

THEORIES OF HUMOUR AND THE PLACE OF HUMOUR IN EDUCATION

by

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## *ABSTRACT*

It is the contention of this thesis that the possession of a sense of humour would contribute considerably to the quality of human life. This thesis explores and discusses some of the difficulties involved in justifying the development of humour in terms of a philosophy of education. In light of developments in the digital age with consequent changes in science, technology and society, the educated person of the future will have to be less concerned with the accumulated knowledge of the past than with the development and interplay of social and natural environments. Such a person will need to have, more than ever, a sense of what is truly real and what is truly valuable in human life. If the primary purpose of education is the preparation of students for their future lives, educators are now faced with some challenging problems. Apart from the high social value of laughter, there is a recognized relationship between humour and intelligence. Knowing that the two are related proves to be a key factor in understanding the learning process and assuring that the development of a sense of humour in education is worthy of consideration.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'argument fondamental de cette thèse repose sur l'idée que le sens de l'humour améliore grandement la qualité de la vie. Parmi les problèmes abordés, cette thèse examine les difficultés relatives à la prise en compte de l'humour dans la philosophie de l'éducation. Compte-tenu des conséquences de la révolution numérique et de son impact sur les sciences, la technologie et la société, une personne bien éduquée devra, à l'avenir, non pas tant se soucier des connaissances acquises par le passé que de l'évolution et de l'interaction entre la société et la nature. Plus que jamais cette personne devra savoir identifier ce qui est véritablement significatif et prioritaire dans la vie. Si l'objectif principal des éducateurs est de préparer leurs étudiants à affronter l'avenir, il faut bien convenir qu'ils font face à des problèmes de taille. La valeur sociale du rire n'est plus à prouver et le rapport entre l'humour et l'intelligence non plus. Le lien entre ces deux derniers éléments occupe un rôle fondamental dans notre compréhension du processus d'apprentissage. Par conséquent inculquer le sens de l'humour devrait constituer une de nos priorités.

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## *Chapter One*

### INTRODUCTION

In his book, **The Medium is the Massage**, Marshall McLuhan makes a provocative observation:

Learning, the educational process, has long been associated only with the glum. We speak of the 'serious student.' Our time presents a unique opportunity for learning by means of humour—a perceptive or incisive joke can be more meaningful than platitudes lying between two covers. <sup>1</sup>

If indeed our time does present a unique opportunity for learning by means of humour, and I think it does, how would one begin? Humour is the stimulus for laughter

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, **The Medium is the Massage** (New York:1967), p. 10.

and one of the unsolved problems of philosophy. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Bain, Bergson, Schopenhauer, Kant, Spencer, and Freud, to mention only a few, have concerned themselves with the definition, the analysis, and the techniques of humour. But quite apart from great thinkers, most of us would recognize the common-sense value of a good sense of humour.

There are a number of approaches to the study of humour: etymological, psychological, biological, sociological, philosophical and historical. Dictionaries deal with verbal significance which can only serve as the starting point of analysis. The unabridged **Random House Dictionary of the English Language** defines humour as the faculty of perceiving or expressing what is amusing or comical. Humour and wit are contrasting terms that agree in referring to an ability to perceive and express a sense of the clever or amusing. Humour mainly consists in the recognition and expression of incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. Often used to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct, it is generally thought of as more kindly than wit: 'a genial and mellow type of humour,' a 'biting wit.'

Wit is a strictly intellectual manifestation of cleverness and quickness of understanding in finding analogies in things that are very different and expressing them in brief, diverting, and often sharp observations or remarks. Etymologically, *wit* stems from *witan*, which means *understanding*. The roots of meaning go back to the Latin *videre*, the Greek *eidw* (to see with the mind's eye having a clear and purely mental perception) and the Sanskrit *veda*, meaning knowledge. The German *Witz* means *both joke and acumen*; it comes from *wissen*, to know; *Wissenschaft*, science, and is closely connected to *Furwit* and *Aberwitz*, meaning *presumption, cheek and jest*. The same is

true in French. *Spirituel* may mean either witty or spiritually profound; to amuse comes from to muse (*à-muser*), and a witty remark is a *jeu d'esprit* ("game of the spirit"), a playful, mischievous form of discovery. The word 'jester,' also has a respectable history. The *chansons de geste* played a large part in medieval literature from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. They were epics centered on heroic events and their name comes from the Latin *gesta*: deeds, exploits. During the Renaissance, satire replaced the epics of chivalry, and in the sixteenth century, the heroic 'geste' turned into 'jest'.

With respect to the word 'humour,' it is a temptation to reject the old psychological meaning of medieval medicine as archaic. This, however, would be a serious omission; there is no doubt that there is a physiological relation between humour, laughter, and health. According to the old beliefs, one's overall humour, both physical and mental, resulted from the combination of four humours; blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. It was thought that a person was healthy when the four humours were properly mixed in the body. In the twentieth century, we were told that humour is the only type of communication in which a mental stimulus results in a stereotyped, predictable response on the physiological level. From this perspective, there is the coordinated contraction of fifteen facial muscles, altered breathing, an increase in circulation of the blood, heightened colour, stimulation of the brain, and a release of tension.

While definitions and etymologies are interesting and illuminating, they do not, as this discussion will show, begin to show the complexity and interrelationships of the concepts in question. And, while the old physiological explanations are obviously out of date, even the most modern scientific considerations of humour, when confronted with the complex nature of the human mind and soul, still prove inadequate.

The ancient Greeks did not define education in terms of useful knowledge and skills. The whole tradition of Western education begins with the observation that man is a human animal distinctive from other animals by his ability to think. It was the Greeks who set in motion the tradition of thinking about thinking and the pursuit of knowledge and education. There are two important points to note with reference to the Greek idea of education. The first is that the function of the mind is to pursue knowledge. The second springs from the first; the belief that the mind will understand knowledge in terms of what is ultimately real and unchanging as it sifts through layers of false beliefs and wrong opinions. It is this point, however, which begs the relationship between knowledge and reality. As a philosophy of education, this view is justified on the grounds that it is in pursuit of ultimate truths beyond passing fads and changing value systems. It is held to be valuable in and of itself and to have no practical value apart from the desire for the ultimate understanding of how one ought to live, both as an individual and as a member of society.

As members of Athenian society, the Greeks appreciated tragedy as an art form complimented by comedy. It was required that each tragic presentation be followed by a comedy or satyr play that made irreverent fun of the sombre events that had just been enacted. This was viewed not only as entertainment but also as education.

One can, with hindsight, survey the history of our species in a world where the gods once screamed in the human mind and suppose, as Julian Jaynes has done, that this is the breakdown of the bicameral mind and the origin of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> We can see the origins of Western thought laid in the fifth century BC and note the modifica-

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<sup>2</sup> Julian Jaynes, **The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind**, (New York:1976)

tions made through time with the advent of Christianity, Modern Science, and Humanism. These influences culminate in the twentieth century with the belief that truth is relative. It seems all too obvious that the curriculum and the objectives of education necessarily rest on value judgements, not just those of the individual but those of various social, religious, political or minority groups.

Changes in the philosophy of education are affected in some measure by changes in the technology by which education itself is transmitted. We begin with non-verbal communication, pictographs, spoken language, hieroglyphics, and the invention of the alphabet. From the bardic tradition of oral literature, we progress to written literature; from writing on cave walls we turn to tomb walls, clay tablets, vases, animal skins, parchment and vellum. In the sixteenth century, with the invention of moveable type, it is no longer the privileged few who are educated by the printed word. By the twentieth century, great masses of people are educated not only by the printed word but by the new electronic technology.

McLuhan has argued that seeing is believing; we do have a tendency to believe what we see with our eyes, especially in the form of the photographic image or in the printed word. This can perhaps be traced back to the verb '*nooein*,' to see, or, in the figurative sense, to understand, and the relation that exists between the eyes and the conscious mind. McLuhan contends that the alphabet shaped the human mind into logical, linear thought patterns that celebrate reason and the cognitive realm as the top priority in education.

Twenty-five hundred years before McLuhan, Socrates believed that the invention of the alphabet would cause 'forgetfulness in the learner's soul.' He believed, like many of his predecessors, that truth was to be found only in living speech.

The painter's products stand before us as if they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same things forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally with those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.

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Socrates, though he is often tongue in cheek, is a believer in what we would call direct rather than indirect experience. He takes the stand that reading and writing are inferior to pure thought and discussion. The truly valuable education is one which writes upon the soul of the learner, not the pages of a notebook.

The foregoing discussion is an attempt to distinguish various questions that may be asked about humour in education. Where should humour fit in the educational scheme of things? How should the development of humour be regarded; is it concerned with feeling, emotion, or intellectual development? How does humour fit in with the rest of our behaviour? Which attitudes seem to be most characteristic of humour? Such questions cannot be given universal, final and definitive answers and this study does not propose to give them. Rather, it will consider the case for the development of

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<sup>3</sup> From **Plato's Phaedrus** (265d-276), tr. R. Hackforth (Cambridge:1972)

a sense of humour through the educational process by examining, first, various views as to the nature of humour and then by discussing some implications for education.

This study puts forward three different theories. The first is concerned with humour as a relief of tension or as a psychological safety valve for the individual in society. The second component is concerned with incongruities; mental activities involved in the mechanisms of humour are the same as those involved in the act of discovery and the creation of art. It is, however, the incongruities of life, leading to a recognition of the differences between what we see and what we believe to be true, that takes us to the third theory dealing with moral development. The final chapters consider humour in connection with various aspects of education in the broad sense of the term; the concern here is with the creation of a place for humour in education.

## Chapter Two

### HUMOUR, WIT AND THE COMIC

Freud's book, **Wit and the Relation to the Unconscious**, is directed to understanding the psychic processes of the comic. For his research, he turned to the philosophers and poets of the nineteenth century; Theodore Lipps, Kuno Fischer, Jean Paul Richter and Theodore Vischer. He found only a few thinkers who had examined wit apart from the comic element in any serious depth.<sup>4</sup>

A certain ratio of interplay is very evident between wit, humour and the comic. But of the three, humour is found to be the most self-sufficient. It is a psychic experience taking place within the individual in which disappointment plays a key role. Freud uses 'disappointment' as a generic term to represent a whole train of emotions such as fear, disgust, frustration, anger or sympathy. His view is that disappointment causes

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<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, **The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud**, ed. Dr. A.A. Brill (New York:1938) p. 633.

pain and that there is no comic effect for the individual who is either caught up in the pain or who faces the pain of disappointment and disregards it.<sup>5</sup>

Before proceeding with an examination of Freud's views, let us look at several examples of different types of humour drawn mainly from motion picture films. The classic example that springs readily to mind is that of Charles Chaplin. A master of pantomime, he has been hailed as the supreme comic genius of the films. Chaplin's mother suffered from poor health that ended in madness and he, as a young boy, was to spend two years in a workhouse for the poor. It is not at all surprising that the majority of his films present an intolerable reality in which there is a disparity between his ability and the task he must accomplish. In his 1925 film, **The Gold Rush**, he sidesteps the reality of an empty stomach as he shortsightedly cooks his shoe and sits down with all the pleasures of a gourmet to enjoy the laces, the leather and the nails. In an earlier film of 1915, **The Tramp**, he loses the girl he loves through elaborate incompetence and then takes refuge in stoicism. Shrugging his shoulders, he walks jauntily off into the future having transformed his painful feelings to a humoristic appreciation of the situation.

Humour, then, is seen as a way of finding pleasure in spite of the painful feelings that give rise to it; it serves as a substitute in replacing these emotions. If we find ourselves in a situation that justifies breaking into tears, and other motives demand that we suppress these feelings, we have the basic ingredients for humour.

In both films, Chaplin, as the character in the role he is playing, would find a charming and winning humoristic pleasure in not having the means for a proper meal; the plight of unrequited love would be transformed into a broad wink and a winsome ex-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.797.

pression of humour. And it is we, as the disinterested audience, who laugh at the comic pleasure. The bottom line of humour, according to Freud, is the not always so simple act of pulling in the reins of our initial runaway feelings of disappointment and the accompanying pain.

He goes on to say that humour, of all the comic forms, is the most independent because it is a subjective process experienced by the individual. It is only by sympathetically understanding the humoristic individual that we acquire the same pleasure.

There is a cartoon of a French Legionnaire standing blindfolded before a firing squad. When offered a lighted cigarette by one of the executioners, he replies, "No thanks, I'm trying to quit." This is a form of gallows humour in which the mock heroism can only be called a roguish commitment. Instead of giving into his despair and having a last cigarette, he valiantly clings to his determination to stop smoking which is redundant in view of his impending execution.

Viewed from another perspective, we might experience intense pity for the man about to die. In this case, however, our feeling of pity is limited for two reasons which are not mutually exclusive. Following McLuhan's idea that the 'medium is the message,' we do not forget that this is a cartoon and not reality itself. Freud, on the other hand, believes that our feeling of pity is limited because of the individual's indifference to the situation. Because such feelings are inappropriate, they are laughed off.

**The Life of Brian** is a 1979 film directed by Terry Jones. A parody of the life of Christ, it also serves as an example of the type of humour found in comic books and animated cartoons involving little bloodshed or suffering against a background of violent happenings. We, as the audience, are impervious and indifferent to any possible pain or

suffering experienced by Brian (or Wiley Coyote) because our sympathy has been di-verted by the impossible and is independent of the limits of reality.

The humoristic effect of a character like Oliver Hardy, a fat, pompous show-off, who at bottom is just an incompetent kid, is based on contempt and indignation and the knowledge that we ourselves would not behave that way. Our condemnation, however, is offset by a whole series of factors. We know that he sees himself to be just what we see; a nasty, spiteful boy. What we admire is the authenticity of the spite he captures so well in his psychologically perceptive performance. Hardy lives in a world where all adults are portrayed as destructive, spiteful children smashing each other's sandcastles. Added to this is his enormous physical size. His body predisposes us to accept a comic interpretation of his personality rather than a serious one. In Hardy, we recognize the feelings of the spiteful child inside ourselves; we admit that life is not always fair and that like children we would find a certain satisfaction in smashing things just to even the score a bit. It is for this reasons that we do not bear him any ill feeling and transform our contempt into comic pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Another yet very different example of the child in the adult is found in Jerzey Kosinski's film **Being There**. Peter Sellers portrays the role of the main character, Chance, as a middle-aged man with the innocence of a child. Chance has spent his en-tire life in isolation from the real world and is a product of 'the reel' world of television. His tastes and value systems have been developed only through his favourite television programs; he has never gone to school and can neither read nor write. Chance would be the ideal participant in **Mr. Roger's Neighbourhood**, a particularly sensitive program

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<sup>6</sup> Gerald Mast, **A Short History of the Movies** (Indianapolis:1981) p.119.

for the preschool child. He himself is a big child described by the maid as “stuffed with rice pudding between the ears...and dumb as a jackass.” His view of the world is childishly simplistic and yet one that is so familiar to all television viewers that he is welcomed by the American public as a sage and potential candidate for the Vice-Presidency of the United States.

Chance is a character who, as Freud would say, possesses no humour himself but gives us a humoristic pleasure with the artless serious needs of a good child. Had Chance taken himself seriously, he would have emerged as a comic character. But Chance is never really clued in to what is going on; it is the media which see them-selves as a mirror image in this naive personality and, like Narcissus, fall in love with their own image.

And so, as in most fairytales, it is the ‘natural,’ openhearted child who is endowed with the profoundest wisdom and noblest aims and made a symbolic token of an ideal-ism. **Being There** is an example of the humoristic effect with a more complex type of humour than that found in Laurel and Hardy.

These examples serve to illustrate different types of humour and different ‘disappointments’ relinquished. Chaplin is the outsider, the poor boy from the workhouse, the tramp who wonders if he will be able to survive in an increasingly technological society. He is the inevitable loser who gives us what Freud would call ‘broken humour.’ Pleasure is found in the situation despite the pain generated by it.

In the case of the nonsmoking soldier of fortune, he has given up the fear of a life cut short by forces beyond his control to stand by his determination to stop smoking. Feelings of pity are out of place both in this situation and in the film, **The Life of Brian**.

In the first instance, we meet total indifference to the 'reality' of the execution. In the second, our sympathy is distracted by impossible events which lie outside the bounds of reality. **The Life of Brian** can be said to lay wider claim to the comic rather than to the humoristic realm. It nevertheless deals with the 'disappointment' that a Christ will perish in torment even in our own age; it is this fear of disappointment, according to Freud's theory that is transformed into comic pleasure. Oliver Hardy is the child, the id within each of us. In him we recognize the child's desire for fair play and the spite of childhood that he, unlike our-selves, gives vent to his feelings. Here we transform the disappointments of childhood and transform our disdain to comic pleasure.

McLuhan and media experts have long argued that the media creates misleadingly favourable images of politicians who are without qualifications for the positions they hold. The film, **Being There**, recognizes our disappointment with the inadequacies of the political electoral system and the fear of media-constructed personalities. Chance is such a personality; his platitudes and homilies are ingrained in the North American mentality through countless hours of television viewing. Our disappointment lies with the role that twentieth century media play in our lives with their focus on image, whether real or media constructed. In this film, we find humour in media confronting media.

There are, of course, many more examples of humour but these should be sufficient to illustrate the conditions of humour that Freud puts forward in his analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Humour is based on two premises: (1) It may appear to be connected either with wit or some other form of the comic. (2) Its purpose is to remove the possibility of a train of emotions that would inhibit any sense of pleasure. In this Freud agrees with Herbert

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, Op cit, pp.801-802.

Spencer who says that nervous energy must not be allowed to diverge into other emotions or other trains of thought. Although it can sometimes be totally effective in doing away with these feelings, it is usually only partially successful in that it emerges as broken humour, the type of humour which 'smiles under its tears.' The mechanism removes only a part of the painful emotion transforming it into the pleasure of humour.

Defence mechanisms serve to protect us against pain from within ourselves; with repression, we hold back the memory of events that would be painful if we were conscious of them.<sup>8</sup> With a reaction formation, we develop character traits that are the opposite of the ones we really have.<sup>9</sup> Attributing undesirable traits to another often involves some degree of projection<sup>10</sup> while regression involves a return to an earlier, more comfortable kind of mental life.<sup>11</sup>

Displacement directs an impulse from its original object to a substitute<sup>12</sup> but the pleasure derived from it, though similar, is different from that of humour when seen as a defense mechanism. We can, for example, ignore a painful feeling knowing that in a hundred years it will not make any difference. This, however, is a so-called philosophic approach, not a humoristic one.

Freud engages in an extensive psychological analysis involving such concepts as the conscious, the unconscious, the foreconscious and preconscious. What is particularly relevant to our study is his suggestion that there is a closer and more direct rela-

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<sup>8</sup> Freud, **Moses and Monotheism**, trans., Katherine Jones (New York:1967), pp.120-122.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-101.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp.97-101.

<sup>11</sup> **The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud**, p. 854.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp.626-627.

tionship between humour and the comic than between wit and the comic; referring to the latter, he writes:

It is a condition for the origin of the comic that we be induced to apply - either 'simultaneously or in rapid succession' - to the same thought function two different modes of ideas, between which the 'comparison' takes place and the comic difference results.<sup>13</sup>

The point to note here is that two different types of understanding happen at the same time in the mind of the individual hearing the wit. The first type of understanding is immediately apparent. The second type is not at first apparent and must follow a train of thought through the unconscious. In humour, however, there are not two different types of understanding with the same content; the understanding is instantaneous. A predicament in which the individual continues to be under the influence of a painful feeling, which should have been kept at a distance, is fatal to the comic effect. Humoristic displacement then is a different kind of operation allowing the liberation of painful feelings.

In his analysis, Freud puts forward a formula for wit, the comic and humour.<sup>14</sup>

The pleasure of wit comes about from 'an economy of expenditure in inhibition,' the pleasure of the comic from 'an economy of expenditure in thought,' and the pleasure of humour from 'an economy of expenditure in feeling.' Economy in humour, like economy of line in art, does not refer to mechanical brevity. It refers to implicit hints rather than explicit statements.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.802.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.803.

Other writers on the subject of wit seem agreed on the significance of brevity and find Shakespeare's Polonius right to the point:

“Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,  
And tediousness the limbs and outward  
flourishers,  
I will be brief.”

(*Hamlet*, II, ii, 90-92)

Marie Collins Swabey, for example, explains:

Such brevity, which bespeaks both a verbal and a logical impulse, is rooted in the principle of simplicity or parsimony, familiar to science and known to scholastic logic as Occam's razor (entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity). In large part, the cleverness of wit consists in the originality combined with adroitness with which shortcuts and epitomizations of thought are expressed in pithy form

. . . In this sense witticisms represent a victory for rational method, that is for 'least means,' the shortest route in speech, the minimum outlay of terms. . .

Don Quixote's "he who is covered with honey will never lack flies," . . . the principle of least means is utilized to expose amusingly the incongruity in a situation in the most condensed, vividly provocative form.<sup>15</sup>

As a further example, Mrs. Swabey quotes Voltaire's wit in repartee when faced with the arrival of the Abbé Goyer who announced that he had come to visit for six weeks. "In what respect my dear Abbé," asked Voltaire, "are you unlike Don Quixote? He took inns for châteaux, and you take châteaux for inns?" The Abbé did not unpack.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marie Collins Swabey, **Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay**, (New Haven:1961), pp.81-84.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

Inhibition, thought, and feeling are the three distinctive modes which find pleasure in economy. It is this desire for 'economy' or simplicity that leads Freud to remark:

...the euphoria which we are thus striving to obtain is nothing but that state of a bygone time, in which we were wont to defray our psychic work with slight expenditure. It is this state of our childhood in which we did not know the comic, were incapable of wit, and did not need humour to make us happy.

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To summarize to this point, laughter, for Freud, is evidence of the discharge of a psychological irritation which has been inhibited. Freud's theory, while finding the roots of the comic in the primitive, the infantile, and in biological need, stands as one of the major theories put forward with respect to humour; the theory of relief of tension or release from inhibition.

One can protest the whole Freudian approach, the technical obscurantism, the specially invented technical terms, the nebulous constructs of id, ego, and superego. One can object to the amount of emphasis placed on irrationality and deplore the tendency to psychoanalyze and biologize the realm of meaning and values. This is the position taken by Mrs. Swabey. From her perspective, Freud's approach is neither liberating nor particularly credible.

To treat 'psychic energy' as if it were a measurable, physically observable quantity like a mechanical energy is absurd. To treat the unconscious as if it were something distinct from the physiological, as well as different from vague, inattentive awareness (yet at the same time as something whose existence can be known only through

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<sup>17</sup>Freud, **The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud**, p. 803.

awareness) is to embrace the equivalent of an unconscious consciousness, something that is quite incomprehensible.

To split up the unity of the self, the individual subject, into three phenomenally distinguishable objects also has its difficulties. But especially his picture of the world as a blind, irrational process undermines our confidence in the power of human intelligence (constructed as a late, restricted comer) to authenticate its construction of a genuine 'scientific' cosmology.

In stressing the wild vagaries of the early stages and in limiting the presence of logical and moral order to the 'maturation' of the race, Freud destroys our assurance of man's ability to grasp the creative process of its unfolding.

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The problem, as Marie Collins Swabey suggests, is this. If humour and the comic are just a "longing for some primordial home, for the womb, or for the return to some biological Eden of pleasurable innocence as a wish fulfillment,"<sup>19</sup> there is little justification for humour in education. Although Mrs. Swabey herself is not concerned with education in this instance, her point is relevant. If crude humour lacks logical structure and requires very little mental effort, there would seem to be reason enough to abandon the whole idea. But, is this the actual state of affairs?

In his analysis, Freud attempts to disentangle the characteristics of wit put forward by various thinkers in the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> For Lipps, wit is to be found in the active behaviour of the subject. This is to say that wit is something that we, as the subjective entity, create whereas a comic situation is discovered. Freud follows Lipps in this line of thinking and adopts the idea of creation into his own formula. Fischer regards wit in terms of its relation to its object as a 'playful judgment.' Freud points out

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<sup>18</sup>Swabey, *Op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* p. 216.

<sup>20</sup>Freud, *Op. cit.*, pp. 633-638.

that an enduring definition has been the discovery of similarities in the dissimilarities and Fischer points to the contrary notion that one does not find similarities but contrasts. Although there is no agreement here, the ground common to all is again in the recognition of the necessity for brevity that is unique to humour, wit and the comic. Having looked at wit, let us now make an examination of the comic and some of its forms.

Aristotle finds comedy to be:

. . . an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.

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This passage has been interpreted in several ways. D. H. Monro quite rightly believes this to be the foundation for Hobbes' theory of superiority and degradation which attracted other thinkers such as Bain, Leacock and Ludovici. He notes that proponents of the intellectual theory such as W. S. Lilly objected that this was to interpret Aristotle in the narrower rather than the wider sense of the meaning. Ugliness includes, according to Lilly,

“incongruities, absurdities, the cross purposes of life, its imperfect correspondences or adjustments, and that in matters intellectual as well as moral.”

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<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, “De Poetica” in **The Basic Works of Aristotle**, ed., Richard McKeon (New York:1941) 1448a 35.

<sup>22</sup>W. A. S. Lilly quoted in D. H. Monro, **Argument for Laughter**, (Melbourne:1951), p. 83.

The important point to note, in drawing a line between wit and the comic, is one that takes us back to Theodore Lipps with the idea that the comic is a situation discovered while wit is something created. It is a comic discovery to find a neighbour walking through freshly laid cement on the sidewalk in bedroom slippers. As a comic situation, it is found to be funny if (1) we are not concerned with the distress of an elderly neighbour, or (2) we are not concerned with the aesthetic disfigurement of the cement. According to Freud, there need only be two people for the comic to exist; the one who finds the comical and the one in whom it is discovered.<sup>23</sup> But is this true?

Can we not imagine ourselves alone laughing at a comic situation in which we are the central character? Hobbes suggests that we do this when we remember our past experiences and laugh at ourselves as though we were another person.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, wit, as we saw, is created. When another observer of the cement predicament remarks, "Hâ Hâ, old Gervaise is planted just like her chestnut trees," it is a mentally creative act, although not an especially lofty one on the part of the wit. Unlike the comic situation which Freud says has need of two people, the one in whom the comic is found and the one who finds it, wit, when it is coupled with the comic requires three people. In this example, there is the elderly Gervaise stuck in the cement, the neighbour who makes the witticism, and the observer who sees the comic situation and appreciates the witticism. It is the observer who laughs, according to Freud, because the individual has experienced an 'economy of mental effort' in acquiring pleasure. The situation was provided and the mental effort of the witticism was presented as an accomplished fact.

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<sup>23</sup>Freud, Op. cit., p.762.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Hobbes, **Leviathan**, (New York:1973), Part I, Chapter III, p. 10.

Most closely associated with wit is the naïve although it is universally found rather than created as is wit. It is, by definition, a lack of experience, judgment or information. The naïve is found in children and uneducated adults. In comparing the naïve with wit, it is speech rather than actions that are the usual form of expression. The difference between wit and naïveté is that in wit, we believe that the speaker intended the witty remark while with naïveté, we assume that the child or adult draws an honest conclusion on the basis of some ignorance. The psychic process of the person producing the wit is active while the naïve person introduces a thought in a simple and normal way with no other purpose in mind. The one who finds pleasure in the naïve is the listener who, as Freud suggests, finds pleasure in the removal of inhibitions. This is to say that the child has a mistaken understanding which overcomes the inhibitions which we have regarding language. The naïve is unintentional. And this is true of the comic itself for it is found in people; in their bodies, their movements, their actions, and in their distinguishing characteristics. Through personification, we also find animals and inanimate objects comical. There is, as well, the comical situation itself in which the conditions necessary for the comic are joined with human actions. In this way, it is possible to make another person look comical. And this applies to our-selves as well. One has a choice of the comic situation: disguise, imitation, unmasking, caricature, parody, or travesty. As Freud points out, these techniques may be used for hostile or aggressive tendencies.<sup>25</sup> In this, Mrs. Swabey agrees with Freud when she states:

...our sense of the comic situation usually arises from some

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<sup>25</sup>Freud, *Op. cit.*, p.768.

form of embarrassment, in which we feel again vicariously the helplessness of the child; the comic of exaggeration from people's exhibiting immoderate behaviour, the uninhibited imagination and ignorance of quantitative relations of the child: again the comic often turns on the love of imitation (said to be the child's best art - in his desire to be like the big fellows); while degradation and unmasking correspond to the child's delight in seeing the adult, voluntarily or involuntarily, lowered to his own level.

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Making people comical serves to deprive them of their claims to dignity and authority converting them to the contemptible. This is, of course, far from unintentional and in this instance, the comical is considered apart from the person in whom it is found.

Why are clowns so funny? Is it because their movements are exaggerated and inappropriate for ordinary functions? Freud suggests that the comic is found in an 'excessive expenditure of energy.'<sup>27</sup> If we look for situations outside the area of created comedy, we might well find them in the actions of children. The actions or words of children become comical in instances where the child exaggerates the movements, speech patterns or words of adults.

Another source of the comic is found in our expectations of what will happen in the future. We expect something to happen and something else happens instead. The proof of expectation is to be found in the motor responses which serve as one of the main props of the situation comedy on television. The actor, for example, thinks a door is heavily barricaded and begins elaborate preparations to break through it when it suddenly swings open on its own. According to Freud's hypothesis, these actions will

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<sup>26</sup>Swabey, Op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>27</sup>Freud, Ibid., p.769.

be seen as comical to the audience because there is an excessive expenditure of energy under the circumstances.

Imitation is another means of making someone else comical; it offers a tremendous amount of pleasure even without the exaggeration of caricature, parody, and travesty. These techniques are directed at people who have authority and respect. The aim is to degrade the 'exalted.'

Caricature is an extremely powerful form of the comic. It takes one feature, comical in itself, from the complete picture of the individual, one which is most often insignificant when viewed in terms of the entire picture. By isolating this feature, it dominates our impression of the whole. Freud, however, notes that there is one condition to this technique:

. . . the presence of the exalted element must not force us into a disposition of reverence. Where such a comical feature is really lacking, caricature then unhesitatingly creates it by exaggerating one that is not comical in itself. It is again characteristic of the origin of the comic pleasure that the effect of the caricature is not essentially impaired through such a falsifying of reality. 28

Parody and travesty may be used as a means of unmasking the notoriously corrupt. Unmasking is used when an individual has claimed dignity and authority that is not his by right. Techniques involve using any of the comic-making devices which degrade the dignity of the individual by pointing out one of the common human failings, especially the dependence of mental activities upon physical needs. This technique is used by Lawrence and Lee in their play **Inherit the Wind**. Mathew Harrison Brady is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 777.

patterned after William Jennings Bryan, the special prosecutor in the famous Scopes trial of 1925. He is a benign giant of a man wearing a pith helmet, a man with great personal magnetism whose dignity is undermined by his immoderate love of food and his dogmatic belief that, "The Lord began the Creation on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October in the Year 4,004B.C. - at uh, at 9 A.M."

Parody is used, not only as a burlesque or humorous imitation of a person or event, but also as a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious work of art. Travesty, on the other hand, is a literary or artistic burlesque of a serious work or subject matter.

Parody has always been a staple of comic humour in films. For Chaplin, it was a means of getting at the serious world of men and society.

This chapter has focused on a fundamental conflict in the study of humour. On the one hand, there is Freud's view that humour must be seen as having essentially a psychological or emotional basis allowing for the release of inhibitions. On the other hand, Swabey argues that it is the intellectual aspects of humour that constitute its essential elements. This is a conflict that must be addressed in any consideration of the place of humour in education.

Before concluding this chapter, we should note the importance of the sense and nonsense types of humour for young children. Are these early stirrings of the imagination the beginning of creativity? What exactly is the relationship between sense, nonsense, humour and creativity? Writing about the broad humour of nonsense, Emile Cammaerts remarks:

[The child] no sooner stores a few ideas or images in his mind than he begins to play with them, bestowing on the

animate and inanimate worlds the qualities of man, making servants behave like kings and kings like servants, bringing the moon and the stars close to the fields and the fields to the stars, altering all ranks and proportions, making blind mice run after the farmer's wife, and rocking cradles on the treetops. 29

Because the world for most of us is not always exhilaratingly fresh, we have a tendency to try, like the child, to escape from the tedium of everyday life and the over familiar. It is what the artist, the musician, the poet, the scientist, and the revolutionary all attempt to do; they are conducting explorations into the inner realm of the imagination. Or, to put it in the language of our subject, linking disparates: importing into one sphere ideas which belong in another.

If you treat a toadstool as a fairy's dinner plate, or rain as angel's tears, you may be a primitive animist groping towards an explanation of the universe, or you may be an A. A. Milne being whimsical. A child can fill either role or both. The point of departure occurs when the two ideas are *felt* as disparates. In exploring new possibilities, it is natural enough to apply to one sphere what has been found in another.

A very young child may suppose, naturally enough, that animals talk. But after he has learned that they do not, he may still find it fun to suppose that they could . . . it can be said that this kind of make-believe, if not exactly funny, is usually *quaint* or *whimsical*. It belongs, in fact, on the fringes of humour. Quaintness or whimsy passes over into humour proper when our attention is focused on the difference between the two spheres which are linked. The art of the fairytale is to create an atmosphere in which it seems natural for dogs to talk, or beanstalks to reach to Heaven. The art of humour is to obtrude these disparities suddenly, unexpectedly, so that the contrast is evident. This is why shock and surprise have been stressed so much in all theories of humour. 30

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<sup>29</sup>Emile Cammaerts, **The Poetry of Nonsense**, (London:1925), pp. 17-18.

<sup>30</sup>Monro, Op. cit., p. 238.

While children cannot relate to satire, witticism, or parody, they do relate to the fun of playing with words, images, and concepts that are incongruous. The passage quoted from Monro suggests that nonsense is an elementary type of humour that can be broken down into two categories: (1) the exploration of new areas, and (2) the desire to escape the familiar, the routine, the well-ordered world of rules and regulations. And this is exactly what the nonsense story offers; it is a deliberate upsetting of all laws and conventions.<sup>31</sup>

As adults, we enjoy the rich imaginative world of children and the sheer fun of nonsense. But is it with a sense of perplexity that we do so? Do we look down on the child thinking, "I'd *never* fall for that!" Often it is the child who is a paragon of stubborn common sense while the adult plays, jokes, teases, and attempts to cajole the child's imagination into a more adventurous fairy world. Following Hobbes, it is probably closer to the mark to say that we take pleasure in the ingenuity of our imaginative creations. Fat, noisy, aggressive children are not funny but an adult such as Oliver Hardy, who *pretends to be the nasty, spiteful child, does give us that sense of superiority in that we would not act that way ourselves.*

Freud certainly has his critics, but we do not need to believe in all the ramifications of his theory to argue that hilarity and humorous enjoyment have a part to play in human experience even if viewed from that perspective of the child in each of us. The emotional release of tension through laughter, the transformation of pain into pleasure, the element of play which is an essential element of our ontological makeup; all con-

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 236-240.

tribute to a better understanding of what it means to be a human being. With respect to Freud's theory, in so far as natural aggression is repressed in childhood, humour can be seen as rebellion against authority in that it wages attacks on the social system. And, while one can argue that such attacks contribute to anarchy, meaninglessness and emptiness, one must also admit that humour has its roots in a strong recognition of the incongruities of life which reason and common sense would prefer otherwise.

## *Chapter Three*

### *HUMOUR, DISCOVERY AND ART*

There is considerable doubt whether 'humour' can ever be finally or consciously defined. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, certain theories have focused on the relation of humour, wit and the comic. Others maintain that real humour is the ability to strike a balance when events around us become too illogical or too incongruous to tolerate. Some of these incongruities are concerned with corruption in high places, hypocrisy in human relations, incompetence, misplaced love, the triumph of the undeserving, and the foolishness of those who should know better. Humour takes the form of witticism, parody, satire, caricature, or an incisive joke. It ranges from the crude scatological humour of children to sophisticated works of art with hidden meanings waiting to be uncovered by the conscious mind. Not one of these theories can be said to be more than an approach that discloses certain dimensions of, or perspectives on, the category of humour. But there certainly is value in humoristic theories; it is these theories that show us what to look for and how to find it both in life and in art. Most serious thinkers on the subject would think one perspective is not enough and, in any

case, various overlapping theories are necessary for a more complete understanding of how humour might be used in education.

According to Arthur Koestler, there are three domains of creativity without sharp distinction; humour, discovery, and art. Through these domains, we laugh, we understand, and we marvel. In each category, the logical pattern of creativity is the same—the discovery of hidden similarities. What is different, however, is the emotional set; the comic simile is tinged with aggressiveness, scientific reasoning lays claim to emotional detachment and neutrality, the poetic image is admiring or sympathetic and based on a positive kind of emotion. Humour, discovery and art are seen as being members of the same creative family.

Humour	Discovery	Art
comic simile	hidden analogy	poetic image
witticism	epigram	trouvaille
satire	social analysis	allegory
impersonation	empathy	illusion
caricature	schématisation	stylisation
pun	word-puzzle	rhyme
riddle	problem	allusion
debunking	discovering	revealing
coincidence	“trigger”	fate
bathos	short cut	pathos

Koestler refers to this triptych when he says:

...all patterns of creative activity are trivalent; they can enter the service of humour, discovery or art; and also as we travel across the triptych from left to right, the emotional climate changes by gradual transitions from aggressive to neutral to sympathetic and identificatory-or, to put it another way, from an absurd through an abstract to a tragic or lyric view of existence. <sup>32</sup>

Koestler notes that there is a difference between the routine skills of thinking on a single plane and the creative act which always operates on more than one level. This is a basic statement of the incongruity theory which Schopenhauer saw as a tracing of connections where none were known to exist. Literature of the comic is filled with examples of this kind ranging from the simple to the complex: "Love a teacher, it's educational." It is the sudden 'bisociation' or the union of two entirely different thoughts that produces the comic effect. Intellectual word play centres on the word 'educational' which is connected with our emotional attitudes and usually kept in different compartments of the mind. A more complex example, but one that has a single point of culmination, is quoted by Koestler.

At the time when John Wilkes was the hero of the poor and lonely, an ill-wisher informed him gleefully, "It seems that some of your faithful supporters have turned their coats." "Impossible," Wilkes answered, "Not one of them has a coat to turn." <sup>33</sup>

In this example, two mutually incompatible frames of reference come into play; the coat is first used metaphorically and then literally. In first choosing one side and

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<sup>32</sup>Arthur Koestler, **The Act of Creation**, (New York:1969), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

then the other, two different mindsets are formed. It is the literal context that gives a visual image that sharpens the difference. The mindset is encouraged by the particular set of beliefs or ideas on which one makes a judgment of things; a turncoat is a traitor. Wilkes responds by shifting this frame of reference; his ragtag-farmer-soldiers are literally without coats. The tension joined with the first set of expectations is dissipated by the second as the intended insult dissolves in laughter. The higher forms of sustained humour do not depend on a single effect but on a series of smaller climaxes. Diagrams may help to fully illustrate Koestler's point.

**Diagram: Figure 1**

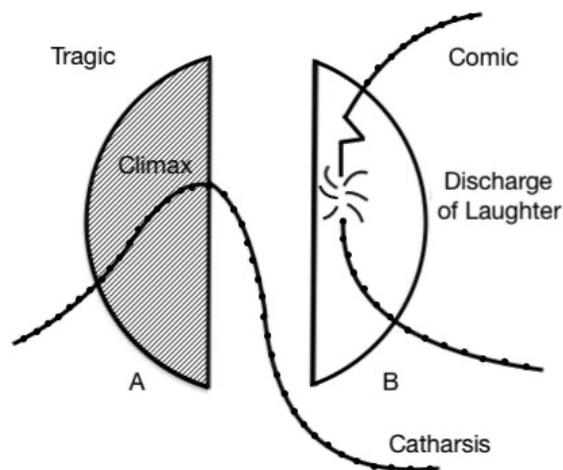


Figure 1

**Figure 1a**, with respect to the tragic form, tension builds until it reaches a climax and then flows into a gradual catharsis. In **Figure. 1b**, tension mounts but does not arrive at the expected climax. The rising curve is suddenly stopped by an unexpected turn of events which frustrates our dramatic expectations and the tension is quickly relieved in the form of laughter. In this, like Freud, Koestler follows Spencer who wonders why the recognition of incongruity would lead to laughter and finally decides that it is an over-35

flow of nervous energy. But it is here that Koestler expands on Spencer and introduces the idea of bisociation.

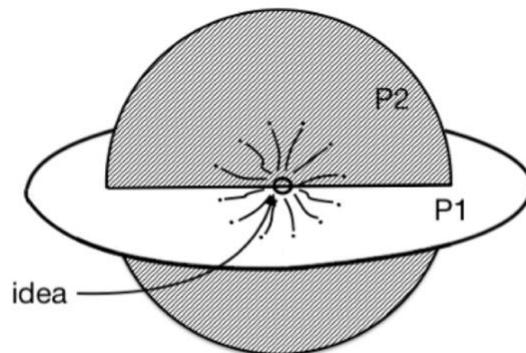


Figure 2

...[it] is *the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference*

[P1 and P2.] The idea, in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths. While this unusual situation lasts, the idea is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two. 34

Take for example, the combination of the existential and tragic along with the comic and trivial. In Anton Chekov's play, **The Cherry Orchard**, two different sets of expectations are expressed in the mind of Yephikodov.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 35. (Koestler's italics) [My P1 and P2]]

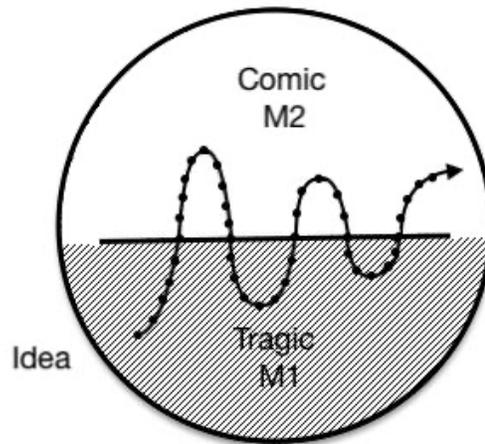


Figure 3

I'm a cultured sort of person and read all kinds of remarkable books, but I just can't get a line on what it is I'm really after. Shall I go on living or shall I shoot myself, I mean? But anyway, I always carry a revolver.

Here it is. 35

Figure 3 illustrates a form of humour such as a satire or a comic poem with more than one point of culmination in which a humorous narrative moves back and forth between a complex set of assumptions which generate conflict and comedy. In **The Cherry Orchard**, Chekhov combines both comic and tragic elements. Charlotte, for example, in the midst of being absorbed in memories of her past, provides comic relief when she nonchalantly reaches into her pocket and draws forth a cucumber.

...Well, I grew up and became a governess. But where I

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<sup>35</sup>Anton Chekov, "The Cherry Orchard," trans. Fell, M. and West, J., **Six Famous Plays** (Lon-don:1949) p.162-163.

come from and who I am I 've no idea. Who my parents were I don 't know either, very likely they weren't even married. [Takes a cucumber out of her pocket and starts eating it.] I don 't know anything. [Pause] I'm looking for someone to talk to, but there isn 't anyone. I'm alone in the world.

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Upon hearing the first three sentences of this dialogue, we are psychologically positioned to have some empathy for her plight. It is Chekhov's introduction of the unexpected snack that leads us to see the situation in a very different way. Casually munching her way through her existential angst, she becomes a comic figure. In this instance, we 'bisociate' one situation with two completely different contexts. There are two expectations; one is tragic having to do with the adversity of her past life and the other is comic. The sudden realization that she is hungry, and happens to have a cucumber in her pocket, has very little to do with the pathos of her early life and this, because of the incongruity, results in an 'explosion' of laughter such as in Figure 2.

Theories of humour, as in all aspects of philosophic thought, are much contested. Spencer holds that sensations produce not only ideas but also emotions. Schopenhauer does not believe that the emotions are in any way involved and sees humour only as a matter of finding connections that did not, until that moment, exist. Koestler, however, finds that there are a number of distinctive emotions involved in different types of humour. The practical joke is frankly aggressive, the jokes of children are

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<sup>36</sup>ibid.

scatological, blue jokes are sexual, the 'sick' joke uses feelings of disgust, and the satirist uses righteous indignation. Freud, in covering this ground, determines that sex and malice are the inhibitions released in humour. Koestler, on the other hand, maintains that, whatever the mixture of more sophisticated jokes, it is an impulse of aggression or apprehension that lies behind it.

This brings us to what psychologists call the 'flight' or 'fight' instinct which may show itself in the guise of malice, derision, condescension, or as a lack of identification with the victim of the joke. It is on the lowest level that we find the practical joke, the 'dirty' joke, and the scatological humour of children. Each of these types have a heavily aggressive or sexual or scatological flavouring and it is in this type of humour that Freud finds support for his theory. In each of these types, it does not require much intellectual effort to "get the joke." Crude emotion overbalances the possibility of intellectual stimulation.

Freud's theory does not attempt to explain wit as an intellectual challenge with a serious purpose. Referring back to the triptych at the beginning of this chapter, the theory of release from inhibition is restricted to the first column. Moving across the three categories, the ration of crude emotion changes until it is reversed and the witticism becomes an intellectual challenge. The crude aggression of the practical joke is sublimated into a malicious kind of ingenuity; gross sexuality into subtle eroticism. For Koestler, it would seem to be a matter of degree.

Thus, as we move from coarse humour towards the neutral zone, we find the bisociation of sound and meaning first exemplified in the pun, then in word games (ranging from the Crossword puzzle to the deciphering of the Rosetta stone):

lastly in alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. 37

While Kant put all the emphasis on surprise, Koestler goes beyond this in that there must be a degree of originality to break away from the usual routines of stereotypical thought. To do this we must “provide mental jolts caused by the collision of incompatible matrices.”<sup>38</sup>

When two independent matrices of perception or reasoning interact with each other the result (as I hope to show) is either a *collision* ending in laughter, or their *fusion* in a new intellectual synthesis, or their confrontation in an aesthetic experience. The bisociative patterns found in any domain of creative activity are trivalent: that is to say that the same pair of matrices can produce comic, tragic, or intellectually challenging effects. 39

Koestler is arguing for recognition of an intimate relation between humour, science, and art. The problem is, as we have seen, that very different emotional attitudes accompany each of these categories. And this is the very crux of the problem for philosophers in humour.

Nietzsche took the sun god Apollo as a representative of reason, clarity, order, and heightened experience through art. The Apollonian mind, generally speaking, is scientific, making connections between apparently unrelated phenomena. But is this true? The whole assumption that science is more objective than other disciplines is very much open to question.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

Bronowski argues that subjective values are implicit in science and the scientific method. It is a point well illustrated by the history of science with the discoveries of Tycho Brahe, Galileo, Newton, Mesmer, Einstein and Freud. Bronowski's frame of reference is very close to that of Koestler's. "The discoveries of science," he says, "the works of art are explorations-more, are explosions, of a hidden likeness." <sup>40</sup> And to this L. L. Whyte adds: "The awkward fact that reason, as we know it, is never aware of its hidden assumptions-has been too much for some philosophers, and even many scientists to admit. <sup>41</sup> According to Schopenhauer, the source of the paradoxical is always paradoxical. "Comic discovery," writes Koestler, "is paradox stated-scientific discovery is paradox resolved." <sup>42</sup> The paradox of science turns on Bronowski's point that judgments of fact depend on judgments of value, not the other way around. And this is the paradox in Koestler's words:

Any branch of knowledge which operates predominately with abstract symbols, whose entire rationale and credo are objectivity, verifiability, logicity, turns out to be dependent on mental processes which are subjective, irrational, and verifiable only after the event. 43

Koestler's objective is to disengage his theory of bisociation from Freud's with its overabundance of primitive emotionality and an obvious logical structure requiring very little mental effort. While science claims to be objective and Apollonian, Koestler

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<sup>40</sup> Jacob Bronowski, **Science and Human Values**, (London:1961).

<sup>41</sup> L. L. Whyte, **The Unconscious Before Freud**, (London:1973).

<sup>42</sup> Koestler, Op. cit, p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

hopes to show that this is an illusion and that creativity is a thread common to humour, discovery and art.

Herbert Marcuse points out that art opens a dimension inaccessible to other experience.<sup>44</sup> In breaking through the restraints of society, art offers an opportunity to see what is usually obscured; it gives a vantage point on other experience and fills the void where religion and philosophy fail. This, Koestler would argue, is surely what both the humorist and the scientist attempt to do. “Art,” states a standard psychology text, “is the innovator’s probe into reality!” Modern music and art permit us, if we are perceptive and open-minded, to hear sounds and see forms we have never before experienced.

Art is master of illusion and “illusion is the simultaneous presence and interaction in the mind of two universes, one real, one imaginary...”<sup>45</sup> Here again we have the same process discussed in both Figure 2 and Figure 3 (on pages 36 and 37) whereby an event is seen as vibrating on two different levels and bisociates with two different matrices.

It is this sudden shift of emphasis to a seemingly irrelevant aspect of a bisociated concept that is found not only in art but also in science and humour. Freud quotes a familiar joke popular amongst humour theorists. This is the story of a horse dealer who is trying to make a sale: “If you mount this horse at 4 a.m. you will be in Monticello at 6:30.” “But what am I to do at Monticello at 6:30 in the morning?” The point of the remark has been twisted; it is irrelevant to the subject under discussion which is con-

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<sup>44</sup>Herbert Marcuse, **The Aesthetic Dimension**, (Boston:1978).

<sup>45</sup>Koestler, Op. cit., p. 306.

cerned with the speed of the horse. The connecting link between the two concepts is *Monticello, 6:30 a.m.*

This type of attention displacement frequently occurs in science with respect to the unconscious workings of the mind. Kekule had been researching the molecular structure of benzene for quite some time. The breakthrough came when he dreamed of a snake with its tail in its mouth and the structure was recognized as a closed carbon ring.<sup>46</sup> Not unrelated to this phenomenon is the Biblical account of the Pharaoh's dream of seven fat cows eaten by seven lean cows which was interpreted by Joseph to mean that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. (Genesis 41:17) It is, however, attention displacement from one part of the mind to another that allows the individual to gain a different insight. Unlikely though it may be that the mind could be separated into compartments, Jung's theory of intuition and Freud's theory of the unconscious do find support in the relationship existing between humour, discovery and art.

All of the major advances in the history of scientific thought can be identified as being a kind of cross-fertilization between different disciplines.

The conditions for original thinking are when two or more streams of research begin to offer evidence that they may converge and so in some manner be combined. It is this combination which can generate new directions of research, and through these it may be found that basic units and activities may have properties not before suspected which open up a lot of new questions for experimental study.

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<sup>46</sup>Carl Jung, **Man and his Symbols**, (New York:1964) p.38.

<sup>47</sup>Sir Frederick Bartlett, **Thinking**, pp. 136-137. Quoted by Arthur Koestler in **The Act of Creation**, p. 232.

While it is possible to accept and feel comfortable with the speculative and rather nebulous constructs of Jung and Freud, many writers seek firmer ground on which to build a philosophy of humour. Marie Collins Swabey, as we saw earlier, argues in this vein:

Against Freud's interpretation of wit as the triumph of unreason over critical judgement and the struggle of the unconscious to regain biological sources of pleasure, we shall continue to maintain on the contrary that wit involves an intellectual victory and the rejection of illogicality. With this goes our further repudiation of his view of wit as an entirely different category from the comic, the first as springing from the unconscious, the second from the fore-conscious; on the contrary, we regard them either as a correlative species, or the comic in the wider sense as the genus of the other. 48

While Koestler does not hesitate to accept a psychological frame of reference, Mrs. Swabey espouses a highly intellectual and philosophical perspective. And while Koestler attempts to prove a correlation between humour, discovery and art, his ultimate aim is to gather some insight with respect to the creative act. Mrs. Swabey's aim, however, is to gain some insight into values. She writes:

What is genuinely funny in words, character or situation must have a logical point, drift, nub or pertinence...in the laughter of the comic insight we achieve a logical moment of truth; while metaphysically, through some darting thought, we detect an incongruence as cancelled by an underlying congruence. We gain an inkling, as it were, of the hang of things, sometimes even a hint of cosmic beneficence. 49

What is common to both Koestler and Mrs. Swabey is the idea that humour involves intellection to a high degree. This idea also holds true for Douglas Hofstadter

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<sup>48</sup>Swabey, Op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.v.

whose attention is focused on analogy-making, artistic creation, literary translation, and discoveries in mathematics and physics. According to Hofstadter, intelligence is a key characteristic for humour, along with science and art, and has the following abilities:

- to respond to situations very flexibly;
- to take advantage of fortuitous circumstances;
- to make sense out of ambiguous or contradictory messages;
- to recognize the relative importance of different elements of a situation;
- to find similarities between situations despite differences which may separate them;
- to draw distinctions between situations despite similarities which may link them;
- to synthesize new concepts by taking old concepts and putting them together in new ways;
- to come up with ideas that are novel.

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The description of the attributes of intelligence is eminently applicable to humour, discovery, and art. The Greeks said that it is our ability to marvel that is the beginning of knowledge. And is it not with a certain sense of wonder that humans approach art? Do we not marvel at the artist's ability to use forms, lines, shades, and colours to create paintings?

In the twentieth century, art, like science, has gone through many revolutions. The most genuine revolution was the abandonment of representation followed by the beginnings of abstract art and the shift to surrealism. The purpose of art, according to André Breton, was to shock, confuse, and amaze. In the same sense as the humorist, the artist must 'provide mental jolts caused by the collision of incompatible matrices.' (see p. 36)

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<sup>50</sup>Douglas R. Hofstadter, **Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid**, (New York:1980), p. 26.

René Magritte, a French surrealist, illustrates this point in his still life called **Common Sense** (1945-46). In this painting, there is a fruit-filled dish sitting on top of a totally blank canvas surrounded by an ornate gold frame. Magritte starts with the standard subject matter of a traditional still life, places it on top of a framed, blank canvas and paints it laying on a table top. Magritte's finished painting is then hung on a wall to deliver an ironic comment about the conflict between the symbol and the actual painting—a mental “jolt caused by the collision of incompatible matrices.”

Very much the same thing happens in music. John Cage led a movement in which all sounds were considered equal and silence was as important as sound, and random sound just as important as organized sound. Hofstadter writes an amusing dialogue on the sound/silence movement:

Achilles: How did the second song go?

Tortoise: That's the interesting thing... It was a song based on the melody C-A-G-E.



Achilles: That's a totally different melody!

Tortoise: True.

Achilles: And isn't John Cage a composer of modern music? I seem to remember reading about him in one of my books on haiku.

Tortoise: Exactly. He has composed many celebrated pieces such as **4'33"**, a three-movement piece consisting of silences of different lengths. It's wonderfully expressive if you like that sort of thing.

Achilles: I can see where if I were in a loud and brash cafe I might  
gladly pay to hear Cage's **4'33"** on a juke-box. It might afford  
some relief.

Tortoise: Right-who wants to hear the racket of clinking dishes and  
jangling silverware?

51

It is these revolutions in art that allow us to see what is ordinarily obscured through a reverberation between sense and nonsense. And it is at the humorous work of art that we laugh, understand and marvel at what Koestler calls the collision point between incompatible matrices, a creative anarchy engendering a new synthesis.

It is generally supposed that science, because it appeals to the mind rather than the emotions, is not concerned with aesthetic canons. While it is true that science does provoke an appreciation, a connoisseurship of elegant mathematical proofs, it does not lay any claim to the intensity or lack of intensity of human qualities and it certainly lays no claim to humour. With respect to this state of affairs, Koestler, in a statement worth quoting at length, points to other periods in time that have been more fortunate than our own:

I must mention one specific factor which is largely responsible for turning science into a bore, and providing the humanist with an excuse for turning his back on it. It is the academic cant, of relatively recent origin, that a self-respecting scientist must be a bore, that the more dehydrated the style of his writing, and the more technical the jargon he uses, the more respect he will command.

...As the great Boltzmann wrote: "A mathematician will recognize Cauchy, Gauss, Jacobi or Helmholtz, after reading a few pages, just as musicians recognize from the first few bars, Mozart, Beethoven, or Schubert. And Jeans compared Maxwell's physics with an enchanted fairyland where no one knew what was coming next

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

...Franklin was an accomplished stylist; Maxwell wrote commendably funny, and Erasmus Darwin unintentionally funny verse; as for William James, I must confess that I find his style far more enjoyable than his brother Henry's. Needless to say, technical communications addressed to specialists must employ technical language; but even here the overloading with jargon, the tortuous and cramped style, are largely a matter of conforming to fashion. 52

Koestler puts forward a convincing argument for better social communication on the part of the sciences and academic disciplines where it has become an anti-humanistic trend to bore the reader without offering any of the relief, the charm, or the beauty that humour and art could provide. Because the logical structure of creativity is the same, whether in humour, science or art, we could reasonably expect the criteria for each to have a common base of similarity. Koestler simplifies these criteria as being originality, emphasis, and economy. In the philosophy of humour, originality comes about as the of two disparate ideas; it is a means of universe changing. The emphasis is on surprise; the mind is geared to move in a certain direction and suddenly finds itself moving in another. The principle involved in simplicity is, as mentioned earlier, the one known as Occam's Razor: entities should not be unnecessarily multiplied.

Koestler argues that the 'eureka' process does not consist in inventing some - thing out of nothing, but in bringing together the unconnected. This is to say that we notice a relationship between A and B and this leads us to look for the same relationship between X and Y. It is the cross-fertilization process referred to earlier. In humour, it is often a perverse logic that cuts through the expected to give a surprise effect. But originality in any field is relatively rare. Most of us, he says, offer emphasis instead of

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<sup>52</sup>Koestler, Op. cit., p.265.

originality.<sup>53</sup> Emphasis is built on suggestiveness which depends on three factors: the choices of context, simplification, and exaggeration. To mention the name of Charles Chaplin is to bring forth a humorous image of wistful eyes and toothbrush moustache. This is the stimulus that sets the context for what is to come.

Simplification is the second factor and it is essential to the building of tension. All nonessential information must be discarded or the audience becomes sidetracked from the main point as tension is dissipated in trivial pieces of information. The process of simplification leads to what McLuhan would call 'cool information.' It is sketchy, allowing the reader or the audience to fill in bits of information as the mind is led along familiar thought patterns and then suddenly surprised with the point of the joke.

The third factor in emphasis is exaggeration through the use of emphatic gestures, incongruity, a stress on dialect, accent, or the use of slang. It is only, however, in the crudest type of humour and the cheapest forms of art that emphasis, by itself, is enough. Economy in humour, like economy of line in art, refers to implication. Koestler quotes, as an example, an amusing anecdote concerning Picasso in which an art dealer bought what he thought was a genuine Picasso and went to Picasso for confirmation. Barely casting a glance at it, Picasso declared it a fake. This happened several times:

"But *cher maître*," expostulated the dealer, "It so happens that I saw you with my very own eyes working on this picture several years ago."

Picasso shrugged: "I often paint fakes."

Picasso's "I often paint fakes" is at the same time original,

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

emphatic, and implicit. He does not say: "Sometimes, like other painters, I do something second rate, repetitive, an uninspired variation on a theme, which after a while looks to me as if somebody had imitated my technique. It is true that this somebody happened to be myself, but that makes no difference to the quality of the picture, which is no better than if it were a fake; in fact you could call it that, an uninspired Picasso aping the style of the true Picasso."

None of this was said; all of it was implied. But the listener has to work out by himself what is implied in the laconic hint; he has to make an imaginative effort to solve the riddle. If the answer were explicitly given, on the lines indicated in the previous paragraph, the listener would be both spared the effort and deprived of its reward; there would be no anecdote to tell. 54

His case is quite impressive. Economy refers to hints instead of statements; logical gaps are left which the reader must make an effort to understand; in this way one is an active participant. He goes on to describe this process as interpolation, extrapolation, and transformation. Interpolation is a matter of putting the missing series of numbers 5, 6, 7, in the sequence 1, 2, 3, 4, \_ , \_ , \_ , 8, 9, 10. Extrapolation is a matter of conjecture; we infer what is not known from what is; 11, 12, 13, 14, etc. A transformation is a reinterpretation into some corresponding terms.

Let us take one of Schopenhauer's examples of wit as it applies to Koestler's theory. He tells the story of the king who was amused by the peasant who was wearing tattered rags in the middle of winter.<sup>55</sup> The peasant, however, was not to be demeaned and cunningly replied: "If your majesty had put on what I have, you would be very warm." "And what pray tell is that?" asked the king. "My whole wardrobe," answered

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., pp.82-84.

<sup>55</sup>Schopenhauer, **The World as Will and Idea**, Vol. II, (London:1905), p. 272.

the peasant. The arrow in M1 represents an entire wardrobe, the other arrow M2, the difference between a king's wardrobe and that of a peasant. Here there is a bisociation between two different planes or matrices, M1 and M2.

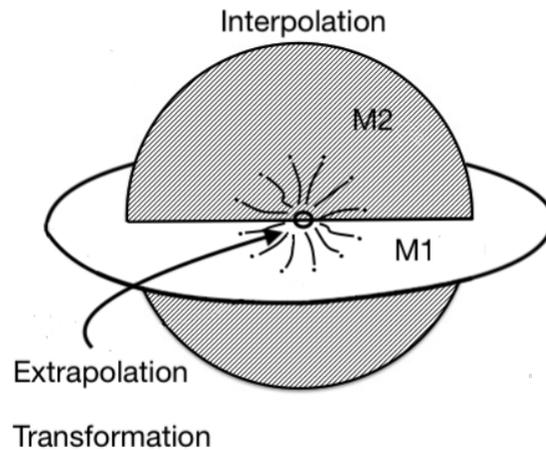


Figure 4

Now how does all this relate to Koestler's explanation of extrapolation? We infer from what is (a) known, what is (b) not known. What is known is that the peasant is wearing tattered rags. What is not known is, what is it the peasant is wearing that, if the king were to wear, he would be warm? But we make a psychological inference that if the king wears what the peasant wears, he will be cold.

The peasant's punch line, "My entire wardrobe!", creates a paradoxical explosion between the concept of the one and the concept of the many; i.e., it cannot be both one and many at the same time. According to Koestler, we then interpolate by filling in the missing information and we would have a vivid picture of the king smothered in layers of clothing and the freezing peasant in his single garment. In the transformation, they are both wearing the same thing; one has many and is warm, the other has

one and is cold. We then would interpret the concepts and not the difference between the general concept of a wardrobe and the particular wardrobe of an individual. Is this what Koestler is suggesting? Is Schopenhauer's story a hidden analogy? This is what Schopenhauer says:

If any truth can be asserted a priori, it is this: for it is the expression of the most general form of all possible and thinkable experience: a form that is more general than time, or space or causality, for they all presuppose it; and each of these is valid only for a particular class of ideas; whereas the antithesis of object and subject is the common form of all these classes, is that form under which alone any idea of whatever kind it may be, abstract or intuitive, pure or empirical, is possible and thinkable. No truth therefore is more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than this, that all that exists for knowledge, and therefore this whole world, is only object in relation to subject, perception of a perceiver, in a word, idea. 56

Schopenhauer's interpretation begins with the paradoxical and takes the form of a syllogism in which there is an undisputed major premise, an unexpected minor premise, and a conclusion. In other words, we move in our thinking from a percept to a concept, from the mental result of perceiving to a general notion of something formed by mentally combining all its characteristics or particulars; and we find that, when confronted with particulars, the concept is inadequate. This results in a type of incongruity which gives us pleasure.

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<sup>56</sup>Schopenhauer in **The Works of Schopenhauer**, ed., Will Durant (New York:1955), p. 3.

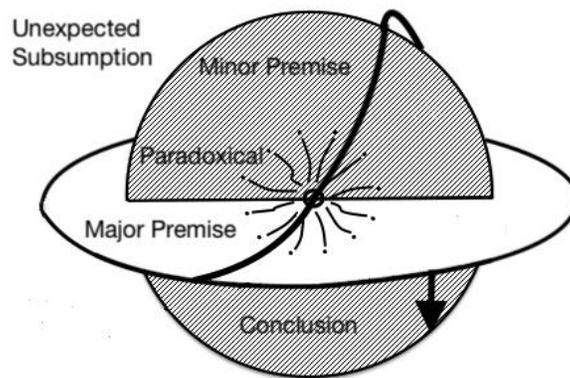


Figure 5

Koestler talks of moving from one matrix to another, and Schopenhauer talks of moving from a major undisputed premise to a minor unexpected premise. While the structure is the same for both, the orientation is different. Koestler's explanation is in terms of a psychological activity; drawing a conclusion from evidence and arriving at certain opinions or beliefs on the basis of others. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, uses logic rather than psychology and explains "that which is ridiculous" as a syllogism with an absurd conclusion. In this instance, the logical correctness of an argument does not depend on the truth of its premises just as the logical correctness or an inference is separate from the truth of the beliefs or opinions which go to make up its evidence. In any case the two theories do share a common bond. The major difference seems to be with respect to emotions. While Koestler holds that, whatever the formal form of the joke, there is always an impulse of aggression behind it, Schopenhauer seems prepared to follow Kant in believing that the element of surprise is enough in-itself. According to Kant:

*Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation to nothing...* the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus, through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation, it is jerked back and put a state of oscillation. <sup>57</sup>

It is Monro who puts forward a common sense objection to Schopenhauer arguing that, on the basis of his explanation, we might get a mild sense of pleasure but little more. Schopenhauer's syllogism overlooks the whole point of aggressive satisfaction emerging from a sense of apprehension.

Monro finds objection to both the 'frustrated expectation' idea and Schopenhauer's formula:

... they stress the formal side of the joke to the exclusion of its content, or what any normal person would regard as its content. We suggested that the formula' "frustrated expectation" only takes meaning if we consider it as a dissolution of an emotional attitude. But Schopenhauer hardly seems to admit that the emotions are involved at all. For him humour is purely a matter of finding ingenious connections between one thing and another "which in a more predominating aspect does not belong to it at all." <sup>58</sup>

For Schopenhauer, then, it is a matter of understanding the incongruities between the world as we perceive it and the concept of its characteristics that we mentally entertain. If Schopenhauer's view is incomplete, it is partially due to his failure to

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<sup>57</sup> Immanuel Kant, **Critique of Pure Judgment**, trans., J.H. Bernard, (New York:1951), pp.177-179.

<sup>58</sup> D. H. Monro, **Argument for Laughter**, p.155.

recognize the existence of feelings and emotions that lie behind the incongruities of a situation.

Koestler says, "Works of art are always transparent to some dim outline of the ultimate experience, the archetypal image..." and scientific theory must point towards the ultimate in terms of "bringing order and harmony into some obscure corner."<sup>59</sup> One of the most enduring archetypal myths is the belief in the Golden Age, the Garden of Eden, and somewhere ahead, the promised land. Meanwhile, we are *en passage* on the sea of life like the child described by John Fowles:

...the one born, as with perfect pitch, with perfect ignorance-  
the pitifully ubiquitous child, who believes that all will be  
explained in the end, the nightmare fade and the green shore rise. 60

But the child is not alone; there is the pessimist, the egocentric, the optimist, the observer, the altruist, and the stoic amongst others. It can be argued that while the 'child' is one important element in the human personality, it is not the only aspect of complexity to be considered.

Freud explains humour, wit, and the comic not in syllogistic terms as does Schopenhauer but in psychological terms. Koestler follows Freud in this respect. Koestler's concept, however, is built on planes of reference dealing with 'associative contexts,' types of logic,' 'codes of behaviour,' and 'universes of discourse.'<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Koestler, Op. cit., p. 354.

<sup>60</sup>John Fowles, **The Aristos** (New York:1970), p. 16.

<sup>61</sup>Koestler, Op. cit., p. 38.

Another difference between the two theorists lies in the feelings or emotions that form the backdrop of humour; while Freud saw them as being sex and malice, Koestler identifies them as being 'aggressive-defensive or a self-asserting tendency.'<sup>62</sup> Most importantly, however, Koestler goes beyond Freud's theory of release from inhibition and moves back to the incongruity theory of Schopenhauer in an effort to explain the higher form of wit. In this he is not unlike Monro who describes the ludicrous as that which is simply inappropriate. But Koestler goes further than this in his argument that the patterns of creative thought are found in humour, discovery, and art. This is Schopenhauer's recognition of incongruities which Koestler sees against the backdrop of aggression, neutrality, and sympathetic feelings; we laugh, we understand and we marvel. The thrust of this argument is that the mental activities involved in the mechanisms of humour are the same as those involved in the act of discovery and the creation of art.

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid. p. 52.

## Chapter Four

### *HUMOUR AND MORALITY*

E. H. Gombrich quotes an amusing anecdote about Matisse. When a lady visiting his studio said, "But surely, the arm of this woman is much too long," the artist politely replied, "Madame, you are mistaken. This is not a woman; this is a picture."<sup>63</sup> There are certain points of similarity here with Schopenhauer's story of the king and the peasant and also with Koestler's story concerning John Wilkes and his turncoats. These have been interpreted as examples of incongruencies, the linking of disparate ideas, or just the act of making connections between different compartments of the mind. Monro has pointed out that these are not just mental acrobatics but, on another level, insults that give us a certain amount of pleasure in seeing someone else put in their place. This line of reasoning leads us to consider the third theory of humour, the theory of superiority and degradation.

One of the earliest references to the ridiculous in relation to a sense of superiority is to be found in Plat's dialogue, **Philebus**, in which it is maintained that malice makes us feel pleasure in the misfortune of our friends:

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<sup>63</sup>E. H. Gombrich in **Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation**, (New York:1972) p.115.

The upshot of our argument is that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are mixing pleasure this time with malice, mixing, that is, our pleasure with pain, for we have been for some time agreed that malice is a pain in the soul, and that laughter is a pleasure, and both occur simultaneously on the occasions in question. 64

Thomas Hobbes refers to a sense of superiority in his book **Leviathan:**

Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, which pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. 65

This does seem to ring psychologically true. We laugh and feel a moment of 'sudden glory' when we are pleased with ourselves: the sudden glory of the joy of being alive in the early morning of summer, the pleasure of promotion, pride in one's children, and the intellectual or spiritual understanding of a new 'truth'-all these things 'pleaseth' us. The second half of Hobbes' definition takes us back to Aristotle and his view that the ridiculous "may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others."<sup>66</sup> He gives, as an example, the mask in theatre which is distorted but does not cause pain.

Following this lead, we can view nonsense as a clever distortion of sense which relies on the image more than the word, and on sentiment more than on intellect.

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<sup>64</sup> Plato, **Philebus**, trans., R. Hackforth, (50-b).

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Hobbes, **Leviathan** (Oxford:1881), Pt. 1, Ch. VI, p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, "De Poetica" in **The Basic Works of Aristotle**, (New York:1941) (1449a 31-35).

“Have you ever, like Alice, seen a rocking-horse fly made entirely of wood, and swinging itself from branch to branch, a snap-dragon fly made of plum pudding, and a bread and butter fly with wings made of thin slices of bread and butter?”

67

These, of course, are not ideas but images, delicious images appealing not to our intellect but to our imagination. The non-sensical effect is achieved by stating the most absurd fact or by stating solemnly the most obvious fact as though it had just been discovered.

“Do you think it’s going to rain?” asked Alice. Tweedledum spread a large umbrella over himself and his brother and looked up into it. “No, I don’t think it is,” he said: “at least not under **here**. No-how.”<sup>68</sup>

Nonsense, like all literature, is written either in prose or in poetry but it is this poetic quality that is essentially rhythmical. In the Christmas of 1896, Charles Dodson, writing under the pen name of Lewis Carroll, tells us how to pronounce ‘slithy’ as if it were two words ‘sly, the’: make the ‘g’ **hard** in ‘gyre’ and ‘gimble’: and pronounce ‘rath’ to rhyme with ‘bath’.<sup>69</sup>

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

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<sup>67</sup> Lewis Carroll, **Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass**, (Boston; 1898) p.131.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis Carroll, **Op. cit.**, p.79.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis Carroll, **Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There**, (New York: 1946), quoted from the preface.

How would Aristotle, Hobbes or Koestler respond to this? According to Aristotle, this would be a distorted and ugly mask held in front of the face of language. Hobbes, it might be argued, would say that we find pleasure in the mental activity of creating images in our mind. Koestler, however, sees it in the psychological frame of a Rorschach test.

'The slithy toves' that 'gyre and gimble in the wabe' evoke sound associations which suggest some kind of action even though we are unable to say exactly what the action is—perhaps some small creatures gyrating and gambolling on a brilliant day in the web of some flowery bush. The meaning varies with the person as the interpretation of the ink blots in a Rorschach test; but without this illusory meaning projected into the phonetic pattern, without the simultaneous knowledge of being fooled and of fooling oneself, there would be no enjoyment of 'the jabberwock with eyes of flame' who came whiffing through the tulgey wood/And bumped as it came. 70

These observations are similar to Max Eastman's view that the subject is something disagreeable, a monster, but one which is a playful figment of our own imaginative creation. But not all such images are disagreeable. The Jumblies, for example, are the delightful invention of Edward Lear.

Far and few, far and few.  
Are the lands where the Jumblies live:  
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue;  
...And they went to sea in a sieve. 71

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<sup>70</sup>Koestler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>71</sup>Edward Lear, **The Complete Nonsense Book**, ed. Lady Strachey (New York:1943), p. 136.

While the Jumblies may be new creatures, the repetitions and rhyme are familiar to most children:

Hippty-hop to the barber shop  
To get a stick of candy,  
One for you and one for me,  
And one for Uncle Sandy. 72

Both examples have a certain rhythmical relation with the nursery rhyme; “Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker’s man,” or “Rub-a-dud-dub, three men in a tub.” The purpose is not only to stimulate the child’s imagination but also to amuse, distract, or even lull the child to sleep. And this is one of the first stages of humour, one that finds amusement or distraction or freshness in something new or something different. Our pleasure is caused by the creation of our own mental images which are incongruent by comparison with the monotony of stubborn common sense and the reality of rigid restrictions. As adults, we can enjoy the sheer fun of nonsense and the possibility of alternate realities. But if we are unable to differentiate between reality and fantasy, we become, if not a tragic character, at the very least, a case of latent tragedy in comedy. Arthur Miller’s *Willy Loman* is a prime example of the first instance, while *Blanche Dubois*, in Woody Allen’s play, “*God (A Play)*,” can stand as an example of latent tragedy in comedy. *Blanche* is looking for God:

I’m afraid it’s all too true. Too true and too ghastly. That’s why I’ve run out of my play. Escaped. Oh, not that Mr. Tennessee Williams is not a very good writer, but honey—he dropped me in the centre of a nightmare. The last thing I remember, I was being taken out by two strangers, one who held a straitjacket. Once outside the Kowalski residence, I broke free and ran. I’ve got to get into another

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<sup>72</sup>Traditional American Nursery Rhyme

play, a play where God exists...somewhere where I can rest at last. That's why you should put me in your play and allow Zeus, young and handsome Zeus, to triumph with his thunderbolt.

73

There is much to be read into this dialogue but, in point of fact, we do not weep for Blanche. She is a stereotypic character looking for a glass of bourbon, an anachronistic Scarlet O'Hara, a ravaged version of Carroll's Alice. Tennessee Williams has created a full-bodied tragic figure that, in Woody Allen's play, becomes a stereotype. Allen also manages to smuggle in the illicit suggestions of sex with reference to Zeus who was famous for his debaucheries with mortals. Why do we find this funny? Following Hobbes' formula, it is for two reasons. On the one hand, we delight in the recognition of a familiar character and the surprise of meeting her not in **A Streetcar Named Desire** but in a zany comedy on a Broadway theatre. On the other hand, we recognize a diseased and deformed character and rejoice that there but for the grace of God go we.

Just as Matisse makes a distinction between "a woman and a picture," we can make a distinction between a woman and a character in a play. This is the difference between life and art. On the comic level, we can laugh at the mechanical foolishness of Blanche but, on a deeper level, we recognize the despair of the human condition. Added to this is the fact that Woody Allen's play flouts the irreversibility of time, and his apparently silly comedy, like Carroll's nonsense, carries serious metaphysical intimations.

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<sup>73</sup>Woody Allen, "God (A Play)" in **Without Feathers**, (New York"1976), p.157.

Nonsense and tales of the supernatural belong to the world of the child and more or less occupy the same position that comedy and tragedy do in the world of the adult. Life itself is neither tragic nor comic; it is made up of events that we perceive as being either good or bad. Depending on our expectations, these events are interpreted as being either a success or a failure. Pure tragedy and pure comedy, however, do exist as art forms and, as such, a particular approach is required. Tragedy encourages empathy with a character who has enough depth and enough psychological complexity to be a real human being and one worth caring about. The classic examples are Antigone, Cordelia, and Ophelia. These are characters with whom we identify; we keenly *feel* life from their particular standpoint with the same frustrations, feelings, desires, and emotions. But the heroes of tragedy, according to Aristotle, are great men with noble and heroic aspirations. Men, for example, such as Uther Pendragon, King of England and father of the renowned Arthur. They usually suffer from the perennial tragic flaw the Greeks called *hubris*, an overwhelming pride which, while making them god-like, also makes them blind. It is this failing that brings about their doom.

Comedy, on the other hand, strives to maintain an emotional distance so that we can laugh at what is foolish or mechanical, at what is pretentious or vain. We are never fully identified with the characters because we have a god's eye view; we see the discrepancy in the way they see life and the way it actually is. With Thomas Berger, we look through the wrong end of the telescope at Uther Pendragon:

“Ulfin,” said he, “I cannot do without this woman.  
Unless I may have her, I can not rise from my couch, I  
shall stricken further and I shall die, and Britain shall  
die with me, and this beautiful land, which my forbear  
Brute, the grandson of Aeneas, conquered from the

giants who then ruled it, will fall to the German toads  
and become a vile place named England. 74

It is overwhelming pride that makes Uther blind and blindness, it turns out, is the point that tragedy has in common with comedy. As art forms expressing fundamental human concerns, both tragedy and comedy are anti-pride. Inflations in manner and speech, as a result of overweening conceit, is an example of foolish pride that is always entertaining. Shakespeare's Don Armado is a good example.

“Sir, it is the King's most sweet pleasure to congratulate  
the Princess at her pavilion in the posteriors of this day,  
which the rude multitude call the afternoon.” 75

Comic characters show a lack of proportion and a blind lack of awareness as to how their actions appear to others. Psychological distance is maintained by presenting the characters as stereotypes with an incongruous appearance and, perhaps, an outlandish name.

In his book, **The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights**, John Steinbeck sets out to put “the stories down in meaning as they were written, leaving out nothing and adding nothing.”<sup>76</sup> Working from Mallory's text, he simply states that Merlin will cause the Lady Igraine to believe that Uther is her husband. The question Thomas Berger asks is: just exactly how is he going to do this? Fortunately, Berger has Merlin the magician at hand.

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<sup>74</sup>Thomas Berger, **Arthur Rex: A Legendary Novel** (New York:1978), p. 12.

<sup>75</sup>Shakespeare, **Love's Labour's Lost**, v i, 94-97.

<sup>76</sup>John Steinbeck, **The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights** (New York:1976), p. 12.

. . .so did his height dwindle, the massive tun of his chest loose half its capacity, his legs bow, and his arms wither, for the Duke of Cornwall was not a comely peer though married to a beautiful woman as is often the case.

And had not Merlin soon remembered to transform the king's robes into a perfect representation of Gorlois's clothing, the figure before him would have been ludicrous, with the crown supported only by the little ears like unto a squirrel's and the ermine piled high around his feet.

77

In the examples given, starting first with Blanche, as she appears in Woody Allen's play, and then with Uther Pendragon in Berger's comic rendition, there are both implicit and explicit references to sex. Why is this funny? Why is any smutty joke funny? Protarchus, in speaking with Socrates, finds it to be a species of the ridiculous:

But I fancy that when we see someone, no matter whom, experiencing pleasure-and I think this is true especially of the greatest pleasures-we detect in them an element either of the ridiculous or of extreme ugliness, so that we ourselves feel ashamed, and do our best to cover it up and hide it away, and we leave that sort of thing to the hours of darkness, feeling that it should not be exposed to the light of day.

78

But neither Woody Allen nor Thomas Berger hesitate to mention the unmentionable. Allen smuggles in an allusion to sex in his dialogue; we thought she was looking for God but it turns out to be young and handsome Zeus with his thunderbolt. These are thoughts that, for the most part, we inhibit. This type of humour does constitute a serious attack on morality but it also recognizes a very natural and momentary wish, the wish that things might be otherwise. It is not in the heroic tradition to have a great king languishing in his chambers for love. Achilles languished in his tent

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<sup>77</sup>Thomas Berger, (1978) p. 16.

<sup>78</sup>Plato, **Philebus**, tr., R. Hackforth, (65e-66).

but out of wounded pride rather than lust. Unlike Achilles who remains a 'hero,' Uther is all too human with his crown dangling from a little tree of stag horns next to his couch and his chamber pot beneath. As humans, we cannot have a Hobbesian sense of superiority with respect to either the chamber pot or the couch. We merely, like Charles Dodgson, take a brief mental holiday from the restrictions of society. But perhaps there are other ways in which we might feel superior. We might, for example, feel rather comfortable about not drinking bourbon to the extent that Blanche does, or indeed, about not drinking at all. And we might feel that we could never bring ourselves to sell our firstborn child, as does Uther to Merlin, for the pleasures of an evening.

“A son? My son? Though having no interest in my gold, Merlin, surely thou art extravagant with my blood. My heir and successor? The next king of Britain? For what purpose pray? To apprentice him to the black art of nigromancy?” Uther did scowl. “A British king kills many, but it would be unnatural for him to speak with the dead.”

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But Uther does agree to Merlin's proposition, and it is thus that Arthur and his knights of the Round Table come to occupy the 'mythical' realm of our imaginations. In the grand scale of values, we tend to believe that a child is worth more than gold, or fame, or pleasure.

To insult people is to treat them with insolence or a contemptuous rudeness—we offer an affront to their dignity and they take up or throw down the gauntlet. Though Merlin was always most diplomatic, Shakespeare was sometimes much less that that.

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<sup>79</sup>Berger, Op. cit., p.14.



persisting. 81

Kierkegaard finds a bond between suffering, humour, and religion and defines himself, not as a religious person, but as a humorist:

There are thus three spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Two boundary zones correspond to these three: irony, constituting the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical; humour as the boundary that separates the ethical from the religious. 82

He goes on to say that irony results from “the constant placing of the particularities of the finite together with the infinite ethical requirement, thus permitting the contradiction to come into being,” and in this, he sounds not unlike Schopenhauer.<sup>83</sup> The ironic attitude is seen as a level of human experience and also as an outlook on life; it is one level of the comic, humour is the other. Socrates is the father of irony but, as Kierkegaard would concede, “He was an ethicist who tended well up towards the limit of the religious.”<sup>84</sup> The base line for irony is one which is neither cynical nor misanthropic; it rests on the goodness inherent in man and in a belief in ultimate meaning. So, curiously enough, it is humour that is the boundary separating the ethical from the religious:

...the secret of the highest humour is generosity, broad-

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<sup>81</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, **Concluding Unscientific Postscript**, tr., David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: 1968), p. 256.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 449.

mindedness, and beneficence; its concern is with the whole twisted, agonizing yet somehow joyous process of living with humanity and not merely with a particular society or the manners of the day. It takes us out of ourselves on a voyage of discovery, enabling us to scrutinize the world at different levels: to observe its sensuous appearance, its accent, gait, its clothes, gestures, to grasp the underlying traits of characters and the problems latent in situations; and finally, to touch the hem of the infinite through the contradictions of the whole human comedy. 85

Many of these contradictions are embodied in comic morality. Mervyn Peake's novel, **Mr. Pye**, is concerned with the paradox of good and evil. Mr. Pye is a charming mock-Edwardian gentleman filled with absolute goodness who becomes so good that he embarrassingly begins to grow wings.

He had grown wings because he was too good for this world. What then should he do to cause them to withdraw themselves or to shrivel away? Plainly, to change his nature. To no longer be too good for this world. He must be positively the reverse. He must be bad for it...

He was, of course, not going to pay his bill. That was quite simple. But surely he could do something less negative than that before stepping out into the darkness. Looking around the hall, the flowers caught his eye. He gathered them up in his fist, lifted them dripping from the vase, and then, with his head turned away and his eyes shut, and a sick sensation in his stomach, he broke off all the heads.

After a little time, when he felt less dizzy, he opened his eyes and placed the murdered gladioli on the table and wiped his hands on his handkerchief. 86

Because Peake's logic is as solid as a rock, it is not surprising that Mr. Pye's misdeeds should result in two horns on either side of his temple as he tries to balance his

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<sup>85</sup>Swabey, Op. Cit., p. 102.

<sup>86</sup>Mervyn Peake, **Mr. Pye**, (New York:1984), pp. 145-147.

morals between good and evil. We laugh at cowardice and laziness, and accidental situations and puns, and riddles; should we not also laugh at goodness?

We laugh, understand, and marvel, and we do so for a number of reasons. We may enjoy a momentary release of inhibition with sexual innuendo, or a brief surge of pleasure in the misfortunes of our friends, or a sense of moral superiority with respect to cowardice, or laziness, gluttony, vanity, or pretentiousness. And while we may assume the god's eye view of looking down from above with what Leacock calls, 'the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of human nature,<sup>87</sup> our 'sudden glory' derives from our ability to see clearly, not necessarily from the degradation of others or the defilement of absolutes. Mr. Pye serves as an example of comic virtue and while we laugh at his predicaments, we do not despise him for trying to be as good as he can; we do not laugh at the ideal behind the "comedy of errors," at things yearned for by the human spirit which are beyond our understanding. We do not, for example, laugh at the rules of Euclidian geometry, but we certainly can laugh at our mistakes in calculation and our misunderstanding of basic principles. We are sometimes in danger, like the woman in Matisse's studio, of confusing a woman with a picture.

To think that we find pleasure in the misfortune of our friends is anything but a lofty idea. But the thought of "Gervaise stuck in the cement," does present a funny picture and with it goes the selfish feeling of "better thee than me." But this is not a truly serious situation. There are many who would rather suffer the pain of a burnt finger, a broken bone, or death itself, than have a loved one suffer. The tragedy of **Timon of Athens** and his compulsive generosity is the tragedy of the cynic and the misanthrope.

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen Leacock, **How to Write**, (New York:1943), p. 213.

The antidote is both a sense of humour and a well-developed sense of the comic with the ability to take the world as it is: “you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for the good.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>George Meredith, “An Essay on Comedy” in **Comedy**, ed., Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: 1983), p. xiii.

## *Chapter Five*

### *HUMOUR AND EDUCATION*

Where does humour fit in the educational scheme? We can begin to answer this question with a consideration of two views. The first is concerned with the qualities of mind that a liberal education should produce. The second has to do with the initiation into various forms of knowledge. Following the first view, the Harvard Committee understood a liberal education in terms of the characteristics of mind to which it led.

By characteristics we mean aims so important as to prescribe how general education should be carried out and which abilities ought to be sought above all others in every part of it. These abilities in our opinion are: to think effectively, to communicate thought, to make relevant judgments, to discriminate among values.

89

Effective thinking is defined as logical thinking in practical terms, the ability to extract universal truths from particular cases, and the ability to make inferences of particulars from general laws. It is, as well, the ability to analyze problems and recombine various parts using the imagination. From a practical point of view, it also involves the

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<sup>89</sup>Harvard Report, **General Education a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee**, (London:1946), pp.64-65.

relational thinking of everyday life and the ability to think at a level appropriate to any particular problem. Included in effective thinking is the imaginative realm of the artist, the poet, the inventor, and the revolutionary.

Communication not only involves speaking, writing, listening, and reading, but also moral qualities such as candour, the high art of conversation, non-verbal communication, and an understanding of psychology and sociology.

The ability to make relevant judgments and to discriminate among values should result from “the ability of the student to bring to bear the whole range of ideas upon the area of experience.”<sup>90</sup> It consists in the ability of effectively relating theory to practice and of relating abstractions to facts. To be able to relate thought to action, as well as to be able to distinguish various kinds of values and to have an appreciation of their relative importance, is also important. This also included an awareness of values regarding character such as fair-play and self-control, intellectual values such as love of truth, and aesthetic values with respect to good taste. A liberal education should, in the final analysis, foster a commitment to these values in terms of conduct.

While the Harvard Report, based on mental characteristics, would seem to satisfy the demands of a modern society and the development of the human mind to the full range of man’s understanding, there are those who take the second view. This is the approach that a liberal education should be concerned with the forms of knowledge into which the student is initiated.

Generally, the word ‘knowledge’ suggests as acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles: a familiarity or conversance as with a particular subject or branch of learn-

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<sup>90</sup>Paul H. Hirst, **Knowledge and the Curriculum**, (London: 1974) p. 26.

ing: the body of truths or facts accumulated by mankind in the course of time. It is this pursuit of knowledge which is central to the idea of a Greek education. Paul Hirst has put forward a theory of education based on the characteristics of mind in relation to the theory of knowledge forms. In this instance, liberal education is seen as an initiation into the forms of knowledge.<sup>91</sup> Hirst proposed a curriculum consisting of seven forms of knowledge; mathematics, the physical sciences, the human sciences (which were later changed to moral judgment), religion, literature, and the fine arts and philosophy.<sup>92</sup> The forms are not seen as disciplines but as classes of true propositions. History and the human sciences were replaced as forms of knowledge because their statements are of a mental or subjective nature, some of which are moral, some aesthetic.<sup>93</sup> Unlike the ideal and eternal Platonic Forms, Hirst's knowledge forms are seen as human discoveries creating through the knowledge system new combinations of fields for study. Initiation into the forms is not an attempt to keep pace with the acquisition of encyclopedic information. "With 15,000 journals published every year, with the body of knowledge doubling every ten years,"<sup>94</sup> this mass of accumulated information is obviously beyond the scope of the human mind. What Hirst suggests is sufficient exposure in a particular form of knowledge to give the student a general idea of the unique way in which it operates. He sees it as teaching the student to "look at ideas in a certain

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<sup>91</sup> Paul H. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge" in **Philosophical Analysis and Education**, ed. Reginald D. Archambault (London:1965), pp.113-138.

<sup>92</sup> Hirst, Op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

<sup>94</sup> Philip Werdell, "Futurism and the Reform of Higher Education" in **Learning for Tomorrow: The Role of the Future in Education**, ed., Alvin Toffler (New York:1974), p. 296.

way” and giving enough of an outline in each area to make the form intelligible.<sup>95</sup> Admittedly, the reference here is not general and undefined but it is related to the specific forms of knowledge. It does, however, render some degree of support to those who associate humour with intellect rather than emotion. Hirst has faced a lengthy list of critics with formidable arguments. Foremost amongst them is Jane Rolland Martin who argues that his theory is “neither tolerant nor generous.” Her position is as follows:

1. Liberal education is the development of the mind.
2. The theory of knowledge forms restricts this development of mind to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding.
3. It restricts knowledge to true propositions.

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The end result of a knowledge form type of education is that students do not develop their potential in terms of acting upon their knowledge. Neither, according to Martin’s stand, does it allow for the development of feeling or emotion.

Does not the fact that the forms of knowledge theory ignores education for feeling, emotion, and effective participation in the world simply mean that it is incomplete? It must not be supposed that every theory endorses or sanctions everything it fails to address.

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Martin believes that Hirst is arguing from a theory of knowledge to conclusions about the full range of what can or ought not to be taught or studied. We have here a confrontation between an analytic and a normative approach. Frankena has made the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48. (Italics mine.).

<sup>96</sup> Jane Roland Martin, “Needed: A New Paradigm for Liberal Education,” in **Philosophy and Education Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education**, ed. Jonas F. Soltis (Chicago:1981) p. 44.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

point that decisions about curriculum content are based on value judgments; analytic theories of knowledge, while important, are not necessarily decisive.

Suppose we hold that music is not knowledge. Does it follow that it should not be taught? Not unless we accept the normative premise that only knowledge should be taught.

98

What is important, according to Frankena, is that education be approached as the fostering of certain dispositions. These dispositions are the prevailing aspects of one's mind as shown in behaviour and in relationships with others. A disposition is the predominate or prevailing tendency of one's mental outlook, nature, character, or humour. Such a disposition involves the faculty of perceiving and expressing or appreciating what is amusing or comical.

The preceding discussion provides only a brief illustration of the fact that there is no general agreement as to the specific elements that make up the outcomes of a liberal education. This thesis argues the case for fostering the development of humour in the individual and, if it is to be seen within the framework of liberal education, such a development requires a broader concept than that of Paul Hirst. Martin argues that Hirst's concept of knowledge is selective, singling out only the intellectual and cognitive realm while neglecting practical applications, feelings and emotions. Bearing in mind that Socrates amused himself by making fun of the endless power of the human mind to create intricate arguments of little account, it is nevertheless tempting to proceed further along this line of inquiry.

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<sup>98</sup>William K. Frankena, quoted by Jane Rolland Martin in "Needed: A New Paradigm for Liberal Education," in **Philosophy and Education Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education**, Part1, p. 47.

The question that arises here is: Why does Hirst ignore feelings, and emotions and practical applications of knowledge? The second part of the question is perhaps best answered first. The Greeks held that education was intrinsically valuable; it was good-in-itself and good-as-a-means in terms of practical applications. The problem here is that the distinction between education in itself and education in practical application is psychologically more complex than might appear at first sight. Monro makes this statement:

It is quite misleading to consider any one activity in isolation, as if it had to be pursued either for its own sake or for the sake of some definite consequence or set of consequences. This is misleading, not only because our motives are mixed, but also because no one of these motives can be properly understood if it is considered out of relation to the others, and to the whole pattern of life of which they form a part. One might say that the only thing valued for its own sake is just this pattern of life as a whole; but this too would be misleading, for in fact we are not conscious of any objective so remote from our everyday concerns as a pattern of life. 99

Monro's statement is relevant, as well, to the severing of feeling and emotion from the intellectual and cognitive realm. There is a distinction to be made between feeling and emotion which, in the final analysis, comes down to a matter of degree. The word 'feeling' is a general term of a subjunctive point of view as well as a term referring to the specific sensations of pleasure or pain. Emotion, such as passion, is a more intensified feeling, and can become so overpowering that it dominates the mind or judgment of the individual, thus causing a state of irrationality. But what if feeling

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<sup>99</sup>D.H. Monro, **Empiricism and Ethics**, (Great Britain:1967), p. 33.

were approached as a sane and rational avenue to the understanding of knowledge forms?

Let us suppose, as Carl Jung has done, that this is the case. Struck by the seemingly endless variations in human individuality, Jung noticed that there were people who thought, using their intellectual abilities, and that there were those who were equally intelligent who did not think but made their way, instead, by feeling. He makes this observation.

I have always been impressed by the fact that there are a surprising number of individuals who never use their minds if they can avoid it; and an equal number who do use their minds, but in an amazingly stupid way. I was also surprised to find many intelligent and wide-awake people who lived (as far as one could make out) as if they had never learned to use their sense organs; they did not see the things before their eyes, hear the words sounding in their ears, or notice the things they touched or tasted. Some lived without being aware of the state of their own bodies.

There were others who seemed to live in a most curious condition of consciousness, as if the state they arrived at today were final with no possibility of change, or as if the world and the psyche were static and would remain so forever. They seemed devoid of all imagination and they entirely and exclusively depended upon their sense perception. Chances and possibility did not exist in their world, and in 'today' there was no real 'tomorrow.' The future was just the repetition of the past.

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Jung, pointing out that these are just four types of human behaviour among others, redefines the functions of the mind and classifies them into four basic groups: thought, intuition, feeling, and sensation. He was concerned with intelligence and the fact that there were different types of intelligence which seemed to prevail in different

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<sup>100</sup>Jung, Op Cit., p. 61.

areas of the mind. There is the cognitive realm of thought where the individual uses the intellectual faculty in a rational and orderly manner. This is the realm to which education has historically been directed. And the area which has traditionally suffered neglect in the educational process is, of course, that of feeling. It is essential to point out that Jung is not here referring to feeling in the sense of sentiment or emotion. Feeling, like thinking, is a rational, ordering of function of the mind. Feeling is seen as a judgment of value whereby an idea or a thing is perceived as agreeable or disagreeable, good or bad. Intuition, on the other hand, is an irrational function, the product of an involuntary event dependent upon various internal and external occurrences and not an act of judgment. Sensation is likewise perceived as irrational because it relies upon objective stimuli which are created by physical rather than mental causes.

Theoretically, the ideal intelligence is not any one of these types in isolation but one that uses all the functions of the mind to the fullest potential:

These four functional types correspond to the obvious means by which consciousness obtains its orientation to experience. *Sensation* (i.e. sense perception) tells you that something exists; *thinking* tells you what it is; *feeling* tells whether it is agreeable or not; and *intuition* tells you whence it comes and where it is going. 101

If the mind itself is seen as an interrelation between various activities with respect to sensation, feeling, thinking, and intuition, Hirst's justification for the seven forms of knowledge is clearly incomplete because it invites a further question; why aim at the intellectual or cognitive realm in isolation? Such an approach would seem to be a denial of what it means to be a complete human being.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

Despite the fact that there is no general agreement as to the specific elements or outcomes of a liberal education, there does seem to be a possibility of general support for the idea of the cultivation of the disposition of humour in education. Frankena points out that education is the fostering of certain dispositions, one of which would be the ability to recognize, express and appreciate that which is witty, amusing or comical. Hirst sees it as teaching the student to look at things in a certain way. Some may be inclined to a dark or vulgar sense of humour while others may be amusing and pleasant to be around. Humour, however, is not a knowledge form; it is a disposition to look at life in all its manifestations from a particular perspective with a characteristic attitude. This attitude may be interpreted as one that is urbane, tolerant, but clear-sighted, and one that allows the individual to see things exactly as they are with some appreciation of the real good in people. It implies not only a judgment of value but also the ability to link different ideas and to trace connections where none were seen to exist. Finally, it is an attitude which helps one to better cope with what Freud calls 'disappointment' and Kant 'expectation dissolved into nothing.'

Jung defines feeling apart from emotion as being a rational process in that it is a judgment of value whereby an idea or thing is found to be agreeable or disagreeable. Acquiring a disposition of humour, in this sense, is an act which in the **Harvard Report** would have many of the desired characteristics: the advantage of effectively relating theory to practice, having the ability to distinguish various kinds of values, especially those values regarding fair play, character and self-control, as well as aesthetic values. The disposition of humour is one that allows the individual to recombine various elements using the imagination in a creative way. Most importantly, it is not 'ivory tower'

thinking but a mode of thinking which involves the relational thinking of everyday life and everyday people.

Three views of humour have been discussed in the previous chapters: the psychological release of tension or inhibition; the intellectual and the creative, and finally, the moral theory of superiority. Is one particular viewpoint to be adopted? To single out only one might prove misleading, but, it should be remembered, it is a disposition of humour, not a particular theory, that is to be developed or fostered in the individual. It is necessary, therefore, to also consider some practical or empirical aspects of the development of a sense of humour that are not unrelated to education in the broad sense of the term.

We live in a society in transition where traditional social, sexual, and ethical rules no longer apply. Although some people certainly have more difficult lives than others, the end result of living in over crowded metropolitan areas, coping with unemployment, dealing with political correctness, fake news, immigration, and the lack of educational opportunities can be harrowing. Such manifold demands made on both the individual and the society can only result in stress, and it is the resulting behavioural responses to stress which can have devastating and lasting effects. With such over-riding concerns it may sound presumptuous to suggest that one can take a small step forward and propose that the solution to stress-related problems might be found in the idea of the cultivation of a disposition of humour.

The origins of this idea go back as far as the Old Testament:

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.

(Proverbs, xvii:22)

Teachers are not alone in experiencing job burn out amongst professionals but for many, as **Time** magazine puts it, “It is a syndrome verging on a trend.” Robert Veninga and James Spradley define five stages leading to job burn out:

1. Intense enthusiasm and job satisfaction that eventually wane as energy reserves are used up;
2. Fatigue, sleeping problems, drinking or shopping binges;
3. Chronic symptoms: exhaustion, physical illness, anger, depression;
4. Crisis: illness that can become incapacitating, pessimism, self-doubt, obsession with one’s problems;
5. A dangerous fatalism that can jeopardize career and life.

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Could this train of development be averted if individuals, from an early age, learned how to use humour in their professional lives? Norman Cousins, author of **Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient**, reasoned that if moods of de-pression cause cancer or impair the body’s immunological functions, positive emotions could be connected to positive health producing chemical changes.<sup>103</sup> It is the laughter that usually accompanies humour that brings about the dynamic results. Empirical re-search in gelotology, the study of laughter and its effects on the body, from both a psychological and a physiological perspective, offers strong support for both mental and

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<sup>102</sup>Barbara J. Combs, Diane R. Hales, Brian K. Williams, **An Invitation to Health, Your Personal Responsibility**, (California:1983), pp. 50-53.

<sup>103</sup>Norman Cousins, **Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient**, (New York:1979), p. 143.

physical health. Psychoanalysts argue that laughter allows the release of pent up tensions or energy, that it permits the expression of ideas or feelings that would otherwise be inhibited, and that it makes coping with difficult circumstances or situations possible. Laughter offers a distraction from worry and tends to lighten stress, anxiety, depression, and pain. In other words, it serves as an effective adaptation to stress.

But it is on physiological level that a number of very interesting changes begin to occur that are related to mental and physical health. Laughter releases hormones which may work against the pain of arthritis and other conditions such as high blood pressure. The stimulation of the endocrine system including the pituitary gland may provoke the release of endorphins as natural painkillers thus resulting in chemical reactions similar to opiates such as morphine and heroin. Cousins discovered that, "Ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain free sleep."<sup>104</sup> It is also believed that laughter may produce enzyme secretions aiding digestions and perhaps even acting as a natural laxative. William Fry Jr. finds that laughter gives the diaphragm, thorax, abdomen, lungs, heart, and possibly even the liver an internal massage; it serves as a form of exercise for the internal organs.<sup>105</sup>

There seems to be increasing scientific evidence to support the idea that laughter and humour are somehow important in the maintenance of good mental and physical health. Added to this perspective is the fact that humour, apart from its consequences, is usually considered to be pleasurable in its own right.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>105</sup> William Fry Jr., "Give Your Body a Laughter Workout," Montreal Gazette, (Quebec) 5 December, 1985, Fitness and Health, The Living Section.

Humour, then, is seen as a way of thinking that involves the relational thinking of everyday life and everyday people. Not only is humour pleasurable, it is also conducive to physical and mental health. In spite of all the indications of the importance of the role humour has to play in education, Edward deBono is one of the very few who have made an effort to incorporate humour and creativity in the thinking process. As he says:

It has always amazed me how little attention philosophers, psychologists, and information theorists have paid to humour. Humour is probably the most significant characteristic of the human mind. It tells us more about how the system works than does anything else.

106

The notion of incongruity contains the idea of something unexpected or out of context, something inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, or exaggerated. A breaking of patterns. According to Edward deBono, humour can only occur in a patterning system. Take, for example, this familiar riddle: "What is grey, has four legs and a trunk?" The pattern of linear thought is created by the sequence of this incoming information and the obvious response would be "an elephant." But there is nothing inappropriate about this; it is a perfectly logical response. It is the absurd answer, "A mouse on vacation," that supplies the humour in the form of incongruity. It is an obscure but plausible connection and it is this type of mental process that deBono finds related to insight:

...Insight involves exactly the same process as humour, except that in the case of humour the end result is only just plausible whereas in that of insight it is more effective than the starting point.

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<sup>106</sup> Edward deBono, **deBono's Thinking Course**, (British Broadcasting Corporation: 1982), p.57.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

It is obvious, however, that incongruity may create reactions that are incompatible with humour: confusion, fear, interest, and curiosity. It is the way in which the event is *perceived* that signifies which reaction will occur; deBono's concept of lateral thinking is concerned with the ability "to change perception and to keep on changing perception."

Is there a relationship between humour and academic standing? Empirical investigations offer conflicting reports. John E. Gibson associates a sense of humour directly with academic achievement.

Your sense of humour is a key to your intelligence. Brains and a well-developed sense of humour go hand in hand. Students who are the wittiest, and show the greatest ability to appreciate a humorous situation, average the highest marks in their studies. Students who average the lowest grades tend to make the poorest showing in sense of humour tests, have difficulty in differentiating between funny jokes and pointless ones.

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Polyxenie Kambouropoulou, however, discovered that a sense of humour had no relation to academic standing, that it was subjective, more apparent in extroverts, and associated with an attitude of interest and self-confidence among the socially ascending.<sup>109</sup>

While this study is concerned with temperamental differences rather than intellectual differences, Kambouropoulou makes an interesting discovery.

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<sup>108</sup> John E. Gibson quoted by Percy H. Whiting in **How to Speak and Write with Humour**, (New York:1959), p.16.

<sup>109</sup> Polyxenie Kambouropoulou, **Individual Differences in the Sense of Humour and Their Relation to Temperamental Differences**, Thesis in the Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, October, 1930, pp.75-76.

The class consisting of incongruous ideas only, a part of the impersonal, incongruity class, when analyzed by itself, shows that the diary authors of higher academic standing report in their diaries a greater proportion of incongruous ideas.

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Paul E. McGhee conducts studies in child development with respect to humour

in a continuation of the research begun by Kambouropoulou. He finds that:

. . .humour seemed to be essentially a cognitive or intellectual experience and that incongruity was a necessary (although not sufficient) prerequisite. Granted, there are important emotional influences upon humour. Social context also has an especially important bearing upon the funniness of an event. But these did not seem to be at the core of humour. This core seemed to consist of an incongruous or nonsensical relationship of which sense had to be made somehow. Sexual and aggressive elements play an important role in much (perhaps most) of our everyday humour, but sex and aggression are not funny in the absence of an incongruous context.

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The whole process of fostering a disposition of humour begins with the pre-school child. Nursery rhymes and fairy tales are full of nonsense, absurdity and incongruity; the deliberate upsetting of the rules and regulations of the real world, the prototypes for humour, the breaking of patterns and the beginning of creativity. So much of our ability to produce and appreciate humour begins with some aspect of make-believe play. Jerome L. Singer suggests the following circumstances to create the special mental set that will develop into adult humour and creativity:

1. An opportunity for practice in a relatively protected setting where the external environment is reasonably redundant so that greater attention can be focused

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>111</sup> Paul E. McGhee, **Humour, its Origin and Development**, (San Fransisco:1979), p. viii.

- on internal activity . . .
- 2. Availability of a variety of materials in the form of stories told, books and playthings . . .
- 3. Freedom from interference by peers or adults who make demands for immediate motor or perceptual reactions . . .
- 4. The availability of adult models or older peers who encourage make-believe activity and provide examples of how this is done . . .
- 5. Cultural acceptance of privacy and make-believe as a reasonably worthwhile form of play . . .

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Clara Owsley Wilson researched laughter situations in young children in 1931.

She discovered that there is evidence for the conditioning of laughter in children by the attitude of parents and teachers. Some of the methods used to encourage laughter are: paying attention when the child laughs; smiling approvingly; laughing with the child; saying, "That's funny," or some smiling remark. The social value of laughter suggests that the classroom is the ideal place for the development of humour. <sup>113</sup>

It would appear that no work has yet been presented which fits humour into an established learning model other than deBono's use of humour as a stepping-stone to a new idea. Should humour be seen as strengthening creativity and imagination?

Although there have been many explorations of a philosophical nature over the past two thousand years, it is only very recently that a systematic, empirical and theoretical approach to the study of humour has been adopted. There remains, however, an

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<sup>112</sup>Jerome L. Singer, **The Child's World of Make-Believe: Experimental Studies of Imaginative Play**, (New York:1973), pp. 198-199.

<sup>113</sup>Clara Owsley Wilson, **A Study of Laughter Situations Among Young Children**, Thesis in the Faculty of the Graduate College of the University of Nebraska, 1931, pp. 40-41.

inconclusiveness of research to date which is perhaps best explained in the words of

Paul E. McGhee:

Like the three blind men who offered varying descriptions of an elephant, depending on which part of the animal's body they came into contact with, humour theorists interested in different aspects of humour have advanced a highly diverse set of explanations of humour. The main difference between current psychological views and earlier philosophical ones lies in the greater awareness of contemporary theorists that a given explanation is, in fact, limited to only one narrow aspect of humour. Philosophers through the centuries have been especially fond of arguing that their explanation accounted for all types or all aspects of humour. Psychologists today are quite aware of the complex and multifaceted nature of humour and realize that it is simply not possible at this time to develop a single broad theory. . .

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<sup>114</sup> McGhee, *Op. Cit.*, (San Francisco: 1979) p. 2.

## Chapter Six

### CONCLUSIONS

Can humour be cultivated as a disposition in education? Let us take this as an instrumental possibility. John B. Watson once said,

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary and they have been doing it for many thousands of years.

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Can humour be cultivated as a disposition of humour? A Behaviourist response would be a definitive 'Yes!' Like the English nursery rhyme, **Three Men in a Tub**, any child can be conditioned to become a butcher, a baker, or even a candlestick maker. Indeed, they can be conditioned to become anything at all. When taken to extremes, however, the effect of classical conditioning offering rewards and punishments does not offer the individual many options with respect to free will.

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<sup>115</sup>Watson, J. B. **Behaviourism**, (Revised edition) (Chicago:1930) p.82.

According to the Harvard Report, a student with a disposition of humour is better able to think effectively, communicate more efficiently, make relevant judgments, and discriminate amongst values. Surely it is possible to say that A is the cause of B. And, regardless of one's chosen occupation, whether it be, soldier, technician, or pastry chef, is not a good sense of humour, and the disposition to have a good sense of humour, a positive attribute?

The foregoing discussions of humour have centred on three areas: (i) the theory of relief of tension or inhibition, (ii) the theory of bisociation or the linking of disparates, and (iii) the superiority theory or what has been called the moral perspective. These three theories can be said to represent a psychological, a cognitive, and a moral approach.

There are differing approaches in the philosophy of education where the emphasis is placed on different areas of importance. Paul Hirst, for example, sees the characteristics of mind in relation to the forms of knowledge, pointing out that we "look at things in a certain way." If we look at a disposition of humour in a general sense rather than the specific one that Hirst referred to, the obvious question that springs to mind is: What kind of way? The answer depends both on the time period and the society in which we live, ruthless and brutish, philosophical or spiritual, chivalrous and honourable, romantic or pragmatic, feminist or sexist. Is there room for the idea that McLuhan puts forward? Does our time present a unique opportunity for learning by means of humour? If the use of humour is an effective way to stimulate students to learn, might it not be worth serious consideration as a constructive tool in education? For Jane Roland Martin, it is important that students develop their potential in

terms of acting upon their knowledge and that feeling and emotion be included along with the cognitive, the logical, and the rational. William Frankena, on the other hand, regards education as the fostering of certain dispositions. Might not a sense of humour be a valuable disposition?

It is only too true that it is easier to ask questions than to answer them. With the understanding that the subject matter of humour is notoriously disputed, we have set about trying to find specific answers to specific questions with some degree of caution. Let us begin with the questions posed at the onset of this discussion; where should humour fit in the educational scheme of things? In order to answer this question, we must first ask how the development of humour should be regarded; is it concerned with feelings, emotions, or intellectual development? How does humour fit in with the rest of our behaviour? Which attitudes seem to be the most characteristic of humour? Starting with the second question first, is humour concerned with feelings, emotions, or intellectual development, we find that there is a wide choice of philosophical arguments for all three categories. Freud states that humour may appear to be connected either with wit or some other form of the comic.<sup>116</sup> He finds humour to be more self-sufficient than either wit or the comic. He describes it as a psychic experience based on disappointment releasing inhibitions of sex and malice. But Marie Collins Swabey disagrees. She places her emphasis on wit and regards it as a “correlative species” of the comic.<sup>117</sup> From her perspective, wit is a purely intellectual phenomenon; whatever is funny “must have a logical point, drift, nub or pertinence . . . in the laughter of the

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<sup>116</sup>Freud, *Op. Cit.*, p. 633.

<sup>117</sup>Swabey, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

comic insight we achieve a logical moment of truth.”<sup>118</sup> She holds, as well, that emotions, taste, and feeling play but a secondary role when compared with the intellectual. Arthur Koestler finds a relationship between three domains without sharp distinction: humour, discovery and art. While he argues that the logical pattern of creativity is the same, he does find that the emotional set is different in each case. The comic has tinges of aggression, scientific reasoning claims to be neutral, and the poetic image of the artist is both admiring and based on a positive, identificatory kind of emotion.<sup>119</sup> But he points out, as Frankena and Bronowski have done, that the neutrality of science is a myth; the contents and objectives of science rest, in the final analysis, on value judgments. This leaves Koestler with two different emotional sets: (i) aggressive and (ii) sympathetic. For Koestler it is an impulse of aggression or apprehension that lies behind even the most sophisticated joke. The aggression, however, is sublimated as we move through discovery and art to become a kind of malicious ingenuity that is intellectually very clever. He goes on to say that the element of surprise is associated with some degree of originality that results in (i) a collision ending in laughter, or (ii) a new fusion in an intellectual synthesis, or (iii) a confrontation in an aesthetic experience.<sup>120</sup> Kierkegaard finds humour to be closely related to the religious sphere; irony constitutes the border between the aesthetic and the ethical while humour is the boundary between the ethical and the religious.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. v.

<sup>119</sup> Koestler, *Op. Cit.*, (1969) p. 27.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>121</sup> Kierkegaard, **Concluding Unscientific Postscript**, p. 448.

Plato believes that malice is mixed with pleasure when we laugh at the misfortunes of our friends.<sup>122</sup> Aristotle sees the comic as “an imitation of men worse than the average . . . ugly and distorted without causing pain.”<sup>123</sup> And Kant regards laughter as “an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation to nothing.”<sup>124</sup> This does not imply serious thought or anything other than a play of aesthetic ideas.<sup>125</sup>

Schopenhauer, expanding on this theory, believes that “laughter expresses a sudden perception of an incongruity between our conceptions of objects and the objects themselves.”<sup>126</sup> While Schopenhauer has what can be called a rather marvellously scathing contempt for just about everyone other than himself and “the immortal Kant,” his system does not recognize either hostile or sympathetic emotions.<sup>127</sup> The example that most delighted Schopenhauer was that of the geometrical figure of a tangent touching a circle. Why would this be funny? Where the tangent touches the circle, we would expect an angle but this is not possible because the line of the circle is curved. Now, while this may be considered a pristine example of wholly comic laughter, most of us would not find it especially hilarious. Why is this?

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<sup>122</sup>Plato, **Philebus**, (50-b).

<sup>123</sup>Aristotle, **De Poetica**, 1448a p.35.

<sup>124</sup>Kant, *Op. Cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>126</sup>J.C. Gregory, **The Nature of Laughter**, (London:1924), p. 113.

<sup>127</sup>Schopenhauer, **The World as Will and Idea**, Vol. II, p. 272.

Perhaps, as Thomas Hobbes would say, it is because there is no real “feeling of triumph in contrast to another’s infirmity.”<sup>128</sup> What becomes funny and amusing is Schopenhauer’s pleasure in the incongruity of the geometrical figure. But, in this instance, we are amused not by his example but by his pleasure in the incongruity. On the other hand, it would not be at all unlike Schopenhauer to “apprehend” the incongruity of the geometric figure and “suddenly applaud” his own perception.

Nonsense has been regarded as serving the child in the same sense that come - dy serves the adult. D. H. Monro argues that it offers (i) the release from the rigid restrictions of society and (ii) the possibility of exploring new areas.<sup>129</sup> In some respects, Monro’s position can be said to touch on that of George Meredith:

Comedy banishes “monstrous monotonousness.” It teaches us to be responsive, to be honest, to interrogate ourselves and correct our pretentiousness. So the comic spirit is “born of our united social intelligence,” and thus keeps us alive. The comic spirit is “the ultimate civilizer” in a dull, insensitive world. 130

Is humour concerned with feelings, emotions or intellectual development? We have looked at humour and its relationship to wit and comedy in an effort to answer this question. Emotions range from the crude, aggressive humour of children to the beneficence of sympathy and understanding in an adult. Comedy is characterized by the act of distancing so that we see rather than feel the predicament of the comic laughter. And this, it can be argued, is more rational than being caught up in the emo-

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<sup>128</sup>Hobbes, **Leviathan**, Pt. 1, Ch. VI, p.27.

<sup>129</sup>Monro, **Argument of Laughter**, p. 248.

<sup>130</sup>Meredith, Op Cit., p. ix.

tional drama of a tragic situation. Feelings which are normally inhibited are released through the mechanisms of humour thus allowing us to laugh at ourselves and at others who offer us an opportunity to feel superior because we would not act as they. Intellectually, humour is the linking of disparates that gives rise to the act of creation. Berger's Queen Guinevere is a character with a true sense of humour; for her, adversity is but an inconvenience. Held captive in the dungeons of Sir Meliagant who finds wickedness to be his very *métier*, she manages to confound him with her metaphysics. Meliagant responds by saying:

“Words, words, but the reality is that I have mastery  
over *you*. That is the truth and all of it.” “Nay,”  
said Guinevere, “it is rather but a fact and,  
like all such, merely transitory.” 131

Guinevere does have a point. What are the facts of humour? They are transitory, they change from age to age, from person to person, from society to society, from one school of thought to another. The question, “*Should* humour be cultivated as a disposition in education?” is a question of value. As an empirical statement about fact, it can be seen as being good as means to something: the well-rounded human being, one who can earn a living, live with other human beings, enjoy life, and fully understand the reasons for existence in human form. Such a disposition would ideally lead to a better life, a better understanding of self and others, a higher degree of tolerance for adversity, and a more creative approach to living and learning. As a question of value, however, we can argue that humour is valuable in itself; it gives us pleasant little shocks of “sudden glory”; it is amusing, entertaining and interesting. Having a disposition of hu-

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<sup>131</sup> Berger, *Op. Cit.*, (1971), p. 192.

mour is something we ought to pursue, not as a means to further ends, but simply for its own sake.

Can this position be defended by a philosophical line of argumentation or does it rely on the observation of individuals? Apart from the maniacal look in the eye of a lobster, it is much easier to observe than to know how it thinks or feels. With people, however, having a sense of humour is usually perceived as being a good thing although what is funny to one person is not necessarily funny to another. A good fart joke can be hilarious depending on your age, sex, and the circumstances.

Q: Who is brave?

A: He who has diarrhea and wants to fart!

Sophisticated humour such as wit and wordplay, or the obscure codified cartoons found in **Punch**, are perhaps better appreciated by the more cosmopolitan reader. Only we ourselves know if we enjoy the company of individuals who exhibit a particular form of humour and, like them, find it pleasurable. The distinction here is between having a disposition of humour (being good-humoured and finding satisfaction and fulfillment in life) and that of enjoying a particular type of humour such as wit, comedy, satire, irony, or buffoonery: these we either like and appreciate or dislike and dismiss.

If we can aim for a disposition of humour simply because we enjoy the pleasures it offers and because we like the consequences, surely we can agree that a 'good' sense of humour, one that is not tendentious and does not cause offence, is a desired characteristic. Such an idea might once have been valuable in and of itself. In the twenty-first century, however, faced with the digital revolution, the threat of unem-

ployment, declining wages, and mass-migrations across continents, people are going to need a radically different way of looking at the world in an attempt to find the meaning of life. In this rapidly changing world where there is scientific evidence of global temperature increases, extreme weather events, and ocean acidification, there are arguably a multitude of reasons for the cultivation of a disposition of humour.

McLuhan might well be right that our time presents a unique opportunity. I find it a profoundly interesting idea. We might want to justify the cultivation of humour through education on the grounds of encouraging creativity, intellectual development, and emotional growth. The psychological advantage of having a sense of humour is that it can offer a release of tension and in so doing physiologically promote good health.

Possibly, when faced with the crisis and the absurdities of human actions, it may even prove to be a method of maintaining one's sanity. As Charles Chaplin once said, "Laughter is the tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain"; we can laugh at the crisis and the absurdities brought about by human actions.

The twenty-first century offers a time in the history of man unlike any other. In education, core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving seem far removed from the traditional Liberal Arts Education that educators once believed schools needed to teach in order to help students succeed in life. Having survived the twentieth century, with its World Wars and the first glimpses of the changes the 'infant internet' would soon make, Carl Jung made the following observation,

How totally different did the world appear to medieval man! For him the earth was eternally fixed and at rest

in the centre of the universe...Men were all children of God under the loving care of the Most High, who prepared them for eternal blessedness; and all knew exactly what they should do and how they should conduct themselves in order to rise from a corruptible world to an incorruptible and joyous existence. Such a life no longer seems real to us, even in our dreams. 132

Faced as we all are with the complexities of the education of human beings, perhaps the last word should be given to William Fry who looks beyond to the ultimate mystery of which humour is an example.

I feel that paradox is as close to the central mystery as it has been possible to move. Whenever man seeks to inspect the self, he will confront the self and discover that the self is the inspector. Perhaps this paradox is responsible for some of the great excitement and satisfaction that can come to us from studies of our human nature. 133

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<sup>132</sup>Jung, "The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man," in **The Collected Works of C.G.Jung**, Trans. R.F.C. Hull Bollingen Series XX, (Princeton:1970 p.81

<sup>133</sup>William Fry, Jr., **Sweet Madness: A Study of Humour**, (California:1963), p. 172.

## *Appendix*

### ***TWO EMPIRICAL STUDIES IN HUMOUR AND EDUCATION***

Reviewing the literature in the philosophy of education reveals little recognition of the potential that humour might have to offer. And while it is true that philosophers have put forward a number of different theories explaining humour and laughter, until only recently the number of psychologists studying laughter as a phase of child development has been very few. Polyxenie Kambouropoulou submitted a doctoral thesis in 1930 on **Individual Differences in the Sense of Humour and Their Relation to Temperamental Differences** dealing with the humour preferences and temperamental peculiarities of one hundred Vassar College Students. She found that a sense of humour bears no relation to academic standing.<sup>134</sup> Her data further revealed that humour amongst the Vassar students tended to be subjective and that those with a good sense of humour were extroverted and confident; a sense of humour is connected with “the more socially ascendant and interesting attitude constituting extroversion.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup>Kambouropoulou, Op. Cit., p.75.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

**A Study of Laughter-Situations Among Young Children** is a 1931 thesis survey conducted by Clara Owsley Wilson. She collected a total of 601 records of laughter in infants from one to twenty-nine months, 481 nursery records, and 1,033 kindergarten and primary records making a total of 2,115. Records were begun in 1928 in the Lincoln, Nebraska area.

Wilson's analysis of the collected data is worth noting:

1. There is evidence of much conditioning of laughter by parents and teachers; the adult is a great determining factor in the amount of laughter in children and in the type of situation producing it.
2. Methods commonly used by adults to discourage laughter in a child are: Ignoring the child, shaking the head "no," scolding, or saying, "That isn't funny." Methods used to encourage laughter are: paying attention when the child laughs, smiling approvingly, laughing with the child, saying, "That's funny," or some smiling remark.
3. Some of the methods commonly used to discourage laughter result in repression rather than education.
4. There is great individual variation in the frequency of laughter in different children.
5. There is more laughter among children in an atmosphere free from restraint.
6. The variation in types of situation accompanied by laughter shows a trend away from body control to a more intellectual and social interest as the child grows older, though laughter with body activity is not lost.
7. a. Laughter accompanying the child's own powers tends to decrease after infancy and the nursery age.
  - b. Laughter accompanying pretence tends to increase at the nursery age and then decrease.
  - c. Laughter accompanying the recognition of

oddities tends to increase as the child grows older.

- d. Laughter accompanying teasing tends to increase as the child grows older.
- e. Laughter accompanying recognition of one's own predicament tends to increase until the child is about seven, then decreases.
- f. Laughter accompanying violation of convention, play on words, comparisons with indirect allusions, absurdities, tends to increase as the child grows older. 136

Wilson offers the following suggestions for the development of laughter in children: -

1. Provide a happy atmosphere free from fear and restraint.
2. Recognize that with certain types of situations, laughter may be expected at different ages as a stage of growth, i.e., with nursery children laughter will likely accompany certain play experience.
3. Give children accurate information about the body in a frank, matter-of-fact way, thus removing the mystery. There would then be no great violation of convention when physical matters are discussed.
4. Encourage laughter at one's own predicaments as a matter of good sportsmanship.
5. Encourage good natured bantering, joking and repartee.
6. Help children to appreciate other people's positions. Some laughter may be cruel. A kindly attitude with fellow feeling is needed.
7. Purposely provide materials and set up wholesome situations which produce laughter. Plan opportunities for the enjoying and telling of funny situations, experiences, jokes, riddles, and word play. Some of

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<sup>136</sup>Wilson, Op. Cit., pp. 40-41.

this may be dull to an adult, for instance, "Did you ever see a side walk?" However, this may contribute to work imagery; and it represents a phase of children's laughter development.

Provide for the reading of humorous stories by the teacher with the children selecting different types of stories. Help children to enjoy good cartoons and to draw cartoons.

8. In all situations, help children to discriminate between the coarse, sordid and commonplace as compared with the more refined, socially acceptable laughter situation. Try to lead them to an appreciation of details, keener apprehension of the less personal and the less obvious and give them more knowledge which will help them enjoy situations of a wider scope.

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The studies of both Kambouropoulou and Wilson strongly indicate the high social value of laughter and a sense of humour. Laughing at one's self leads to a better understanding of self and others in that it allows one to achieve a better sense of proportion in relation to the rest of the world. It also provides an outlet for emotions and the release of tension as well as offering relaxation to mind and body. It seems self-evident that the humorous and witty individual is not only frequently extroverted but also socially accomplished. And while it is apparent that a good laugh does indeed relieve tension, it is surprising that no relationship was found between intelligence and humour, or between academic standing and a sense of humour. The fact is that these results are dependent on the classification of humorous material.

The classifications of humorous material in the Vassar students' diaries fall into three groups: (1) the personal (subjective) defective category belonging to the superiority class in which the laughable is the inferiority of a person, (2) the impersonal (objective) incongruity class in which the laughable is an incongruous idea or situation, and

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<sup>137</sup> Op. cit., pp.42-43.

(3)laughter without a laughable cause. During the 1920s when Kambouropoulou was conducting her research, she would have been stepping into thin air in an attempt to link the cognitive with laughter situations. The laughter without a laughable cause class of entry was found to correlate negatively with academic standing. But this is not at all surprising as there are many non-humorous reasons for laughter: success in tests, failure in tests, a sense of comfort and well being, discomfort and embarrassment, the unexpected, the familiar, nervousness, happiness, and so on. There is, however, a crucial point that argues in favour of the idea of humour in education:

The class consisting of incongruous ideas only, a part of the impersonal, incongruity class, when analyzed by itself, shows that the diary authors of higher academic standing report in their diaries a greater proportion of incongruous ideas.

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This could prove a fruitful starting point in search of evidence in support of Koestler's theory that it is the same intellectual process that discovers incongruities in humour, science, or art; that it is an indication of creative thought. Kambouropoulou's study, however, leads in quite another direction. She is not actively pursuing the incongruity theory of bisociation or inappropriateness but the superiority theory. Following this trail, it is not surprising that extroversion and the superiority type of humour are related. When the category of extroversion is broken down into two compartments, sociability and confidence, the superiority theory was linked more strongly with confidence than with sociability. Having a high degree of confidence does not necessarily produce what others consider admirable characteristics. With self-composure, one who is seldom embarrassed, can be perceived as being too forward. Insistent upon

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<sup>138</sup>Kambouropoulou, p. 37.

the acceptance of their ideas and plans, such individuals may be regarded as being, not only persuasive, but also argumentative. Having a strong initiative, they prefer to lead and, being independent, they can often be seen as insensitive and indifferent to the opinions of others. In making the best appearance possible, others might see them as being conceited and showing off. Such self-confident and self-reliant individuals tend to take success for granted.

Sociability traits, on the other hand, tend to be more genial in that the individual prefers group activities when working or playing and is not entirely happy with individual projects. Hearty and cordial even to strangers, he or she easily makes acquaintances and has a wide range of friends; emotions are easily expressed showing delight, anger, sympathy or jealousy. Open, talkative, and sociable, they do not stand on ceremony.

While this study is by no means conclusive with respect to the relation between humour, intelligence, and creativity, it does find that those with a "good sense of humour" of the superiority type are extroverted, confident, and sociable. The better students in Kambouropoulou's project did not laugh at nothing in particular and did not consider the things they did laugh at as being excessively funny. It would seem to be an attribute of the poorer student to laugh out of proportion at something of little or no importance. In this instance, such laughter is taken as a lack of intellectual maturity.

It has been said more than once that we have a tendency to find what we are looking for, that it is possible to find examples to support almost any theory, that we choose the ones that support our view, and ignore the others. It seems very possible

that a study conducted along the lines of the theory of bisociation would show a positive correlation between humour and, if not intelligence, at the very least, creativity. As we have seen in the previous discussions on humour, the intellectual aspect is one theory among others. More research needs to be done in educational psychology on the psychological significance of developing humour in education. Piaget's stages in cognitive development and Kohlberg's theory of moral development offer a possible base from which others may move into the future.

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