

Paradox in Perspective: A Liar's Guide to Humor

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“But if I agree with you, we’ll *both* be wrong!”

Why do we laugh at jokes? Numerous theorists have attempted to answer this question. Probably the most commonly-held answer is that laughter arises as a way of releasing a build-up of tension. For example, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), claimed: “Laughter...arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.”¹ He thinks a well-formed joke causes the listener to expect one kind of outcome, but the punch line delivers a different result. The psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) defended a similar “relief” theory of humor: laughter releases the psychic energy built up by some unconscious tension.² Another philosopher, Henri Bergson, argued in his book, *Laughter* (1900), that humor is *intrinsic* to the human situation, but is normally valid only for a particular, socially-defined target audience; laughter arises when we abstract from the feeling-content of a situation, viewing it from a purely intellectual point of view. But does all humor fit these rules?

The one-line joke quoted above can serve as an example to illustrate the limits of such accounts of humor. Do you think the opening quote is funny? If so, why? Did it release a tension you were previously experiencing? I doubt it. Admittedly, Bergson is right most of the time: very few jokes can be translated literally into another language and still be funny. But some can. Why?

My theory of humor is not inconsistent with the foregoing accounts, but raises them to a new level of generalization. I maintain that humor arises first and foremost out of a momentary *deception* caused by an unexpected mixing of perspectives. (A “perspective” is a way of looking at a particular subject matter, or an “angle” from which to view something.) When a listener is led to believe that the speaker is assuming one perspective, but then a very different perspective suddenly comes into play, the result (for those who recognize the mixing of perspectives—i.e., who “get” the joke), is *laughter*. To claim to “agree” with one’s opponent

¹ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, tr. W.S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p.332.

² *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, tr. A.A. Brill (New York, 1916), pp.27-8.

and yet to say we will then “both be wrong” is to deceive the other person into *thinking* you are agreeing, yet not to deceive them, since you are admitting all along that you will still disagree with the opponent’s position. This is paradoxical, so it is *funny* only for those who see the paradox.

Paradox is, in fact, one of the most interesting features of philosophy. Among the great paradoxes that have perplexed many a philosopher, perhaps the first and foremost is the so-called Liar Paradox. It originates from an ancient Greek poem by Epimenides, written to Zeus in c.600BC. In the poem Epimenides (a citizen of Crete) says: “They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one / The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies! / But thou art not dead: thou livest and abidest forever, / For in thee we live and move and have our being.” Two centuries later, the philosopher Eubulides of Miletus noticed that in this poem a *Cretan* is claiming that Cretans always lie; and if this is true, then Epimenides’ claim (that all Cretans lie) must itself be a lie!

The Liar Paradox has taken many different forms over the past 2500 years, such as “I always lie” or “This statement is false”; but in each case, a crucial feature of the Liar Paradox is that it must involve self-reference. There is no paradox if I say “*You* always lie”, nor is “This statement is false” a paradox if “this” refers to the *previous* sentence. In the latter case, it would merely be stating that you do *not* always lie, which is perfectly self-consistent. What I have discovered during my 25 years of teaching at HKBU is that students almost always *laugh* when I explain such self-referential paradoxes. Why is that?

If we treat the Liar Paradox (or any paradox arising out of the problem of self-reference) as a merely semantic phenomenon, then it is ultimately irresolvable. This is the way philosophers have most often treated it, so this is why such paradoxes still perplex people today. However, if we look more deeply at what makes such paradoxes (especially the Liar Paradox) *funny*, then we may at least be able to understand *why* they are paradoxical. This may not “resolve” the paradox, in the most technical sense of the term (i.e., the sentences will remain paradoxical); but it will make them much less confusing.

Before explaining how the above theory of humor (as a deceptive mixing of perspectives) can ease the perplexity of the Liar Paradox, I shall reflect briefly on the multi-perspectival character of human nature in general. Humans are rational animals, and all reasoning is rooted in the presupposition of what can be called a “double I”: the “I” who thinks and the “I” who is

the object of thought (or who experiences or remembers oneself thinking). Without *both* senses of “I”, we could not reason. It is therefore no accident that the most difficult problem of *self-reference* is: “How can I *know* the knowing ‘I’?”

This problem is ultimately irresolvable if we limit our understanding of human reason to the traditional form of logic initially developed by the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. He argues that all meaningful statements must abide by two main rules: the law of identity (A is A) and the law of non-contradiction (A is not -A). I call this “analytic logic”, because it teaches us how reason operates when we are dividing the world into discrete units of meaning. However, quite a lot of human language functions not to divide the world, but to enable us to put together what would otherwise remain separate. This use of language is also rational, yet it does not follow Aristotle’s laws. What I call “synthetic logic” (or the logic of paradox) assumes the opposite rules: the law of non-identity (A is not A) and the law of contradiction (A is -A).³

Another way to express the same distinction is to say that analytic (Aristotelian) logic enables us to understand purely *verbal* truth, whereas synthetic logic enables us to understand *experienced* truth. We misunderstand the point of Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim, that “everything is false” (a statement that becomes paradoxical, once we apply it to itself), if we think he was literally claiming that no words can express any consistent (analytic) truth. The profound wisdom of his statement can be grasped only if we assume he was using synthetic logic (i.e., intentionally contradicting himself) to point out that language falsifies *experienced* reality: words can never perfectly describe our experience. For those who refuse to accept the possibility that paradoxes *can* be meaningful, the only option is the one proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”⁴ The irony, of course, is that these words are themselves paradoxical, if they are taken as a rule that relates to unspeakable reality. As such, Wittgenstein’s profound maxim is actually quite funny.

Only if we recognize the function of synthetic logic (i.e., only if we are willing to consider that paradoxes *can* convey genuine meaning) can we understand why there is truth in every jest. Just as in the theory of humor introduced above, so also paradoxes can be explained quite easily, by identifying the two (or more) perspectives that are being deceptively mixed. In the case of

³ For a more complete discussion of this analytic-synthetic distinction, see my book, *The Tree of Philosophy*; 哲学入门, tr. Zhai Pengxiao (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005 [2010]), especially chapter 4.

⁴ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 [1921]), §7.

standard philosophical paradoxes such as the Liar, these two perspectives can best be identified as perspectives of “the one” (or universal truth) and “the many” (or particular truth). In the case of the Liar, for example, the perspective of the poet (the “thinking I”) as the “the observer of *all* Cretans” does not seem paradoxical at first; the paradox arises only when we view the poet from the perspective of the poem itself (the “thought I”), as “*one* of the Cretans”. We laugh at the thought that a Cretan is calling all Cretans liars; but we only get the joke if we *see through* the deception of the mixed perspectives. This conflation is what *makes* the statement a paradox.

Similar explanations can be given for each of the great paradoxes that have perplexed philosophers down through the years. In the paradox of the Heap (where piling up grains of sand at some point eventually become a heap, yet the exact point of transformation cannot be identified), for example, to *name* the heap is to think of it from the universal perspective (“*all* grains of sand in the pile”), while thinking of it as not yet a heap requires the perspective of the particulars (“*each* of the grains of sand”).

Not all paradoxes arise out of the conflation of universal and particular perspectives. However, all paradoxes are grounded in *some* conflation of perspectives, just as all humor is grounded in a thinly veiled attempt to *deceive* one’s listener into treating multiple perspectives as one. Some paradoxes, for example, conflate linguistic (or analytic) truth with experiential (or synthetic) truth. The Paradox of the Horns (e.g., the horse has never lost its horns, so why does the horse have no horns?) conflates the linguistic meaning of “not lost” (as equivalent to “still possesses”) with the empirical meaning (as equivalent to “does not possess”). Similarly, Zeno’s most famous paradox (i.e., the race between Achilles and the tortoise, whereby the fastest runner never catches the slowest animal, because he can only ever reach half the distance between them) conflates two perspectives on time: mathematical and experiential.

Does this awareness of perspectival differences actually *resolve* such time-honored paradoxes? Yes and no. The claim that paradox is a problem is the ultimate logical lie, for it deceives us into believing that human reasoning is mono-perspectival. And that is not funny! For that misconception about human reason is the root of all personal disagreements.

If you disagree with me—especially if you believe that analytic logic is the only path to truth and meaning—I promise not to call you a liar, since you probably wouldn’t get the joke!