

A Phenomenological Sketch

Humor

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Everyone seems to know what humor is, and everyone claims to have a good sense of it. But the enormous range of things referred to by the word makes it especially difficult to discover an essence common to all its varieties, and we are tempted to take "Wittgenstein's escape" and appeal to mere family resemblances. However, it is clear to me that games do have a common essence in the intentionality of play, and I believe humor has its essences as well.

The approach I will take is to begin, rather than end, with a technical description (or "definition") of humor and go on to test that description by examining key variations. I will need, however, to preface the analysis with a very brief discussion of consciousness and emotion generally as I have come to understand them.

Consciousness (being-in-the-world) is founded on desire, specifically, the desire to maintain and enhance the organism, which desire Goldstein called actualization. It is this desire that makes the organism – which would otherwise be indistinguishable from its non-conscious surroundings – take a perspective on its surroundings and thereby differentiate itself from those surroundings. The organism may then interact with its surroundings, whereas it otherwise could only react.

The manner in which the organism's interaction with its surroundings satisfies, fails to satisfy, or defeats its desire to maintain and enhance itself constitutes its emotions. Although one may choose to view emotions as feedback concerning the organism's success or failure, it is more accurate to see them as the organism's "tone of existence" and the very carrier of consciousness itself. As long as we are conscious, there is a feeling tone, and as long as there is a feeling tone, we are conscious.

In organisms that make considerable use of learning to aid in their maintenance and enhancement, the acts of learning and use of prior learning become the focal points of emotion. When our understanding of the world (and ourselves) is shown to be deficient in some way, we experience distress, ranging from minor irritations to frustration to fear to outright terror. When our understanding is improved in such a way that we can now deal with this previously frightening situation, or when the situation is otherwise changed, removed, or avoided, we feel delight, ranging from modest relief to great joy.

With this background, we can see that humor is a form of delight somewhere between relief and joy, with physical manifestations somewhere between the sigh of relief and the tears of joy. We can start with a tentative definition: Humor is the sudden awareness of an alternative construction of a distressful situation which dissipates (to some degree) that distress. Our next step is to look at the phenomena of humor more closely to see whether this definition can stand, needs to be altered, or is fundamentally unacceptable.

Children's humor seems to fit the definition quite well if we understand "alternative construction" to include dissipation of distress not under the control of the child itself, i.e., provided by another. The archetype for children's humor (and, I would argue, of all humor) is "peek-a-boo." First the infant is uncertain, slightly frightened; then the fear is shown to be illusory. Humor is the discovery of safety within fear, just like laughter, humor's physical counterpoint, is relaxation within stress.

If laughter is relatively easy to explain, smiles are more difficult. The smile is certainly not "showing teeth," as some early theorists suggested. If you look at animals doing so, or if you do so yourself, you can see the difference clearly. In its fullest, least inhibited form, i.e. in infants, the smile does involve opening the mouth, but it is to breathe, after having suspended breathing for a moment or two before. This resumption of breathing is related to the sigh of relief and, of course, to the strange spasmodic breathing of the laugh, and it comes only after the "safety" has been revealed.

The most characteristic aspect of the smile is the upturned lips, or rather, if you look closely, the twinkling of the eyes and "popping" of cheeks. The smile is the opposite of the fearful face, just like the sigh of relief is the opposite of the shallow or still breathing of fear. Perhaps the smile is an "over-release" of the fear-face, a reversal of certain muscle tensions past relaxation. (Please notice that fear is not the same, physically or mentally, as anger, i.e., fight and flight, whatever their commonalities in the sympathetic nervous system, are quite distinguishable!) A reasonable hypothesis is that the smile is a sign-stimulus communicating relief from fear or discomfort.

Young children seem especially fond of simple incongruity viewed in safety: Expectations are violated, yet something in the scenario tells the child that the violation need not be feared, e.g. the presence of a parent, distance, the fact that the violation is on television or only in a story, i.e. is not "real," etc. Later, we see more so-called "aggressive" humor, which is not based on aggression at all,

but rather, like other humor, on relief from fear: A very young child may cry when another child falls; an older child has learned to more clearly differentiate himself from others and will laugh at another's fall – not out of malice, but out of a relief that it was, in fact, not himself who fell.

The idea that much humor is aggressive in a truly malicious sense comes from the fact that the smile and the laugh may also be generated voluntarily or become associated with things other than humor. Most people have little difficulty differentiating the smirk from the smile or the bark from the laugh. Likewise, we can, without too much practice, differentiate the nervous laugh and the social laugh from a genuine one, and so on. That some humor hurts some people, and that, in fact, there may be at least a malicious component to some humor is, of course, undeniable. Nevertheless, such humor is humor to those people in whom some degree of fear is elicited and then relieved. In addition, such humor may contain something more universally funny.

Note that the nervous smile and laugh reflect a desired or hoped-for resolution, so we may smile when someone gives us bad news, or laugh when we are in difficulty. The fact that we are capable of imagining ourselves out of the situation we are in may be a component of a lot more than just nervous laughter.

To return to children's humor, in older children, many jokes are made at the expense of the adult world. At a certain age, demands are made on the child to live up to the standards of the adult world. This can be quite frustrating and, especially when punishments are involved, quite frightening. Even without punishment, adult standards are often presented as an ideal to which the child must aspire, and the child, by adults or by himself, is shown to be lacking. Fear of unworthiness – i.e. inferiority – becomes a central theme for children, and anything that relieves that fear in a sudden, perspective-changing way is found humorous. When adults make mistakes, even simple ones such as mistakes in speech or forgetting a name, the child's tension are, for a while, relieved.

Again, this is not to say that humor is basically a reflection of power, mastery, or status-demonstration. These things tend to be accompanied by the same kinds of smirks and barks that characterize aggressive "humor," and, in fact, are just variations on that theme. As I pointed out above, hostile laughter is a gesture of superiority which says "you are laughable." That it isn't really so funny is revealed by the fact that, when we say something is "ridiculous," we seldom laugh! Nevertheless, some genuine humor may contain "power" components, and whoever finds status a fearful issue will find such humor amusing.

We also find, in later childhood, the emergence of the "jokester" or comedian. One way to discover safety within a fearful situation is to have someone else attack that situation, especially if that someone has voluntarily taken on the role, accepts the dangers associated with it, finds the laughter of others rewarding, or in other ways manages to circumnavigate the consequences of his actions. Historically, of course, the clown, because he is not "taken seriously," is permitted to attack the powers that be, and others are permitted to laugh as long as they maintain the pretense that they laugh at the clown, not at the butts of his humor. It is generally safer to be in the audience.

Adult humor is a little more difficult to understand. It is clear that the intensity of enjoyment usually greatly exceeds the intensity of the relief-from-confusion intrinsic to the humorous event itself. The little bit of incongruity within a joke, for example, is hardly enough to be responsible for the laughter that follows; yet there are rarely the clear examples of fearfulness we find in children. The obvious response to this dilemma is to seek a source of tension within the adult, a source that may be less-than-fully-available to consciousness.

Edmund Bergler, building on Freud's work, said "the joke – every joke – is on the superego." His theory of humor makes heavy use of Freudian preconceptions, which we must bracket, but the basic idea is born out by experience: We are compelled by our upbringing and the culture that upbringing reflects to behave ourselves, to live by the rules, to aspire to certain ideals, to put away childish things, to deny certain needs, etc. These things provide a social order that supplements the natural order (which may be very disorderly to say the least!). When these rules are violated, by ourselves or others, we feel anxiety and guilt. Humor violates these rules, then immediately relieves us of our distress at those violations by presenting an alternative construction of the violation.

We desire an orderly world – i.e. one we are capable of comprehending and anticipating. We are, however, constantly aware of the limits of our comprehension, and many of us live in a rather constant, if modest, state of anxiety, that is, of expecting the unexpected. Humor is a major part of an understanding and acceptance of these facts: I desire order; I will never have it in any complete form; anxiety is a part of life. Then add the fact that the surprises are seldom as great as our anxiety about them!

Another way of looking at it is to see humor as a short, quick version of phenomena like trust and optimism, other things that the humorless call foolish. Note that word, foolish: In the archetypal humor situation – peek-a-boo – mom fools us; and the fool is the person who walks into danger (where wise men fear to tread) with a smile on his face. This also brings to mind the use of humorous stories in mystical traditions such as Zen and Sufiism: One might say that the goal of these traditions is to turn the adherent into a fool – God's fool, perhaps, but a fool nonetheless. The same may be said for certain forms of therapy. Such "deep" humor seems to involve the stripping away of layers of conditioning (conditions of worth? the social unconscious? Maya?) so that our lives may be guided by more profound forces (morality? reason? actualization? the Tao?).

It is worthwhile to try to distinguish "higher" from "lower" forms of humor. Lower forms are based on relief of distress without adaptation, by means of some kind of avoidance or other external change. Someone else intervenes and shows us that the object of fear is safe, as in peek-a-boo, or we laugh at the stranger's display of weakness, or we observe the object of fear attacked in safety, by a comedian or in a comic strip or in some way not likely to lead to retribution. At the "peek-a-boo" level it is quite passive; at other levels it shares some qualities with anger. Anger is a response to fear that musters our energies and directs them toward changing the world to fit our expectations of it (thus "correcting" our "misunderstanding"). It is active and may be the source of great positive change. It may also serve as a conservative function in that it protects the "status quo" of our beliefs and values by manipulating dissonant information or beating-up disagreeable others.

Higher humor is based on relief of distress through true adaptation or learning. Our fear is shown to be baseless through a higher reconstruction of the situation. Instead of saying to oneself "I'm glad it's him and not me!" we say "there go I!" i.e. I laugh not at him but at the humanity we share, at the me in him. Again, safety plays a part, even at this level, since, if it actually were me, I would need to defend myself; the fact that it is him allows me to accept the lesson. So higher humor involves real learning, a miniature "aha!" experience. But it is also associated, therefore, with some sadness, inasmuch as sadness is the emotional tone of our need to change ourselves in response to undeniable realities. When we rise above our illusions, we become "disillusioned," and we grieve for our past selves.

The "me-in-him" idea is, I believe, a lot more important in most humor than is implied here. We fail to differentiate ourselves from others as well as we like to think we do (especially unconsciously, or pre-reflectively), so that empathy is not so much a higher function placed on top of lower, more selfish ones, as it is a basic sense of identity with the other. So a great deal of the tension developed in humorous situations is based on a partial identification with the comedian, the perpetrator in a joke, or the butt of the joke, followed by anything from "I'm glad it wasn't me" to "there but for the grace of God go I." Again, this serves to emphasize the fact that "hostile" humor and humor that reveals universals of human nature are actually cut from the same cloth.

Last, I would like to point out that in much, even most, humor, there are likely to be several lines of tension-building and tension-relief operating simultaneously and consequentially. A simple joke, for example, may include several incongruities, poke fun at "adult" social conventions, play with linguistic conventions and double-meanings, introduce taboo sexual topics, toy with socially unacceptable aggressiveness, establish a degree of superiority, be told by someone taking the comic role, and reveal universals of human nature all at the same time. Add such "external" factors as setting, mood, contagion, etc., and analysis becomes even more challenging. Humor reminds me of cooking, in that we have been doing it so long that even a "simple" dish involves many ingredients and complex preparations.

To conclude, it appears that the definition – "the sudden awareness of an alternative construction of a distressful situation which dissipates (to some extent) that distress" – holds up quite well to variation. Further it is clear that humor differs from other forms of "distress dissipation," such as relief and joy, more in terms of a large number of details than in essence.