



Jean-Paul RIOPELLE, L'hommage à Rosa Luxemburg, 1992 (détail) [*]

Getting It: on jokes and art

[Steven Burns](#) and [Alice MacLachlan](#)

Abstract:

“What is *appreciation*?” is a basic question in the philosophy of art, and the analogy between appreciating a work of art and getting a joke can help us answer it. We first propose a subjective account of aesthetic appreciation (I). Then we consider jokes (II). The difference between getting a joke and not, or what it is to get it right, can often be objectively articulated. Such explanations cannot substitute for the joke itself, and indeed may undermine the very power of the joke to evoke an appropriate response. *Sometimes* the discourse of art critics can have a similar effect. We therefore explore the analogy between getting jokes and appreciating works of art (III), and find it unexpectedly strong. Finally (IV), we consider Wittgensteinian grounds for thinking as we do, considering the *language game* of joke-telling, the relevance of *seeing aspects*, and *giving reasons*.

AB

“The question, ‘what is the nature of a joke?’ is like the question, ‘what is the nature of a lyric poem?’” [1]

Philosophers have a reputation for wit, but not all of us indulge. A. C. Ewing, for instance, was much given to seriousness. He has been described as “a drab little man”. At Cambridge, one student recalls, “he would talk for a bit, and then say ‘I will now dictate’. ...He always had a worked-out answer to everything.” [2] Ewing “was deeply religious and serious. A. J. Ayer [who was of course a wit] ribbed him about his belief in the afterlife, demanding to know what he most looked forward to in the next world. Ewing replied immediately, ‘God will tell me whether there are synthetic *a priori* propositions.’” That is not a joke. It is just a story. This is not changed by the fact that we might even see Ayer as the straight man in the story,

and Ewing as the wit. He did, after all, manage to suggest that he was not likely to learn the answer from Ayer. One is lead to suspect, however, that that was inadvertent. Anecdotes of this sort can be close cousins of the sort of mock story invented for a laugh that we call a joke. Our aim in this paper is to direct the reader's attention to the latter, and to compare the appreciation of jokes to the appreciation of works of art.

The late Derek Jarman, in his film, *Wittgenstein*, invents a death-bed scene in which Wittgenstein tells his friend, Maynard Keynes, that he once conceived of a philosophy written entirely in jokes. [3] "Why did you not write it?" asks Keynes. Wittgenstein deadpans, "I didn't have a sense of humour." He certainly had aesthetic taste, however, and we think that the two are richly analogous. We shall begin by discussing aesthetic appreciation.

Wittgenstein's analogy between jokes and art is the horizon against which we are sketching. It is no accident that it is in a paper on jokes that Ted Cohen identifies an account of aesthetic appreciation is an "absolutely basic question in the philosophy of art". [4] In §I we focus on a paper by John Findlay, which argues, convincingly if one-sidedly, that this "absolutely basic" question in aesthetics is answered when we have an account of aesthetic experience as one "uniquely marked out and extraordinary in its delight". [5] We argue that he was wrong, however, to discount entirely the relevance of the object being experienced. We develop an account of appreciation that is based on Findlay's view. We then discuss the parallel case (§II), the relation between jokes and laughter. The difference between getting a joke and not—missing the point—can be articulated. Such explanations have the form of giving reasons for seeing the joke one way rather than others. It is usually claimed, however, that such explanations cannot substitute for the joke itself, and indeed undermine the very power of the joke to evoke an appropriate response. We challenge this view. We then (III) explore the intersection of those two discussions, maintaining that several features of the appreciation of jokes are relevant to an analysis of appreciation of artworks. We conclude (IV) with a section on the Wittgensteinian foundations of our analysis, considering the *language game* of joke-telling, the relevance of *seeing aspects*, and the matter of *giving reasons*.

I. Appreciation

The natural place to begin an analysis of aesthetic appreciation is with the observer's subjective states. One could start with the artist's imagination, and seek to show that to appreciate art is to get *that* straight. The viewer, that is, really appreciates the work if she gets herself into the frame of mind that the artist had when conceiving the work. Or one could start with the physical work of art itself, and claim that getting *its* objective properties right is the essence of appreciation. The latter is a classically cognitivist view, and the former can be called an expressivist one. John Findlay's view can be contrasted with those familiar cognitivist and expressivist stances. [6] Cognitivists emphasize objective features of

the work of art, or public features of the language of interpretation, which assure the work a cognitive content whether or not an individual observer, or even the artist herself, assesses correctly what that content is. Ideally, of course, such content is communicated from artist to observer. Appreciation from this starting point is a case of getting it right. Expressivists, too, are concerned with communication, but in the first instance they conceive the art work as the artist's attempt at expressing her feelings, emotions or experiences. Here, too, getting it right is essential to appreciation, though in this case it is a matter of feeling what the artist was feeling. Findlay's view, in contrast, is scarcely concerned with communication at all. Getting it is not about being right about the artist or the object. Findlay begins with the experience of the observer regardless of what causes it.

Findlay attacks philosophical aesthetics as practiced in English in the decades immediately after World War II. He calls it "as theme less, as structureless, as unprincipled, as devoid of backbone and as trivial and unmemorable as the material they think it deals with." [7] [Think of that as a case of insult as wit.] He, on the other hand, takes art and aesthetic experience to be none of the above, and embraces "the quest for unity and generality in which philosophy consists" (*ibid.*). He maintains that "aesthetic consciousness is just consciousness in its purest form" (102), and from this derives the claim that our tendency to seek perspicuity and poignancy in experience, rather than to cultivate the obscure and the humdrum, springs necessarily from our nature as essentially conscious beings. This appears to be a subjectivist view, because of its focus on the nature of the subject's conscious experience, but Findlay makes important qualifications.

Of his own aesthetic experiences, Findlay says that they "are for me of agonizing importance, and I suffer recurrently from a sort of aesthetic impotence or insensibility which I rate as the most depriving and the most readily fallen into of all forms of impotence." But he continues,

So far am I from holding that there is no such specific thing as an aesthetic experience, that it is just *any* experience in a special context, that I think it a type of experience uniquely marked out, extraordinary in its delight, and often in its difficulty and pain, but above all an experience that is not always nor readily to be had, that it involves the concentration, the mental undistractedness, even the bodily euphoria and lightness that we too often cannot muster at all. (89-90)

An important and popular view of aesthetic appreciation—one that *is* subjectivist—is thus set aside. It is the view that an object has been aesthetically appreciated when an observer has had "just *any* experience" in its presence. "I like it because it makes me feel sad or hopeful, makes me think of my grandmother or of canoeing the Mersey River...." To appreciate, on this view, is to *like*, and in particular to like because of an awakened emotion or association. Such a view, although popular, is easily undermined. The observer's reaction may not be to the work itself, or to relevant aspects of it, it may not respond to any of the artist's

intentions (who may have had courage in mind rather than sadness, e.g.), or may be an eccentric, personal association with an actual feature of the work that is not a relevant part of the work, itself (that it was playing when my car went off the road—so reminds me of fear). This sort of experience is an *experience*, sure enough, and one in an aesthetic context. But it is not, just because of that, an *aesthetic* experience.

Objections such as these are built on notions of relevance: the experience that counts as an aesthetic response must be responding to a relevant feature of the work, or to something intended by the artist, or to something that is *in* the work in such a way that other observers of similar cultural background may be expected to “get it”. Findlay’s objection is based on none of the above. His first claim is that the aesthetic experience is a unique one and in some sense the same for everyone. He bases this on a second claim, that the nature of aesthetic appreciation can be systematically derived from prior philosophical commitments. This point needs examination. Findlay is not interested in the mere variety of empirical phenomena. What he would like to propound is a theory which derives aesthetic experience from the concept of being, but he will content himself here with deriving it from the concept of consciousness. To this end he begins with “Brentano’s masterly ground-plan of mental life” (94), which divides the conscious mind into three basic species: *mere* conception (having something present to one); theoretical acceptance (of something as true, existent or believable); and practical acceptance (which is present in our feelings, desires and practical decisions). The value of this scheme, thinks Findlay, is that it properly locates the aesthetic field—“it is one of suspended conception, a pure having something before one for contemplation” (*ibid.*). Appreciation, that is, is not a matter of figuring something out. Aesthetic attitudes, therefore, are present wherever there is consciousness, they are consciousness at its purest – highly to be welcomed, and easy to be distracted from by concerns practical or theoretical.

Findlay thus claims to have located, despite all the diversity of aesthetic experience, the simple, common nature of it. However, he does not express much interest in the fact that the experiences in question will still differ from case to case. This seems to us to be an important omission. Consider the testimony of the late Richard Wollheim, who has left us a description of his own method of looking at paintings:

I evolved a way of looking at paintings which was massively time consuming and deeply rewarding. For I came to recognise that it often took the first hour or so in front of a painting for stray associations or motivated misperceptions to settle down, and it was only then, with the same amount of time or more to spend looking at it, that the picture could be relied upon to disclose itself as it was. I noticed that I became an object of suspicion to passers-by, and so did the picture that I was looking at. [8]

This is first of all Findlayan; consider the time taken, the need to remove distractions, the achievement of a state of appreciation that no doubt includes some

of “the concentration ...even the bodily euphoria and lightness that we too often cannot muster at all” (Findlay, 90). Wollheim reminds us, however, that appreciation is more than just having an experience of this sort, however unique and extraordinary the experience may be; in particular, it requires that the experience be connected in some appropriate way with the object in question, and thus that it differ from object to object. Having such an aesthetic experience while hearing, for instance, Heinz Holliger play Luciano Berio’s *Sequenza for Oboe*, might involve appreciating the performer’s anguished attempt to express himself on a recalcitrant instrument. [\[9\]](#) This would seem to be a quite different experience from appreciating the salmon-coloured beauty of a Maritime sunset. In the latter case we would be happy to say that the sunset’s bringing peace to the end of a troubled day would not count as essential to aesthetic appreciation. Response to the sensuous beauty alone, or to a painter’s capturing of it, would suffice, while its relation to the troubles of the day would surely fall into one of Brentano’s other categories (presumably the pragmatic one). Of the oboe solo, on the other hand, part of experiencing the piece would be seeing the performer dismantle his instrument, play on the mouthpiece alone, and then as though gasping for breath play with just the reeds dipped into the glass of water that is part of the oboist’s accoutrement. This is what we described as striving to express himself on a recalcitrant instrument. To mistake the anguish for mere hard work would be to miss an aspect of the work itself, or at least of this performance of it.

Appreciation in this sense is of course a complex term. It is, we have claimed, a special, detached state of contemplative consciousness, but one with some appropriate cognizance of the work being contemplated. Simply reacting to a work, and liking it, is insufficient. “Getting it right” on the other hand is also not required. This constraint, that the experience should to some degree respond to the object of attention, tends to make appreciation seem like judgement; this tendency needs to be restrained before we turn Findlay back into a cognitivist. One must know a certain amount about what it is that one is confronting in order to have the aesthetic experience properly associated with it, but “appreciate” does not mean “make the correct value judgement about the object”. Findlay’s cat is not up to that. [\[10\]](#) Appreciation should not be confused with critical judgement any more than it should be confused with “just any experience” of merely subjective status.

Of greatest importance for Findlay is the receptiveness of the consciousness. We do not say “passivity” (although agency or activity is primarily confined to Brentano’s theoretical and practical forms of consciousness); there is activity in the preparations for receptivity. Remember the *time* that Wollheim takes in front of a painting. Similarly, one does not fall asleep by making an effort to fall asleep, but one does typically prepare mind and body for rest, putting aside the dirt and clothing and troubles of the day, finding a dark and quiet place to lie down, and so on. Perhaps falling asleep is something that happens to one rather than something that one *does*, but it is not usually adventitious, unwilling, or totally passive. These characteristics are shared with Findlay’s aesthetic appreciator. Let us now hold

aesthetic appreciation in the background while we consider the matter of appreciating a joke.

II. Laughter

Serving as an analogy for aesthetic appreciation, and also oddly paralleled by the analogy with falling asleep, is the getting of a joke. A joke is of course not the only sign of a sense of humour; getting a joke is a fairly limited, if mundane, example of humour. Nonetheless, the laugh at the punch-line of a decently-told story is something that happens to a person. It is not something that can be actively done, but it, too, is not purely adventitious, unwilled, or passive. We do not consciously decide to laugh any more than we do to have an aesthetic experience, but typically one prepares oneself for a joke. There are clues that one is coming: a sermon or an after-dinner speech is beginning, co-workers are on a break and in a mood to entertain one another, a volunteer steps forward to try to break an oppressive tension, a boss intends to make an impression on vulnerable employees, and so on. “Did you hear the one about...?” is a dead giveaway, of course, but there are subtler clues that a story is beginning – a hesitation, shift in tone, a sudden seriousness, and so on. Thus, the listener is typically aware that a joke is underway. (Humour which does not prepare the listener is of a drier sort, and the reaction is usually slower in coming, if it comes at all. We confine ourselves here to the common, well-signalled joke.)

A weak example will be sufficient for our purposes: An earnest parish priest and an alcoholic bus-driver approach the Pearly Gates together. St. Peter welcomes them, then assigns the bus-driver an eternal home in a stately mansion and the priest a place in a run-down rooming-house. “There must be some mistake”, protests the priest. “Not at all”, explains St. Peter. “Consider your lives. Whenever people listened to one of your sermons they fell asleep. Whenever people rode on his bus they started to pray.”

A standard account of the laugh is that, like the sneeze or the orgasm it is a release of tension. There may not seem to be much reason why anyone who laughed at that joke should have been particularly tense, however. Another is that it takes delight in aggression. [\[11\]](#) Here the victim would be the priest, but victimization seems low on the list of things that might be keys to the joke. A third standard account is that the laugh is triggered by surprise. [\[12\]](#) That seems to work better, at least in this sort of case. Clearly there is an easy expectation that a priest should receive better treatment in an afterlife than a reprobate. That expectation is contradicted by our story. That however is not the key surprise – it just establishes that there is something needing explaining. Indeed, it is really a surprise that functions to set up a tension; we need to preserve an assumption that has surprisingly been controverted in the set-up of the joke. Tension and surprise seem to us not to be incompatible features of the getting of a joke. It has to be noted that a *simple* explanation of this joke would *not* suffice: if St. Peter had explained his decision by

pointing out that the priest had fornicated with gullible parishioners while the bus-driver had conducted inspiring prayer meetings, we would have understood his decision, but would not have had a joke. For one thing, the priest's well-intentioned protest would have been insufficiently motivated. For another, no matter how unexpected the explanation it would not be sufficiently outside the realm of what the listener thought possible to trigger the required surprise.

The surprise in this case is of several kinds: that a priest is less honoured in a religious context than a bus-driver; that a professional man is less honoured in a more global context than a blue-collar worker; that a job conscientiously done is less honoured than one performed while inebriated – the priest's dismay is thus fully explained, indeed it is over-determined. The punch-line, however, still brings a twist. In fact it is a further twist which reestablishes our pre-joke harmony. There was tension after all. It was created by the anomalies in the story itself. And if we insist on looking for surprise, then there are two surprises needed. Whether the key is thought to be tension, aggression or surprise, we are inclined to think that no such simple schematism will give the essential theory of the laugh. Jokes, after all, show considerable variety.

Clerics often tell such anti-clerical jokes about themselves. They do so not only in a desperate attempt to keep a congregation awake, but often also in recognition that their priestly purpose is to induce religious attitudes rather than unconsciousness. We think that there is a third surprise in our example. Perhaps the keenest twist of the joke, is that despite reinforcing stereotypical Roman Catholic mythology and theory (about saints and heaven, e.g.), it is essentially *anti-Catholic*, an inversion of religious values; it asserts that Catholicism cares not how or why a person prays, as long as he prays! Praying to get off a bus alive cannot in good conscience be compared to praying for forgiveness of sins so that one can face the last judgement with an open heart. Praying out of temporary mortal fear rather than out of eternal love also demeans the institution. So by a bit of quasi-theology, an anti-religious association of prayer with the bus-driver rather than with the priest completes the bitter twist that makes the joke a joke.

The joke is not only bitter, however, but also hopeful. One of the highlights of Ted Cohen's paper on jokes is his discussion of the way both teller and laughter reinforce some sense of community, whether a closed one of in-group knowledge or of shared beliefs and feelings, or a general one of common humanity. In our example, besides the shared knowledge of rudimentary eschatology, there is the shared hope that we in our human imperfection may also yet be saved. As Cohen concludes, "Anything which can show us that aspect of ourselves deserves fond and serious attention." [13]

We have gone on at length about that one poor story partly to indicate how much common understanding is presupposed among those who "get the joke", but also to corner the person who does not get it. [We leave aside here the listener who gets it,

all right, but does not think it funny; that is a different sort of problem.] To get the joke, not only must a person know a minimum about priests and bus-drivers, and about rewards in the afterlife, but must also understand that getting people to pray, in this scheme of things, is rewarded, boring them to sleep is not. Moreover, having been told that sermons achieved the latter the listener must also be quick enough to see that dangerous driving achieved the former. Assuming suitable background knowledge, the step likely to be missed is the last. “It was his drunk driving that made them pray”, is probably the needed explanation in that case. That would likely evoke a subdued, “Oh, I get it.” The recognition would come too late and too predictably to produce a laugh, which would be further suppressed by the embarrassment of having had to have the joke explained.

Someone might half-get the joke, and laugh anyway. Should he then say, “Funny that all the people who wanted to pray took the bus instead of going to church, eh?”, we should think that his laughing was at best half-way justified, and that he had not really got the main point of the joke. Of course in such situations it is better to let sleeping dogs lie, and just to change the subject, but one might press on with a modest, “I think it was because he was a *drunk* bus-driver that his passengers resorted to prayer.” Although our victim *might* reply, “Then I don’t see why it’s funny”, which could set off yet another round of explanations, there is a strong case for thinking that there is a right way to read the joke, and quite enough ways to show what *is* the right way, for there to be pretty general agreement about it. This idea, that there is a single point, and only one way of getting it, can, however, be exaggerated. The person who laughs at the discomfiture of the priest and the person who laughs at the luck of the bus driver, both get the joke, and neither need think of the pseudo-theology involved, let alone feel the community of human wit, to be said to have gotten it.

Here it may be appropriate to consider the oddness of human laughter. Wittgenstein offers this observation:

Two people are laughing together, say at a joke. One of them has used certain somewhat unusual words and now they both break out into a sort of bleating. That might appear *very* extraordinary to a visitor coming from quite a different environment. Whereas we find it completely *reasonable*.

(I recently witnessed this scene on a bus and was able to think myself into position of someone to whom this would be unfamiliar. From that point of view it struck me as quite irrational, like the responses of an outlandish *animal*.) [14]

It can strike empirical scientists that way, too. A neuro-embryologist, Robert Provine, has claimed that laughter is not a response to punch lines, but to social bonding cues. It is of course related to primitive tickle reflexes and primate playfulness, but he claims that when the conversations of groups of laughing people were recorded and analyzed, “only around 15 per cent of the sentences that triggered laughter were traditionally humorous.” [15] Clearly people do sometimes

laugh at things that are not funny and do so for social reasons (to be included in the group, because the boss told the joke); similarly people sometimes do not laugh at things that are funny and do so for social reasons (embarrassment, moral objections). Normally, however, we do not laugh at things we find unfunny, as many a would-be comic can testify. To see human laughter as like the responses of an outlandish animal is a bizarre way to try to understand it.

It was our initial purpose to explore the analogy between getting a joke and appreciating an art work. How, some listeners will want to ask, can anything similar to what we have just said about jokes be said about appreciating works of art? Surely there are myriad ways of appreciating an artwork, and no such thing as “the right way”. Getting a joke is a matter of some precision, and did we not end our §I with the claim that art does *not* need to be got exactly right to be appreciated? We have been taking some care to reduce the starkness of this apparent contrast. If we keep in mind our Findlayan starting point, treating the subjective “getting it” as having priority over the objective “getting it right”, the analogy can be drawn even more closely and more fruitfully.

III. Punch-line

Ted Cohen, suggests several similarities between jokes and art. One, which we have mentioned above, derives from their common ability to bring us out of ourselves, to reinforce our shared feelings, our shared humanity, our shared capacity for feelings. Even Findlay’s subjective starting point is a fundamental capacity shared with all other conscious beings—that would include many humans. Exercising this capacity reinforces that common humanity. A second is that some jokes, like ethnic jokes and sequence jokes (lightbulb jokes, “what do you call someone...?” jokes [16]), are importantly members of a genus, and gain force from being seen as instances of a type. (This can be seen in the way that Russell and Art, in the footnote above, are funnier when Bill and Bob have been established. The former exploit the given framework, and change its rules slightly at the same time.) Cohen says: “This seems to me exactly how it is with art forms. The form itself induces particular expectations and forms of attention, and then the individual work moves with or against them. The work cannot get to you unless you can see it in its frame” (Cohen, “Jokes”, 138). [This works in a Findlayan way: the conscious attention has priority, then the framing assumptions, and lastly the details of the work.] Thirdly, as in works of art, “in a very good joke every element...has a point” (*ibid.*). That is, each of its elements can be accounted for in connection with explaining the joke / art work. Jokes with random details are not as good, or not as well told. It is similar with works of art and their explanations. A fourth point in common is that they do not have discursive equivalents—we have to get the effect from the object itself, rather than from an explanation of it. This helps to account for the importance of originality in art and freshness in jokes. It is worth remarking, however, that in both cases the explanation is given in words. Words can be no substitute for a painting, but in the case of the joke both it and the explanation are discursive. The

explanation is a sort of substitute; because it is in words it is like a badly-told joke. That is one reason why it lets you down; it kills the laugh, while the prose explanation of a painting turns you back to the painting. We shall return to the matter of explanations in a moment.

We first want to point to a fifth common feature of the art-appreciator and the joke-getter: one that can be called humility. There is humility required of the joke-hearer: that she awaits with patience being manipulated (wound up and then released), or at least surprised – while also being threatened with “not getting the point”. She must, that is, set aside certain normal preoccupations of the self: some of its task-orientedness, some of its self-confidence, and above all some of its autonomy. The joke-hearer wills herself heteronymous; she will let herself be taken over for a few moments by the story-teller, and will allow him to try to bring her to laughter. This requires, as Findlay pointed out, a state of self-suppression, in which the ego’s practical and theoretical demands are set aside, in which the self, like water, seeks the lowest ground, and awaits with heightened awareness the coming of the revelation. This phenomenon has a great deal in common with what Findlay identifies as aesthetic experience. [It also invites political comment, which we set aside at this time.]

There are, of course, important differences: an obvious one is that, except when being entertained by a stand-up comic, people often take turns telling jokes. This reciprocity alleviates the stigma of heteronomy, without in any way eliminating the necessity of it. Another obvious difference is that the laugh is sudden and relatively brief, while the aesthetic experience can dawn gradually and persist. The physiology is appropriately very different. The laugh shakes the body; aesthetic absorption is a “zestful, purring meditation”. The biggest problem, however, with our claim that the analogy is a close one is the inclination to think that jokes and art differ because explanation ruins a joke and assists with the appreciation of art. This objection, we think, is not entirely justified. It is true that there are no joke critics writing columns for *The Globe*. Cohen, however, argues that this is a function of the simplicity of many jokes. More elaborate ones, with deep sources and the potential to survive retelling, are not always obliterated by analysis. “If a joke *or an art work* can be truly effective only once, then it is smothered by its exegesis. The explanation seems to usurp the one chance the work had. But if the work has a multiple capacity, then exegesis can even be invigorating” (131, our emphasis). [17] One measure of this is that even when a joke is successfully told, discussion about its wit and structure can lead the teller to think more highly of the joke, to tell it better next time and laugh more heartily along with her hearers.

This brings us to our final observation about the analogy between jokes and art. It is a popular view of art that its “multiple capacity” is not just that a good work of art rewards repeated observings, but that it sustains multiple and incompatible but equally justified interpretations. In this, of course, a work of art would be very unlike a joke, which usually forces very clear agreement about what its point is.

The matter of multiple interpretations of a single work is no small topic. We promised to take Wittgenstein seriously in this paper. His discussion of seeing-aspects in Part II.xi of *Philosophical Investigations* offers a preliminary idea. The “duck-rabbit” is a figure that sustains two in some sense incompatible interpretations. *Hamlet*, being much more complex, ought to sustain very many more, goes the standard reading. The duck-rabbit, however, becomes *less*, not more, ambiguous as we add feathers or fur, feet or tail. Similarly, we should expect that the more complex a painting or a play, the more decidable it will be which interpretations are more powerful, explain more features of the work, do so with more plausibility, unity or simplicity, and so on. [18] We need not insist that there is *a best* interpretation, but the richer and more interpretable a work is, the more potential there is for differentiating between better and worse interpretations. Similarly, there are degrees of getting a joke, and one can get it without getting it perfectly. Sometimes people can laugh at different things in a joke without it having to be the case that one of them does not get it. This leaves the analogy with the elaborate joke much closer and richer than at first appeared. There can be ambiguities in both art and humour. Yet both the artist and the teller of a joke must draw the audience into a funnel. Background assumptions must be engaged, agreement in judgements must be assumed, the audience’s attention must be focused or compressed, and ultimately the audience must be led to see matters in a quite specific way in order to get the point.

Those are our proposals about the usefulness of the analogy between jokes and art. Nonetheless, our analysis is incomplete. We used Findlay as a starting point, but then diverged from him. We shall end with Wittgenstein, and some remarks on how he has guided our thinking. Getting to Wittgenstein from Findlay requires some acknowledgment that Findlay thought Wittgenstein a mere empiricist who gathered minutiae but could not see their unity, a man whose concept of family resemblances was not itself a family-resemblance concept but one with an a priori unity of its own—proof that the only sameness that is of interest to philosophers is an essentialist, conceptual sameness. [19] We do not accept those theses of Findlay. We needed him to help locate appreciation in the first place, but we do not stop there.

IV. Explaining the joke

Wittgenstein advises his reader to “[r]eview the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:…Making a joke; telling it—.” [20] Taking his advice has given us some insight into the practice of telling and sharing jokes. First of all, jokes are intentionally made; while something I say may be accidentally funny or strike my audience as comical, it does not seem right to call it a joke unless I intend it in some particular way. I can accidentally *be* a joke to someone, but telling a joke is not something that accidentally happens to me. I mean it. This intention involves certain visible/audible changes in my behaviour; we discussed some of them in §II, above. A well-told joke is a performance, a kind of

ceremony—even if a joke-ceremony sometimes depends on the appearance of a casual straight face (deadpan). We understand certain rules or guidelines for a well-performed joke, even if these guidelines are themselves open, or flexible. These rules are present even when the joke works against them. (“How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? – That’s not funny!” This is a joke that makes fun of the very form of the lightbulb joke. It also implies that feminists are prone to seeing ‘innocent’ jokes as instruments of oppression, so that this joke is an example of the very oppression it tries to make fun of). In the 1960s, Frank Stella sometimes used shaped canvases to contain the restless arcs which were the subject matter of his “Protractor Series” paintings; this exemplifies the sort of work that “moves against its frame”, in this case challenging the expectation of a rectangular canvas. Nor can I tell a joke without the co-operation of my audience. A joke is at least a two-person language game (although one person can, on occasion, play both parts), and both parties are active. When Wayne used Schuster as a straight-man, the audience was the active *third* party. We introduced the humility of the audience in §III. The audience agrees to surrender in a certain way: to be held in the spell of the person telling a joke, and to accept the suspension of disbelief that jokes often require (everything from animals walking into bars, to conversations taking place at the Pearly Gates).

What kind of a language game is joking? It behaves like an information-sharing game, in which the hearer is told something that she did not know before. In other words, there is the expectation of surprise and then fulfilment, just as if I discover something from someone, or am taught it. But a joke-game is not exactly like an information-sharing game. [21] One reason for this is that the humour of the joke depends on shared knowledge. In a sense, the hearer has to be already familiar with all the appropriate elements of the joke to get it properly. This leads to many misunderstandings when jokes are told across cultures, or in unfamiliar contexts. But if all the information is already known, what is shared when a joke is well told? Certainly we experience it as gaining something, or at least as a shift in perception. It is not just the reorganization of knowledge, or the forging of a new (and unusual) connection between two previously unconnected pieces of knowledge. Not every new connection is funny. The way the elements are linked is subject to certain constraints; they have to obey certain rules, and these rules are implicitly acknowledged by those who take on a joke language-game. In our example above, the story creates a tension (the drunk is in a mansion, the priest in a hovel), and then releases it. [22] In fact it is complicity in betraying the information-sharing game that helps make a joke work. There is a shift to a different game that is recognized by both teller and audience, and part of the fun comes from the way it is parasitic on the assumptions of information-sharing, and we are co-conspirators in pretending to play one game when we are really playing another. Within jokes, too, there are often two language-games at work. If heavenly rewards for earthly virtue are discussed in one language game, then cynical discussion of worldly rewards for earthly vices takes place in another; our sample joke switches between them, creating a shift of aspect that takes the listener by surprise and forces an abrupt

change of interpretation. [\[23\]](#)

If a joke succeeds or fails, this success or failure can belong either to the teller or to the hearer or to some other factor. Consider failure: the teller could fail to perform well, by messing up the punch line, by missing an element or including irrelevant ones, or by failing to enact appropriate joking behaviour (appropriate pauses, raised eyebrows, a serious manner, the grin of a punch-line,). Her audience may also fail, by missing the joke (we discussed a case in §II), but there can also be some other factor missing, which does not immediately seem to belong to either party. We want to describe this as a shared horizon; it involves a sense of significance, meaning or the order of how things are in the world that both people have. In other words, to imagine a joke properly told is “to imagine a form of life” (§19). [\[24\]](#) What is necessary to be able to play a joking language-game? In other words, what do people need to share, or what does a language need to have available to it so that it has the resources for joking? Consider the builders in the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. They have only a few words, block, pillar, slab, beam, and at first we are told that their calls, as a kind of order, are conceived as a “complete primitive language”. But it would not take very much tinkering for this language to produce a couple of rudimentary, if adolescent, jokes. [\[25\]](#) One builder might point to a slab and, with a wink, call out “block” to his bewildered assistant, repeatedly. Three Stooges comedies have been designed with less. Or, even more plausibly, a friendly conspiracy might develop between some seasoned builders and ‘the new guy’, so that they tell him that slabs are really beams. Here the joking quality of the communication seems to develop out of a kind of behaviour, and also out of being included or excluded from a group. [\[26\]](#) This phenomenon can lead not only to misunderstanding, but also to the exposure of prejudices and to jokes that are morally or politically offensive. [\[27\]](#) Similar features of a work of art can distract a viewer from appreciating it; she can be dragged into what Findlay identified as the ‘impotence’ of allowing practical or theoretical concerns reoccupy her consciousness. Then she cannot achieve the essential contemplative euphoria; similarly she may not be able to find a sexist joke funny. We believe that there are times when she is right about this, times when the joke is not funny, times when morality trumps aesthetics. But that would require discussing the intersection of major language games—a topic for another time.

A laugh is intensified by its own anticipation; the punch line is both expected and not-expected. Indeed, the hearer expects that it will be unexpected, and takes pleasure in the particular way this expectation of surprise is fulfilled. There is a parallel in art appreciation, perhaps most obviously in the short story, the most single-minded of literary forms. Edgar Allan Poe claimed that a story’s aim is “to create ‘an effect’—by which Poe meant something almost physical, like... a *frisson*. Every word in a story, Poe said, is in the service of this effect.... The reader of a story expects an effect, and expects to be surprised by it, too.” [\[28\]](#) There is both openness and rigidity to this fulfilment, whether in art or joke, which creates a kind of satisfaction itself.

What is this satisfaction? In joking, one possibility is the sheer pleasure of demonstrating a mastery of language, of being able to communicate unexpected meanings to someone else, especially when we project words beyond the context in which we normally use them, stringing them together in pun or double-entendre. There is enjoyment in the mastery of the technique, to use Wittgenstein's phrase (*PI* §199). But there is something about the satisfaction of a joke that is not present in a metaphor, or a secret language, or for that matter in the surprising reversal of fate that constitutes tragedy. The particular patterns of subversion and change that take place in a joke are funny, and our response is laughter.

The surprise or tension-release of the joke involves the recognition of a *change of aspect*. Wittgenstein's exploration of seeing-aspects, and in particular the changing or dawning of an aspect, is important for us. This experience may involve the same kind of stillness and concentration that Findlay describes in aesthetic experience. We experience the dawning of an aspect as something that happens to us, as a change that takes place. Yet when we are asked to explain it, any sort of explanation that is external (e.g., that it is the object, the picture of the duck-rabbit, that changes) seems nonsensically and needlessly mechanical. [29] The drawing, the marks on paper, remains the same; it is the viewer's "take" on it that changes. So it is with the getting of a joke. Not only that, but the surprise of the joke depends on the hearer seeing it as, so to speak, a duck and then a rabbit. A hearer who instantly recognizes the joke as a duck-rabbit (who has heard it before, or who sees the inevitable punch line looming, or who has had it explained) will miss something, as will a hearer who cannot see the rabbit-aspect dawn at all in place of the duck. As the duck-rabbit is "half visual experience, half thought" (II xi, p.197), so the appreciation of a joke is part receptive (indeed passive) aural experience and part thought, or active connecting.

How do we explain why the dawnings of some aspects are funny and others are not (just as some are aesthetic and some not)? Perhaps it is linked to the particular rules or grammar of a joking language game, or perhaps it is the particular balance of surprise and expectation. But also, just as we all know what it is to kill a good joke, we should beware of Wittgenstein's ominous comment that "here we are in enormous danger of wanting to make fine distinctions" (II xi, p. 200).

Let us take one more risk. Wittgenstein emphasizes the role of giving reasons in thinking about art. As G. E. Moore reports, he claimed that reasons in aesthetics are "of the nature of further descriptions", and that what they do is "to draw your attention to a thing", to "place things side by side". [30] In explaining this, Wittgenstein used the analogy of a discussion in a court of law, where the presentation of relevant cases and precedents can lead the judge to a new conclusion. In exploring our analogy we have employed this method ourselves. This sort of setting things side by side, when it is adequately done, can bring a viewer to a greater appreciation of a work of art. It can similarly bring a deeper

appreciation of a joke. But can it bring a laugh? In a sense it is the key to it. When cases are lined up similarity for similarity, and then shown to be total contraries, we laugh—for logic had us in its grasp, and suddenly set us free. Laughter rejoices in its own reasoning power, and its transcendence of it.

We have used Wittgensteinian accounts of language games, seeing aspects and giving reasons to strengthen our account of the analogy between getting jokes and appreciating art. It is for many good reasons that the analogy is close enough to be illuminating. Both activities are touchstones of worthiness in human lives. At their best they invite us to enjoy our common capacity for creating and for making meaning, and to find in the endeavour shared abilities and values. [\[31\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited by Alice Ambrose, ed., *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge 1932-35*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 39.

[\[2\]](#) David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 52.

[\[3\]](#) That he was not joking is shown by *Philosophical Investigations* §111, where he writes: “Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.)”

[\[4\]](#) Ted Cohen, “Jokes”, in *Pleasure, Preference and Value: studies in philosophical aesthetics*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 121 n2.

It should be said that Cohen has since published a book on the subject: *Jokes: philosophical thoughts on joking matters* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999). In it he reiterates that “[t]he striking similarities between jokes, figures of speech, and works of art are worth attention, and wonder”, but adds “I will pass them over in this book” (p. 4).

The matter of why figures of speech belong on this list, and why metaphor is fundamental to thinking (compare, e.g., seeing a proof in logic), is insightfully explored by Jan Zwicky in *Wisdom and Metaphor* (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2003).

[\[5\]](#) J. N. Findlay, “The Perspicuous and the Poignant: Two Aesthetic Fundamentals”, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (1967), reprinted in *Aesthetics*, ed. Harold Osborne, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 89-105.

[\[6\]](#) See for instance the discussion of cognitive and expressive theories in Chapter 6 of Cynthia Freeland’s lively introductory text, *But is it art?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

[\[7\]](#) Findlay, *op. cit.*, 89.

[\[8\]](#) The quotation is from the obituary by Arthur Danto, in *The Guardian*, 4 November 2003. Richard Wollheim (1923-2003) was especially noted for developing the concept of “seeing in”, a primitive human ability to see an object in painted marks (*Art and its Objects*, 1968), and for coining the term “minimalism” (“Minimal Art”, 1965).

[\[9\]](#) SB is recalling here an experience from his graduate student days, a concert at the Edinburgh Festival.

[\[10\]](#) Holding that aesthetic consciousness is just consciousness in its purest form, and that

consciousness is an essential unity, Findlay admits: “I do not doubt that cats..., and other less exuberant animals may at times fall into a zestful, purring meditation which I should not hesitate to call ‘aesthetic’.” (*op. cit.*, 95.)

[11] Steven Pinker promotes Arthur Koestler’s version of this theory, that humour is a kind of aggression, in *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton and Company, 1997), pp. 545-54. See also the chapter on the aesthetics of humour in Robert M. Martin’s *There are Two Errors in The Title of This Book* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002). For an important development of this theory, see J. Harvey, “Humor as social act: Ethical issues”, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 29: 1995, pp. 19-30.

[12] We are grateful to Jordan Burks for reminding us of John Morreall’s work, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983) which presents these three theories as emphasizing *relief*, *superiority* and *incongruity*.

[13] Cohen, *op. cit.*, 136. I have taken the sentence a little out of context, but I think that the point it makes here is still appropriate. It is a point germane to an important thesis of Cohen’s, *viz.*, that jokes serve to establish intimacy and to sustain community. (See especially *Jokes*, ch. 6.)

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 78e.

[15] Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, reported by Steven Johnson in *Discover*, April 2003, p. 66. Provine cites, “I’ll see you guys later./ Put those cigarettes away.../ We can handle this.” as unfunny. By this standard, however, most of the punch-lines in an Eddie Izzard routine would look unfunny, too. “You had to be there”, is the phrase we often use to indicate that of course the lines are unfunny out of context, and that it can be devilishly difficult to recapture the humour.

[16] The latter are sometimes called ‘Thalidomide jokes’, though the butt of these jokes is a *caricature*, and really has nothing to do with the cruelty of that drug; the jokes are about common names. E.g.: What do you call a guy with no arms or legs lying on a doorstep? Matt. In your mailbox? Bill. Fallen off a ship? Bob. Thrown off a ship? Skip. Long buried? Pete. Under a pile of leaves? Russell. Hanging on a wall? Art. But that brings us back to our subject.

[17] An example (attributed by Cohen to Peter Kivy): A musician was performing a solo recital in Israel. When he ended the last selection, a thunderous response came from audience, including many cries of ‘Play it again.’ He stepped forward, bowed, and said, ‘What a wonderfully moving response. Of course I shall be delighted to play it again.’ And he did. At the end, again there was a roar from the audience, and again many cries of ‘Play it again.’ This time the soloist came forward smiling and said, ‘Thank you. I have never been so touched in all my concert career. I should love to play it again, but there is no time, for I must perform tonight in Tel Aviv. So, thank you from the bottom of my heart – and farewell.’ Immediately a voice was heard from the back of the hall saying, ‘You will stay here and play it again until you get it right.’

This story works well enough with a general audience, but even better with an audience that knows “that on certain [Jewish religious] occasions the appropriate portion of the Hebrew Bible [must] be read out, that those present make known any errors they detect in the reading, and that the reader...then go back and read out the text correctly” (“Jokes”, 126).

[18] Anthony Savile made this case in careful detail, in “The Place of Intention in the Concept of Art”, Harold Osborne, ed., *Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 158-176.

[19] Findlay, *op. cit.*, 93.

[20] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

[21] “Don’t forget that even though a poem is framed in the language of information, it is not employed in the language-game of information.” Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. I, §888. This apt remark was brought to our attention by Jan Zwicky, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[22] This is apparent if we think about how small children try to imitate jokes, and the sweetness of the ways in which they fail. Often it will be simply by adding a random addition to the question, or by making something of their own up entirely, and then squealing with laughter.

We also play pre-linguistic joking games with infants—visual gags, tickling games, and so on. These extend to some of the lower animals, too. Sue Sherwin insists, no doubt rightly, that her dog, Forbes, has a sense of humour, but we doubt that he can *tell* a joke.

[23] We are grateful to Liam Dempsey for calling our attention to comic situations of this sort. In one sort of example a shocked eavesdropper (Mr. Bean, perhaps) overhears an innocent conversation about vegetables but thinks it is about sex.

[24] Cohen calls this “an implicit acknowledgement of a shared background, a background of awareness that you both are already in possession of and bring to the joke” (*Jokes*, 28).

[25] Wittgenstein suggests as much at §42: “One could imagine this as a sort of joke between them.”

[26] Ted Cohen develops a taxonomy of “conditional” jokes, ones which depend on shared background, knowledge or feelings, or on group membership. Some are more “hermetic” than others. (“Jokes”, 131ff.), but Cohen admits in *Jokes* that all jokes are at least minimally conditional (p. 12).

[27] Steven Burns discusses jokes that are “just not funny” in “Reason, Love and Laughter”, *Dialogue* 28, 1989, 499-507.

[28] We are quoting from Louis Menand, writing about John Updike. “True Story: the art of short fiction”, *The New Yorker*, December 1, 2003, pp. 104-5.

[29] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II xi, pp. 194 ff.

[30] G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33”, in *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 315.

[31] Previous incarnations of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Aesthetics (Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 2003), at the annual meeting of the Atlantic Region Philosophical Association (Université de Moncton, New Brunswick, October 2003), and at the Dalhousie University Philosophy Seminar (November 2003). We are grateful to those audiences for their many good jokes and suggested improvements.



← [Previous article /](#)
[Article précédent](#)

[Top / Début](#)

[Next article /](#)
→ [Article suivant](#)

[Table of content / Table des
matières](#)