

## Incongruity and Seriousness

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In humor studies, the following quotation from Arthur Schopenhauer is well known: “*Laughter* always arises from nothing other than a suddenly perceived lack of congruence between a concept and the real objects that are in some respect or other thought through it, and it is itself just the expression of this lack of congruence.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, what is *congruous* would be a percept that a perceiver expects to see or that which fits within his already established preconceptual framework through which one interprets the world. When inconsistencies are brought to consciousness, or in Schopenhauer’s sense, when we are surprised to find “two or more real objects [that] are thought through *one* concept,”<sup>2</sup> the elements for humor are in place. Schopenhauer is arguing that *if* there is laughter then there must be the sorts of incongruity he discusses. It is not clear that he is saying the converse that *if* there is incongruity there must be laughter; this untenable view would imply that all incongruities are funny. But even with the more favorable interpretation, he does not explain what it is about the incongruity that leads to laughter. So, what could that be?

It cannot merely be an unexpected break in a pattern, or a violation of some rule or conceptual model. Finding the severed head of your favorite racehorse in your bed is clearly incongruous, but hardly elicits mirth. Therefore, there must be something that allows us to distinguish between amusing incongruities and incongruities *as such* that might include “the grotesque, the macabre, the horrible, the bizarre, and the fantastic.”<sup>3</sup> John Morreall argues that the non-humorous incongruities “lack the playfulness of amusement, in that they are emotionally engaged responses.”<sup>4</sup> When we laugh at something we found humorous, we undergo a psychological and conceptual shift: “This change may be primarily cognitive, as the incongruity theory shows—from a serious state of perceiving and thinking about things that fit into our conceptual patterns, to a nonserious state of being amused by some incongruity.”<sup>5</sup> Schopenhauer fails to reveal what it is about the incongruity in operation that leads to mirth beyond noting the recognition that our reason is not infallible.<sup>6</sup> Morreall’s additional feature of play mode related to free, creative thought, and his extended analysis of the sudden conceptual shift with the recognition of incongruity, provide more detail about the content of incongruity in addition to placing humorous incongruities within a distinct context from non-humorous dissonance.

Morreall argues that the feeling of mirth arises from a sudden conceptual shift caused by the recognition of a non-threatening incongruity. If the psychological shift in response to an incongruity evokes an attitude that is practically engaged, there will be no pleasure, and thus no humor, or very little of either. The practical concern is usually expressed through emotions. He offers examples of

negative emotions such as “fear, pity, indignation, disgust, etc.” and neutral ones like “puzzlement, wonder, curiosity, or problem-solving,”<sup>7</sup> as attitudes that will not provide pleasure sufficient for humor. The reason for this, Morreall argues, is that such emotional states gear one toward “urgent practical needs,”<sup>8</sup> or as he puts it later, “[e]motions involve cognitive and practical engagement with what is going on around us. We are serious, focused on dangers and opportunities, and prepared to act to further our interests. What is happening matters to us. The mental framework is REAL/HERE/NOW/ME/PRACTICAL.”<sup>9</sup> This attitude is in contrast to the humorous attitude that does not call for any adjustments to one’s environment or self; it is the play mode, which he opposes to a serious mode. However, this central distinction Morreall makes fails to take into account the ambiguities of seriousness and playfulness. One of the results of this is that he prematurely stalls investigation into some humor that can be used toward serious ends; humorists who are serious in their subversion of what the existentialists call a “spirit of seriousness.”<sup>10</sup>

Consider Schopenhauer’s harsh treatment of the systematizing pedant (Kant?), which could also be a description of the existentialists’ *spirit of seriousness* described below: “Here then the incongruence between concepts and reality is soon shown, soon shown how the former never descend to the level of the individual, and how their generality and *rigid determinateness* can never exactly fit the subtle nuances and manifold modifications of actual reality.”<sup>11</sup> Put into existentialist terms, there is a contrast between the static abstractions of universalizing systems of thought that are bound by presumed necessary laws, and the dynamic, plural, contingencies of lived experience. For Schopenhauer, we are *foolish* if we think our conceptual schemas can so easily and perfectly map onto reality, as if there were no incongruity.

In *The World as Will and Idea Volume II*, Schopenhauer provides another connection between seriousness and humor: “The opposite of laughing and joking is *seriousness*. Accordingly, it consists in the consciousness of the perfect agreement and congruity of the conception, or thought, with what is perceived, or the reality. *The serious man is convinced that he thinks the things as they are, and that they are as he thinks them.*”<sup>12</sup> Notice this conception of seriousness is quite different from the common connotation of the term, which has as synonyms such words as *grave, solemn, somber, severe, sober, stern*, etc., to describe the person’s mental state. It is also distinct from Morreall’s conception of seriousness, which is *not* the existentialist connotation, as is revealed in the following description: “For us to be serious is to be solemn and given to sustained, narrowly focused thought. It is also for us to be earnest, that is, sincere, in what we say and do. We say only what we believe, and act only according to our real intentions.”<sup>13</sup> Aside from solemnity, all of the other elements Morreall presumes to be a part of seriousness are compatible with a humorist who is attacking the putatively necessary conventions and rules of society, e.g., but doing so indirectly. In this way, as I will describe more below with some of Morreall’s own examples, the humorist can be understood to be

...Indeed, this is an important part of the incongruity, as the audience must oscillate between the literal, bona-fide, and direct speech, and the intended meaning, or the “implicature.”<sup>14</sup>

Compare existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre’s, Simone De Beauvoir’s, Jorge Portilla’s, and Lewis Gordon’s approaches to the spirit of seriousness in which the salient feature is the absolutist, dogmatic, and otherworldliness and/or unquestionable nature of the values and meanings held by serious people. Under this attitude, the serious person fails to recognize the dynamic, flexible, and contingent characteristics of human persons that challenge the idea that we have unchanging natures, some presumed to be “superior” to others. In addition, especially related to issues surrounding oppression, De Beauvoir adds “The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature, by the gods, by the powers against whom revolt has no meaning.”<sup>15</sup> To be sure, one who holds fast to a world view takes it *seriously* in the sense that it is important to him, another common connotation of the term, but one who tenaciously sticks to a set of beliefs regardless of any counter-evidence, is serious in a different way than the familiar senses connote. The spirit of seriousness is an attitude that self-perpetuates mental inflexibility especially related to values and meanings connected to power and comfort. The cognitive ease that comes with (presumed) certainty can act in a reciprocal fashion by further entrenching one in seriousness. Graveness, soberness, etc., might accompany this sense of seriousness, but one can peel those common notions away from a serious man, and still be left with the opposite of humor.

Morreall (1999) offers a taxonomy of the tragic vision of life, which I see as analogous to the sense of seriousness invoked by Schopenhauer and later existentialists. He distinguishes the comic and tragic world-views where the over-arching difference has to do with mental rigidity in seriousness as opposed to flexibility in humor. The serious (tragic) individuals engage life through simple conceptual schemes in terms of unquestioned absolutes that appeal to authority, tradition, and the comforts of the status quo. We see the motivation for complacency, ease, and purity of thought about oneself, the world, and especially other people. Here, Morreall does seem to have the right notion of seriousness in contrast to humor.

This tragic attitude parallels the presumptions of serious people who are inclined toward what Lewis Gordon calls “epistemic closure” in the context of making judgments about groups of people: “In the act of epistemic closure, one ends a process of inquiry. In effect, it is the judgment ‘say no more’...In contrast, epistemological openness is the judgment ‘there is always more to be known.’”<sup>16</sup> This outlook shuns ambiguity and vagueness in the drive for simplicity, dividing reality into neat and tidy essential categories: “[m]ost thinking in tragedy is what psychologists call convergent thinking... In this mode, there is no room for making unusual connections between ideas.”<sup>17</sup> The “rigid determinateness” Schopenhauer sees in the pedant’s theoretical, universal,

abstract thinking can also be found in the serious person's clinging to the "accuracy" of certain stereotypes, e.g., which sustain a comfortable narrative for that person.

The mental inelasticity combined with power and a society that privileges those who already have power creates and perpetuates the sort of seriousness which I wish to contrast with humor; in particular, subversive humor. This sort of humor has as *one* of its goals the subversion of an unjust status quo. For such a disruption to be successful, different possible perspectives on reality need to be made available, and this requires, on the part of the humorist and audience, an ability *and* inclination to cognitive shifting so that incongruity can be recognized rather than ignored. In order to do this (non-existentially) serious work through humor, one must be capable of *playing* and encouraging others to adopt a similarly playful mode of discourse/interaction. One effective way to do this is to create and/or highlight incongruities in such a way that others will want to play with the seemingly incoherent thoughts, and possibly discover a hidden meaning within the ludicrous.

### Incongruity and Playfulness

What can be pleasurable about incongruity? Most of the conceptions of incongruity involve some element of confusion, tension, doubt, disagreement, or some kind of discord, all of which can be, as Kant argues, quite displeasing to the understanding. Thus, a consideration of the mental states of the audience in addition to the content of the humor is required, as Morreall claims, "[t]here is nothing objectively incongruous or comic about the universe or the human condition, then, and so amusement is possible only for those who are ignorant and confused."<sup>18</sup> Ignorance and confusion sound unpleasant and indeed people in either mental state have often been the butt of humorists. But such mental states can lead to enjoyment or even be enjoyable in themselves for one who is in play mode. Within the framework of a playful attitude, these otherwise negative mental states can be co-opted<sup>19</sup> to aid in philosophical investigation specifically, but awareness and interest in the world generally. On the other hand, for those who desire to alleviate the discomfort felt in the realization of a tension between one's beliefs and perceptions immediately, or expectations and reality, there are fewer openings to live an examined life and one is in a sense trapped in seriousness.

For Morreall, playfulness or play mode is an attitude about the world, but it is not the default mode;<sup>20</sup> it is something that one has to cultivate and hone much like an appreciation of aesthetics in general, or the taste for beer. This is exemplified in what he calls the "comic vision of life." Within this attitude, "[w]e can be playful in several senses, each opposed to a sense of 'serious.' First, we can be not-grave, not engaged in deep, narrowly focused thought. Second, we can be not-sincere in what we say and do. As a joke, we can engage in non-bona fide communication and activity...When we are serious, we are usually in a practical frame of mind in which we want to achieve some goal. We are working toward something, and *anything playful would be a distraction.*"<sup>21</sup> Morreall also includes a

third interesting connection between the ways we “play” rather than “work” music, e.g., noting that life in general is something better played rather than worked in serious mode. This is so even though he claims “[m]ost humor ... has always been about problems.”<sup>22</sup>

A playful attitude inclines one toward using the feelings of doubt and confusion, which are inevitable in an uncertain, surprising, and often baffling world. When in play mode, one is more open to the complexities of reality, not only cognizant of disorder, the unfamiliar, ambiguity, incongruity, but predisposed to *enjoy* the mental tension that results from these dissonances, as these disruptions of expectations are helpful in opening avenues for creative thinking. By “creative” here, I simply mean one’s thought is free from the constraints imposed by others.

Creative thinking cultivated by playfulness could include free playtime during school recess, e.g., in which children engage in imaginative play rather than “organized” sport in which the rules and goals have been preset by others (often *humorless* overly-competitive adults).<sup>23</sup> In this way, a spirit of playfulness is opposed to the existentialist spirit of seriousness in addition to Morreall’s conception of seriousness. For instance, De Beauvoir considers the playfulness of a child *thrown* into a world of ready-made values, but where “he is allowed to play, to expend his existence freely. In this child’s circle he feels that he can passionately pursue and joyfully attain goals which he has set up for himself.”<sup>24</sup>

A related point is that creative play also promotes mental freedom, as the French philosopher Penjon claims, laughter is “freedom from the strict laws of rational thinking and freedom to play with new ideas.”<sup>25</sup> Of course, many of these “laws” are the sorts Schopenhauer bemoans that are constructed by *a priori* theorists. Under the umbrella concept “incongruity,” we can see some of the benefits of a humorous attitude. The feeling of mirth, like that experienced in play generally, is desirable in itself. But humor, like play, is also instrumentally valuable. There is a reciprocal relationship between incongruities that encourage playfulness, and a playful attitude that places one in the appropriate cognitive distance to first recognize, then understand, and then enjoy the incongruity. They build upon each other, and *no* one, not even the most serious of the existentially serious, is wholly incapable of recognizing and enjoying humor.<sup>26</sup>

So, not only can incongruity be pleasurable in play mode, akin to an aesthetic experience where “incongruity is enjoyed for its own sake,”<sup>27</sup> the amusement we experience in detecting incongruities habituates us to be on the lookout for more of them in a variety of contexts; this is in effect intellectual training in preparation for confronting an uncertain world. This provides the wit with a unique opportunity to open the minds of otherwise serious people by triggering their play mode. In doing so, both the wit and the audience can enjoy incongruity and possibly see a socio-political situation, e.g., from a new, more accurate and possibly even egalitarian perspective.

### The Ambiguities of Seriousness and Playfulness

In Morreall's latest book, he devotes an entire chapter to "The Negative Ethics of Humor."<sup>28</sup> However, this analysis of humor remains almost Machiavellian in its advice narrowly tailored to the socially privileged as to when laughing is acceptable and when it is not. Morreall does show concern about oppressive jokes and analyzes what might be wrong with them;<sup>29</sup> in addition, he considers why black people, women, and homosexuals, e.g., do not laugh at jokes that harm them. However, Morreall's account of playfulness and seriousness has the unintended consequence of both exonerating oppressors and undermining the efficacy of subversive humorists. This is due to the level of emotional and cognitive disengagement in his sense of play mode.

Morreall is too insistent that one of the advantages of humor lies in *total* cognitive and emotional disengagement.<sup>30</sup> When taken as far as he does this at the very least turns into the vice of apathy. This emotional distance can cultivate a number of intellectual and moral virtues, but when the disengagement is the sort advocated by Morreall, there is a doubly negative consequence: since purveyors of oppressive jokes have no intention of doing harm, as they are "just playing" with no designs to actually convey genuine or "bona-fide" information, they are guilty of little more than revealing an "indifference to the truth."<sup>31</sup> At the same time it further degrades the power of the oppressed who *do* choose to engage their situation with a humorous attitude--they too are "just playing" as they are not taking seriously (in Morreall's sense) the content of their own jokes, and thus *they* need not be taken seriously in any sense. Therefore, Morreall at once absolves oppressors who use ridicule, for example,<sup>32</sup> and undermines marginalized peoples' use of subversive humor as mere frivolity, intending *only* to stimulate glee: "the creator of humor puts ideas into our heads not to communicate information, but for the delight those ideas will bring."<sup>33</sup>

This non-serious attitude in Morreall's sense, when applied to oppressor or oppressed in humor, can actually be seen as an adoption of seriousness in the existentialist sense. Rather than standing as a confrontation to a legitimate problem, the laughter from the oppressed acts merely as an exercise of fictionalizing and/or aestheticizing what would otherwise be viewed as a crippling state of affairs. Seen in this light, the humor acts not as a subversive tactic, but rather as another mechanism of self-constraint, for the laughers are not really interested in changing anything, but merely experiencing the temporary relief that comes from tension-releasing laughter; they are revealing that they are content, even *at ease* with the way things are even though the play mode enables them to recognize the disparity between that reality and how things *should* be.<sup>34</sup> This is not an espousal of Stoicism per se, in which one seeks the wisdom to distinguish between that which can be controlled and that which is beyond anyone's power. Morreall has many valuable things to say about laughter in the face of the latter, where I think a connection can be made between his "comic pragmatism"<sup>35</sup> and an existentialist brand of humor.<sup>36</sup> However, to confuse the latter with the

former is to adopt a spirit of seriousness: since nothing can be done about systemic oppression any more than we can elude death, “Why bother?” Why not just laugh?<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, I do not think this is what occurs when subversive humor, at least, is invoked.

There seem to be three distinct meanings of “seriousness” in opposition to “playfulness” relevant to this discussion: (1) the existential sense and Schopenhauer’s description above; (2) Morreall’s solemn or *grave* sense in which one has immediate practical concerns revealed in the literal use of *bona-fide* language and emotional engagement; and (3) the practical concern for that which is *important* to an individual; I take something *seriously* because it matters to me. This kind of *mattering* does not entail a hyper-emotional attachment to some state of affairs such that one is in a sense trapped in her reptilian brain, for example, where only fight or flight type responses are available. However, it is also not a mental state wholly devoid of emotion, as such a mental state would not (could not) elicit any interest, much less concern, for the individual.<sup>38</sup> It is this third sense of seriousness that is distinct from both the existentialist connotation and Morreall’s seriousness-as-graveness that is combined with playfulness in subversive humor that uses incongruities as a means to unsettle an unjust status quo.

Even with Morreall’s encouragement to *play life* as one plays music, rather than to work it, he still equates play with a purely aesthetic experience in which one is engaged “simply for the pleasure of the activity itself.”<sup>39</sup> There are many examples of this play mode in musicians, athletes, actors, and *playwrights*. In this sense, grave, sober, solemn, etc., are antonyms of play, but, when we look at professional (or even *amateur*, in the sense of “loving” what one does) musicians, athletes, etc., we are not contradicting ourselves if we note such people take their *play seriously*. We can add to this list philosophers and comedians. A philosopher, e.g., who engages in thought experiment (play of ideas) is serious in the sense of having sufficient concern about something to take the time to think about it deeply. At the same time, she is not overly-emotionally engaged with the subject of study such that she cannot think critically about it; she is not stuck in the mode of convergent thinking in which unusual solutions are ignored and incongruities are only viewed as “disturbances in the practical order of things.”<sup>40</sup> So, the philosopher can be serious without being in a spirit of seriousness and without being grave, grim, stern, and certainly not solemn or sober—a quick look at the history of philosophical thought experiments with evil demons, brains in vats, what it would be like to be bats, teletransporters, and famous violinists surreptitiously attached to one’s back, will quickly disabuse us from using the epithet “sober” for philosophers.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, a comedian, subversive wit in particular, does intend to arouse enjoyable laughter, but at the same time, she intends to invoke such mirth about important and thus *serious* matters. Very much like the philosopher, she engages her audience with amusing counter-factuals, possible worlds, and often socio-political role-reversals that convey serious information playfully. They reveal that playful humor does not just offer a sugar-coating to an otherwise tasteless (or distasteful)

medicine, but creative, critical open-mindedness that is more suited to making sense of an ambiguous, contingent, dynamic, and often uncertain reality.

It is surprising that Morreall maintains this hard line between his notions of “serious” and “play” given his analysis of humor and freedom and his specific mention<sup>42</sup> of the subversive feminist group, *The Guerilla Girls*, and in Soviet Russia, *Krokidil*,<sup>43</sup> who clearly use humor as a means to convey rebellious information *and* effect socio-political change. However, he later undercuts the force of their humor: “When we want to evoke anger or outrage about some problem, we don’t present it in a humorous way, precisely because of the practical disengagement of humor. *Satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries.*”<sup>44</sup> Many political spoofs are just jests employed solely for the gratification they might bring to an audience. Nevertheless, this is not the case for subversive humor, including the wittiness of many of the very individuals and groups Morreall cites.

### Serious Play in Subversive Humor

Consider the following from Morreall: “Suppose we are talking about how General Motors [GM] has recently closed several factories in order to cut costs, and you say, ‘Next they’ll shut down *all* their plants, to really save some money.’”<sup>45</sup> Morreall claims the humorous retort does not qualify as a locutionary act in J. L. Austin’s sense, e.g., other than being a meaningful string of words, because it is not meant to actually convey information, ask a question, or give a command.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Morreall claims it is not an illocutionary act either. In such acts, one is intending to *do* something with the words uttered, in particular, to get others to act in some way. So, when one performs an illocutionary act, this can be a means to bring about a change of some state of affairs, or what amounts to a perlocutionary act. He gives the example of a child asking to borrow dad’s car, and the father responds with the implicit command “the gas tank is almost empty.”<sup>47</sup> Here the illocutionary speech act is performed *in* the straightforward locutionary act which appears to be describing a state of affairs. But in this context, this mundane statement is understood by the child to mean something like “If you want to borrow the car YOU will have to fill it up with gas, perhaps out of YOUR own money.”

According to Morreall, joking and amusement, non-bona-fide or insincere uses of language, cannot be explained through Austin’s framework. This is not surprising, as mentioned multiple times above, playful humor conflicts with any practical concern, including the successful transmission of information. This is because, while in play mode, “[a]ll that counts is whether your words amuse me, and it doesn’t much matter how that is done.”<sup>48</sup> I think this misses the point of humor even in the everyday example Morreall chooses to make his case about humor and speech acts; but it especially fails to make sense of what occurs with subversive humor.



To return to his GM example, I might not be directly informing you about a fact regarding GM, but I am *indirectly* telling you something about the way GM affects my moral sensibilities, and others like me, and *should* affect yours. I do not intend that you believe the literal content of the faux-assertion, but I do convey something I think is true, at least on one reading of the joke—GM engages in immoral practices, or GM does not value (or care at all) for its employees. In order to enjoy the remark, one must be able to recognize the incongruity involved, and yet come to realize that what appeared nonsensical, non-illocutionary, and impractical on the superficial level, in fact does make sense when reinterpreted, in this case, from a (mildly) rebellious perspective: “Leaders of giant corporations that are too big to fail (or jail) can get away with anything; this is not as it should be.” This adept use of hyperbole to create a pleasing incongruity is doing more than merely delighting.

In Morreall’s example where my son wants to borrow the car, I state (locutionary act) that the car is almost out of gas. However, I am giving more than just a description of the way the world is; I am in a way prescribing to my son that the car *should* be filled up *by him*. There is a similar underlying linguistic and psychological structure with the GM example, but with the notable difference in its attempt at humor. In both of these rather ordinary cases, more is being said than what is literally presented, and the implicit information in both can be interpreted as important—even *serious* in the sense that what one is saying (in not saying it) matters.

The subversive wit recognizes the difference between the way the world is and the way it should be, and is *not content*, contra Morreall, with “everything [being] acceptable just as it is.”<sup>49</sup> In the section on intellectual and moral virtues fostered by humor, Morreall notes that since “all moral codes want us to transcend our ‘here/now/me’ perspective, they encourage us to avoid anger, fear, and other self-focused emotions.”<sup>50</sup> It is significant that he omits “real” and “practical” from this list, which he had included earlier in the text.<sup>51</sup> I think he has it right in the latter section, as neither morality nor humor is fully disengaged from reality and practical concern, and this is especially so with subversive humor. Indeed, Morreall offers many insightful examples that make this point, against so much of his earlier insistence that if something is truly humorous it cannot be burdened with practical concern, because, to the extent that it is, the experiences invoked are less aesthetic, less enjoyable, less focused only on the incongruity, and more concerned with somber issues that must be solved in an absolute, single-tracked approach.<sup>52</sup> This is the counter-attitude to playfulness, not the seriousness that accompanies important, real, practical issues like oppression, for example. The subversive humorist is not laughing stoically against an unjust reality that is inexorable no matter what one does--this is the spirit of seriousness. Rather, she is laughing at incongruities between reality and the way she thinks it should (and could) be. Diminishing this possibility unnecessarily shuts off potential avenues for non-violent protest against injustice within a system, such as subtle racism and implicit biases, which cannot be amended in more direct, legal, or

economic ways. As Iris Young rightly notes, we cannot legislate against joking any more than we can successfully proscribe racist or sexist attitudes through the court system.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, I will address some of the examples Morreall uses to defend the claim that humor fosters open-mindedness, multiple perspectives, and makes us “not only more tolerant of people’s differences, but more gracious.”<sup>54</sup> Here is the first:

Consider how Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater became a member of the Phoenix Country Club in the 1960’s. Because his father was Jewish, the club initially rejected his application. Instead of getting angry or filing a lawsuit, Goldwater called the club president to ask a question. ‘Since I’m only *half*-Jewish, can I join if I just play nine holes?’ The man laughed heartily and immediately let him in. Goldwater’s humor has gently opened his eyes to the absurdity of the club’s anti-Semitism and had given him an easy way to *change* its policy.<sup>55</sup>

Morreall does not tell us whether the policy was changed *only* for Goldwater or for all—a significant point. However, even if this worked only in the individual case, it does illustrate how one can be in play mode, use incongruity (“the absurdity of anti-Semitism”) humorously in order to elicit play mode in the listener, and invoke a change, even if minor, in an oppressive system. The question for Morreall here is whether this instance is no longer funny *because* it has as an additional goal, the practical intent to alter a part of social reality that Goldwater wishes were not the case. If the quip is still amusing, and it is as effective as Morreall contends, then this stands as an example of subversive humor in which a playful attitude is used to not only highlight, but amend a serious/important and practical situation.<sup>56</sup> This stands as an attack of the spirit of seriousness, in this case, explicitly mandated by the bigoted country club—that is, Goldwater is using humor to address a contingent state of affairs constructed by the mystifications of the serious.<sup>57</sup>

In another case, Morreall contends “[l]ives have been saved by humor... A few years before coming President, Lincoln was challenged to a duel. He agreed, provided that he could specify the weapons and the distance at which they would stand. The other gentleman agreed. Lincoln said, ‘Cow shit at five paces.’ And that was the end of the argument.” Little needs to be said about the seriousness involved with a situation in which death is highly probable; Lincoln was apparently inept at both swords and firearms. Happily for him, he did have a sense of humor; a fact duly noted and adopted by his potential dueler. The third example comes from his section entitled “Humor during the Holocaust.” In fact, there are many examples I could pick out from this section which illustrate the point I wish to make regarding the efficacy of subversive humor in which the wit *is* in play mode, *and* is taking a matter seriously in the sense that he wishes his situation were not as it is, and is acting through humor to change it. Jewish prisoners in ghettos or camps, for example, recognize the

incongruities in the absurdity of the Nazi regime and through humor are benefitted in three ways, according to Morreall: “humor focused attention on what was wrong and sparked resistance to it. Second was its cohesive function: it created solidarity in those laughing together at their oppressors. And third was its coping function: it helped the oppressed get through their suffering without going insane.”<sup>58</sup> There is both cognitive and emotional distance here, but it is not the sort envisioned by Morreall, for if it were, such humor would have been a boon only in his second and third ways, which is not nothing, of course. The first benefit of humor requires some kind of practical engagement, likely one that is both emotional and cognitive.

I will end with an example provided by Morreall that illustrates at least these three benefits of humor, in this case used against overt oppression:

Goebbels was touring German schools. At one, he asked the students to call out patriotic slogans. “Heil Hitler,” shouted one child. “Very good,” said Goebbels. “Deutschland über alles,” another called out. “Excellent. How about a stronger slogan?” A hand shot up, and Goebbels nodded. “Our people shall live forever,” the little boy said. “Wonderful,” exclaimed Goebbels. “What is your name, young man?” “Israel Goldberg.”<sup>59</sup>

This example, and others, disconfirms Morreall’s claims regarding the degree of disengagement in humor as such: “We are in a *play mode* rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns.”<sup>60</sup> But here we can see the ambiguity of “playfulness” and “seriousness.” Who is wholly disengaged in this example? Is it the Jewish boy who creates the humor? Is he so unemotional in this case that he is only concerned with creating an aesthetic experience? Is he so emotionally involved that he cannot succeed in such a creation? I would argue that he, like other subversive humorists from Frederick Douglass to Richard Pryor, to Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle, are in play mode when they make humorous socio-political commentary—but they are also (non-existentially) serious in much the same way a musician *seriously* plays her instrument, as an athlete *seriously* plays her sport, as a philosopher *seriously* plays with thought (experiments), and as a comedian *seriously* plays with humor.

By assuming a framework in which *everything* fits perfectly we habituate ourselves toward a spirit of seriousness. That is, we *incline* ourselves to an unquestioning attitude, one that presumes a hermetic seal between our (pre)conceptions and perceptions. Morreall notes that an omniscient being would not (*could* not) have a sense of humor as there would be nothing unexpected; no violations of patterns or conceptual frameworks.<sup>61</sup> By analogy (and it can only be that), the person habituated in a spirit of seriousness is epistemically closed not due to actual omniscience, but a

presumption of certainty within a particular domain that does not admit of surprise. Put differently, one has fostered a disposition to ignore any *unwanted* incongruities.

So with injustice, e.g., the subversive wit is not just puzzled by incongruity such that she attempts to only amend her attitude and perspective toward it as if she were merely confronted with a riddle; nor is she solely constrained within a negative attitude such that her thoughts are convergent, single-tracked, irrational, existentially and *Morreall*-serious. Rather, with subversive humor, there is the third element, humorous amusement, which allows for the subversive wit to transcend (without denying or fictionalizing) the emotional seriousness through entering play mode, linger with the puzzling incongruity, and find the matter important/serious enough to do something creative about it. Playfulness implies freedom of thought in which rules and hierarchies are viewed as contingent and malleable rather than necessary and inviolate, as assumed under a spirit of seriousness. The subversive humorist relies upon a playful attitude in her audience, but she also can help to facilitate such an attitude through the use of humor. When one is playful, one is open to others in ways not available in the default serious mode; meanings are not absolute and fixed, but contingent, as are the hierarchical, serious, oppressive structures resisted by the playful subversive humorist who recognize and exploit incongruities or gaps between our professed ideals and the way the world actually is. Analyzing the ambiguities between seriousness and playfulness and their relation to humor can provide fertile ground for further investigations in to the practical means of protest through humor.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer 2008, 93. For an overview Incongruity Theory of humor see Morreall 1983, 1-59; 1987, 1-186; Hurley et al. 37-56. Other terms often used as synonyms to define/explain incongruity have been ludicrousness, ridiculousness, the unexpected, contradiction, paradox, absurdity, something inappropriate or inconsistent, a lack of harmony, having parts that do not fit together, etc. Of course, not all of these concepts are interchangeable with each other. For more on this, see Morreall 2009, 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer 2008, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Morreall 2009, 13, 73-5; see also Sánchez 2012, 179 and Carroll 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Morreall 2009, 73.

<sup>5</sup> Morreall 1983, 38.

<sup>6</sup> According to Schopenhauer, humorous laughter results from the “victory of knowledge of perception over thought [which] affords us pleasure...It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency”, Schopenhauer 1887, 279-80. This is actually a very important insight by Schopenhauer,

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unfortunately he does not develop it any further, leaving us wondering what could possibly be enjoyable about discovering defects in our rationality.

<sup>7</sup> Morreall 1983, 52-3; see also 1987a.

<sup>8</sup> Morreall 1983, 53; 1987b.

<sup>9</sup> Morreall 2009, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Morreall is not alone in this view. See Davenport 171, Marmysz 146, and especially Gregor Benton, who has investigated the use of humor in the Soviet Union, puts it this way: “But the political joke will change nothing. It is the relentless enemy of greed, injustice, cruelty and oppression—but it could never do without them. It is not a form of active resistance...” Quoted in Sorensen 168-9. In contrasting amusement with negative emotions, Morreall claims that since “we enjoy the incongruity in amusement, our only motivation might be to prolong and perhaps communicate the enjoyable experience; we do not have the practical concern to improve the incongruous situation, nor the theoretical concern to improve our understanding of it”, 1987a, 196. I agree with Morreall regarding the desire to communicate the mirth and thus prolong (spread) that feeling to others, but without prolonging the activities themselves (government mistreatment of citizens, e.g.). I suppose it might be true that politically subversive humor would not be necessary if there were no incongruities to find amusing—if everyone were truly equal, and greed, injustice, cruelty, and oppression were somehow eradicated. However, this does not entail that humor cannot be beneficial in creating socio-political change. This would be akin to claiming that compassion is causally inert against suffering since the former could “never do without” the latter.

<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer 2008, 94, my italics.

<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer 1887, 280, my italics.

<sup>13</sup> Morreall 1999, 31.

<sup>14</sup> This term is adopted by H.P. Grice to refer to conversational senses inferred in a dialog in which one omits or even says the contrary of what one means. He offers a stipulative definition of this term to distinguish it from logical implication.

<sup>15</sup> De Beauvoir 1976, 85. See also Sartre 1977, 86-116; Gordon 1999; De Beauvoir 1976, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon 2000, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Morreall 1999, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Morreall 2009, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Hurley et al. 264.

<sup>20</sup> Morreall 2009, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Morreall 1999, 33, my italics.

<sup>22</sup> Morreall 2009, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Lugones’ conception of play fits the sort I envision for the subversive humorist. In contrasting her sense of play from the *agonistic* and competitive sense espoused by Johan Huizinga

and Hans-Georg Gadamer, she adeptly, and succinctly, deflates the former's view: "Huizinga, in his classic book on play, interprets Western civilization as play. That is an interesting thing for Third World people to think about." Lugones 94.

<sup>24</sup> De Beauvoir 1976, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Ziv 1983, 69.

<sup>26</sup> To presume the serious are incapable of humor is itself an adoption of a spirit of seriousness. At times Davenport falls into this attitude even as he, correctly I think, describes seriousness: "Indeed, it must be emphasized that individuals can be truly serious, in the ordinary [non-existential] sense, only to the degree that they do *not* hold their beliefs and values to be absolute" (Davenport 174-5). But he also writes this: "Humor, I am suggesting, requires a detachment from seriousness. The serious man--the man with undeviating confidence that his values are absolute is no more able to laugh at himself than the serious God", Davenport 170. I would replace "able" with "inclined".

<sup>27</sup> Morreall 1983, 93; 1987a, 197.

<sup>28</sup> Morreall 2009, 90-110.

<sup>29</sup> Morreall 2009, 105-9. Morreall reminds his readers that "sexist and racist jokes, like jokes in general, are known to be fictional by tellers and audience alike. We often introduce jokes with play signals such as, 'Have you heard the one about...'" and we use the present instead of the past tense to indicate that what we are saying is not a report of a real event", Morreall 2009, 105, and we use such obvious hyperbole that no one would take them as assertions. But on the very next page, Morreall states the following: "What usually makes these jokes harmful is that they present characters with exaggerated degrees of undesirable traits who represent groups that *some people believe* actually have those traits" (Morreall 2009, 106, my italics), and that it is the "stretching of negative stereotypes" that produces the fun (107). So they are fictional to the joke-teller, but not necessarily to an audience—this contradicts his statement on the previous page regarding "play signals." So, joke-tellers have no intention to convey information; if they did, they would not have packaged the "propositions" in the form of aesthetic vehicles which are (only?) meant to delight.

<sup>30</sup> Morreall 1983, 121-26.

<sup>31</sup> Morreall 2009, 106.

<sup>32</sup> See any of the horrid examples of oppressive jokes on the racist website "White Aryan Resistance" (WAR).

<sup>33</sup> Morreall 2009, 102.

<sup>34</sup> See Morreall 1999, 4-6.

<sup>35</sup> Morreall 1999, 29.

<sup>36</sup> See Marmysz 155-166; Davenport.

<sup>37</sup> This is the attitude toward humor that Gordon rightly criticizes: "Humor stands in these communities as complex competitors of proverbs, but instead of wisdom, they offer distance",

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Gordon 2000, 34. I think Morreall's criticism of Camus' "metaphysical rebellion" and his scornful attitude toward the absurdity of existence, for instance, is correct. A comic vision, of the sort expressed by Nietzsche, e.g., rather than tragic vision in response to such *inevitable* absurdity makes more sense: "the lesson they offer is that facing a world without epistemological or ethical foundations, our highest and most authentic response is not pointless rebellion, but laughter", Morreall 2009, 132; see also Marmysz 155-71; Davenport 169-173. But the sorts of absurdity in oppression that subversive humorists rebel against are *not* inevitable; rebellion is not pointless in these cases, nor is rebellious laughter, as it is not God or Nature or some other Law of Necessity against which the marginalized are railing, but the contingent structures designed for the benefit of some humans at the expense of others. To borrow from Daniel Dennett on issues of free will, these oppressive systems are "evitable." Contra Morreall, I argue that subversive humor is not a flippant attempt to render an inexorable event psychologically, emotionally, or intellectually insignificant, but a practical means of responding to that part of the world and mind which is *subvertible*. Marmysz, I think gets it half right when he notes that we can use humor to "reorient ourselves toward" otherwise painful experiences "in such a manner that we gain a feeling of control and mastery over them" (145). But he, like Morreall, sees this attitude as a mere "means toward the end of providing us with merriment", Marmysz 146.

<sup>38</sup> "If it was about something that didn't matter, the brain wouldn't bother dealing with it at all", Hurley et al. 184 nt. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Morreall 1999, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Morreall 1983, 122.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the seriousness of playing with thought, see Kramer "The Playful thought Experiments of Louis CK," in *Louis CK and Philosophy*, forthcoming.

<sup>42</sup> Morreall 2009, 70.

<sup>43</sup> Morreall 1983, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Morreall 2009, 101, my italics.

<sup>45</sup> Morreall 2009, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Additionally, it violates most of H.P. Grice's rules of conversational logic, in particular his Cooperative Principle. Here are some of the maxims which I mesh together: "Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence; avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief [and he adds somewhat ironically] (avoid unnecessary prolixity); be orderly", see Morreall 1983, 79-82.

<sup>47</sup> Morreall 2009, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Morreall 2009, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Morreall 1989, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Morreall 2009, 116.

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<sup>51</sup> Morreall 2009, 32, quoted above.

<sup>52</sup> See Morreall 1983, 92-100; 1987b, 216; 2009, 116. Davenport (171) and Marmysz follow Morreall on this: “Seriousness is committed, earnest and somber. The humorous attitude ... moderates our seriousness, reminding us that in the grand scheme of things, nothing is really that important”, Marmysz 161. The subversive humorist, at least, is also committed and earnest, just indirectly, and this is especially the case when humor is used as a tool to undercut an unjust system rather than frivolously flail against fate. But I think Marmysz has half of the story correct enough to incorporate an analysis of all sorts of humor *including* subversive humor. This is evident in the following: “However, a humorous attitude is not the same as an attitude lacking in seriousness. It is, rather, an ability to see things within the context of multiple perspectives” (Marmysz 162). But he does not disambiguate the term “serious.”

<sup>53</sup> See Young 152. Perhaps not surprisingly, there have been “Joke Courts” established by some totalitarian regimes, most notably in Nazi Germany, in which people were punished for naming “their dogs and horses ‘Adolph’”, Morreall 1983, 102. This is revealing for a number of reasons: first, it shows that the phrase “It’s just a joke” needs unpacking especially regarding political humor, and a second related point, those in power fear the weapon of the humorist-from-below.

<sup>54</sup> Morreall 2009, 116-7.

<sup>55</sup> Morreall 2009, 117, my italics.

<sup>56</sup> It is an error to assume *a priori* that one cannot question certitude without assuming a position of indubitability, and thus, existential, solemn seriousness. Morreall is not alone in his claim that humor dissipates as practical engagement intrudes: “The best humorists—Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Bob Hope, and Mort Sahl—share this mixture of detachment and desire, eagerness to believe, and irreverence concerning the possibility of certainty. And when they become serious about their convictions—as Twain did about colonialism and Hope about Vietnam—they cease to be humorous,” Davenport 171. He does not provide examples of their attempts at satire that fail to be humorous.

<sup>57</sup> While the situations are clearly different in scope, there are parallels between this sort of exchange and the satire of someone like Jonathan Swift: “And that, of course, was Swift’s intention. He used humor not to entertain, but to change the reader’s political views. The ability of humor to change (or attempt to change) our beliefs deserves explanation”, LaFollette and Shanks 330. I agree. Although I would qualify the statement with “he used humor not [just] to entertain....” Marmysz offers a good starting point for the arguments I wish to make: “Comedy, jokes, and humor are potentially subversive tools that, in their power to make the dangers of the world look small, also have the power to overthrow and destroy the serious spirit of reverence that tradition and authority have bestowed upon our leaders and social institutions,” Marmysz 162. There is a fine line, however,



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between making a potential tragedy appear less important than it might be, and trivializing genuine suffering.

<sup>58</sup> Morreall 2009, 118.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Morreall 2009, 124.

<sup>60</sup> Morreall 2009, 50; see also 1983, 88-90; 1999, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Morreall 2009, 14-15; 1999, 46.

<sup>62</sup> This paper is a result of research from my dissertation "Subversive Humor."

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