

Chris A. Kramer\*: *A Philosophy of Humour*, Alan Roberts. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. pp. ix +133.

In *A Philosophy of Humour*, Alan Roberts presents a brief but extremely well-sourced overview of the history of the philosophy of humor (I will omit “u” for brevity, the soul of wit), and offers a new theory of humor focusing on the role of amusement. This text does not assume any prior acquaintance with theories of humor or philosophy, and in light of this, Roberts does well to define, either in the text or a brief note, the philosophical concepts necessary to help the reader follow along. Even though the text is relatively short, Roberts covers a surprising amount of philosophical ground on humor including a considerable number of counterarguments from multiple disciplines. This is important as humor is not explicable from a single field of study, as it is a subject that is interwoven in just about every intellectual (and non-intellectual) domain.

Those well-versed in the philosophy of humor might be inclined to skip to the final chapter that introduces a new theoretical framework. This would be a mistake. For one thing, you would miss out on the oldest joke in the world (a fart joke, of course) and the oldest joke in English (a dick joke, of course) (28n3). But there are other, perhaps even more important, reasons. Essential conceptual analysis in the early chapters sets the scaffolding for the later fully developed theory. For instance, in Chapter 2, Roberts makes integral distinctions among “amusement,” “funniness,” and “humor” where other theorists have lumped them together, often to the detriment of their own arguments. When those 4 elements are conflated it becomes difficult to avoid circular and/or vacuous definitions (see 4, 14–16). Furthermore, Roberts makes a critical distinction between the normative and descriptive assumptions of *funniness*, a difference other well-known theorists, such as Noël Carroll, Aaron Smuts, and Berys Gaut, fail to make. When we claim that a statement is funny, we are not merely describing some facet of reality, or describing anything at all; rather, Roberts contends, we are making a normative or evaluative claim, we are “endors[ing] a response of amusement towards it” (13). This leads Roberts to his “Theory of Funniness: Object *O* is funny if and only if *O* merits amusement” (14). And this will eventually take us to his “Theory of Humor: Object *O* is humor if and only if *O* is intended to elicit amusement” (17). This means the role and mental states of the wit, in addition to those of the audience, is crucial to any evaluation of humor.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Santa Barbara City College; cakramer1@pipeline.sbccc.edu

<sup>1</sup> I will return to this point later with my very few critiques of the text.

Indeed, because of the “intended” criterion, we are able to preclude ubiquitous cat videos on YouTube from the circle of humor, even if they amuse us. I, for one, find this to be a positive development. Additionally, “unintentional humor,” on Roberts’s account, is contradictory: if I accidentally slip on a banana peel [this has surely NEVER actually happened in the history of humanity, but seems to make it into every text on humor, including this one], and my friends (and enemies) laugh at me, I am *not* the author of humor, even though my inept actions caused others to be amused. Rather, I am the unintentional object of amusement. The assessment is different, of course, if we can determine that the fall was a deliberate bit of slapstick (something Roberts’s theory does well to address in a way other theorists often cannot). Arriving at this conclusion is not a flaw of the theory, but the “inevitable consequence of making the definition of ‘humor’ more rigorous” (19). What then is “amusement,” the critical component of humor? We have to wait until the final chapter, luckily, only a mere 96 pages away.

Chapter 3 offers early accounts of the Superiority, Release, and Play theories of humor, setting the stage for Chapter 5 where he provides critiques as well as “refinements” focusing on the affective elements of amusement. Chapter 4 highlights the cognitive components of amusement, centering on early incongruity theories and then supplying some fine-tuning. In the interest of space and not giving it all away, I will focus here only on one of these proposed refinements. Historically, Incongruity theses state that some sort of dissonance, unexpected result, frame-shifting between incompatible scripts, or general incongruity is necessary or sufficient, or necessary and sufficient, for humor. Roberts covers what he calls unsuccessful refinements of the incongruity theories (51–57) then proposes his own treatment borrowing from Arthur Koestler’s Bisociation model. This takes some work, even though it is in a short span of a few pages. He ends up with the following cognitive component of amusement: “If subject *S* is amused by object *O*, then *S* activates two inconsistent interpretations via unsound reasoning because of *O*” (75). The addition of unsound reasoning helps to explain why we are sometimes amused when confronted by a fallacy or recognize we have committed one ourselves, but only in certain circumstances. This then leads to his assessment of the affective component of amusement found in the Superiority, Release, and Play theories in the penultimate chapter.

His “key insight” gained from the Superiority theories (the view that there is always a butt of a joke) is that aggression, in the proper amounts, can increase the degree of amusement (90). But if there is too much, if the comic goes too far or “crosses the line,” then there is the other side of the bell curve, and amusement decreases. This is not the most insightful point of the book, but it plays an important role in connecting the affective with the cognitive components of

amusement later. It reminds me of the scene from Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, "If it bends it's funny. If it breaks, it isn't." This Aristotelian golden mean of aggression will be a key component in Roberts's broader theory of the affective component of amusement. It could be argued that there is a similar bell-curve found in cognitive elements of incongruity theories as well—too much incongruity with no hope for resolution will correlate with less amusement. Too little incongruity, a joke that requires hardly any cognitive effort, will also lack amusement (think of an easy riddle or crossword puzzle, or, on the other end of the spectrum, a riddle or puzzle that appears unsolvable). I was once told that James Joyce had a number of inside jokes embedded in his *Ulysses* that only a few people could get. He also had a number about which, purportedly, only *he* could experience incongruity. This much obscurity makes one wonder whether there could be humor present at all.

Roberts's most interesting insight is his refinement of contemporary Play theories where he considers that play, while not sufficient, might be necessary for amusement. He invokes the wonderful coinage from Michael Apter referencing a playful state of mind—"paratelic"—one is engaged in an activity solely for the pleasure of it. This is in contrast to a "telic" state that is goal-directed, and thus akin to seriousness, although they are not synonymous (99). While one can be both telic and playful, one can also be both playful and serious, and even in a paratelic state while interacting with satirical humor. This conceptual work has great potential for studies of *serious humor*. But, one cannot be simultaneously paratelic and in a goal-directed state. This, for me, is the crux of the book, but also a potential weakness. He then delivers the definition of the affective component of amusement which is combined with the cognitive component to give the following theory of amusement: "Subject *S* is amused by object *O*, if and only if: (1) *S* is in the paratelic state. (2) *S* activates two inconsistent interpretations via unsound reasoning because of *O*. (3) *S*'s arousal is increased because of (2) (116). I am only going to consider part 1 of this definition, the arousal component appears sound, and any critique of (2) would require a full length paper.

Roberts notes that counter-examples to part 1 would have to "be cases of amusement in a goal-directed state or cases of amusement in a threatened state" (104). I agree with him that being in a playful state precludes one being, in that moment, threatened, as the two states are incompatible. But it is not obvious that goal-directedness and amusement are mutually exclusive. Of the putative counter-examples he offers, the following is the most promising: "a tennis player is amused with self-satisfied delight at skillfully scoring a point. It may seem that the player is both amused and in a goal-directed state. However, I argue that here the amusement and goal-directed state occur successively rather than simultaneously. The player is in the goal-directed state while scoring

the point and in a state of amusement after scoring the point” (105). An analogy with satire might be this: the audience is in a paratelic state, listening to a comedian solely for the sake of amusement, and only after laughing at a subversive joke, do they get the point on a cognitive level, and might be led to a telic mode in which they might now have a conscious goal to address an injustice called out by the humorist. But the tennis example focuses only on the player’s mental states, not the audience’s, which makes sense in an analysis of a tennis player’s self-satisfaction. This fact is revealing when juxtaposed with instances of humor. Throughout the text, Roberts primarily is concerned with an audience’s reception and internal mental states when perceiving something that might constitute amusement. In fact, he only makes explicit reference to the mental states of humorists, those who *intend* to elicit amusement in others, a couple of times (17–20). With such little focus on the creators of amusement, a large segment of socio-political humor is left under-explained, in particular the unique collaborative relationship between humorist and audience. Why does this matter?

Consider a couple of examples from comedian and (simultaneously) Civil Rights activist Dick Gregory: “My wife and I were just voted the good-neighbor award, we even went out and burned our own cross” (quoted in Watkins 1999, 257). Or this, “A black man enters a Southern restaurant and is told, ‘Sorry, we don’t serve colored folks here.’ His reply, ‘Fine, I don’t eat them, just bring me a medium rare hamburger” (quoted in Watkins 1991, 52). In both cases there is an inconsistent interpretation brought on by unsound reasoning, and the audiences’ arousal is increased because of the incongruity, meeting Roberts’s second and third conditions in his theory of amusement. But it is not clear that the audience, nor importantly, Gregory himself, is completely ensconced within a paratelic state, that is, without any goals. These instances of humor can be explained better if we assume Gregory has multiple goals simultaneously; one goal is to get an audience to think about and possibly make a change regarding something that might otherwise be uncomfortable, racism or oppression, e. g., and another, simultaneous goal, is to get them to be amused. It might be that there is more emphasis on one over the other, and so for clarification we could place the goal of amusement first in the sentence, but this does not determine a temporal ordering of amusement and consciousness raising.

Roberts, quoting Apter, claims that: “When in the paratelic state one will ‘create a small and manageable private world... into which the outside world of real problems cannot properly impinge’ and ‘experience the world through a protective frame,’ feeling safe from danger or serious consequences” (100). But Gregory’s humor is goal-directed while it remains within the “protective frame,” a frame that he creates via his amusing performance. This was a necessary construction for Gregory especially when he performed in front of predom-

inantly white audiences in white-owned theatres. In these cases, the amusement he elicits within his audience is inseparable from his dual goal of consciousness raising. In order to get his humor, which is one of the audiences' goals, the cognitive element is required for them to make the appropriate shifts between inconsistent interpretations, that is, to experience amusement. In other words, Gregory is both amused (and amusing) and in a goal-directed state, and so too are his audiences whom he has invited through humor into a collaborative relationship. This is most likely the case with audiences that have some prior experience with his brand of ethical humor. To be sure, they are engaging with his humor for the sake of being amused, so this constitutes a type of goal-directedness, but they are also likely aware of the social commentary that is inextricably intertwined with his mechanisms of amusement. Put another way, in these cases the amusement mechanism and the social commentary mechanism are the same. He has created "a small manageable world" that is protective within the playful act for himself and the audience, but it is not "private" and it is not wholly disconnected or immune to the impingements of the "outside world or real problems," problems he and his audience *are* interested in solving.

Admittedly, this might not be a devastating critique of Roberts's theory, in fact it might merely stand as a springboard for further conceptual analyses of satirical humor, but ones that would require more development including the interconnections between wit and audience. There are other criticisms of the text, but they are minimal. For instance, Roberts is a bit unnecessarily repetitive for such a brief work. He fits the model of "I am going to tell you what I am going to do, then I am going to do it, then I will remind you what I just did," even when what he just did was only a page or two prior. Such summarizing might be helpful as a concluding chapter, but seems redundant otherwise. Another quibble, the Index is so brief as to be almost useless, barely amounting to three pages—one wonders why it was even included. But those are hardly substantive criticisms.

Roberts's writing and argumentation fits squarely within the analytic tradition, representing and critiquing theories that attempt to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for amusement. His bold essentialist account invites readers to provide counterexamples to his concise definition of humor. This is a boon, as we know what it would take to disprove it. Upon my first reading, I admit finding or manufacturing such counterexamples was not easy; a testament to the clarity and strength of the conceptual work. However, given its clarity and conditions for falsifiability in his attempt to cover *all* instances of humor, I suspect there will be numerous efforts by humor scholars in the near future to poke holes in his essentialist definitions. What other accolade could one give than to take seriously enough the philosophical work than to try to refute it? I think there

will be many such efforts, and, as a result, plenty of opportunities for Roberts to continue tweaking his account.

## References

Watkins, Mel. 1999. *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.