THE ABSURD AND THE COMIC

A Thesis

by

PHILIP PARK

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Philosophy

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,   John J. McDermott
Committee Members,   Scott Austin
                                    W. Bedford Clark
Head of Department,   Daniel Conway

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ABSTRACT

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Philip Park, B.A., Calvin College

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. John J. McDermott

In my thesis, I propose a theory that posits a connection between our absurd existential situation and our comic tendencies. I work within a framework of existentialist assumptions, the most important of which being the assumption that, as Sartre writes, "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself." Consequently, I focus on the process of how human beings use humor to form themselves by using it to form their conception of reality. What I propose in my thesis is not an explanation of humor as much as it is an existential interpretation of its source and function.

I begin with an analysis of the absurd. After considering and rejecting the arguments against the claim that life is not absurd, I argue that the disunity that we encounter in the world creates a need within us for stability and that one of the main ways in which we find this stability is through the comic. I use Berger and Luckmann's analysis of reality construction in my argument that the connections that we form with others through comical experiences construct and maintain a system of knowledge that satisfies what Camus calls our "nostalgia for unity," a desire that remains unfulfilled when we attempt to encounter the absurdity of human experience alone. The conclusion of my research is that it is through our laughing with others that we reify our

expectations of reality. Our laughter at the objects that contradict our normative understanding of reality confirms that others share the same cognitive and affective position that we hold in a given situation, thus confirming our expectations of reality to be valid, a confirmation that protects us against the terror of the absurd.

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I want to express my gratitude to the members of my advisory committee. They patiently awaited my chapters, and they offered insightful comments throughout. Thank you, Professor McDermott, Professor Austin, and Professor Clark. You have made the daunting task of writing a thesis an enjoyable one.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We all enjoy a good laugh. Alone or in the company of others, we find catharsis in comical transactions. But what is the appeal of the comic? Why do we laugh, and why do we want to laugh? As with any other phenomenon as prevalent as comical experience, philosophical discussions of the comic reach no unanimity regarding its nature or function.

This thesis presents a theory of the comic and its relation to the existential concept of the absurd. An attempt to situate the two concepts within the same thematic realm might seem counterintuitive. The *absurd* elicits melancholy connotations: Camus refers to it as "that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints."[1] The *comic*, on the other hand, suggests lightheartedness. The fact that we use the word "absurd" to describe instances of the comic seems to be at most an interesting coincidence.

I argue in my thesis that the comic arises because of the absurdity of our existential situation. In my first chapter, I present an argument for Camus' claim that human life is absurd. In my second chapter, I explain the process by which we form the constructions that give stability and meaning to our lives. I argue in this chapter that the comic is one such construction. In the third chapter, I present my theory that the comic is

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This thesis follows the style and format of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed.

[1] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 37.

found when we encounter an incongruity that contradicts our socially-constructed

expectations. Comic laughter arises as a form of relief, because we are reminded by the

incongruity that there is an order amid the chaos of life. I draw from two traditionally

recognized theories of humor, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory, both of

which I will explain in the second chapter. I conclude the last chapter with some

implications and applications of my theory.

CHAPTER II

THE ANXIETY OF THE ABSURD

Camus describes the human being as a creature whose survival is contingent upon his ability to interpret the world as an intelligible unity: "The mind's deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity."[2] We are forced to live with uncertainties about the world, and the precariousness of the unknowns elicits from us the attempt to make sense of reality in terms of human thought. Fearful of thunder, we think of ways to appease the forces that control nature. Angered by unjust treatment, we create a system in which we are morally superior to our oppressors. Surviving by completing a series of goal-oriented projects, we conclude that the world too must have a teleological end. For Camus, our metaphysical speculation is not the accidental conclusion of a tradition rooted in Greek ontology but rather an essential characteristic of the human mind. The clash between this human "nostalgia for unity" and the "unreasonable silence of the world" is what Camus finds absurd.[3] The implication of his message is a critique of historical attempts to impose order upon reality: the theological and philosophical frameworks that we have used to make sense of existence do not accurately portray the world or our relation to it. Our attempts to impose clarity upon the world are necessarily bound to fail.

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[2] Ibid., p. 13.
[3] Ibid., p. 21.

Though passion emanates from his writing, Camus does not provide a rationale for his conclusion. I offer in this chapter a justification for his claim that there exists a "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints."[4] I will examine how what we take to be knowledge about the world falls short of bridging that divorce. There are things we will never know, not because of the finitude of our lives or the limited intellectual energy we possess but because of the nature of the things we desire to know.

A. An Analysis of the Absurd

Many are bound to find Camus' pessimistic epistemology counterintuitive, as there seem to be many things in the world that do give us clarity, things about which we claim to have knowledge. The level of satisfaction that we have attained with our lives presupposes that we have a certain kind of knowledge – a knowledge of survival – about the world and our place in it.

We say that we know things in different ways. One of the most popular senses associated with our use of the word "knowing" is propositional in nature: we know that two plus two equals four; we know that getting into an argument with a loved one leaves us feeling disturbed; we know that Sally prefers chocolate ice cream to strawberry. Though we learn these propositions about the world (and ourselves) in different ways, a characteristic found in all of them is that their truth can be verified by others who share the relevant background information. Those with an elementary mathematical education

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[4] Ibid., p. 37.

can verify that two plus two equals four; a friend who knows us well can affirm that we do in fact feel disturbed after such arguments, and he can add that he responds similarly in that kind of situation; Sally can nod when we ask her about her preference for chocolate.

It is the philosophical questions that concern our existence, however, that do not yield epistemological certitude. Why are we here? Why do I sometimes feel disconnected from my surroundings? Is there anything beyond all this? How do I know that the interpretation I hold of reality is accurate, if I can compare it to nothing but itself? The basic ways in which we "understand reality" seem to yield more certainty than does the more general question of whether the concepts that constitute our interpretive schemas exist independently of their possessors. That there is no consensus to be found in our speculative attempts to answer these questions supports Camus' claim that "if the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and its impotences."[5]

Much of what we claim to know rests upon ideas in this philosophically ambiguous territory. Examples of this contingency can be found in the disappointment that often results when people begin to question their reasons for living. Philosophical topics that are more popular among people outside of academia are the existence of God and the relativity of morals. When people begin to grapple with questions of this nature, they become aware at least in an indirect way of the potential of the human mind to construct ideological systems through which it can make sense of experience. Doubts

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[5] Ibid., p. 14.

about the existence of God and the truth of our moral convictions trickle in, and they often linger. Those who have flirted with this strain of doubt have confronted the distinction between the constructed and the independent, the phenomenal and the noumenal. As Camus writes, "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. . . . What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms."[6] We do not know if there is a world beyond what we have interpreted using our interpretational schema. Thus, in spite of the fact that we know many propositions about the world, this knowledge is not the kind that Camus has in mind when he speaks of the disconnection between us and the world. Knowledge about existence, ours as well as the world's, cannot be verified.

Knowledge about the world, critics of Camus might respond, need not have this propositional, verifiable nature. We say that we know things even when we do not hold a particular proposition in our heads. Knowledge often comes in this more tacit variety. People know that certain memories make them sad and choose not to think of them even if they do not acknowledge their sadness but only subconsciously choose to spend their time thinking about positive memories; they can know some words would be inappropriate for a situation even if they are unable to articulate a rationale for their position, which they do not even have to acknowledge as a position. This kind of knowledge has consequences in the knower's affective state and/or behavior. The knower does not need to recognize that she possesses this knowledge or that she is experiencing a change in her affective state or behavior. A person who burns himself on

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[6] Ibid., p. 38.

a hot stove and keeps his hand away is said to have knowledge, that a hot range will cause pain and that he does not like pain; his knowledge is visceral and requires no articulation or justification. We can consequently say that one who continues to burn himself on a hot stove does not have knowledge in this way, precisely because there is no mental content that has any implications for his affective or behavioral states. We possess kinds of non-propositional knowledge that allow us to survive as creatures, up against the precariousness of the world. Thus, though this kind of knowledge admittedly is not philosophical knowledge as the latter is commonly understood, it rests on a different conception of knowledge. Knowledge in this sense is what allows us to relate to our surroundings in a way that is beneficial for our survival. As we can understand something without articulating our understanding or without even recognizing that we understand something, we can understand the world in general in the same way. If we identify this understanding as a kind of knowledge, then we have reason to be skeptical of Camus' claim that the world is necessarily unintelligible.

This objection against Camus' position poses a more serious challenge than does the former. The former states that we can have knowledge about the world, because we hold verifiable propositions. We responded to that objection by making the distinction between knowledge about things in the worlds and knowledge about the world itself, that is, non-philosophical and philosophical knowledge, respectively. This objection, on the other hand, holds that the means we use to survive and prosper in the world constitute knowledge; consequently, it is not clear that we cannot have knowledge of the world. Camus' claim that there will forever be tension between "this mind and this world

straining against each other without being able to embrace each other" seems to disregard the fact that we gain something from our experiences, something that makes success in our projects more likely.[7] Though we do not know whether Camus would consider this kind of instinctual, survival-oriented knowledge as an example of the embrace between our minds and the world, his position ignores the harmony that often exists between the two.

Against this objection, I suggest that there still exists a divide between us and the world, because there still exists a divide between what we believe to be knowledge about the world and knowledge about the world. The former may of course be identical to the latter, but we will never know if this is the case. We know, however, that what we take to be an understanding of reality is contingent upon our social context. What we take to be knowledge of the world seems to differ from person to person, depending on his or her social context. To be sure, our ways of approaching the world may have much in common with the ways found in other settings, but in light of the diversity of ways in which to make sense of reality, it would be more accurate to describe these ways as strategies rather than solutions.[8] There is a variety of strategies to survive in the world, but it is not clear that we have discovered a solution that solves the riddle of human existence. If there were an ontological framework that "worked" for everyone, this interpretation of reality would be adopted by all.

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[7] Ibid., p. 30.
[8] John J. McDermott, "Ill-at-Ease: The Natural Travail of Ontological Disconnectedness," ch. 12 in his *The Drama of Possibility*" (New York: Fordham, 2007), p. 242.

If what is taken to be knowledge is to be knowledge, those knowledgeable about the world should feel "complete," that they "get reality." But this is not the case. As John J. McDermott writes, the "mismatch between what we *can* get, physiologically, and what, in sum, we *do* get, consciously, causes us to be ill-at-ease, for we are living in a transaction that promises more than it delivers."[9] There is a lacuna that sets us apart from the world, and this lacuna is finitude. When we reflect on the fact of our embodiment, we realize that there is much about this world that we will never experience and understand. We feel that the content of our knowledge about the world is but one approach to existing in the world. This acknowledgement is a cold reminder of our spatial-temporal insignificance: "we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one."[10] We may know many things about the world, but we are far from reaching any kind of consensus regarding the foundational questions that ground our lives.

At the end of this analysis, we recognize that Camus' claim is not altogether unwarranted. After examining some of the objections against his claim, I suggest that he is justified in holding that life is ultimately absurd. McDermott describes the moment when our eyes are opened to this fact: "we find ourselves in a situation which, in its most profound sense, *does not work*."[11] The confrontation between the world and man is irreconcilable; we will never have concrete, verifiable answers to questions regarding ultimate meaning.

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[9] Ibid., p. 240.

[10] Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," ch.2 in his *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge, 1979), p. 12.

[11] McDermott, "Ill-at-Ease," p. 242.

The descriptions of the absurd given by Camus and Thomas Nagel are not identical, but I suggest that they convey the same message. Nagel notes that Camus finds the absurd to be the confrontation between "human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."[12] Doubts concerning the ultimate significance of our lives ask whether there is a clear, intelligible system "out there" in the world that somehow confers ultimate significance on our lives. Nagel, on the other hand, believes that there is nothing about the world *per se* that results in the disconnection between it and the human mind. "Unsettlable doubts" arise rather in us as creatures with the ability to transcend ourselves in thought; the external conditions of the world do not change this fact. Nagel explains that after we take the natural "transcendental step," we cannot compare our reality with an alternative reality.[13] We are, however, able to see ourselves from an outsider's perspective. When we do, we recognize that the lives for which we devote "decades of intense concern" rest "on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question."[14] According to Nagel, this characteristic is descriptive of the human situation independently of the world in which we find ourselves. ". . . [T]he absurdity of our situation derives . . . from a collision within ourselves."[15]We will never achieve the kind of certainty we desire regarding the most foundational questions of our existence, and we will constantly feel a sense of disconnection. Nagel finds absurd the fact that we are able to recognize the arbitrariness

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[12] Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 21.
[13] Ibid., pp. 21, 19.
[14] Ibid., p. 15.
[15] Ibid., p. 17.

of our aims and pursuits and continue living, now aware that we cannot explain or defend the basic responses and habits that guide our behavior.[16]

The inability to know whether there exists such an alternative reality is indeed a characteristic of human beings, but I suggest that this inability also implies a characteristic of the world. If the human being is necessarily unable to satisfy his curiosity about the arbitrariness of his life, then the meaning of the world that is the basis of his experience is necessarily unknowable, at least in a sense that human beings find epistemologically satisfactory. Though Nagel assumes that unsettlable doubts arise in human beings in every conceivable world, he cannot conclude that the primary cause lies within us, as it is possible that every conceivable world necessarily prevents our understanding of it. Camus and Nagel have in common the theme of the limited epistemological perspective that we have concerning our lives as a whole.

Camus and Nagel also differ in their suggestions of how to respond to the absurdity of our situation. For Camus, by intentionally confronting the absurd we are revolting against it. He answers the question with which he begins his essay, whether suicide is a solution to the absurd, by providing an alternative way in which to face the absurd: living with it, "initiating the suicide of . . . thought in its purest revolt."[17] Nagel suggests what he believes to be a less melodramatic (i.e., considering "the cosmic unimportance of the situation") approach, one in which we "approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."[18]

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[16] Ibid., p. 15.
[17] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 8.
[18] Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 23.

To be sure, many would not sympathize with the position advocated by Camus and Nagel. Many might respond that their situation is in fact working: they are happy, with families and friends, and a well-paying job. It is important to note that not everyone comes to a place where he or she can accept the absurd. If an individual believes that there is clarity to be found in the world, everything will make sense to him, as everything will be seen through the lens of the system that he has created.[19] If we are creatures that depend on order, without an order we will construct orders that give our lives meaning. Claims about the nonsense of the universe will be difficult for us to understand when forces of society prevent us from thinking about the contingency of our systems. Nagel describes the commitment that human beings make to causes greater than themselves (e.g., a revolution, scientific progress, the glory of God) as an attempt to fill the void that remains when we recognize the smallness of our lives. People can distract themselves from the recognition of absurdity when they believe that they are part of something bigger than their lives, and the seriousness with which they take their lives will no longer seem absurd. Those who doubt that there is ultimate significance to human life doubt the power of these larger purposes to bestow the significance that people often seek.

The individual who reaches self-awareness by "feigning a nebula's-eye view" of herself returns to her life, in spite of her inability to answer the doubts that were temporarily confronted during the recognition of the absurd.[20] This recognition can

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[19] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 14.
[20] Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 21.

occur at any time, "at any streetcorner."[21] Once we become aware of the absurd, there is

no means to escape the gestalt switch that occurs. McDermott suggests that there is a

"direct experiential identity of the quality of our personal sensitivity and the

correspondent thickness of our being ill-at-ease."[22] As Camus reminds us, our need to

survive leads us into a routine, and this routine eventually pushes many to realize the

absurdity of life. Nagel writes that we can never intentionally forget this realization,

though he may admit that the mundane routine of which Camus speaks allows us to push

it to the back of our minds, only to resurface at a future moment.[23]

Camus encourages his readers to be bold and confront the absurd, while Nagel

encourages his to be more light-hearted than overly dramatic. Both philosophers, in spite

of their differences, propose an attitude of courage in the face of the absurd. Nagel does

not mention the difficulty involved in returning to our lives, lives for which we invest

serious concern, with a sense of irony after recognizing their cosmic unimportance. He

encourages his readers to accept transiency as a defining element of the human

condition.

If we are to agree with Camus in his belief that our desire for clarity in the world

is the "worm . . . in man's heart," we must realize that facing the absurd with contempt

or irony is contrary to our nature as human beings.[24] We want certainty about our place

in the universe; we want familiarity with the world. Camus writes that "a world that can

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[21] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 9.
[22] McDermott, "Ill-at-Ease," p. 240.
[23] Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 21.
[24] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 4.

be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world."[25] Upon the realization of the

necessarily unknowable character of the world, "man feels an alien, a stranger."[26] He

leaves his familiar territory for "those waterless deserts where thought reaches its

confines."[27] Some commit suicide in this new territory, while others revolt.

But it seems that most people fall between these two categories; most do not

contemplate suicide, nor do they fully confront the absurd, but they bury it within their

subconscious. To be sure, there are many who never leave their familiar world of clarity,

but I suggest that there are many who have at least at one time been struck by the feeling

of the absurd, only to return to their lives, trying to forget that feeling. I suggest that

anxiety results from the inability to confront the absurd with the attitudes described in

the accounts above. In the shadow of an experience of the absurd, such an individual

experiences anxiety. People are anxious about the possibility that the significance that

they place on their lives may ultimately be trivial.

B. The Anxiety that Results

The theme of anxiety is found throughout existential philosophy. Kierkegaard

was one of the first in modern thought to examine this topic at length, and his insights

are helpful to our present analysis of the human condition. Kierkegaard's account of

anxiety is described in religious terminology that is sometimes difficult to interpret. He

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[25] Ibid., p. 5.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., p. 8.

says, for instance, that "anxiety is a qualification of dreaming spirit."[28] Some might say

that to interpret his philosophy through a naturalist filter would do violence to his

philosophy. The aim of this section is not to provide a comprehensive explication of

Kierkegaard's philosophy, but rather to present the argument that anxiety is the

consequence of the recognition of the absurd.

Kierkegaard, in his *The Concept of Anxiety*, writes that the human being is a

"synthesis of the psychical and the physical," the two being united by something he calls

spirit.[29] The spirit is both hostile and friendly, as it both disturbs the psychical-physical

relation and allows such a relation to exist in the first place. When the "spirit relate[s]

itself to itself and to its conditionality," it manifests itself as anxiety.[30] The positive and

negative characteristics of the spirit have their analogue in the individual's attitude

toward it: she is both attracted and repelled by the spirit. Kierkegaard describes anxiety

as "*sympathetic antipathy* and *an antipathetic sympathy*."[31]

Kierkegaard is clear that this anxiety is not a bad thing. It is because the human

being is a synthesis of the soul and body that he feels anxious; those who have not

experienced this anxiety are spiritless.[32] Their lack of spirit prevents them from realizing

that they have before them infinite possibilities: "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the

possibility of possibility."[33] Kierkegaard thus states that "whoever is educated by anxiety

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[28] Soren Kiekegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation of the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Translated by Reider Thomte (Princeton: Princeton, 1980), p. 41.
[29] Ibid., p. 43.
[30] Ibid., p. 44.
[31] Ibid., p. 42.
[32] Ibid., pp. 155, 7.
[33] Ibid., p. 42.

is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude."

It is important to recall here Kierkegaard's statement that anxiety is a force that attracts as well as repels. He notes that people "defraud possibility," avoiding the feeling of anxiety. What seems to be an attractive word, "possibility," is something that is intentionally avoided by some. Kierkegaard does not explain why people "succumb to anxiety." I suggest here that people avoid this feeling of anxiety (and, hence, this feeling of possibility) because they are frightened when they realize that they are responsible for their way of being in the world, responsible for something that requires much care but is small and insignificant in the context of the universe.[34] Camus writes that "there is no longer a single idea explaining everything, but an infinite number of essences giving a meaning to an infinite number of objects."[35] Consequently, the human being is free to construct himself as he likes. The fact that individuals are wholly responsible for their own lives is a reminder of the arbitrariness of human existence (and, consequently, of the world). There is no clear meaning expressed by an external source; the only meaning that our lives possess is the meaning that we impose upon them.

Besides the worry that the seriousness with which we live our lives may be unwarranted, there is also the anxiety of loneliness that plagues many people. We do not want to stop believing in the sets of norms held by society, because we do not want to abandon a framework of thinking that would alienate us from the social networks that give our lives a sense of stability. Our fear of loneliness in an unstable world prevents us

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[34] Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 16.
[35] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 33.

from wanting to realize the infinite possibilities that could lie in our future. Society

discourages the active confrontation of the absurd. The tension that results from the

recognition of the absurd, which brings the recognition of the infinite possibilities that

await us, in the context of a society that strives to impose clarity upon the world only

leads to more loneliness. The initial anxiety leads to an anxiety that is negative, even to

the point of being debilitating.

CHAPTER III

THE COMIC AS A NORMATIVE TOOL

As with any other situation in which a phenomenon elicits from us an affective response, we understand the relationship between freedom and anxiety only when we begin to analyze what it is about freedom that we find anxiety-producing. I suggest in this chapter that the notion of freedom, the capacity to make ourselves and the realities we inhabit, is repelling precisely because of the notion of contingency and the implications that follow from it. The contingency of our existence is a reminder that there is no order "out there" but the one we have imposed upon it.

We begin by seeing words as objects that exist independently of human contribution and later become aware that even the language that we use to make sense of reality is something that could have easily been any other way. We are thus forced to confront the arbitrariness of the human experience. As we discussed in the previous chapter, our situation is absurd: we desire clarity, but the world remains silent. What we take to be order is in fact a group of human constructions that respond to the disorder found in the world. We occupy only a minute speck in the history of an ever-evolving species, but we do not want to face our comparative insignificance. Doing so would enervate the systems that give our lives clarity and, consequently, meaning. Without a sense of necessity, our systems lose their sense of permanency.

We will never know the answers to the questions foundational to our lives, but we ignore this inability, as we need a sense of permanency to rule our lives; we need to

know that we are actually doing some good that will be significant in the larger picture. The human being thus represses her recognition of what Kierkegaard calls the possibility of possibility. In spite of her suspicion that her sense of self is only the product of social determination, she thrusts herself into the reified system of culture, ignoring reflection that would remind her of the tenuous nature of her systems.

I presented in the last chapter Camus' idea that the human being has an intrinsic need to make sense of reality in his own terms. But it is with the affirmation of this truth that Camus' analysis ends. The first chapter is a defense of his position, a response to the objections against his claim that our situation is absurd. In this chapter, I want to use the work of sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann to theorize about the process through which we stamp reality with our seal. I use elements of this process to discuss the unique normative power of the comic.

I will take *the comic* to refer to a basic conceptual category. We know when jokes or situations are comical, or "funny," though we may not be able to articulate what makes them distinct from situations that we find amusing, but not funny. It would be unusual for someone to say that, after being tickled, the experience was funny. If someone won the lottery and began to laugh, we would make the distinction between her laughter of surprise and her laughter at a joke. The comic can be manifested both intentionally and unintentionally, that is, in jokes and in situations. On pain of giving a circular definition, I will follow Berger and Luckmann in exploring the philosophical implications of the concept of the comic *as it is commonly understood*.

I will also use the phrase, "the comic" to denote both the comical act or situation and the response that follows it; it is the general theme of the transaction that occurs. I will use "the comic" and "humor" interchangeably, as the latter refers to instances of the abstract idea of the comic. The transaction can happen in solitude, in pairs, or in groups, but I suggest here that the main role of the comic is found in its social function. When an individual has a comical thought, I suggest that it is because of the thought's reference to social structures that the comic can be a source of enjoyment.

In this chapter, I will first briefly outline some of the major theories of humor and laughter, noting a few strengths and weaknesses of each. I will then bring some of these insights together to form a tentative theory of the structure of the comic. As Ted Cohen reminds us, only fools believe in "theories" that work in every situation.[36] My purpose here is not give a comprehensive theory of the comic but rather to explore the possible connection between the absurd and the comic, and to do so requires that I make some generalizations about the situations people find to be comical. I will then go through Berger and Luckmann's analysis of reality-construction in order to establish the foundation upon which my theory lies.

A. Theories of Humor

Before we begin, I should note that I will be examining theories related to but not dealing exclusively with the comic. Many historical thinkers, for example, discuss conditions for laughter, without any mention of the comic. I suggest, however, that their

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[36] Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), p. 9.

concerns revolve around the idea of the comic and that the inconsistency of terms is only a linguistic discrepancy.

Traditionally speaking, there are three theories of the comic. The first, the Superiority Theory, states that comic laughter expresses one's feelings of superiority over another. For Plato, we laugh at the ridiculousness of our friends out of malice.[37] Aristotle also makes the connection between humor and feelings of superiority when he says that comedy is the imitation of inferior people.[38] Hobbes too writes that we laugh in response to the foolishness or misfortune of others.[39] This theory holds some intuitive appeal, because it is often the case that what is comical is not admirable. We do not want to be someone that other people find comical. When we want to be the cause of someone else's laughter, we do not want to be found comical but witty; we want to be able to point out what is comical in situations. In so doing, we establish ourselves to others as intelligent and perhaps charming. These characteristics seem to follow as implications of the brief analyses of comedy by Plato and Aristotle. Comic laughter is connected with power; those who laugh are those in power, and they laugh at those who are not in power.

The second theory, the Relief Theory, is best articulated by Freud. His theory posits humor as a mechanism against the restriction imposed upon us by reason. According to Freud, we are happier when we are playing. Humor returns us to this state,

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[37] Plato, *Philebus*, 10-13, in John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: State University of New York, 1987), p. 13.

[38] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 14-16, in John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 14.

[39] Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 19-20, in John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 20.

giving temporary respite from the demands of reason.[40] Henri Bergson, though typically associated with the Superiority Theory, offers a variation of the Relief Theory as well. He finds the comical in the rigidity of human beings, who, having become rigid as a means to survive, are incapable of adapting to their surroundings. People need to learn to be elastic, adaptive creatures.[41] As laughter is a corrective to rigidity, his theory resembles a Superiority Theory, but as Mary Douglas notes, ". . . for both [Freud and Bergson] the essence of a joke is that something formal is attacked by something informal, something organised and controlled, by something vital, energetic, an upsurge of life for Bergson, of libido for Freud."[42] Though Bergson can be understood as representing both the Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory, I agree with Douglas that the main themes of his theory are repression and liberation.

Both Kant and Schopenhauer hold the Incongruity Theory. Kant writes that "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." Kant's theory of humor explains why many of our jokes concern something that is known to frustrate or disappoint.[43] Freud later calls this disappointment a form of "psychic irritation." He uses a term of Herbert Spencer when

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[40] Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by A.A. Brill (New York: Dover, 1996), p. 202.

[41] Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, 117-126, in John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 125.

[42] Mary Douglas, "Jokes," 90-114, in her *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (Boston: Routledge, 1975), p. 95.

[43] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45-50, in John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 47.

he notes that comic laughter arises only when there is a "descending incongruity," when what we get is smaller than what we expected.[44]

Morreall adds that "laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift."[45] Though his is not precisely an incongruity theory, they are similar in relevant ways. He supports his view by explaining how the shift is always pleasant throughout the different stages of psychological development. The infant laughs as a response to a shift in sensory input, such as being tickled or tossed in to the air. Upon learning to perceive objects, he can have pleasant perceptual shifts, such as in the game of peekaboo, in which a familiar face suddenly returns from non-existence. When the child not only perceives objects but can also subsume them under concepts, he can experience pleasant conceptual shifts. Morreall gives here the example of the conceptually astute child, usually around three or four years of age, who finds humorous a person wearing a dog's head from a costume, an episode that would likely surprise or even frighten an infant. Psychologist Diane Horgan gives the example of her sixteen-month-old daughter who would experiment with conceptual incongruities. She would laugh uncontrollably whenever she placed her foot in an object, saying the recently learned word, "shoe," when the object was not a shoe.[46] Morreall rejects the Superiority Theory and the Relief

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[44] Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 225.

[45] John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," 128-138, in his *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 133.

[46] Cited in Paul E. McGhee, "Humor Development: Toward a Life Span Approach," 109-134, in Paul E. McGhee, et al. eds. *Handbook of Humor Research, Volume I* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983), p. 110.

Theory on the grounds that they locate the essence of humor in an affective, not conceptual, shift.[47]

Schopenhauer affirms the Incongruity Theory when he writes that "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity."[48] He gives two common models in which this phenomenon occurs. First, two objects are thought to represent a single concept, but then, upon recognizing the vast differences between the two objects, one realizes that they both represent the concept from "a one-sided point of view." Another model for the cause of laughter is found in instances in which one realizes the incongruity between a single object and the concept that was associated – correctly, in a sense – with it.

Many contemporary philosophers endorse some kind of incongruity theory. Critchley, for example, writes that in humor there is an incongruity "between expectation and actuality."[49] But, as we will see in the remainder of this chapter, our expectations of reality are shaped by our cultural context. This explains why some of our jokes do not translate well into other cultures or why we no longer find things funny after a certain age; in both cases, our expectations are different. We would do well then to examine how these expectations are formed in order to understand how our expectations of reality shape and are shaped by the comic.

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[47] Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," p. 136.

[48] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 51-64, in John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 52.

[49] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

B. The Construction of Reality

Berger and Luckmann's analysis, as a work of sociology, is necessarily empirical, but their assumptions concerning human nature make obvious their existentialist commitments. The existentialist theme at the foundation of their work is the belief that – besides some anthropological constants, such as "world-openness and plasticity of instinctual structure" – there is no such thing as a human nature.[50] Sartre likewise writes that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."[51] It can be said that the sociology of knowledge and existentialism are counterparts: while sociology of knowledge looks backward, at how human beings have formed themselves, existentialism looks forward, at the many ways in which they can form and re-form themselves.

The sociology of knowledge is the study of the relationship between thought and its social context.[52] As Berger and Luckmann commit themselves to working within the realm of the empirical, they define *reality* simply as "a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition" and *knowledge* as "the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics."[53]

An underlying theme in their phenomenological analysis is the dialectical nature of the relationship between thought and social context. There are three stages in this

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[50] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1966), p. 49.
[51] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 345-369, in Walter Kaufmann, ed. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1975), p. 349.
[52] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 4.
[53] Ibid., p. 1.

dialectic: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization occurs whenever human beings express their subjectivity. Objectivation occurs when these expressions gain objective status in a social world; they are objects that are knowable to others, and the producers cannot simply "wish them away."[54]

Objectivation is the natural consequence of our evolutionary instincts: we habitualize actions as a means to conserve psychological energy. Objectivation begins by means of what the authors call "reciprocity of typification." In the case of two people working toward similar goals, one will adopt the actions of the other, and eventually a custom will emerge. Customs allow the stability necessary for human survival. Individuals in this embryonic society know what kind of behavior to expect from others, and they know that others hold similar expectations of them. The quality of living improves for all when individuals fulfill these expectations, reducing the amount of surprise and potential danger their actions might cause others. The next generation, from birth and throughout the early stages of socialization, sees these constructions as the already established ways in which the world functions; they see them as "historical institutions."[55] Similar to physical objects, these constructions exist before the infant is born, appearing to him as mind-independent objects of the world.

These objectivations compose a significant portion of the reality of our everyday lives. It is the reality that we take for granted as reality, where our "tension of consciousness is highest."[56] It is this reality of everyday life, "reality *par excellence*,"

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[54] Ibid., p. 34.
[55] Ibid., p. 58.
[56] Ibid., pp. 21, 23.

that presents to us social constructions analogous to the "order of objects" that exists in the natural world.[57]

Though the structures in place are not the necessary outcomes of our biological makeup, the need for some kind of social order is rooted in our nature. We discussed in the last chapter Camus' claim that we necessarily make sense of the world in terms of human thought. We need stability and familiarity.[58] We thus externalize a reality, which becomes objectivated and then internalized by us and the generations that follow.

We are not fully developed when we are born. Berger and Luckmann suggest that the fetal stage continues for about a year after birth: "important organismic developments" that occur within the mother in other animals take place in the human infant's first year of interacting with his environment. The environment, of course, includes the social structures in place. The notion that these structures are objectivities that exist in the world does not imply that they are not human products. This truth, however, is impossible for the infant to grasp. The infant sees his world as necessary, not contingent upon his particular social context; he perceives a world that he believes to be the only possible world, "the world *tout court*." He gradually begins to internalize the objectivities that comprise the world.[59] It is not difficult to see then why the world-internalization that occurs at this stage is more profoundly entrenched in one's consciousness than are the other worlds the child will later internalize. The world of

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[57] Ibid., p. 59.
[58] Ibid., p. 52.
[59] Ibid., p. 134.

primary socialization is a human being's first ordered objectivity, where the child is given a place after being pulled from the womb.

The world is mediated to the infant through his caretakers. Besides seeing their roles and behavior as necessary characteristics of the social world, the child also comes to identify with his significant others: "the self is a reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others toward it; the individual becomes what he is addressed as by his significant others."[60] They are his first examples of human selfhood. He has no option but to trust the people who hover over him, responding to his needs. Their manner of acting and interacting becomes a kind of common sense for the absorbing child.

It is at this stage that the normative role of the comic is most obvious. The infant becomes familiar with sights and sounds, and she associates them with an ordered reality. She learns to recognize situations in which she feels safe and relaxed enough to laugh. Most importantly, as we have learned, an infant will adopt the attitudes and thoughts of her significant others. Cohen writes that a successful joke requires that the teller and hearer share two things, one cognitive and another affective. The first is a perspective on the world, or an aspect of the world. Jokes affirm that the teller and hearer have similar beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, etc. The second is an emotional response to the topic of the joke; the teller and hearer of a joke must feel the same way about the issue.[61] In the process of internalization, the infant learns what is funny and what is not. The rules of society become for him a set of expectations that will later be

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 28.

the standard against which phenomena will be characterized as comical. The sharing of both elements can be realized without jokes, "but with jokes, the second constituent is amplified by the first, and this is a very curious and wonderful fact about jokes."[62] With jokes come laughter, which plays a unique role in the internalization process because of its visceral nature. The physiological and psychological enjoyment we experience in laughter enforces the shared cognitive content.

Language is a reminder that the relationship between human beings and their reality is a dialectical one: not only do we create language, but language creates our experience. Through language we can objectify our experiences; that is, language allows us to categorize our responses to situations under symbols that provide meanings that can be understood by others.[63] Language creates a broad base of descriptions of experiences and responses to experiences that people use to express their subjectivity: "As . . . [language] typifies, it also anonymizes experiences, for the typified experience can, in principle, be duplicated by anyone falling into the category in question."[64] Thus, not only does language force us in to syntactic patterns, but the phrases and words of our language provide a bank of symbols that we will come to identify as the experiential phenomena that we share with others. Language objectifies experiences, and these objectifications become objects of individual consciousness. For example, those uncertain in making a decision often vocalize their thoughts, arriving at a conclusion that might confirm their initial worry. This worry becomes an objectified reality within one's

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 39.
[64] Ibid.

consciousness after it is represented in language.[65] Further, if an individual conveys to another the rationale for his conclusion, then that language and the thought expressed in it become an object (of knowledge) that now exists in the social world. We use language to "objectify unfolding biographical experience."[66]

The emphasis on the indispensable role of the other in objectivation and internalization sets Berger and Luckmann's account of human nature apart from the individualistic accounts typically associated with existentialism. The ultimate fear of the human being is anomic, being "deprived of this shield and . . . exposed, alone, to the onslaught of a nightmare."[67] It is the nomic, or ordering, structure that reassures the infant from the beginning that "everything is all right."[68] It is the set of systems that will prevent the infant from feeling alienated in the world. Our fear of loneliness causes us to trust the objectivity of the social structures, because it is through these structures that we are connected to other people in a meaningful way. The institution of family, the characteristics of friendship, the moral expectations we hold of others – these are all structures that, besides bringing order to our lives, give us an identity in relation to others. Camus' contention that our situation is absurd implies our construction of reality.

Berger and Luckmann's focus on the development of the infant's conceptualizing ability is helpful in our exploration of the comic here. They argue that infants move from thinking about roles and attitudes in particular to roles and attitudes in general. After having moved from "Mother is angry with me *now*" to "Mother is angry with me

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[65] Ibid., p. 153
[66] Ibid., p. 154.
[67] Ibid., p. 102
[68] Ibid., p. 136.

whenever I spill the soup," the child moves from the particular to the universal, "*One*

does not spill soup." The child now sees himself as an other, an individual that is

perceived by others as an agent with his distinctive individuality. The process of his self-

identification also moves from the particular to the general. Once he realizes that he

belongs to a society, he moves from the understanding that he has an identity for a

particular significant other to the recognition that he has a general identity that follows

him throughout the variety of his social interactions.[69] The process of learning that

particular phenomena are comical can also illustrate the child's ability to abstract from

particulars, from "My siblings laugh when Father sticks out his tongue" to "Anyone

sticking out his or her tongue is funny."

Berger and Luckmann make the distinction between two kinds of reality-

maintenance, routine maintenance and crisis maintenance, only the first of which will be

relevant to us here. We maintain the reality of everyday life through our routines,

especially when we converse with others. Though they mention that non-verbal

communication also performs this function to an extent, they hold that conversation is

the reality-maintenance tool *par excellence*. Conversation performs a good deal of its

function implicitly: "its massivity is achieved by the accumulation and consistency of

casual conversation – conversation that can *afford to be casual* precisely because it

refers to the routines of a taken-for-granted world."[70]

In the case of the comic, however, something funny must be brought to the

foreground for it to be effective. Someone must tell a joke to someone who understands

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[69] Ibid., p. 133.
[70] Ibid., p. 153.

that she's joking; something out of the ordinary event must occur. Humor is different from typical conversation in this regard, but the fact that it does not rest casually in the background of our reality allows for it be an even more effective tool for reality construction.

The comic gives us a new perspective on common sense. We see that something goes against our expectations, and in so doing we reflect upon our expectations. Because our identity is tied so closely to our sense of humor, we are made aware of our past and the objectivities that have given joy to our lives. This reflection will make us appreciate the importance of the systems we have created. We are forced to take a step back from our lives with the comic. It is, as Critchley writes, "socially embedded philosophy."[71]

Aristotle writes that "no animal laughs save Man."[72] Critchley suggests from this statement that humor is significant in our exploration of what it means to be human. He writes that "what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human."[73] As with the tragic, it is only with our ability to see ourselves from a transcendent perspective that we can see ourselves and our situations as comical. It is for this reason that philosophers such as Critchley note the philosophical nature of the comic.[74] No animal laughs except the human being because no animal philosophizes except the human being.

The comic has a unique role for another reason. It provides opportunities that connect us to other individuals. A joke is an invitation to be understood by another.

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[71] Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 87.
[72] Cited in Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 25.
[73] Ibid., p. 29.
[74] Ibid., p. 87.

Moments of comical connection often reveal that someone shares with us the same cognitive and affective content, that someone understands where we stand on a particular issue.[75] When we connect with another person who has internalized the same objectivities, their existence becomes more solidified for us. We eventually come to attribute an object simply as comical without thinking about the fact that our unmet expectations at the basis of the comical incongruity are consequences of being born into a particular social context.

Michael P. Wolf explains how the comic is also used as a tool to discourage deviance from social norms. According to Wolf, the comic serves the function of distinguishing those who do not follow the norms of the community, thereby suggesting that they do not belong to the community.[76] The object of our joke is made to feel that she is outside the group, resulting from a deficiency in some element of her character or some action she committed. The person presenting the joke and those who laugh at it relish in the delight of knowing that they are members of the norm-fulfilling community.[77] If we are the object of the joke, we feel compelled to correct ourselves and gain or regain solidarity with those in the joking group: "Conformist creatures would hate to look like fools."[78] Wolf suggests that it is the element of solidarity that separates this function of humor from other forms of correction.

A joke, for Wolf, need not be cutting to perform as a corrective. Jokes are also given in what he calls the "congenial forms." He writes:

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[75] Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 29.
[76] Michael P. Wolf, "A Grasshopper Walks into a Bar: The Role of Humour in Normativity," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 32: 3 (2002), p. 334.
[77] Ibid., p. 334.
[78] Ibid., p. 335.

> To take back the joke is to have all that pragmatic and social significance of the joke made apparent, but then to overtly forego one's entitlement to reject the person who is the butt of the joke from one's community and practices. A joke is thus a sort of mock-ostracism in which I bring up some deviation on your part and invite those who care to listen to take pleasure in your embarrassment, but then, having shown that I have the authority to at least chastise you, I pass on further and full exercise of that entitlement and welcome you back to the fold.[79]

A congenial joke that responds to deviations of others then requires a sense of trust between the joker and the object of the joke. The joker is reminding the object of her joke that she is aware of the deviation or fault of the other but accepts him anyway. The object of the joke, if he can "take the joke" and laugh at himself, shows through his good humor that he understands the norms that bind the community and recognizes his failure to conform to them. The congenial joke also reminds those involved of the solidarity between the teller and object of the joke: someone's faults are made known but ultimately seen as unimportant in relation to his other characteristics that place him in good standing with the community.

C. The Importance of Humor

We do not have to be able to articulate the importance of humor in order to recognize at least tacitly that the comic is an important element of the human experience. It is a similar sense of humor that we seek in friendships; if someone doesn't laugh at our jokes, we move on, and we find a community that appreciates our sense of humor. We seek comic relief as a rejuvenating escape from the routine of work. Comic laughter

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[79] Ibid., p. 336.

brings comfort in times of crisis. Not being able to find a community with whom we can share comic experience causes feelings of loneliness.

Critchley notes that in light of this unique humanity of laughter, "the human being who does not laugh invites the charge of inhumanity, or at least makes us somewhat suspicious."[80] We have all been in situations in which we want to find to something funny but cannot. We do not want to appear cold to the people around us, and we want to show that we find solidarity with them. When we are young, through forcing ourselves to laugh in situations that we do not naturally find humorous, we are training ourselves to see reality through the perspective of our fellow laughers. When we are older and our conception of the comic is more solidified, we look for people with a similar sense of humor, whom we find to be "more human."

The comic, then, plays the important role of creating and enforcing social norms. Of course, there are other tools that serve this normative function, but I suggest that the comic's affective and visceral nature gives it unique standing. When we are infants, we begin to internalize the expectations that society has for its members. Our desire to identify with others, consequently forming our own identity, makes us pay particular attention to the expectations at the basis of comical transactions; we see the importance of comical connections with others, and we adapt our senses of humor accordingly.

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[80] Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 25.

CHAPTER IV

A NEW THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

My purpose in this chapter is to clarify the connection between the anxiety that results from our absurd existential situation and comic laughter. The absurd is the confrontation between our need for clarity and the world's silence. My first chapter is an analysis of this disunity. It is our nostalgia for unity that prompts us to construct a reality that, besides making many of our procedures conveniently habitual, becomes known as a world, ordered and reliable. My second chapter is an explication of the process of reality construction. In the present chapter, I want to propose a revised theory of the comic, one that is the natural result of existential disappointment and our consequent dependence upon social structures.

A. A Revised Theory

The theory of the comic I want to present here draws upon Morreall's theory of laughter: "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift."[81] His general explanation of laughter can provide a theory concerning the uniqueness of comic laughter. He mentions this possibility but does not give attention to it. The theory presented here takes Morreall's insights into the cause of laughter and locates the root of comic laughter in psychological pleasure. When we understand the forces at work in

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[81] John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," p. 133.

comic laughter, we will be able to see them recur in other situations or objects that we find comical.

The relation between tragedy and comedy has been a long-standing topic of philosophical interest. Though the dissimilarities between these genres may outnumber their similarities, both of them turn on incongruity. This characteristic is ontologically noteworthy, because our propensity of categorizing and then reflecting upon the tragic and the comic reveals the human need to view our lives from a particular objective perspective. As Marie Collins Swabey writes, "Both comic and tragic experience claim to tell us something about values, the nature of the world and man's relation to it, and not merely to convey the feelings of the subject as affected by sensuous representations."[82]

There are two version of incongruity we can find in our lives. If the offense against reality deals with justice, a sense of harmony in the world, we have tragedy. There are, of course, countless situations that deal with justice that we would not describe as tragic. Children are bullied, cars are scratched without even a note of apology, and we get overcharged at restaurants. Such situations, though they deal with justice in their own ways, do not concern values or "the nature of the world and man's relation to it" in a way that we would describe as tragic.

Though an analysis of the distinction between the unfortunate and the tragic would exceed the scope of this paper, I want to suggest, for the sake of our examination of the comic, that this distinction be understood in light of our analysis of reality-

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[82] Marie Collins Swabey, *Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale, 1961), p. 10.

construction. Whether and how we find a situation to be tragic is contingent upon our metaphysical assumptions (and, consequently, expectations), which are contingent upon the society into which we are adopted. When a particular misfortune is or becomes common, we think of it as an unfortunate incident. The less frequently it occurs, and the more serious its consequences, we move to consider it a tragic phenomenon. I suggest that there is an analogue in the comic. If the incongruity is of little consequence, we have comedy. But there are many incongruities in life that we would not consider comical. When an incongruity occurs often, it loses the comical nature that it had in the beginning. We include that incongruity in the list of our expectations, and we no longer find it diverging from them. This phenomenon is represented in the cessation of our comical enjoyment of an old joke. It can also be the case that the incongruity is of such little importance that it fails to be comical. A pen with the wrong cap, for example, is not a comical matter, though it represents a kind of incongruity. The incongruity here, however, does not contradict our logical or teleological expectations, a theme that we will visit in this chapter. Unfortunately, we can give here only brief attention to this analogue in the tragic, as a preface to thinking about the role of social construction in our distinction between situations that are comical and those that are simply amusing or interesting.

In comedy, we are overjoyed when we discover that the situation does not threaten our structure but rather only reminds us of the protection it gives us against anomic experience. Laughter arises when we are shocked by an incongruous situation. We suddenly experience the relief that comes from thinking of the stability of our

structures. We are not alone in the chaos of this world; we exist in relation to others through structures that give clarity and meaning to our lives. In this proposed theory, there is a connection between the laughter of relief and the laughter that results from joking: the former is a more primitive version of the latter; laughter is the result of realizing that we are safe in a world that makes sense. We share jokes in order to remind each other of the norms of what should be the case, further solidifying our externalizations as real entities that give objective meaning to our lives.

As I argue that the comic arises from the clarity that we impose upon our experiences, the worry might be raised that such a theory advocates an inauthentic escape from the absurd. Our experiences do not yield clarity in the questions we have about the world itself, but the comic presupposes an objective standard from which we judge situations to be comical, and we often understand these standards as characteristics of the metaphysical nature of the world. When we feel that we have a grasp on this nature, the world now has a clarity that we believe to be absolute. We no longer feel the terror of disorder. The comic, then, seems to be only a sedative that closes our eyes to that disconnection between us and the world.

It is true that the comic can often be used as an escape from metaphysical uncertainty. As we saw in Chapter II, many do "defraud possibility," unable to confront the absurd with the courage necessary for Camus' revolt. But the comic does not necessarily breed this kind of inauthenticity. In fact, as we will see in the following section, the comic has the power to challenge and gradually change social common sense. The comic, though it follows from our reliance upon our social structures, does

not preclude our realization of the metaphysical uncertainty that gives rise to our social structures. Those who face the absurd consequently need not abandon their appreciation of the comic. In fact, the comic can be a means through which those who are aware of the contingencies of our lives can communicate this awareness to others in a non-threatening way.

To say that the notion of the comic rests on incongruity is not to say that the incongruous, which we sometimes describe as "comic nonsense," is senseless. The comic is found in logical and teleological incongruities. The comical then cannot be anything that we find out of the ordinary. According to Schopenhauer, the mismatch at the base of the comic results from our need to organize our experiences into concepts. An explanation of the comical in a situation, person, etc. can thus be reduced to an explanation of the present incongruity. The need for sense is most evident when the comic is expressed verbally, through jokes.

Mary Douglas's insights into the nature of jokes as attacks against "ordering of experience" may help us understand the need for congruity in the incongruity. Jokes, using a structure similar to that of rites, aim to "denigrate and devalue" the dominant cultural values. The patterns we use to interpret reality have no necessity. In fact, she goes so far as to call jokes "anti-rites." However, if other patterns of social life are to be acceptable, they have to be coherent systems that operate according to their own logic. Otherwise, the joke would not be presenting any viable destination for escape.

It is because of this nature of the comic that Swabey rejects Kant's position on laughter, which states that laughter does not offer insight but is rather only a "*play* with

aesthetical ideas or of representations of the understanding through which ultimately *nothing is thought*."[83] Our understanding is in fact satisfied, Swabey argues. We do not gain from jokes mere "practical" knowledge regarding how one should behave in society. Rather, the comic is a way in which we gain metaphysical knowledge, knowledge about the "structure of truth and reality."[84] It allows us to "make the transition to a novel standpoint," where we have a different perspective in judging a situation. The intellectual apprehension of incongruity is the foundation of the comic, and the affective response associated with this recognition is secondary.

That the comic allows us to step outside of reality does not imply that we have access to an objective position that allows us to transcend our subjectivity. Swabey compares the comic insight to the religious insight in that both are interpretations of a present situation in light of ultimate norms. To say that both offer objective perspectives regarding ultimate questions is not to say that they offer the same perspective or that they both offer objective truth. Critchley says that in the comic we become "philosophical spectators upon our lives." [85] But from where do we philosophize? I suggest that the objective perspective is the stock of common knowledge. We philosophize from a perspective that is rooted in a particular tradition, and it is this unique philosophical perspective, broadly construed (that is, the perspective gained with the ability to generalize from particulars to universals, which allows us to form logical

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[83] Ibid., p. 10.
[84] Ibid., p. 12.
[85] Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 18.

and teleological expectations about the world), that provides this so-called objective stance from which we judge things to be comic or tragic.

An application of this theory to a joke would be helpful. Take the classic children's joke that asks why the chicken crossed the road. The response, "To get to the other side," is a response that would be appropriate if the questioner had been looking for the simple, immediate goal that motivated the chicken to cross. The joke is funny because it is implied from the contextless nature of the question that the questioner has in mind a unique answer, an amusing quip that would not be as obvious. We find, ultimately, that the questioner was waiting for us to ignore the most obvious answer. The incongruity in this case lies in the teleological assumptions of question-asking. The purpose of asking such a question is to convey new information to the hearer, not to expect an obvious answer.

B. Some Implications and Applications of the Theory

The new theory helps explain why we are offended when others find us comical. According to Swabey, the comical amusement that others find in us suggests that they see us as incongruous with reality; more specifically stated, they see an incongruity between how we interpret reality and reality itself.[86] We are seen as people on "an inferior cognitive status," exemplifying "moral depravity, mental disease, or just plain ignorance."[87]

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[86] Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p. 165.
[87] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 66.

Of course, if we belong to another community in which what makes us deviants elsewhere is seen as acceptable or even commendable, depending on which community we find more important, we may be become less insecure in our deviant features. Jokes also carry less sting when what is comical about us is of little consequence in the value-system of the social world we inhabit. Take, for example, the following joke: A man walked angrily into a crowded bar, ordered a drink, and then said to the bartender, "All lawyers are assholes." From the end of the bar a man spoke up, "Just a minute. I resent that." "Why? Are you a lawyer?" "No, I'm an asshole."[88] The stereotype of the infamy of lawyers is generally found not to be offensive, because most lawyers are not greatly affected by the stereotype, though they are aware of it.

Racist jokes provide an illuminating example of this point, as it appears on the surface that the victims of these jokes all belong to a supportive community, where they affirm with each other that one's race should not be a handicap in one's pursuit of projects. A joke that turns on a racial stereotype assumes a particular racial or cultural characteristic as a negative, of little value or even of disvalue to society. A race or a member of a race fails to show an understanding of the ways in which things should be done, evoking mockery that is eventually encapsulated and then passed around in the form of a joke. A racist joke achieves its evaluative and corrective end in a particular community because, although the object of the joke may belong to a community that takes pride in their identity, race does often hold value, or disvalue, in the community in which the joke is prevalent.

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[88] Cited in Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 74.

In the previous chapter, I gave Cohen's thesis that a joke succeeds when there is a "shared outlook on the world" and a "shared response to something."[89] This analysis, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that the intimacy established between the teller and hearer is always enjoyed by both parties. The hearer, after laughing at a joke, may regret his laughter. Perhaps he regrets the other now knowing that he finds such a joke funny, or perhaps he regrets his finding the joke funny in the first place. This is often the case with racist jokes, jokes that sometimes make us laugh but make us feel guilty in our amusement. The teller of the joke may hold a negative belief and disposition towards black people, but he may not see his stereotype as a cause for worry. His friend, the hearer, may find the joke funny but disturbing nevertheless. He realizes that that he finds it funny because he holds a certain belief, and it is the fact that he holds this belief, at least subconsciously, that bothers him.

> There many topics about which we do not care to joke. Swabey writes,
>
> A limit is reached in siphoning off rationality and value from the world, in treating lightly as of no moment the weightiest matters of life, a limit found in the comic when the discovery that certain values like formal truth, the obligation to operational integrity, and a kind of law of compensation are built into the very structure of experience itself.[90]

According to Swabey's account, we do not make jokes that take lightly, without feigning, the values that we consider foundational. Aversion toward racism and the suspicion that such jokes only propagate the problem are the reasons that many feel obliged to refrain from sharing them or enjoying them. We can tell much about

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[89] Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 28.
[90] Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p. 21.

someone's value system from learning what kinds of jokes she enjoys and what situations she finds comical.

It is interesting, then, that there are so many jokes about death, as death seems to carry more intimidating force than does talk about moral obligations. As Cohen writes, "To joke about death is a way of domesticating something that essentially cannot be tamed."[91] Embodied in everyday conversation, the theme of death confronts us. We realize, by sharing such jokes with others, that we are not alone in thinking about its inevitability; it is an oppressive presence in all of our lives. Our talking about death restrains its power over us. Laughing at absurdity is often a way of confessing that we "cannot make sense of it and that we accept it. Thus this laughter is an expression of our humanity, our finite capacity, our ability to live with what we cannot understand or subdue."[92] Joking gives us power to lessen the gravity of the forces that make us vulnerable.[93]

This is not to say that our laughter at such jokes implies that we have conquered our fear. Our laughter may hide anxiety or confusion. But we laugh at these jokes anyway, because in our laughing at them, we are training ourselves to confront its inevitability, not only in our own lives but in those of others as well. Life happens, and then we die. Reminded that I am only one of the countless beings who have undergone this fear reminds me of the absurdity of our situation. Death is something we will never understand, and the dramatic incongruity between the meaninglessness of death (that is,

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[91] Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 44.
[92] Ibid., p. 41.
[93] Ibid., p. 45.

the inability to see the reason for death and, consequently, the reason for life) and the seriousness with which we devote our lives makes us laugh. It is perhaps for this reason that Swabey writes that "comic perception is wiser than tragic in apprehending more clearly that suffering is part and parcel of the nature of life."[94]

Most often, jokes are used to reinforce the status quo, to keep everyone within the bounds of communal norms. And when they challenge the absolute status of the existing orders, they do so "in a charming but quite benign fashion."[95] But this is not to say that humor cannot be used as a catalyst for change in a society. Critchley argues that "humour might be said to project another possible *sensus communis*, namely a *dissensus communis* distinct from the dominant common sense." It is for this reason that he says that jokes have "a certain redemptive or messianic power."[96] "Redemptive" need not insinuate a reminder of the "world beyond this world." The hope found in the comic can be found in the solidarity we feel when we share with others a common acceptance of the absurdity of our existence.

It should be stated again here that the theory presented in this thesis is not an attempt at a comprehensive account of the comic. Though I suggest that incongruity is a common element in manifestations of the comic, the uses of the comic are various. We may use the comic not as a corrective for others but as a means to put ourselves in good standing with others in the community. Take, for example, self-deprecating humor. When the teller of the joke is the butt of his own joke, he conveys the message that he

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[94] Swabey, *Comic Laughter*, p. 184.
[95] Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 11.
[96] Ibid., p. 16.

does not consider himself above the "assessment and reproach" of the community. The lighthearted humility that he conveys shows not only that he recognizes that he is violating a minor social norm but that he adheres to the social norm of not taking ourselves too seriously.[97]

Morreall describes the laughter of embarrassment as a similar phenomenon. In an embarrassing situation, our laughter conceals our embarrassment under the façade of amusement.[98] We are in a situation that makes us feel self-conscious, and we do not want to appear so, and we laugh to achieve this end: if we are laughing, we must be laughing at ourselves and thus not be socially uncomfortable.[99] Here, too, one can see the same theme that is analyzed in Wolf's analysis of humor. We are using humor as a message, that we are strong, not vulnerable.

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[97] Wolf, "A Grasshopper Walks into a Bar," p. 337.
[98] John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," p. 137.
[99] Ibid., p. 138.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In my first chapter, I defended the claim that our existence is absurd. Though the notion of the absurd provides an explanation of our tendency to rely on social constructions, one need not concede this notion as long as one holds that there exists within human consciousness an anxiety that pushes us toward such a reliance. If we agree that a significant portion of our expectations are contingent upon the society in which we find ourselves, we will see the value of an Incongruity Theory that takes social norms into consideration.

The comic, then, is not as far removed from the absurd as we often assume. We make the quick distinction that the absurd deals with the dark topic of human frustration while the comic deals with the lighthearted topics of laughter and tomfoolery. We thus prevent ourselves from seeing the connection between the two. In this thesis, I have argued that the absurdity of our situation leads to an anxiety, which leads to our construction of reality, which leads to a standard by which to judge phenomena as comically incongruous. When we laugh at a joke, then, we are reminded of our solidarity with others, but it is the fear of being alone that prompts us to learn and replicate comic behavior. When we laugh, we are reminded that we are part of a community, and this community provides order and meaning for our lives.

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VITA

Name: Philip Park

Address: Bolton Hall 310, Department of Philosophy, Texas A&M University, College
      Station, TX 77843

E-mail address: p-park@philosophy.tamu.edu

Education: B.A., Philosophy and English, Calvin College, 2003
              M.A., Philosophy, Texas A&M University, 2008