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The Sudden, the Sudded, and the Sidesplitting

"Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift," says John Morreall, hoping thereby to have formulated a "new" and fully general theory of laughter.¹ And indeed Morreall's theory is new in the sense that it focuses on common features of laughter that the traditional superiority, incongruity, and relief theories seem merely to have cast in supporting roles. And Morreall's theory is general in that it places no restriction on what kind of situation (e.g. hearing a joke, being tickled) might occasion laughter, other than that the laughter be psychogenic. The "pleasant feeling" claimed by Morreall's theory is supposed to be that which laughter is commonly taken to be an expression of ("amusement" might be a good word for it in many contexts); the term "shift" is an abbreviation for "sudden change". Previously I have argued that laughter requires neither a pleasant nor a sudden change.² Of the two alleged requirements, I believe that suddenness is the more central to an aesthetic theory of humor in that it would impose limitations on the form an object of humor can take. In what follows I will restate and amplify the case against suddenness.

Right off the bat, one might think of tickling as a possible counter to the suddenness claim. For those people who actually enjoy being tickled and are brought to laughter thereby, does that not often involve a gradual buildup or suffusion of pleasant feeling, to the point at which laughter erupts? This example, however, misses the mark in that it exploits an unintended ambiguity in Morreall's formulation. Morreall wants to be read as saying that it is the psychological change that we find pleasant that has to be sudden, not our coming to find that sudden change pleasant. (p. 689)³

¹ "A New Theory of Laughter", *Philosophical Studies* 42 (1982) 243-254; reprinted with minor changes in John Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

² Karl Pfeifer, "Laughing Matters", *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 22 (1983), 695-697; "More on Morreall on Laughter", *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 26 (1987), 695-697; "Laughter and Pleasure", *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 7 (1994), 157-172.

³ John Morreall, "Laughter, Suddenness, and Pleasure", *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 23 (1984), 689-694. All parenthetical page references are to this article.

However, reading the adjective "pleasant" in Morreall's theory proleptically as now suggested raises certain questions which must be addressed if confusion is to be avoided. In particular, we must determine such things as what is meant by "coming to find that psychological change pleasant" (or perhaps better: what is meant by "coming to find that psychological change pleasant") and what it is exactly that is found to be pleasant here.

Suppose after having eaten garlic I take a lick of mango ice cream, the lick being coincident with a sudden unpleasant taste. However I continue licking, and as the garlic residue in my mouth is washed away, I gradually come to find the mango ice cream to have its much touted pleasant taste. What has happened here?

One way of characterizing the situation is to read "finding x to be P" as having the implicature that x was P all along but one didn't cotton to its being P. The pleasant taste was in a sense there to be tasted but the taste channels happened to be sudded⁴ with garlic. I have now found the taste that it had and still has pleasant, though only now does it taste that way to me. In this account the emphasis is on the tasted rather than the taster.

In another way of characterizing the situation we focus instead on the taster. Evidently we do not want to say that the initial "taste shift"--the very one--was later found to be pleasant. Nor must we say that the "shiftiness" of that shift was necessary for there to be a later experience of finding something pleasant. What is appropriately said here is that a later sensory input of similar type (getting mango ice cream on one's taste buds) caused the later experience of pleasantness, with a little help from altered (i.e. sudd-free) standing conditions.

Are psychological shifts like the taste of mango ice cream or like the tasting of mango ice cream? Yes and yes. As an analog of the former we might think of an agent's cognitive shift (e.g. understanding a pun) as objectively pleasant or amusing in some sense, even if the agent is not now pleased or amused because of a present bad mood which suds the processes which would have led to his finding the shift pleasant or the pun amusing. As for an analog of the latter, my remarks (at least so far) about tasting mango ice cream appear to be in harmony with Morreall's remarks on tickling, if we read "coming to find pleasant" as applying to a different token of the same type of psychological shift:

In the case of an infant being tickled, for example, I said that the sudden change is a change in sensory input--stimulation on the

⁴ Sudd", from the Arabic word for "obstruction", was the term used for floating vegetable matter that interfered with navigation on the White Nile

baby's skin and underlying tissues alternating with no stimulation. ... [T]ickling may at first not be pleasant because the infant does not recognize the tickler. But then as recognition occurs, the baby can come to find the sudden change of stimulation alternating with no stimulation pleasant. This change from not enjoying the shift in stimulation to enjoying it may be gradual, but that is compatible with my theory, in which it is the change in stimulation itself that is sudden. (pp.689-690)

So where's the disagreement between Morreall and myself? For starters, we might note that in the mango ice cream tasting case, the later pleasantness does not require repeated sudden shifts such as licking alternated with non-licking; I need not have lifted my tongue from the cone the entire time. Moreover those things that happen later--the experience of pleasantness and perhaps some further reaction to this experience such as a smack of the lips or a low moan of "mmm"--may also be either sudden or gradual, for cause and effect need not comport with one another in these respects. Likewise for tickling and ensuing pleasant feelings and laughter, one would have thought; sudden alternating changes in stimulation are but one means to success in tickling. Morreall however explicitly denies this:

... consider the infant's reaction if we were to make the alternating stimulation and lack of stimulation gradual instead of sudden. Suppose we gently placed our fingers on the baby's skin and gradually increased and then decreased the pressure. Even if the baby found the gradual change of psychological state produced by such stimulation pleasant, it would not cause laughter. And the same is true in adults--a slow massage will not produce the laughter that tickling does.(p. 690)

Maybe Morreall should consider changing his partner or his technique. After all, there are slow massages and there are slow massages. Admittedly there are some people who can just take in their stride and enjoy those shivery sensations produced by slow, gentle, continuous caressing, without ever betraying gasps or moans, never mind sidesplitting convulsions of laughter; for such people suddenness may be hardwired. But there are also people just too ticklish to play along with that sort of foreplay, even when they are trying hard to cooperate. Merely resting one's hand on the right part of such a person's body too long can in fact cause laughter. (In my experience, the side of the torso in the vicinity of the armpit often works just fine.) Still others may be able to withstand a slow,

gentle, continuous caress for a little while before laughter is finally produced. In such a case it would not be alternating stimulation and lack of stimulation but an unbroken continuation of stimulation which brings about the laughter. Laughing, like moaning, does not require suddenness, given the right predispositions.

What I hope to have conveyed by the foregoing is that the states underlying laughter may and often do involve a gradual progress to a threshold--either of intensity or of duration--at which laughter occurs. The laughter itself may be sudden, but the underlying psychological states it expresses continuous.⁵

It should be noted that this does not rule out the possibility that there may have to be some underlying sudden physiological changes in order to bring on laughter. For all I know, an account of what happens at threshold in the cases I have described may require that certain humors be ejaculated instead of oozed, that nervous impulses be regulated by biological on/off switches rather than rheostats, or the like. Nor would this preclude the possibility of the reduction of psychological states to physiological states. If such a reduction is valid, then it would simply mean that the suddenness or gradualness of the reduced states can be systematically accounted for in terms of properties of the reducing states without these different levels of explanation having to be congruent in respect of what they mark off as sudden or gradual.

Perhaps a few words about the notion of suddenness itself are in order at this point. These remarks of Morreall's are suggestive as to how he views suddenness:

This need for suddenness in tickling also explains why we cannot tickle ourselves. As Aristotle said, the laugh of tickling comes from "a sort of surprise and deception" which is not possible when one's own fingers are doing the poking (*P r o b l e m s*, 35, 6).⁶ My general claim about suddenness in laughter is that when we laugh we are reacting to a change of psychological state which happens too fast for us to adjust smoothly to it. If we make the change gradual instead of sudden, so that it is smoothly assimilated into our

⁵ The fact that the psychological changes causally mediating between a laughter-inducing stimulus and its overt response may be either gradual or sudden could also indicate the existence of more than one psychological mechanism, rather than of only one mechanism which may get sudded to various degrees. Thus a bad mood might act as a switch which diverts us to a slow siding. (Should we call this "virtual sudding"?)

⁶ Aristotle and Morreall are wrong. Try lightly stroking the roof of your mouth just behind the front teeth with your fingertip.

experience, then we will no longer be caused to laugh, at least by that psychological change. (p. 690)

Two distinct notions can be discerned here: that of something happening quickly or (perhaps better) abruptly and that of something happening unexpectedly or being surprising. These are independent and ought not to be conflated. Describing a change of psychological state as happening too fast for one to adjust to begs a point that is at issue here. It presupposes that the state is one that the agent in question could suitably adjust to in the first place. There are important individual differences here and for some no amount of exclusion of surprise and deception will make the difference for them. (Some of us just can't hit a baseball even if we can see exactly where it's going and in plenty of time.) Also, it should be clear that what can be surprising or unexpected about the cause of a psychological change (or perhaps even of the change itself) is that it is gradual rather than sudden. (And, I would add, one can be laughing before one cognizes this.)

Thus far my attack on Morreall's suddenness requirement hasn't mentioned humor, but I think there is a similar case to be made for laughter occasioned by humor. Is it not a commonplace that jokes are not always fully appreciated immediately, that they may take time to take? Cannot one go through a gradual progression from unamused, to mildly amused, to immensely amused? Morreall rejects this suggestion:

The most plausible way to interpret this purported counterexample, perhaps, is this: we listen to a joke, we "get" the punch line, just as those who laugh at the joke do, but it does not amuse us; then we go through a gradual progression of states, from mild to strong amusement. If this is what Pfeifer has in mind, then our disagreement is empirical, for I deny that there are such cases. I deny that someone can understand a joke, not find it funny, and then without noticing some new feature of the joke (a second meaning for a word, a hidden reason why the characters in the story behave as they do, etc.), gradually change to being very amused by it.

Being amused by a joke, I submit, involves a sudden psychological change--our thinking is proceeding along one track and then at the punch line is suddenly switched to another....

[C]an people not be in a grouchy mood, say, when they hear a joke, get the joke but not be amused by it? (because at that moment they are not receptive to enjoying a n y t h i n g) and yet then gradually

come to laugh at the joke as their mood improves?

In fact this does not happen, and the reason, I think is that getting a particular joke, unlike being tickled, occurs just once. ... If we are not amused by a joke ... because we are in a bad mood and so do not enjoy the cognitive shift we experience at the punch line, we do not get a second chance to be amused by that joke, because once we know the joke, we will not experience that shift again. (pp. 690 - 691)

To be sure, the issue between Morreall and myself is in part empirical. But it is also metaphysical. Morreall for example wishes to conclude what cannot be from what is not and is in effect arguing that laughter, qua human psychological response, has certain relational properties essentially. I would claim that even if there were de facto no cases of the sort in question there still could be, and in something stronger than the sense of mere logical possibility. As well as there being no incoherence in the example as imagined, there are good grounds for believing that a theory of laughter embedded in some broader evolutionary account of our "natures" will show us how we came to be the sorts of laughers that we are rather than the sorts of laughers we nearly were (and may yet may become) had selective pressures been slightly different. But it is not necessary to pursue this in the present context for surely there are plenty of real examples too. What Morreall denies can happen has in fact happened to me often enough in my own life, and I doubt very much that I am alone in this. Let me present some personal anecdotal evidence.

The commercial syndication of television programming relies on the fact that many people, even those with reasonably good memories, can get pleasure out of viewing something they have viewed before, and remember having viewed before, sometimes several times before. I myself have favorite episodes of certain sitcoms that I enjoy watching whenever they are rerun. The point of interest here is that, having seen many episodes several times, I remember many of the jokes and expectantly wait for the familiar punch line and still laugh. Moreover, the reason for laughing remains the same: an amused appreciation of the incongruity and wit. These features might have struck me suddenly the first time around, but surely not thereafter. Morreall would insist that I must have noticed some new feature of the joke, but that can't be. Many of the jokes I repeatedly enjoy are just one-liners or puns, and hence too simple for there to be new features to discover.⁷

⁷ There is in fact a species of joke, the "standing joke" (a.k.a. "running gag") which

From time to time, I have had the experience of finding myself chuckling, in bed, in the middle of the night, at a joke that had elicited only a feeble smile from me when I first heard it earlier in the day. Again, there was no deeper understanding of the joke on my part, no new feature discovered (again, some of these jokes were rather simple). The first time around, it just didn't take, even though I did get the joke. There have also been occasions when I was made to laugh in spite of myself. I was peevish, determined to be miserable, and then made to laugh despite my mood--not suddenly, but in step with the retreating mood. There was a delayed reaction; the joke had to dispel the mood or suffuse it with amusement before laughter began to take place. Morreall of course denies the empirical possibility of this (in the last quotation above), but inasmuch as the sitcom-rerun example makes it evident that one can later be made to laugh by an erstwhile-gotten (and not yet forgotten) joke, his reasoning ("getting a particular joke occurs just once") is not compelling.

Were he not distracted by his particular empirical views, Morreall could perhaps reply that my last example is not incompatible with his theory after all; that I might think it is just shows that I myself have been suckered by the ambiguity noted at the beginning of this essay. The pleasant feeling or amusement can come upon one gradually (even if it takes all day, as in the chuckling-in-bed example)⁸, whereas the cognitive act of getting the joke (e.g. apprehending an incongruity) has to be sudden. This, however, would be plausible only for a sense of "sudden" that would make a l l cognitive acts of understanding and the like sudden; I take it that the issue here is not over something like whether "understanding" is a verb of achievement rather than performance.⁹ Some mental acts of this kind are, in the vernacular, sudden and some are not.

Morreall ventures another interpretation of the commonplace notions --that jokes are not always fully appreciated immediately, that they may take time to take, that one go through a gradual progression from unamused, to mildly amused, to immensely amused--with which we began this thread on humor-occasioned laughter:

...we could say that the person is not amused on first hearing the joke because he or she does not get it, does not notice its funny-making property or properties; but then as this property or properties are noticed, the person is amused. If this is what Pfeifer

depends on repetition and expectation thereof for its effect.

⁸ Maybe that would be carrying a joke too far....

⁹ On this distinction, see Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Penguin University Books, 1973), esp. chap. 5, sec.5.

has in mind, I agree with him that it may take a while for a person to see the funny-making property(-ties) of a joke, and so experience the psychological shift I have discussed....But I do insist that in order for any of these acts of noticing to amuse the person, they must occur suddenly when they do occur. It may take a while for the point of a joke to strike us, but when it does, it must strike us, and not come over us gradually. (p. 692)

Suddenness then may take the form of either sudden "bits-and-pieces" or suddenly "everything-all-at-once", depending on the particular case. However, while this distinction may help to explain why some examples are not to the point, I still maintain that it does not cover all the possible cases. In particular the chuckling-in-bed and bad-mood examples presented above do not involve piecemeal apprehension of a joke's funny-making properties in tandem with gradually increasing amusement. Another case in the same vein is that of people who become so amused by their own joke as they are telling it that they can't manage to finish it properly.

Morreall emphasizes the word "strike" in the passage just quoted, and indeed, as he points out in a preceding passage, our terminology for talking about jokes has suddenness built into it: punch lines hit us, knock us out, etc. I would suggest however that this is a feature which merely happens to attend a lot of humor and which for various reasons we tend to highlight. Being suddenly taken in or surprised is a mode of humor appreciation that we prize highly and are even willing to pay good money for. Yet this may not be entirely for its efficacy in making us laugh and affording us the pleasure of laughter. It may also be because of our appreciation of the humorist's skills, the inertia of our cultural traditions, or the hardiness of certain memories, to mention a few possibilities.

In any case, we should be wary of drawing our metaphysics from the surface of our speech. Jokes, after all, don't literally strike us and even things that do strike us literally may not strike us suddenly. Besides, for many figurative senses of "strike" akin to those used in talking about jokes, the notion of suddenness wouldn't even make sense. For example the locution "How does it strike you?" may just mean "What is your opinion of it?"; similarly, "He was struck by her beauty" can just mean that her beauty impressed him strongly. Here we might say that we are drawing our figures from effects rather than causes. One is struck because (metaphorically) one is subjected to an effect (leaving--pun intended--an impression) like (though nowhere near just like) the effect of a literal strike. If jokes strike us in these senses--and why wouldn't they?--suddenness is not "built in". Sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not.

Morreall is just trading too heavily on the personal associations he has for the joke terminology here. Joke terminology of this kind is vague, multiply figurative, and potentially misleading, the labyrinthine paths of family resemblance tending to lead the best of associations astray.

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Fiktive Gegenstände als abstrakte Individuen

Gibt es fiktive Gegenstände und wenn ja, welche Art von Gegenständen sind sie?

Ich möchte hier folgende Auffassung über fiktive Gegenstände verteidigen:

Fiktive Gegenstände *existieren*. Sie sind von Autoren kreierte und daher aktuelle und kontingente Gegenstände. Sie sind *abstrakte Individuen* (abstrakt im Sinne von nicht materiell), auf einer Ebene mit Geschichten, Symphonien und anderen Artefakten, die zwar zeitliches, aber nicht raum-zeitliches Sein haben.

Warum gibt es überhaupt einen Streit um den ontologischen Status fiktiver Gegenstände?

Der Grund dafür ist, daß die Annahme fiktiver Gegenstände eine Reihe von Problemen aufwirft:

1. Wenn fiktive Gegenstände nicht existieren, wie kann es dann überhaupt wahre Sätze über fiktive Gegenstände geben?
2. Viele unserer Überzeugungen fiktive Gegenstände betreffend widersprechen direkt oder indirekt dem, was wir über die Realität glauben.
3. Interne Probleme: In diese Gruppe gehören Fragen betreffend Identität und Individuierung, das Problem realer Gegenstände in Fiktionen und das Problem der Unvollständigkeit fiktiver Gegenstände.

1. Der Ausgangspunkt sind Sätze über fiktive Gegenstände, d. h. Sätze, in denen fiktiven Gegenständen Eigenschaften zugesprochen werden. Allem Anschein nach gibt es solche Sätze, und viele von ihnen halten wir für wahr.

Z. B.:

- (1) Der Greif ist eine Figur aus der griechischen Mythologie. Er hat die Beine und den Kopf eines Adlers und den Rumpf eines Löwen.
- (2) Sherlock Holmes, der berühmteste Detektiv in der Geschichte des Kriminalromans, ist eine Schöpfung von Arthur Conan Doyle.

Ich mache hier drei Voraussetzungen:

- a. Ich nehme die Sätze über fiktive Gegenstände als das, was sie zu sein scheinen, nämlich Sätze *über fiktive Gegenstände*. D. h.: Ich versuche nicht, sie zu paraphrasieren in Sätze über Autoren, Bücher oder Texte.
- b. Ich nehme an, daß manche Sätze über fiktive Gegenstände wahr sind.
- c. Ich setze voraus, daß ein Satz der Form 'x ist F.' (wobei für x ein singulärer Term und für F ein allgemeiner Term einzusetzen ist) nicht wahr sein kann,