience do with all that tension? Theoretically, it would have to come out sometime. But if I kept denying them the formality of a punch line, the audience would eventually pick their own place to laugh, essentially out of desperation. This type of laugh seemed stronger to me, as they would be laughing at something *they chose*, rather than being told exactly when to laugh. (Martin 2007, 111)

This is comedy that, contrary to appearances, requires for its full appreciation a high degree of active engagement from the audience. Much like magic—and unlike much set-up-and-punch-line comedy—it is not something you can appreciate properly if you simply “take it in.” Indeed, *just* like magic, “getting” Martin’s act requires trying—and failing—to make sense of it. We get it in not getting it. Thus, Martin writes: “My goal was to make the audience laugh but leave them unable to describe what it was that had made them laugh” (Martin 2007, 113). In my experience, this is precisely the sort of laughter that magic generates. Ask someone who is laughing at a magic trick, “Why are you laughing?” and you’re likely to get a puzzled reply: “I don’t know!” The correct answer, I think, finds expression in an exclamation that strong magic can provoke: “What? That

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makes no sense!” Just as in Martin’s absurdist routine, there is nothing to “get” in magic but a type of not-getting. In other words, what’s amusing in both is an apparently unresolvable “derangement of sense” (Carroll 2014, 36).¹⁴

How does this help to explain the intuition that that magic does not fit neatly in the domain of humor despite satisfying plausible conditions for doing so? Well, Martin is one of the most important performers in the history of standup comedy, but some early reviewers denied that his act fit neatly in the domain: “My first reviews came in. One said, ‘This so-called “comedian” should be told that jokes are supposed to have punch lines’” (Martin 2007, 113). Such reviewers didn’t get the not-getting that Martin wanted them to experience. They were insensitive to the thoughtful, provocative way in which he played with unresolved incongruity. If this was enough to tempt them to deny that he counted as a comedian, we should not be much moved by the intuition that magic doesn’t fit neatly into the domain of humor (even though it satisfies plausible conditions for doing so). Instead, fully embracing the possibility of humor based on unresolved incongruity, we should accept that magic performances are proper objects of comic amusement, and that magic is a form of standup comedy.¹⁵

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Taking magic to be a form of standup comedy has significant explanatory payoff. First, it illuminates the nature and integrity Martin’s act: it’s neither comedy *about* magic nor comedy *plus* magic; it’s a unified performance of the comedy of unresolved incongruity. Second, it makes sense

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of the various close relationships between magic and comedy—historical and otherwise—that I enumerated in Part 1.

Of course, even if I'm right, questions remain. Here are two. First, there are other types of performance—in particular, ventriloquism and juggling—that typically receive comic treatment. “Serious” juggling and ventriloquism acts are perhaps even less common than “serious” magic acts. So, do they, too, deserve to be treated as forms of standup comedy? Second, even if most magic acts incorporate canonical comedy, some do not. What are we to say about them? Is the idea of *serious magic* a contradiction in terms? I'll conclude with brief replies to these questions, though they deserve much deeper consideration than I can give them here.

As Martin indicates in the passage quoted above, comedy thrives on tension (2007, 111). So we might expect that, other things being equal, increasing tension will enhance a comic effect and that comedy will be well-complemented by tension-raising genres and performance-types. This helps to explain the common coincidence of humor and horror (Carroll 1999, 146); and it perhaps completely explains the conjunction of comedy and juggling. There is, however, no reason to think that juggling itself is a form of comedy; it is simply a tension-raising demonstration of skill.

Ventriloquism is a more interesting case. A successful performance creates the illusion that what is visibly an inanimate object is conscious and capable of intelligent speech (Goldblatt 2017, 367–9). In this respect, the object of our experience is a perceived incongruity. Thus, our response to ventriloquism satisfies one of Carroll's six conditions for comic amusement; and while I can't defend it here, I believe it also satisfies the other five.¹⁶ So, I believe that ventriloquism should

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also be counted as a form of standup comedy. As David Goldblatt writes: “[This] may well be the most important thing one can say about ventriloquism.... [W]hen a man comes on stage with a dummy, a stupid-looking puppet, for the most part, we can bet that comedy is about to happen” (2017, 372). Yet Goldblatt thinks that “[v]entriloquism is contingently a comic act” (2017, 372). I think there are grounds for a bolder claim: like magic, ventriloquism is *essentially* comic.

But does this mean that it’s impossible to do “serious” magic or ventriloquism? In one respect, the answer is *yes*. In both cases, the medium is part of the message, and indissolubly so. A magic or ventriloquism performance may downplay its comic character, but to eliminate it altogether is impossible. To try to do so is to flirt with incoherence. Both are essentially *playful* engagements with incongruities of a particular sort, and performers ignore this at their own peril. There is something essentially ridiculous about a magic act performed with unironic gravitas or a ventriloquist who treats the dummy as a serious theatrical agent. In the case of magic, this finds expression in a comic trope most memorably embodied by the character G.O.B. in the TV series *Arrested Development*: the magician who, out of ignorance, or fear of artistic triviality, earnestly insists that we treat every trick as a profound mystery.

Again, none of this is to deny that—like canonical comedy—both magic and ventriloquism can treat serious subjects and have serious moments. And inasmuch as we experience magic’s incongruities only in experiencing our own cognitive limitations—we experience a performance as impossible only in experiencing our own failure to explain it—magic *does* bear an essential and distinctive connection to the topic of mystery (Swiss 2002b; 2017). In fact, this is another point of possible resistance to counting magic as a form of standup comedy. Unlike canonical absurdist

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humor, magic's unresolved incongruities constitutively depend on the audience's ignorance. This is the disquieting aporetic dimension of the experience of magic mentioned above (Leddington 2016, 261; 2017, 378). The fact is that, no matter how playful a successful magic performance is, there is something essentially unnerving about it. It's rare to have your cognitive limitations laid so bare, and it stays with you. As Whit Haydn says, a good magic trick leaves you "with a burr under the saddle of the mind" (2009, 6). So, while "[t]here is something in [magic]... that belongs to the spirit of true comedy," there is also something in magic that is in tension with it (Oxenford 1868, 5). In this respect, even if magic counts as a form of standup comedy, it lies at the limit of the genre, and the very best magical performers exploit and explore this rich liminal space.¹⁷

In one of this article's epigraphs, magician and essayist Jamy Ian Swiss describes magic as "a burlesque" of science. We're now in a position to understand this idea. In apparently presenting us with impossibilities, the magician playfully exposes the limits of our understanding. We are amused even as we ask, "But how?" In this way, magic comically re-enacts something deeply serious: the moment of aporetic not-knowing, of wonder, that, according to Aristotle, lies at the root of all inquiry (*Met.* 982b12).¹⁸

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¹ It’s true that in 1634 ‘mirth’ had a broader use than today: according to the OED, it could be used to speak generally of “pleasurable feeling” or “enjoyment.” Nevertheless, one of its central uses even then was to denote “[g]aiety or lightness of mood or mind, esp. as manifested in laughter; merriment, hilarity. In early use also: a jest (obsolete). In some early quots. with connotation of ridicule or mockery” (“Mirth, n.” 2019).

² On the American and British roots of standup, see Oliver Double (2014, chs. 3–4). Double’s discussion includes a representative variety program from 1938 that features both a “comedian” and a “comedy magician” (2014, 36–7).

³ See, for example, the discussion of the three performance styles in the chapter on the presentation of magic in Jean Hugard and Frederick Braué’s seminal and massively influential *Expert Card Technique* (1974[1944], Part 6, ch. 2). Their first and third performance styles are essentially comic; the second is not. However, this style—that of “the Merlin who nudges the occult in his performances, who wishes his audiences to believe, if ever so little, that he possesses powers not granted to the rest of the world”—is, they admit, one that does “not readily lend itself to general magic of the type under discussion.” Indeed, performances in this style come dangerously close to violating Vincent’s rules for the “lawfull” use of magical techniques and of no longer counting as magic at all (see Part 2 below).

⁴ Generally, even performers who cultivate a more serious mien crack plenty of jokes during their live shows. For example, David Copperfield is best known for his earnest and sentimental 1980s TV performances, but his regular Vegas show is full of dry, even biting humor. More on the theatrical risks of “serious” magic in Part 5.

⁵ For one thing, some of the very same claims could be made about juggling or ventriloquism. I return to this point in Part 5.

⁶ This can get complicated. For example, on *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert parodied a conservative TV talkshow host. He adopted this persona so thoroughly and consistently and the irony was so layered that it was sometimes difficult for even well-posted viewers know what Colbert himself believed. Nevertheless, they understood at least this: Colbert was not simply acting the part of a conservative talkshow host; he was *presenting himself as acting* the part of a conservative talkshow host. Either would count as standup, but the difference is significant. If Colbert just acts a part, then what Colbert himself believes is potentially invisible; the performance invites us to attend only to the character. But if Colbert presents himself *as* acting a part, then the performance invites us to attend both to Colbert and to his character, and so, to the relationship between them. This ironic gap is where parody lives. Much of the fun of watching *The Colbert Report* lay in following this complex presentational dynamic.

⁷ My definition is a good fit with the one Oliver Double develops in his excellent *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy* (2014, esp. chs. 1 and 19).

⁸ Arguably, this flexibility is a strength, not a weakness. As Oliver Double notes in a chapter on the “outer limits” of stand-up: “One of the things that makes stand-up comedy so difficult to define is that its boundaries are fluid and fuzzy” (2014, 77).

⁹ As of this writing, the video is available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIOxISOr3_M.

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¹⁰ This requires some qualification. For example, some tricks are structured to create the impression that the performer might come to harm if things go awry (sometimes this impression is accurate). This can cause anxiety in the audience. But what's causing the anxiety here is *not* the magical illusion itself.

¹¹ It's an interesting question what explains this divergence in taste with respect to magic. To say that people who don't like magic are "epistemically uptight" just postpones the question. What does it mean to be epistemically uptight in the relevant sense? Perhaps recent philosophical and psychological research on epistemic emotions can provide some insight here. (See, for instance, the essays collected in Inan et al. (2018).)

¹² Every magician knows that people love recounting such experiences and are often eager to share them with others. And that strong magic can be so memorable is not surprising given that performances present us with seeming violations of the causal structure of the world as we understand it, something we seem to have an inbuilt drive to understand (Gopnik 1998).

¹³ Roberts might claim that I've missed his point. His argument against treating magic as humor makes use of the account of the experience of magic in Leddington (2016). On that account, the experience of magic does *not* involve a conflict of beliefs, rather a conflict between a belief and a belief-like state that Tamar Gendler calls an "alief" (2008). According to Roberts, *this* is why "magic tricks do not create cognitive dissonance in the way required" (2019, 120). But he provides no argument here, and it's hard to devise one. Aliefs are genuine cognitive states with representational content; so, they constitute authentically cognitive "interpretations" of their objects. Thus, when aliefs conflict with beliefs, dissonance results, and it is genuinely cognitive.

¹⁴ Compare Jamy Ian Swiss: "It should come as no surprise that many magical effects possess some degree of inherent humor.... The simple anomaly of the magical experience, the sudden jarring of the senses felt when fantasy crashes with reality, often produces a laugh of delight" (2002b, 165).

¹⁵ Building on the account of the experience of magic in Leddington (2016), Meilin Chinn has recently argued that "the ironic and paradoxical cognitive requirements of stage magic" create audiences "primed...toward violating cognitive norms," and so, more susceptible to accepting inconsistencies such as those involved in crude but effective Orientalist appropriations by white magicians (2019, 426; 429). The present argument suggests that Chinn's analysis might extend to the comedy of unresolved incongruity in general.

¹⁶ I suspect it also satisfies Roberts' conditions (2019).

¹⁷ You might worry that I've compromised my account. In discussing Carroll's six conditions on comic amusement, I argued that—when properly appreciated—magic is neither anxiety-provoking nor annoying; but now I've admitted that magic is essentially unnerving, and aren't unnerving things at least annoying? No. Compare: those who appreciate black humor find it neither anxiety-provoking nor annoying, but it can still be unnerving! Arguably, many of humor's most interesting forms lie at its limits, just as we should expect. Again, on this point, see Double (2014, ch. 7).

¹⁸ This paper is based on a talk originally presented at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. Thanks to my audience there—especially Jerrold Levinson, Robert Hopkins, and Eva Dadlez—for their questions and comments. A much later draft was subject to a very useful close reading by the participants in Bence Nanay's marvelous work-in-progress discussion group at the Centre for Philosophical Psychology at the University of Antwerp. Thanks to everyone who read and commented. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 795393.