

## I Laugh Because it's Absurd: Humor as Error-Detection

Chris A. Kramer (Summer 2020)

Forthcoming (2021) in *The Lighthearted Philosophers Society's Introduction to Philosophy through Humor*

“A man orders a whole pizza pie for himself and is asked whether he would like it cut into eight or four slices. He responds, ‘Four, I’m on a diet’” (Carroll)<sup>1</sup>

While not *hilarious*--so funny that it induces chortling punctuated with outrageous vomiting--this little gem is amusing. We recognize that something has gone wrong. On a first reading it might not compute, something doesn't quite make sense. Then, *aha!*, we understand the hapless dieter has misapplied general rules of thumb, mental short-cuts, or heuristics, that we were also initially committed to and that would usually be good enough to rely upon—*fewer slices equals fewer calories; diets require fewer calories*, etc—but in this particular case they fail, and the feeling of mirth is our reward for making this discovery. We don't say all of that after a punchline, of course, but that's what is happening according to the *Humor as Error-Detection Theory*: our sense of humor can sense our errors.

This chapter will focus on the overlap and benefits of a humorous and philosophical attitude toward the world and our place in it. The historian of philosophy Will Durant tells us that genuine philosophy begins when one learns to doubt; we can say something similar with humor--trust me.

### **I. If philosophy (or humor) is to serve a positive purpose it is to dissipate certainty**

The paraphrase above (with my parenthetical addition) is from Bertrand Russell's *Philosophy for Laymen*. This is his central point: “[Philosophy] must not teach mere skepticism, for, while the

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<sup>1</sup> From *Philosophy Bites* Podcast with David Edmunds and Nigel Warburton, ep. 151, 4/9/11. [https://hwdn.libsyn.com/p/4/4/0/440ba45df61652ba/Noel\\_Carroll\\_on\\_Humour.mp3?c\\_id=3170938&cs\\_id=3170938&expiration=1593445900&hwt=96d8eb7bc5bf362449d62701916c818e](https://hwdn.libsyn.com/p/4/4/0/440ba45df61652ba/Noel_Carroll_on_Humour.mp3?c_id=3170938&cs_id=3170938&expiration=1593445900&hwt=96d8eb7bc5bf362449d62701916c818e). Carroll believes that “Humor is about humility, realizing what cognitively frail beings we are.” He's probably right.

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dogmatist is harmful, the skeptic is useless. Dogmatism and skepticism are both, in a sense, absolute philosophies; one is certain of knowing, the other of not knowing” (Russell 45). It is interesting that both philosophy and humor confront a similar target: absolutism. To clarify, Russell is worried about an extreme form of skepticism that presumes knowledge is impossible. Socrates, I think, dealt with that brand of unmitigated ignorance some time ago: are you *certain* you know nothing? The extreme skeptical claim is self-refuting, paradoxical, and at least a little bit droll.<sup>2</sup>

This is different from what we might call “rational skepticism” which is the sort of epistemic caution extolled in philosophy, but also in humor as we can see from humorists like Mark Twain, “What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know; it’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so” (quoted in Hurley 109), and comedians like Chris Rock, “to make people laugh about things that weren’t so funny [or obvious] to begin with. That’s why I’m here” (Oprah Interview 2002), Hannah Gadsby, “My goal is to shake your confidence” (*Douglas* 2020), and Louis CK,<sup>3</sup> “I believe in taking people to upsetting territory, and making them glad they went there” (*Sundance* 2010), and we like it. So, we benefit from a humorous attitude in a similar way that we can benefit from a philosophical attitude: we are open to doubt, confusion, ambiguity, vagueness, complexity. That is, we are open to reality as it is, not just as we might wish it were.

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<sup>2</sup> If I know I know nothing, then there is something I know; that I know nothing. But that is not knowing nothing, it’s knowing something--that I know nothing. Therefore, it’s false that I know nothing. And I know it’s false. So, I know something. Something doesn’t smell right--but nothing smells worse.

<sup>3</sup> Yes, morally troubled waters here. I will say this: Louis CK is like Immanuel Kant, if only in this respect; both displayed egregiously sexist ideology and/or behavior, and both are difficult to completely remove from the canons of their respective fields. For more on this, see Becca Rothfeld’s “Can Sexual Predators Be Good Scholars?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2017). Kant probably also masturbated into plants in front of people.

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The moment you sense that feeling of unshakable confidence in your beliefs, you should be worried, because, as Russell and Twain aver, that is where danger lurks. I give little to no thought to the truth of the equation  $1+1=2$ .<sup>4</sup> In fact my certainty in that precludes me from even considering alternative answers. That is fine. But if that same feeling of certainty infects other areas of epistemic concern, like religion, politics, ethics, or baseball statistics, then I have a problem. I will be disinclined to even listen to differing perspectives. This way leads to dogmatism, and that quickly manifests in burning witches, or insisting that COVID-19 will go away if only we would just stop testing for it so much.<sup>5</sup>

Happily, a humorous attitude toward the world helps facilitate a philosophical attitude, and vice-versa. Consider any number of seminal<sup>6</sup> thought experiments involving evil demons, brains in vats, what it would be like to be bats, teletransporters, and famous violinists surreptitiously attached to our backs. These mental exercises cultivate unconventional ways of thinking about issues we might otherwise complacently ignore. They are also kind of funny; at least, if we are open-minded, they elicit a “hey, that’s funny”, as in “strange”, “unexpected”, “novel”, or an enlightening variant of “WTF!”, but about matters we thought we already knew quite well. Humor, like philosophy, takes nothing for granted; this is good, because I’m pretty confident that we’re wrong a lot more than we’re right.

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<sup>4</sup> Russell did though. For a fun time, find his logical grounding for that equation halfway through volume 2 of the massive tome *Principia Mathematica*. Now *that* text *is* hilarious. You will vomit.

<sup>5</sup> Our President: “When you do testing to that extent, you’re going to find more people, you’re going to find more cases, so I said to my people, ‘Slow the testing down, please.’” Jane C. Timm, “Fact check: Trump blames testing for spike in COVID-19 cases. Experts fault reopening of states.”

<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/fact-check-trump-blames-testing-spike-covid-19-cases-experts-n1228671>. June 10, 2020, accessed 6/29/20.

<sup>6</sup> You thought there’d be a joke here, didn’t you?

## II. Fallacies are funny

Very often when we discover a mistake in reasoning, a fallacy, we laugh.<sup>7</sup> This is interesting. Contradiction, inconsistency, irrationality, absurdity, nonsense, ridiculousness, repugnance, fallacy, etc., are some terms philosophers have used to refer to instances of poor reasoning. They are also concepts useful in analyzing why laughter often accompanies fault-finding endeavors. For instance, I was recently in a political-economic discussion, and my interlocutor responded to my point with something like “you don’t benefit poor people by raising the minimum wage. That’s just *Econ 101*.” My witty repartee: “And *that* is a proof surrogate!” Puzzled, he asked what the hell that was. My even wittier riposte: “Don’t you know? That’s *Logic...101*.”<sup>8</sup> A surrogate mother is not the actual mother, she is standing in for her. Likewise, a surrogate proof is not an actual proof, it is something else that is easy (castigating someone for not taking the proper college course), taking the place of the burden of thinking logically. Of course, part of my wittiness was itself a proof surrogate. We laughed.

Returning to our President’s peculiar view on the causal connections between testing and the spread of a disease, Trump and his spokespeople have claimed he was being sarcastic with those comments, presumably each time he made them. But if you watch the videos of each of those statements, and you know the meaning of “sarcasm”, you might come to a different

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<sup>7</sup> Special thanks to Brian Wagner and Michelle Rotert for all our conversations on this topic. For a look at funny fallacies in *Sesame Street*, see (Ross 2015). For a look at a lot of funny fallacies in general, see (Capps and Capps 2009).

<sup>8</sup> That’s not exactly how it went down. Instead I actually made some esoteric case against propagandistic language that indoctrinates us into thinking we help the poor by helping the rich; and we *hurt* the poor by trying to *help* the poor. Not as funny or clever. But the witty reply only really occurred to me just now. If brevity is the soul of wit, immediacy-of-rebuttal is its body.

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conclusion--indeed, you might laugh at their risible rationalizations. If he was being serious, which he has, inexplicably, also said, well, there's not much hope. To expound by way of analogy, here are some other areas where we could "improve" through willful, aggressive ignorance: *if we desire fewer babies, get rid of pregnancy tests; if we don't want mercury in our waters, stop looking for it there; want to lose weight? throw away all your scales, and don't go to the doctor--ever. That last one should markedly improve your overall health.* Notice these absurd analogies reveal the silliness (I was going to use "stupendous stupidity" but that would be uncouth, and if I am anything, it's couth)<sup>9</sup> of the primary analogue.

It is not coincidental that in logic we have an argument form called *reductio ad absurdum*, or for the initiated, and snobby, just *reductio*. It is, as you might guess, to reduce another's argument or claim to absurdity, which in logic implies revealing contradictions or at least significant inferential errors in their argument. Daniel Dennett refers to it as "the crowbar of rational inquiry," and, in reference to the common employment of analogies found with similar logical thrusts and parries, he tells us it works "by parody of reasoning" (Dennett 29). This is clever; "parity" of reasoning amounts to the legal heuristic, *similar cases ought to be decided similarly*. But you see, "parody" of reasoning connotes satirical imitation or lampooning. It's quite good, really.

The *reductio* offers a handy rejoinder to rampant conspiracy theories, e.g., where you might ask an Alex Jones-type, *what would have to also be the case if what you're saying about*

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<sup>9</sup> This is an example of *paralipsis*, more of a rhetorical device of manipulation than a fallacy, but usually resorted to when one is bereft of logical argument; and it can also be quite funny. It is purposely calling attention to something in the very act of asserting that you are *not* going to talk about it. It could be classed as a variant of *performative contradiction*, like that found in Augustine and later more formally in Descartes: if I can doubt my own existence, that entails I must exist. Put in terms relevant here, "I don't exist!", once uttered, annihilates itself--"Who said that?"

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*the Sandy Hook mass shooting conspiracy were true? An answer: Oh, the gun-control folks wanted to gin up anger at NRA folks, so they went the route of mass-child-murder to manipulate our pathos to spark an attack against the Second Amendment. This seems implausible.<sup>10</sup> If contradictions, absurdities, question-begging nonsense, etc., were to follow, that should show that the initial conspiratorial claims are dubious, if not outright laughable.<sup>11</sup>*

Recognizing absurdity can be funny. Søren Kierkegaard goes so far as to claim that all humor is a species of contradiction. Literally “to speak against” oneself, contradictions do seem ripe for humor: “Errors are comical, and are all to be explained by the contradiction involved, however complicated the combinations” (Kierkegaard 1986, 86). He probably meant something like “incongruity”, or unexpected dissonance, rather than the strict logical sense of “contradiction”, but there are many examples of funny formal contradictions.<sup>12</sup> Here’s one from quantum physics: *Schrödinger’s cat walks into a bar and doesn’t*. It would be irrational, in terms of classical logic<sup>13</sup> to assent to both of those claims at once. But, lots of people a lot of the time, fall into the abyss of absurdity. It might even be an inescapable aspect of being human, to

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<sup>10</sup> That is called *understatement*--exaggeration going the other direction. See Timothy Johnson’s “Here is exactly what Alex Jones has said about the Sandy Hook massacre” <https://www.mediamatters.org/alex-jones/here-exactly-what-alex-jones-has-said-about-sandy-hook-massacre> (2017) for Jones’ long-standing perspectives on Sandy Hook. Accessed 7/1/2020.

<sup>11</sup> There are plenty more supremely stupid claims that would have to be true if the “Sandy Hook Conspiracies” (there is more than 1) were true. Why this will not always convince a conspiracy theorist that they have made an error is curious, but would require a separate chapter to properly address. Suffice it to say here, their perseverance in maintaining a self-sealing web of beliefs is extraordinary, against which even laughter might prove ineffective.

<sup>12</sup> Our meme-obsessed culture sometimes can provide decent educational examples: <https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=funny+images+of+contradictions&qpvf=funny+images+of+contradictions&form=IGRE&first=1&scenario=ImageBasicHover>. Accessed 6/10/20. Kierkegaard would *love* the internet! (Sarcasm, not paralipsis).

<sup>13</sup> There might be exceptions to this according to non-classical logics, in which some contradictions can be true. This view can be found in paraconsistent logic--which is itself a joke. And also, it isn’t.

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paraphrase Walt Whitman, so what if we contradict ourselves, “we are large, we contain multitudes,” and this might mean that humor is in fact inevitable.

The first part of this chapter's title borrows from Kierkegaard (1989 446), and before him the Christian apologist Tertullian, who once quipped about the central *contradictory* tenets of Christianity, in putatively ironic fashion, “I believe because it is absurd.” The idea that we laugh at absurdity, contradictions, or an incongruity between the way we thought the world was and how we now recognize it actually is, goes back at least to Arthur Schopenhauer (an odd source for humor analysis. Seriously, go find an image of him right now--that face and humor are extremely incongruous).

For 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 279-80). This seems correct, but needs the following: being amused can be a diversion, but not necessarily, or not *only* that, and “for once” seems too weak--mistakes are everywhere, and with the properly cultivated attitude, not only can we be primed to find them, we can actually enjoy the discoveries enough to want to repeat the experience of error-detection, so that we are open<sup>14</sup> to the possibility of errors and become better equipped to recognize them in the future. Thus, humor can be intrinsically valuable and diverting, like sex, which is pleasurable

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<sup>14</sup> Being open to error is essential, and we can see in at least one way how a humorous attitude differs from an overly serious one: “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*” (Schopenhauer 280, my italics). Such a dogmatic lens is highly susceptible to ignoring errors, not just committing them. For more on the ambiguities of “seriousness” and “playfulness”, see (Kramer 2015b).

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in and of itself, but also instrumentally valuable as a fecund form of playful intellectual training, a means to give birth to a sound web of beliefs--like having sex with an intellectual.

Schopenhauer even provides an example of our joyful experience of detecting an error in a joke: “The soldiers in the guard-room who allowed a prisoner who was brought in to join their game of cards, then quarreled with him for cheating, and turned him out . . . [he then dissects the joke for us] They let themselves be led by the general conception, ‘Bad companions are turned out,’ and forget that he is also a prisoner, i.e., one who they ought to hold fast” (Schopenhauer 277-8). Once again, no projectile-puking here, but notice it can be interpreted as a fallacy of Accident in which a general rule is followed and *accidental* features in this specific case are ignored, as the rule of thumb, heuristic, or “general conception” is strictly adhered to even in the face of mitigating factors that should have been seen as exceptions the rule. That sought-out feeling of mirth is so rewarding that we enjoy finding mistakes, even in our own cognitive house, as we will soon see. So, on the Error-Detection model, mirth provides “the motivation for a mind to search out subtle oversights made in reasoning that could infect the integrity of our knowledge” (Hurley 67), making humor an excellent and enjoyable mistake-minding tool.

### III. Why is error-detection so enjoyable?

I mentioned sex, a couple of times. That is with good reason--we need it, desperately. For whatever (comically strange) reason, that is just how our species propagates. It is nearly impossible to explain this procedure to your children without eliciting an uncomfortable smile or a guffaw of outrage tinged with befuddlement -- “No way! *That can-not* be how it's done!” The



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child's mixed-emotional exclamation is not misplaced; it really does seem like they have unearthed a colossal blunder in the design of the world, and their laughter in part expresses this.

The world is complex, and is exponentially more so when we add human beings interacting with one another in situations that require immediate action with little information. We need something that can do the dirty work of “debugging for the underlying mechanisms of control within an environment” (Hurley xi) to catch the flawed rules of thumb that would otherwise direct our behavior and belief. One of the clearest presentations of this view is from Hurley:

Our brains are engaged full time in real-time (risky) heuristic search, generating presumptions about what will be experienced next in every domain. This time-pressured, unsupervised generation process has necessarily lenient standards and introduces content—not all of which can be properly checked for truth—into our mental spaces. If left unexamined, the inevitable errors in these vestibules of consciousness would ultimately continue on to contaminate our world knowledge store. So there has to be a policy of double-checking these candidate beliefs and surmisings, and the discovery and resolution of these at breakneck speed is maintained by a powerful reward system—the feeling of humor; mirth—that must support this activity in competition with all the other things you could be thinking about (Hurley, 12-13).

The hard-won reward for sex is orgasm, as the easy-won reward for error-detection is mirth, and we are addicted to both--hopefully not at the same time. The feelings of mirth arise as payoff for the mental energy required to juxtapose potentially conflicting ideas in our minds, allowing for us to discover an error in our committed beliefs: “Humor happens when an *assumption* is *epistemically committed* to in a mental space and then discovered to have been a *mistake*” (Hurley 121). Most of the examples used by Hurley regarding committed erroneous beliefs are rather innocuous. However, the cognitive groundwork they provide allows us to extend their

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notion of error detection to humor as a mechanism capable of revealing pernicious stereotypical beliefs, e.g., to which one is committed. The feelings of mirth arise as a reward for finding an error in heuristic thinking that if left unchecked could lead to negative stereotyping and oppression. That is some of the serious work that humor can do.<sup>15</sup>

Heuristics are fast, frugal, and rarely conscious, so, in order for an error to be exposed, the humor must bring to consciousness the relevant frames or schemas in our mental spaces, and in a way that is pleasant enough to desire repeating it, again, and again. Not only are the heuristics that so often regulate our lives below the level of consciousness, *most* of our beliefs are not consciously engaged at any given moment, even when they might be causally efficacious with respect to our action. This is a problem if those underlying causal beliefs are flawed and might lead to unethical acts against others. This is one reason why philosophical thought experiments can be so effective, for example, as they are designed to tweak our intuitions in the “laboratories of our minds”, our mental spaces, as opposed to empirical testing in physical labs which is not always possible.

It is a useful exercise to consider how many beliefs you might actually have, and then, ask how many of them are likely true? Where did they come from, when did you acquire them and why? Listening to some comedians, it seems this Cartesian method is central to their performance: you think you know all your beliefs are true? Well, then *what's the deal with death and public speaking?* “According to most studies, people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average

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<sup>15</sup> For more on this see (Kramer 2013; 2015ab).

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person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy" (Seinfeld 2014).<sup>16</sup> Well obviously, *that* is false, even *absurd*. But then why do we keep claiming we fear public speaking so damn much? In other words, we are wrong about what we think our own fears are! How stupid can we be? A better question: can we ameliorate our ignorance through recognizing an error within our own belief system? If we cannot, then perhaps "stupid" is apt. If we can, and even enjoy the process, well then, we might just be brilliant!

### IV. What's so funny about *me* being so wrong?

It is true, our gleeful error-detection in *other* people's words and deeds is more common because it is much easier than realizing *I* have reasoned repugnantly. But sometimes we can laugh at our own ludicrous behavior and thought, and be better for it. After all, a philosophical attitude critical only of others comes perilously close to dogmatism, so we should be able to direct our humor-analyzing mechanism to our own web of beliefs as well. I will close with an anecdote to make this pedagogical point, even though it will be at my own expense--such is the sacrifice heroic educators must sometimes make.

There was a time when I suffered from "road rage" and I would often yell and pound my fist in the air at my freeway opponents. Once I was cut off by a pickup truck and immediately flew into rage-mode, screaming and punching the ceiling of my own car--I acquired the stereotype "all pickup drivers are jackasses" from my father; striking my own car is my embellishment. I briefly caught sight of myself in the rear-view mirror, and in that second I burst

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ6giVKp9ec>. Accessed 7/3/2020.

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out in uncontrollable laughter, *at myself*. This happened so quickly that the laughter began before the ceiling-pounding had ended, making for a borderline psychotic, clearly ridiculous scene.

This was not a typical eureka moment that happened in a flash; I had built up to it through months, if not years, of my wife's gentle, and at times more aggressive, humorous mocking of my deep character flaw. My self-directed laughter was not ridiculing or a superiority-type of mockery espoused by Hobbes (**see this volume, chapter...**), as I would then have had to be feeling superior to myself in that very moment--this would be incoherent. The sense of humor in that instance put me in the right distance metaphorically from the source of the humor (myself, perceived in an unappealing light), and enabled me to understand, and perhaps feel what I must have looked like from someone else's perspective, and that something had gone horribly wrong with me.<sup>17</sup> It worked! This, finally, made me conscious of the stereotype-driven character flaw, and changed my behavior; the laughter at myself drove me to ride a bicycle to work. I am happy to report, I no longer feel any rage at those pickup truck driving jackasses.

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<sup>17</sup> Much of this paragraph comes from (Kramer 2012).

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