

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF HUMOR

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Abstract: In this paper, I seek to explore the increasing popular claim that the performance of philosophy and the performance of humor share similar features. I argue that the explanation lies in the function of humor—a function which can be a catalyst for philosophy. Following Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms and utilizing insights from various philosophical and scientific perspectives on the nature and origins of humor, I argue that the function of humor is to reveal faulty belief or error in judgment. Once such errors are revealed the mind demands resolution, and this is the work of philosophy. But philosophy cannot solve a problem unless it recognizes that there is a problem to solve. That is, the move from ignorance to philosophy requires a mediating step. Humor can act as that step, and, as such, humor can serve as a catalyst for philosophy while being necessarily distinct from it.

An emerging theme in contemporary cultural studies is the exploration of connections between humor and philosophy.¹ John Morreall, for example, asserts that “most of [humor’s] benefits [self-transcendence, humility, critical and creative thinking, etc.] are benefits of philosophy too”² while comedy instructor Greg Dean explains that the reason for a comic to be on stage is “to tell the audience what’s wrong,” something that many philosophers believe is the first step in reflective awareness of oneself or the world.³ Recently, when I argued that humor is best understood metaphysically as what Ernst Cassirer would call a “symbolic form,” Cassirer scholar Stephen Lofts commented that perhaps humor and philosophy serve similar functions in Cassirer’s system.⁴

In this paper, I seek to explore why the performance of philosophy and the performance of humor share similar features. I argue that the explanation lies in the function of humor—a function which can be a catalyst for philosophy. Following Cassirer’s metaphysical philosophy of symbolic forms and utilizing insights from philosophical, phenomenological, psychological, and bio-evolutionary perspectives on the nature and origins of humor, I claim that the function of humor is to reveal faulty belief or error in judgment. Once such errors are revealed the human mind demands resolution, as anomalies

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are inherently disturbing.⁵ This resolution is the work of philosophy. But philosophy cannot begin to solve a problem unless it recognizes that there is a problem to solve. In other words, the move from ignorance to philosophy requires a mediating step. Humor can act as that step, and as such humor can serve as a catalyst for philosophy while being necessarily distinct from it.

My argument will make use of Cassirer's understanding of symbolic forms and the role of philosophy within his system. I assume this definition of philosophy and its function for two reasons: first, I believe that his definition can subsume most contemporary understandings of philosophy as a discipline, albeit in the language of phenomenology.⁶ Second, I have previously argued that humor is best understood in Cassirer's terms as a symbolic form. If I am correct about this metaphysical status of humor, then humor must serve its own unique function separate from all other forms *and* from philosophy lest it simply collapse into one of them. Therefore, identifying the unique function of humor adds further support for my claim that it is, indeed, a symbolic form. It is thus fruitful to maintain the same metaphysic and language in this argument. In sum, I will argue the following: (1) that humor and philosophy serve distinct and irreducible functions, though (2) humor can indeed be a path to philosophy. This argument (3) further supports my claim that humor is a symbolic form.

1. Contemporary Theories of Humor

a. Philosophical Theories

The subfield which we now call the philosophy of humor began with Plato, who, in addition to Hobbes and Kant, wrote about laughter.⁷ Aristotle wrote about the virtue of wit and the vice of buffoonery, while Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard wrote about absurdity.⁸ It was not until distinctions were made between humor, as a broad category, and those things which may fall under it (laughter, wit, etc.), that a more critical philosophy of humor took shape.⁹ It is agreed that humor is an umbrella term which is meant to encompass everything that can be considered humorous stimuli, whether it be verbal or nonverbal, satire or wit, genre or pun. Humor may include those things that make us laugh but is not limited only to those things.¹⁰ Laughter is a physiological action which may or may not be stimulated by humor; this is clear when we think of nervous or contact laughter. While laughter can accompany humor, neither depends on the other.¹¹ These distinctions are crucially important, as Morreall insists, because "without them we are in danger of conflating different types of laughter situations . . . the most common mistake here is to treat all cases of laughter as cases of humor."¹²

This distinction understood, many classic theories were recategorized as theories of laughter, and contemporary philosophers set about understanding how these insights informed our understanding of humor itself. What follows

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is a survey of contemporary work in the philosophy of humor as well as a brief summary of my own account.

i. Incongruity Theory

The Incongruity theory is the most widely accepted today, with various refinements and iterations making up the greater part of contemporary humor discourse. By sampling several versions of the Incongruity theory, Noël Carroll summarizes that a person will find something humorous if “the object of their mental state is a perceived incongruity” which is enjoyed “precisely for their perception of its incongruity.”¹³ Incongruity itself can be expressed in a multitude of ways: what I perceive is *absurd* based on normal behaviors, what I perceive is *unusual* based on my previous experience with that perception, what I perceive is a *non sequitur*, what I perceive *does not belong*, etc.¹⁴ The idea in all cases is that something is perceived which I did not expect or which I do not consider normal—for example, consider this favorite joke:¹⁵

Question: What’s brown and sticky?

Answer: A stick.

The expectation from the set-up is hints toward an answer that includes bodily functions or something texturally displeasing; the punchline is funny, according to this theory, because it cashes in on that expectation and subverts it by revealing to us that the associations we have upon hearing the word “sticky” that have nothing to do with trees. Psychological approaches to the incongruity theory note that the confrontation with the unexpected must be in some way nonthreatening in order for the situation to be found humorous rather than traumatic; this will be explored further in the empirical sciences section of this paper.

Contemporary theorists have reached general agreement that some modification of the incongruity theory has the most potential for a universal account. Among those who support variations of the Incongruity theory are Noel Carroll, John Morreall, and Victor Raskin.¹⁶

ii. Belief Based Theory

From an epistemological perspective, a refined version of the incongruity theory which focuses particularly on the role of belief in humor is the Belief Based Theory. Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks present their theory (henceforth referred to as the BBH Theory) in a 1993 article called “Belief and the Basis of Humor.” The account states that human beings have various levels of beliefs, ranked in a hierarchical ordering; the highest are those beliefs which they take to be the truest of reality, the lowest those which they consider the least true.¹⁷ Humor, they say, is not only the ability to set these high level and low level beliefs at odds, but the ability to contrast their own belief sets (whether it be the entirety or simply a portion) against another’s

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belief set; that is, to pit beliefs that they hold against those which they do not. The authors refer to this action as a “flickering,” a rapid vacillating back and forth between the belief sets: “this flickering in the focus of attention—this active oscillating between these different but related belief sets—is humor.”¹⁸

The flickering between sets requires that the sets to and from which one can flicker do in fact exist. Sets exist because we are social creatures constantly interacting with others, and rarely do we share exact belief sets with everyone with which we interact. However, these sets may or may not be accessible to us in certain contexts. If I’ve never heard of Newt Gingrich, it is unlikely that a joke about him will be funny to me; I have no belief set to which I can flicker. This contextual element excludes the possibility that any object or a person is intrinsically funny, but also includes the possibility that any object or person *can* be funny given the right conditions. The authors explain this phenomenon by saying:

Humor is inherently relational—no event, person, or thing is intrinsically humorous. It is context dependent. It depends upon the circumstances, the teller (if there is one), the current beliefs of the listeners (or viewers), and the relationship (if any) between the teller and the listener.¹⁹

In cases where the perceiver²⁰ has inadequately developed cognitive abilities there may not be a rich hierarchical belief set at all, and the ability to flicker between any that exist and another would be unlikely.²¹ In a situation where the participant is “too close” to the humor presented, or if the participant is in a particularly intervening physiological or psychological state (depressed, for example), they may not find anything humorous.²²

*b. Empirical Theories of Humor*²³

i. Benign Violation Theory

Psychologists Peter McGraw and Caleb Warner conducted experiments in order to prove the thesis of their incongruity-inspired theory: Benign Violation.²⁴ They hypothesize that there are three conditions which must be present for humor: first, “a situation must be appraised as a violation,” second, “a situation must be appraised as benign,” and third, “these two appraisals must occur simultaneously.”²⁵ In other words, solving a previous worry of the incongruity theory, the violations must be considered in some way “safe” in order for it to be considered humorous rather than traumatic. McGraw and Warner define a violation as benign if it is considered acceptable by another social norm, one is “only weakly committed to the violated norm,” or if one has psychological distance from the violation (if one has never been the recipient of racial discrimination, for example, a racist joke is more likely to be funny than offensive).²⁶

To test their hypothesis, McGraw and Warren presented subjects with control and test versions of a number of scenarios. The control version included

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scenarios that were rather straight forward, for example, with no violation. These same scenarios were then adjusted to test a particular element of the theory; for example, a scenario about burying a father's ashes (benign) became a scenario about snorting a father's ashes (violation).²⁷ The results of their experiments support their thesis; only when the presented stimuli included a violation did the participants find it amusing, and only when that violation was also considered in some way benign.²⁸

The benefits of the psychological perspective lie in the empirical evidence it can provide; indeed, McGraw continues humor related experimentation as founder of the Humor Research Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder.²⁹ These experiments provide further evidence for theories of humor which suggest that revelation in the form of incongruity and belief are essential to humor.

ii. Cognitive Shifts

As was implicit in the work of McGraw and Warner, psychology asserts that cognitive shifts take place in humor. These shifts can have strong effects on the human body and mind.³⁰ Psychologist and comedian Stephanie Davies's project, grounded in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), focuses on exposing and harnessing cognitive shifts in the experience of humor in order to intentionally direct one's attitude and behavior.³¹ Davies explains that we absorb information and beliefs from our surrounding environment, and this has a direct effect on our emotions, which in turn effect our behavior and language, something which has been supported by philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and media scholars.³² External events are processed through our cognitive apparatus to create an internal representation (IR), which combines with physiological responses to create an internal emotional condition (IEC).³³ Our IEC is conditioned in part by our prior IR patterns, creating physiological and psychological patterns to which we refer whenever similar circumstances arise.³⁴ It is for this reason, Davies states, that one can, for example, feel "trapped" or "stuck" within depressive patterns—one's IR has habituated an automatic generation of a particular IEC. She argues that humor can be used to intentionally change the IR, interrupting the generation process, and therefore breaking negative IEC patterns. Once this pattern is broken one is able, Davies argues, to consciously habituate oneself to respond with positive IEC to stimuli that would have previously reinforced negativity.³⁵ She summarizes:

Humour is a cognitive skill that is learnt; and if a skill is learnt it means it can be enhanced. Thoughts create feelings and our feelings cause us to respond and react. If we can intercept negative thoughts with humour, using a developed toolkit based on our understanding of how humour is formed, we can impact our feelings about the situation and generally act better, make superior choices and choose more proactive behaviors.³⁶

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Davies's claim of harnessing and controlling the cognitive shifts initiated by humor provides psychological support for incongruity theories of humor. If humor has been proven useful and effective in intentional redirection of negative or harmful IRs to positive and healthy ones, then it must be the case that humor has some sort of redirecting capacity, be it by recognizing incongruity, by revealing that violations are benign, or by exposing that beliefs are fallacious. Thus we see the same conclusions over and over again—in whatever jargon and with whatever emphasis a theorist chooses—humor *reveals* something. Humor draws attention to something which was not in conscious thought before, it brings to the fore that which has been forgotten or unknown, it uncovers contradictions where one thought none lie. Whichever method of inquiry we use in our attempt to give an answer to the humor question, the common denominator in each of our answers is revelation.

c. Evolutionary Accounts of Humor

For even further support, we can look to evolutionary theories of humor. While laughter can be explained as physiologically beneficial in a number of ways, humor separate from laughter has no clear Darwinian purpose.³⁷ As mentioned previously, it is not unusual for unanticipated revelation to be more frightening than funny; if a recognition of incongruous stimuli is all that humor amounts to, it would seem like an evolutionary mistake that such stimuli would be capable of producing both joy and fear. In basic terms, we must pinpoint why we would be *rewarded* for recognition of incongruities, as is our experience with humor, rather than *punished* for recognitions of (or confrontations with) incongruities, as is our experience with trauma. Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams give what I believe to be the most likely account of the evolutionary origins of humor in their 2011 study *Inside Jokes*.³⁸

In summary, the authors argue that we are typically engaged in rather risky actions and assume the safety of those actions based on prior experience.³⁹ Because many of the actions we performed in our earliest existence were dangerous and required a great deal of care in order to reassure the continuation of our species, we needed to develop some sort of mechanism that would delay our action, giving our brains a chance to rethink the behavior, before we proceeded. As the authors explain, left unchecked,

this time-pressured, unsupervised generation process has necessarily lenient standards and introduces content—not all of which properly checked for truth—into our mental spaces. If left unexamined, the inevitable errors in these vestibules of consciousness would ultimately continue to contaminate our world knowledge store.⁴⁰

To solve this problem, we needed some policy of double checking the information we rely upon, a policy which operates quickly and rewards us for discovering our knowledge errors. We need the reward to be both instant-

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neous and powerful, addictive perhaps, in order for it to compete with the rest of the sensations and thoughts we may be experiencing simultaneously. Humor, they claim, developed as an epistemological safe guard which rewards us for discovering errors which may have, if left unchecked, resulted in dangerous behaviors.⁴¹

If this is the case, then humor cannot *simply* be a matter of incongruity, or of flickering between belief sets. Humor has an important, evolutionarily supported function, and this function is to “pump the breaks” (for lack of a better term) of our consciousness in order to give us time to consider the validity of a statement or the safety of an action before we commit to it.

All of the above theories and insights about humor seems to be correct, focusing on the aspect of humor which is most related to the field from which the theorist is most familiar. All also have one thing in common: humor, no matter what angle is explored, has a necessarily revelatory function. Whatever humor *is*, it has revelation as a function—revelation is what humor *does*. An account of “what humor is,” then, must be able to account for why each of these theories is correct. That is, such an account must be properly foundational, it must somehow combine these insights into one solid foundation. This is common practice in the German tradition; when one discovers split foundations, it logically follows that an underlying principle, one which will unify the disparate explanations into one ultimate foundation, will yet be found. I offered such a unified foundation by understanding humor in a new metaphysical light, as a symbolic form. A brief summary of this claim follows.

d. Humor as a Symbolic Form

I argued that what humor *is* can be best understood as a metaphysical category called a “symbolic form.” As Sebastian Luft explains, “A symbolic form is the condition of the possibility of experiencing. It is a *transcendental form of intuition*.”⁴² It is “not itself a world but that which *forms* a world as a meaningful context or totality.”⁴³ In his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Ernst Cassirer explains that what Kant accomplished in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is best understood as an analysis of the laws and logic of one symbolic form, the form of science or reason.⁴⁴ But, Cassirer claims, this critique of the form of reason only gives us *part* of the human story, and in order to tell the whole tale we need to critique other aspects of our existence, or, other symbolic forms, and learn the laws and logic of them.⁴⁵ He says:

Hence, the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture. It seeks to understand and to show how all content of culture, in so far as it is more than merely a particular content, presupposes an original deed of the spirit. In so doing, the basis thesis of idealism finds its genuine and complete authentication.⁴⁶

Cassirer names art, myth, language, and religion among these forms, but never claims that this list is complete. I argued that humor ought to be added

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to this list. Humor is a universal way in which the human spirit reveals itself in the world.⁴⁷ Like all symbolic forms, humor is governed by its own laws and logic; just as the laws of science cannot be applied with any accuracy to art, so too must we avoid using the criteria of myth, for example, to be relevant criteria for humor.⁴⁸

In presenting humor as a symbolic form, we now have the metaphysical tools to explain why all the above theories are correct, albeit from different perspectives; Incongruity, BBH, Benign Violation, and evolutionary theory can *all* explain an instance of humor *in their own terms*, and all accounts would be plausible if not convincing. Cassirer would say that this is because the theorist is operating from within a particular form, a form which presupposes the answer to the question in the very way it chooses to formulate the question.⁴⁹ A psychologist is going to look for a psychological explanation, in other words, and would discount evidence that does not operate within those parameters as misguided, just as a sociologist will look for sociological evidence, a scientist will look for scientific evidence, and an evolutionary theorist will look for evolutionary evidence. Understanding humor as a symbolic form has the explanatory power of understanding this peculiarity of plurality within humor research while simultaneously unifying them into one foundational metaphysic.

Just as art, language, myth, and science have their particular and irreducible functions in Cassirer's system, humor too must have a unique function or forfeit its status as symbolic form. For if humor's function can be reduced to that of an existing form, such as myth, it cannot itself be a form; if this were the case, whatever I am calling humor is would just be a particular manifestation of myth, not a form in and of itself. Revelation, I argue, is the function of humor, and this function is unique to this form. In other words, a symbolic form is what humor *is*, revelation is what humor *does*. While other objects that properly belong to other forms may also reveal something to an observer, that revelation is *accidental* to the forms' function.⁵⁰ I claim that revelation is *necessary* to the form of humor. This revelation can inspire action, but it need not inspire any particular action, or any action at all, in order for my argument to stand. In what follows, I offer that the revelations offered by humor can be a catalyst for philosophy. This claim has explanatory power in its ability to isolate the precise connection between humor and philosophy that gives rise to the similarities we see in their performance. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of philosophy and its necessary conditions in the phenomenological tradition.

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II. Phenomenology and the Necessary Conditions for Philosophy

a. Cassirer

Cassirer describes philosophy's function in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as that which allows one to step outside of the forms and to understand the unity in their plurality:

It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge as the "self-knowledge of reason" that it does not create a principally new symbol form, it does not found in this sense a new creative modality—but it grasps the earlier modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms.⁵¹

When I view the world from within the form of science, I am blind to the idea that there may be other ways in which to interpret objects. As a scientist, I may find claims of divine inspiration and creationist accounts of human existence to be absurd because the criteria I use to judge the truth of a claim will never accept these religious forms of evidence as legitimate. I may consider those who discount my scientifically based claims as foolish, and I will not understand why what I consider objectively legitimate evidence is not accepted by my interlocutor. According to Cassirer, this is because I do not understand that the form from within which I am operating is only one of many valid and legitimate forms. If I am operating from within science, it is only one of many standpoints that one may take. What I am not understanding is that science is only one of many standpoints I may take and thus I may refuse to acknowledge the evidence of religion. Cassirer explains:

This tendency is introduced by the particular symbolic forms themselves. In the course of their development they all turn against their own "system of signs"—so religion turns against myth, cognitive inquiry against language, the scientific concept of causality against the sensory-anthropomorphic-mythic conception of causality, and so forth.⁵²

Religion, like science, has its own criteria under which it judges the validity of a claim. From within the form of religion, reducing human life and experience to natural causes and scientific laws is to not only miss the point of the religious life, but it is to effectively miss the truth of human experience.⁵³ In essence, unless we understand that we are standing within different forms, we are doomed to talk past each other and to discount the importance and validity of the other's perspective.

This is not to say that we are always within one form and can never shift our perspective to that of another; on the contrary, Cassirer believes we do this quite often as we go about the world.⁵⁴ Let us assume, for example, that my ordinary way of understanding the world is from within the form of science. When I enter an art museum, I look at the artwork with the intention of viewing that art and appreciating it as art. I am no longer operating from within the form of science, but from within art. I judge the paintings as good or bad based on my knowledge of the craft and the emotive response the piece

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invokes. I have left science at the door, so to speak. However, as soon as I step back out into the world, I am back in the realm of science without even so much as an awareness that I participated in a shift of my metaphysical framework, if only for a few hours.

Philosophy is what we do when we “step back” from within and understand the plurality of the forms. It allows us to understand each form as unique in its laws, structure, and function, and to understand the criteria under which each form determines validity.⁵⁵ Philosophy must recognize that the forms are disparate before it can unify them in understanding as all equally valid and necessary expressions of the human spirit:

But philosophy does not want to replace the older forms with another, higher form. It does not want to replace one symbol with another; rather, its task consists in comprehending the basic symbolic character of knowledge itself. We cannot cast off these forms, although the urge to do so is innate in us, but we can and must grasp and recognize their relative necessity. That is the only possible ideal liberation from the compulsion of symbolism.⁵⁶

Because I operate in the world with a general unawareness and inattention to the forms from within which I am operating, it is not a given that I know or will discover that a multiplicity exists. Recognizing the forms *as forms* takes a great deal of reflection, reflection that we often do not undergo due to the complacency with which we live our lives. In order for philosophy to perform its function of unifying and legitimizing the totality of forms, we must first recognize a form *as a form*. This requires some sort of stimuli. Something must instigate an awakening from the complacency of my inattention to see a plurality. Only then can philosophy set about its work of unification. Following the above quote, Cassirer continues:

Such a compulsion is involved in every application of a positive form, in every positive “language.” We cannot overcome it by casting off the symbolic forms as though they were some husk and then behold the “Absolute” face to face. Instead, we must strive to comprehend every symbol in its place and recognize how it is limited and conditioned by every other symbol.⁵⁷

Therefore, in Cassirer’s system, a necessary condition for the possibility of philosophy, which functions to unify the forms, is the recognition of the forms *as forms*. This does not happen automatically or inevitably in human experience; on the contrary, it requires a catalyst. For clarification of this point, we turn now to one of Cassirer’s greatest influences, Edmund Husserl.⁵⁸

b. Husserl

Husserl’s articulation of the natural and philosophical attitudes is perhaps the clearest explication of the issue at hand. He writes that the way in which we operate in the “everyday” is unreflective and habitually complacent, in other words, it is a “natural attitude.”⁵⁹ The natural attitude for Husserl refers to

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our immediate experience of the world. In our everyday, unreflective lives, we operate on the knowledge we gain from the world around us, always assuming that that knowledge is trustworthy.⁶⁰ In the natural attitude, I assume that people will behave as I have come to expect, that I will not come upon a detour on my way to work, and that my coffee mug has a backside whether or not I can see it from this angle. That is, I use my experiences of the world to make adequate predictions about the future. However, sometimes people behave contrary to the character I expect from them, an accident results in a detour that makes me late for work, and the mug doesn't have a backside due to an unfortunate break. It is in these moments that Husserl believes we realize that the vast majority of the knowledge we have of the world is only merely adequate, that is, revisable given additional information.⁶¹ Husserl explains:

In the “*natural reflection*” of everyday life, also however in that of psychological science (that is, in psychological experience of our own psychic processes), we stand on the footing of the world already given as existing—as when, everyday life, we assert: “I see a house there” or “I remember having heard this melody.” In *transcendental-phenomenological reflection* we deliver ourselves from this footing, by universal epoché with respect to the being or non-being of the world.⁶²

Because we take so much for granted, we only realize the revisability of our world when the unexpected occurs.

When we realize that the world is not as predictable as we imagine, or that the knowledge that we have of the world is lacking in absolute certainty, we recognize the natural attitude as what it is: naivety.⁶³ For in reality, the knowledge we have of the world is adequate in that we *can* make predictions that turn out to be correct and develop sciences which *can* explain the contents of our world, but this knowledge is *always subject to change* given new information. In the natural attitude, we hardly entertain this reality. But we ought to, Husserl claims, lest we continue to make mistakes in judgment:

Their [the sciences'] universal basis, the experienced world, must also be deprived of its naive acceptance. The being of the world, by reason of the evidence of natural experience, must no longer be for us an obvious matter of fact; it too must be for us, henceforth, only an acceptance-phenomenon.⁶⁴

It is only the phenomenologist who can recognize that *both attitudes exist* and can switch between them; at one time asserting the clear existence of the world, and at another knowing undoubtedly that this world may not exist at all.⁶⁵ In other words, in the natural attitude everything in perception is so obviously “there,” before us, that to deny it would be insanity. But the philosopher knows this obvious evidence is always only adequate and could turn out otherwise. As Husserl explains,

what we say is: the existence of the world is *completely beyond doubt*. . . .
Nothing speaks in favor of the world's not existing, and everything speaks

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in favor of its existing. . . . But what is crucial for us here is the fact that this complete empirical certainty, this empirical indubitability, nevertheless, as empirical, leaves open the possibility that this world does not exist.⁶⁶

Or, to put it in Jeff Yoshimi's terms, "In the natural attitude, we are realists, and phenomenology provides a way of understanding that realism as an accomplishment of regulated series of appearances."⁶⁷

Just as with Cassirer, we are left with the question of how this information is revealed: how does one recognize the natural attitude *as natural*? For Ludwig Landgrebe says that the *impulse* to become a philosopher can be found in the natural attitude, lest none of us feel it in the first place, even though no *true philosopher* can exist within such an attitude.⁶⁸ Therefore there must be something, then, that confronts us in the natural attitude that simultaneously reveals that attitude. Something must, to appropriately paraphrase Kant, wake us from our dogmatic slumbers regarding the ordinary world, and this awakening is a necessary condition for the possibility of philosophy. Or, to paraphrase Plato, something must trigger in us the impulse to leave the cave in order for us to have any chance of seeing the sun.

III. The Phenomenological Function of Humor

One must recognize the natural attitude (for Husserl) or the forms as forms (for Cassirer) in order to create the necessary conditions for the possibility of philosophy. As we have seen, this requires a catalyst. Humor's necessary and unique function is precisely that of revelation—humor can provide that catalyst. Humor is one way that this revelation can occur. For the sake of consistency and clarity, moving forward I will utilize Husserl's terminology in particular, both for its explanatory power and its influence on the articulation of similar concepts in Cassirer's work.⁶⁹

As we saw in the first section, humor under any theory is in some way revelatory; it detects something that was previously taken for granted. Humor reveals the truth—for example—that we take for granted the luxury of airline travel, which is why we find it humorous when Louis CK brings this to our attention:

People on planes are the worst. . . . They make it sound like they were on a cattle car in Poland in the 40's. . . . I had to sit on the runway for 40 minutes! . . . Oh my god, really, what happened then, did you fly through the air like a bird incredibly? Did you soar into the clouds impossibly? Did you partake in the miracle of human flight? And then land softly on giant tires that you couldn't even conceive of how they put air into them? How dare you, bitching about flying! . . . You're sitting in a chair in the sky! You're like a Greek myth right now!⁷⁰

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But not only can humor show us what we take for granted, it can show us that what we think we know is always up for revision. Take the following from comedian Elvira Kurt:

Oh this is nice. Five minutes ago we were laughing, having a good time, then I mention I'm a lesbian and you're like "Hahaha—HUH?" Very well. I'll allow you a moment to let the reality sink in. You're like, "if you're a lesbian, and we were laughing at you. . . . Does that make us gay?" So let me reassure you that yes, yes it does.⁷¹

Now obviously these examples are particular to comedy, and standup comedy at that, but humor operates in the same way in pun, satire, and absurdity, to name only a few. Puns reveal non-obvious double meanings in ordinary language (in the film *Snow Cake*, when Alan Rickman's character is asked if he needs assistance in an eyeglass store, he replies no, that he is simply "eye-browsing"⁷²). Satire takes small character traits, ideas, or connotations and magnifies them to outrageous degrees (Fox News is portrayed by *The Daily Show* as the headquarters of "Bullshit Mountain"⁷³). Absurdity breaks down common cultural beliefs and practices and shows them to be illogical (hysteria is a women's disease; while the symptoms are those of normal, human sexual frustration, it would go against the popular scientific thesis that women have no sexual desire to call it otherwise⁷⁴).

In presenting the human mind with something incongruous (to use the popular term), humor reveals to us that airplane travel is amazing, not inconvenient, that the woman we took for granted as straight is actually not, that the word "browse" sounds the same but holds a completely different meaning from "brows," or that at one point doctors would rather diagnose a woman with a mental illness than understand her as a sexual being.⁷⁵ That is, humor allows us to see our world "for the first time," to look at those things we overlook, to pay attention to those things in our immediate experience, and to understand that our horizon is, as Husserl says, a "*horizon of indeterminate actuality, a horizon of which I am dimly conscious.*"⁷⁶

Furthermore, humor has a scientific reputation for enhancing critical and creative thinking, both things which phenomenologists would certainly say are essential for philosophizing.⁷⁷ McGraw and Warner cite psychologist Alice Isen's 1987 study to show that participants who watched a blooper reel were more likely to solve a challenging puzzle using creative methods than the control group.⁷⁸ More recent studies show a correlation between humor and open-mindedness and self-transcendence (or objectivity), acting as a liberating force from one's tightly held ideologies and presuppositions.⁷⁹ These are precisely the sort of virtues necessary to transcend the natural attitude.

In his analysis of how one transitions from the natural to the phenomenological attitudes, Klaus Held offers that the catalyst may be found in the mood called wonder. He says that the reason one commits to philosophy is

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because of interest, but “this interest is aroused for its part by motives which consciousness is not the master.”⁸⁰ He goes on to say:

[P]hilosophical and scientific thought arose from wonder (in Greek, *thaumazein*). But wonder is a mood. The fundamental trait of this mood is the astonishment with which we become aware of this world as world. . . . The genesis of philosophy and science was an unpredictable accident—the accident that a mood appeared on the scene which motivated making the world itself thematic.⁸¹

The mood of wonder is what Held believes is that which opens the flood gates, so to speak, to philosophy.

This is a very interesting, and very important, insight into our discussion. If Held’s impulse is correct and wonder is a catalyst, then humor has found an ally. Wonder has long been tied to both philosophy and humor. Rene Descartes is certainly a most appropriate example given his influence on Husserl (and thus Cassirer). Descartes describes wonder as that which comes over us when we confront an object that “surprises us” due to being “novel” or “very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed ought to be.”⁸² This is the only passion, Descartes says, which has no opposite “for, if the object before us has no characteristics that surprise us, we are not moved by it at all and we consider it without passion.”⁸³ Morreall argues that “[h]ad Descartes explored the relation of laughter to wonder itself . . . he might well have developed a version of the Incongruity Theory.” He goes on: “Had he extended his theorizing by considering incongruity as a type of novelty, it would have been a short step to the idea of laughter as caused by our surprise at some incongruity.”⁸⁴

A further function of wonder, according to Descartes, is to point out error. Amy Schmitter articulates the dangers of unknown error and identifies the useful nature of the passions to awaken us to them:

[A] person may remain satisfied simply because he fails to realize that he lacks knowledge, even when that knowledge is easily had . . . [we might ask] whether she has experienced the sort of despair and unease that arises from doubt and motivates us to resolve doubt.⁸⁵

Amelie Rorty echoes this insight: “It is the emotions, and particularly the emotion of wonder, that energize science and gives it direction.”⁸⁶ Descartes even counts “gentle mockery” as a moral virtue.⁸⁷ Even for Descartes, humor plays an important epistemic role.

But let us return now to Held. Wonder is a mood which serves as a catalyst for the transcendence from the natural attitude. Wonder is closely connected with humor in that it can be initiated through humor. Wonder is also closely connected to philosophy in that it serves an epistemic function. What this amounts to is the following: humor gives rise to wonder which can give rise

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to philosophy, which, as it turns out, is precisely what I have argued. Humor jars us from complacency and opens epistemic room for attentiveness.

As for Cassirer himself, his stance on humor follows much the same pattern. Cassirer's view is highly influenced by Hermann Cohen, who believes that

comedy leads us to expect reversals in structural form, and to pay attention to this horizon of meaning in any dialogic form of meaning . . . comedy reveals a universal form of logic at work in all human activity . . . canceling obvious conclusions and frustrating expectation.⁸⁸

According to Gregory Moynahan, Cassirer himself utilizes humor in his own work for precisely these purposes, suggesting that he uses a comic style in his writing in order to give a performative example of the "multivalent development of possibilities" and "lack of closure," which is highly consistent with the philosophy of symbolic forms as a whole.⁸⁹ As Stephen Lofts explains, philosophy of culture is an ongoing project for Cassirer, one which must reflect and understand culture *as it is now*, from an always contemporary perspective, interpreting and reinterpreting the culture within which one is embedded.⁹⁰ Humor assists in reminding one to avoid complacency of past interpretation and instead use all of her resources in making conclusions about her world.

In *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, Cassirer analyzes the epistemological benefits of humor as revelatory, referring to particular characters in comedy as exposing "genuinely symbolic and humorous truth," stating that "humor becomes the touchstone of the true and the false of the genuine and the counterfeit, of the essential and the merely conventional."⁹¹ This is a crucially important role for Cassirer, for "objective truth is attainable only through truth towards oneself, through truthfulness in the individual."⁹² This is an impossible perspective if one is dogmatic or skeptical, both of which are signs of "moral degeneracy of human nature."⁹³ Later, Cassirer treats comedy in *Essay on Man*, stating that "in comic perspective all things begin to take on a new face. We are perhaps never nearer to our human world than in the works of the great comic writer."⁹⁴ The function of humor as revelatory is echoed once again.

In summary, humor can cause one to see the world from a different perspective, to recognize its adequacy. This recognition can lead to wonder, a desire to seek after knowledge. This mood of wonder is, for Held, what can catapult one to committing oneself to a genuine life (that is, to philosophy). One may then ask, if humor gives rise to wonder and wonder to philosophy, then what gives rise to humor? As a phenomenologist, I could argue that the question is misguided; humor is always already, a product of the human spirit, an a priori symbolic form. It has no more genesis than religion, myth, or language—it is already and unavoidably within lived experience. As an empirical scientist, I would answer the question in terms of evolutionary biology as

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Hurley and others have, for indeed, understanding the evolutionary origins of humor 1) explains the universality of humor, which strengthens its status as a symbolic form, 2) provides an evolutionary basis for my placing it on the level of forms such as language and myth which have their own distinct evolutionary origins, and 3) presents another perspective through which to understand how humor may act as a catalyst for philosophy. For in its earliest beginnings, humor evolved as a way of rewarding the recognition of error. The resolution of that error, I maintain, is not the work of humor. Humor is merely a signpost which can point us toward philosophy, but it does not and cannot force us to walk the path.⁹⁵

IV. Conclusion

Cassirer believes that philosophy is the means by which we can recognize unity in the plurality of forms. Philosophy allows us to see that each form has its own laws and logic, all of which are legitimate from within their form. In identifying the boundaries of the forms and the legitimacy of the laws and logic within them, philosophy serves to unify human experience *as human experience*.⁹⁶

The function of the form of humor is not that of philosophy. Humor reveals the mere adequacy of knowledge, the error, from within a form, thus insinuating the existence of those forms. Humors function if to reveal the natural attitude, the naivety that we so easily slip into in going about our daily lives. Philosophy unifies the forms and solves the error. Philosophers and comedians are in a very different business; comedians expose and undermine, philosophers resolve and unify.

I have argued the following:

Argument 1:

- a. The Incongruity theory claims that humor is the recognition of incongruous elements within the humorous stimuli
- b. The BBH theory claims that humor is the juxtaposition of contradictory belief sets.
- c. The Benign Violation theory claims that humor is the simultaneous recognition of a stimuli as being both a violation and being benign.
- d. Cognitive shift research claims that humor can be used to reveal IR and IEC responses.
- e. Evolutionary accounts claim humor rewards error detection.
- f. Claims a–e are correct from the particular perspective from which each theorist resides.
- g. Claims a–e are incorrect in that none can account for the correctness of the other theories, nor can provide a holistic explanation of humor.
- h. Claims a–e have one uniting feature—each rely on humor as being that which reveals some sort of information.

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- i. Therefore, revelation is a necessary function of humor.

Argument 2:

- a. Understanding humor as a symbolic form unifies claims a–e into one foundational metaphysic.
- b. The function of humor is revelation (Argument 1)
- c. Within the metaphysic of the symbolic forms, the function of philosophy is to unify the plurality of forms.
- d. Therefore, humor and philosophy have distinct and unique functions.

Argument 3:

- a. Exposure of error is the necessary condition for the possibility of wonder (doubt, curiosity, etc.).
- b. Humor reveals error, and thus gives rise to wonder.
- c. Wonder is a necessary condition of philosophy.
- d. Therefore, humor can give rise to philosophy.

Argument 4:

- a. Symbolic forms each have their own unique function.
- b. If humor is a symbolic form, then it must serve its own function.
- c. Revelation is a necessary function of humor (Argument 1)
- d. This function is not served by art, language, myth, or science, as argued in Marra (2015).
- e. Humor and philosophy have distinct and unique functions (Argument 2).
- f. Therefore, humor has its own unique function.
- g. Therefore, in addition to arguments given in Marra (2015), humor is a symbolic form.

In conclusion, humor can be yet another way into philosophy, and one which deserves attention. It surrounds us every day, in every culture, in every time, pointing out what we often are too busy, or too comfortable, to see. Whether it be a play on words, a social encounter, an image, or a sound, humor is always already preparing us to recognize the adequacy of our world. We ought to understand humor as an “accomplishment of consciousness”⁹⁷ and its function as that which can prepare us for genuine existence.

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Notes

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student and junior members, and the enthusiastic environment in which they cultivate rigorous and joyful philosophical engagement.

1. Philosophers David Buchanan (<https://www.partiallyexaminedlife.com/2015/03/20/philosophy-and-comedy/>), John Morreall (*Comic Relief*, chap. 7), and Jules Evans (<http://www.philosophyforlife.org/what-is-the-relationship-between-philosophy-and-comedy/>) have all written about the overlap between the methods of comedians and philosophers. In 2014, Charlie Rose called comedian Louis CK a “philosopher-king;” the Huffington Post has claimed that “this generation’s true philosophers” are standup comedians (Simmons, “Morality, the Zeitgeist, and Dick Jokes”), Danny Lobell’s podcast “Modern Day Philosophers” is dedicated to interviewing comedians about philosophical issues (see <http://www.moderndayphilosophers.net/>), and comedians T. J. Miller and Pete Holmes are very clear that they think of themselves as performing philosophy on stage: “As T. J. says, comedians are the modern-day philosophers. And not too many comedians would like to say that because it makes them sound like lofty assholes, but the truth is, my job is [to] look at everything that’s happening inside and outside of me, and then articulate that” (Jesse David Fox, “Pete Holmes on How the Comedian Became the Modern-Day Philosopher”). One of the most respected theories of humor comes from journalist Arthur Koestler, who uses philosophy to create a guide to joke creation. Koestler is responsible for what we would now consider a version of the incongruity theory; in his version, humor is “the clash of two mutually incompatible codes” (Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 35). Stanley Cavell has written on comedy numerous times, including his 1981 book *Pursuits of Happiness*.

2. Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 112–116, 126.

3. McGraw and Warner, *The Humor Code*, 23. This is certainly one way in which we could describe Socrates, who Morreall has claimed was the first standup comedian (Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 126).

4. Marra, “Humor as a Symbolic Form.” This paper was originally presented at The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment on 21 June 2014.

5. Barnes, “The Comparison of Belief Systems,” 190. Thomas Schulz explains that after the age of seven, incongruity alone will no longer be humorous to us; we need that incongruity to be resolved in order for it to be humor, otherwise what we have is simply “nonsense” (“A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humor,” 12–13).

6. It would be tangential for me to argue this point in the current paper, particularly given that my thesis does not rely on any particular definition of philosophy. Even if my presumptions regarding the function of philosophy are wrong, my argument regarding the function of humor will hold. Definitions of philosophy from Cassirer and Husserl are presented in section II.

7. Plato, “Republic,” 388e, and “Philebus” 48–50 (in *Complete Works*); John Morreall, “Thomas Hobbes,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall, 19–20; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:332–335.

8. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV.8, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes; Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, I.13; Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 459–468.

9. Perhaps the first to do so was Michael Clark in his 1970 paper “Humor and Incongruity.”

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10. Provine, *Laughter*, 42.
11. Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 39.
12. Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 5.
13. Carroll, *Humour*, 37.
14. Ibid.
15. This joke was told to me several years ago by my younger brother, Jonathan Marra, between fits of giggles. I will note that he was 25 years of age at the time, and that he does not know where he heard the joke originally.
16. Carroll, *Humour*; Morreall, *Comic Relief*; Raskin, "Theory of Humor."
17. LaFollette and Shanks, "Belief and the Basis of Humor," 331.
18. Ibid., 333.
19. Ibid., 332.
20. I use this language, rather than "audience" or "listener" because humor is not limited to verbal or visual stimuli.
21. LaFollette and Shanks, "Belief and the Basis of Humor," 330.
22. Ibid., 331. This condition has been referred to as "psychological distance" by McGraw and Warren and others. See A. Peter McGraw, Lawrence E. Williams, and Caleb Warren, "Psychological Distance," in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo, 602–604.
23. I have chosen not to include Freud's famous Relief theory from *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in this paper for the simple reason that it is a theory of laughter exclusively, not of humor. Freud's focus on jokes and the unconscious speaks to physiological pressures which find socially acceptable relief *through laughing*. (Morreall, *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 111). While I believe that expanding Freud's analysis to humor itself would add further support for my argument regarding humor's function, not all humor involves laughter, and it would be misleading to assert that Freud intended his theory to be an explanation of humor writ large. Freud does take up a narrow definition of humor directly twenty years later (ibid., 111–116), but this definition is both too narrow for this paper and is not distinguishable enough from the theories already mentioned to do much philosophical work here.
24. McGraw and Warren, "Benign Violations," 1142.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 1143.
28. Ibid., 1143–1147.
29. See McGraw and Warner, *The Humor Code*.
30. See Wilkins and Eisenbraun, "Humor Theories," for physiological benefits in human beings; Fox, Dean, and Lyford, "Development of Humor Styles Questionnaire," for psychological benefits in children; Martin, "Humor and Health," and Morreall, "Applications of Humor," for benefits in mental health.

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31. Ibid., 77.

32. Davies, *Laughology*, 30–32. See also Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” and Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, among others.

33. Davies, *Laughology*, 4, 95–97.

34. Ibid., 5, 95–97.

35. Ibid., Prologue, 96–97.

36. Davies, *Laughology*, 80. This is not to say that this route is accessible or possible for all persons—indeed, Davies seems to be presenting this form of CBT for those who do not have psychological disorders such as bipolar disorder. Those with intervening physiological conditions may require the intervention of medications such as SSRIs in order initiate the disruption of a cognitive system that is disrupted by mental illness. I thank Dana Fritz for pressing me to clarify this point.

37. There are plenty of account of the origins and purposes of laughter, but given that there is, as we now experience humor, has no necessary connection between laughter and humor, to explore these accounts would be to confuse categories and not answer the fundamental question at hand.

For theories that state that laughter evolved into the human practice of humor, I will say the following: Morreall argues that laughter evolved as a play signal, a cue to others that what follows is not to be taken seriously (on a social or educational level) and that they ought not be offended; this, for Morreall, maintains within the playful attitude he claims is necessarily present for recognition of humor itself (*Comic Relief*, 37). I disagree with this conclusion on a number of levels, but particularly because it rests on the thesis that no information can be transmitted from within a playful attitude. For Morreall, nothing can be taught and nothing can be learned from humor; pleasure and knowledge are incompatible modes of being (ibid., 34). This paper serves as an indirect argument against this premise.

38. Of course, any evolutionary theory is, by its very nature, impossible to falsify. The authors acknowledge that what they offer is a narrative, historically conditioned by their own situatedness, though this is no reason to discount their argument. As Cassirer believed and Lofts reminds us, quoting Jorge Luis Borges, “Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place,” and continuing in his own voice, “All historical recollection is a reconstruction by and for the historian” (Lofts, *Ernst Cassirer*, 14). If what we desire in historical accounts is verifiable evidence that amounts to revisiting the past outside of our present framework, then no account will ever satisfy us. If, however, this argument fails to persuade some due to the nature of evolutionary hypothesis, I believe the previous accounts of humor discussed thus far are leverage enough to make my case. I include this section to strengthen that case from another empirical perspective, but it is not necessary for my argument to hold. My thanks to Alexander Neubauer for pressing this point.

39. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes*, 12.

40. Ibid., 13.

41. Ibid.

42. Luft, “Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,” 31; emphasis in the original.

43. Ibid., 30; emphasis in the original.

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44. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, p. 11.
45. Ibid., 78.
46. Ibid., 11.
47. Marra, "Humor as a Symbolic Form," 429–430.
48. Ibid.
49. More on this will be explored in the next section.
50. The function of other forms and their differentiation from humor is argued in Marra, "Humor as a Symbolic Form."
51. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, p. 226.
52. Ibid.
53. Luft, "Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," 32.
54. Ibid., 32–33.
55. Ibid., 37.
56. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, p. 226.
57. Ibid.
58. As his work is much better known than Cassirer's, I will maintain Husserl's terminology when presenting my argument that humor can be a means to philosophy in the next section. By doing so, I hope to appeal to phenomenologists in a more general way that does not require or need to endorse Cassirer's metaphysic for the point to be made.
59. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 33.
60. Ibid., 15.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 33–34; emphasis in the original.
63. Husserl, *Ideas I*, 49–53; Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 18, 34.
64. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 18.
65. Ibid., 34.
66. Ibid., 54.
67. Yoshimi, "The Metaphysical Neutrality of Husserlian Phenomenology," 4.
68. Landgrebe, *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl*, 73.
69. Luft, "Cassirer's Philosophy," 27.
70. Louis CK, *Hilarious*.
71. Kurt, *Comedy Central Presents*.
72. Evans, *Snow Cake*.
73. See the following 2012 clip for an example: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/p6cltq/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-chaos-on-bulls--t-mountain>.

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74. The 2011 film *Hysteria* is an excellent comedic portrayal of this belief among doctors and scientists.

75. Tasca, Rapetti, Carta, and Fadda, "Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health."

76. Husserl, *Ideas I*, 50; emphasis in the original.

77. Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 112–113.

78. McGraw and Warner, *Humor Code*, 50.

79. Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 115.

80. Held, "The Finitude of the World," 193.

81. *Ibid.*, 195.

82. Descartes, "The Passions of the Soul," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, art. 53.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Morreall, *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 21.

85. Schmitter, "Descartes and the Primacy of Practice," 104.

86. Rorty, "Descartes on Thinking with the Body," 386.

87. Descartes, "The Passions of the Soul," 180.

88. Moynahan, *Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany*, 19.

89. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

90. Lofts, *Ernst Cassirer*, 14–15.

91. Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, 181.

92. *Ibid.*, 157.

93. *Ibid.*, 162.

94. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 150. Cassirer here is collapsing comedy into a form of art; for my argument for why this analysis is consistent with humor as a symbolic form, and my claim that Cassirer himself speaks as though humor is a form, can be found on pages 426–429 of my 2015 article, "Humor as a Symbolic Form."

95. Perhaps the seed that began with rewarding recognition of error split into two distinct strands of uniquely human enterprises: that of humor, or the recognition of error, and that of philosophy, the resolution of that error. The similarities between the performance of philosophy and the performance of humor would be further explained if they shared an evolutionary origin. For it seems that the reward system which encouraged us to recognize error rather than go boldly forward with an unmerited belief could be the same system which encouraged human beings to engage in reflection in the first place. This system could be, in Heldian and Cartesian terms, what opened epistemic space for wonder. Of course, this claim is speculative at best, though is certainly a direction in which this research can continue.

96. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, p. 227.

97. Landgrebe, *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl*, 128.

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