

*A Phenomenological Sketch*

*Nihilistic Tendencies in Psychology  
&  
the Phenomenology of Off-Color Jokes*

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A bakery in Maine hires a new clerk. She's a very attractive young woman who tends to wear her skirts rather short. The men of the town hear about her and line up at the bakery the next morning. Each one asks for raisin bread, knowing she'd have to climb a ladder to reach it. After hours of climbing up and down the ladder, she finally asks the last man, "Is yours a raisin, too?" He answers, "No, but it's a twitterin'!"

I have noticed more and more examples of nihilism in psychology lately, ever since the constructionist view has replaced the old behaviorist view. Erving Goffman wrote a book in which he suggested that, as you peel away the social constructions we surround ourselves with, you eventually find that, like an onion, there is nothing inside. This bothered him a great deal. Likewise, terror management theory, a quasi-existentialist minitheory in social psychology, suggests that society essentially exists to protect us from awareness of our own nothingness.

Let me explain: When I pay for my groceries, I write my name on a piece of paper and give it to the clerk. Amazingly, the clerk accepts this paper cheerfully in exchange for wonderful edible stuff! The store sends the paper to a bank, where someone who believes they have the right tells me that now I am worth less than I was before! Checks, money, stores, banks, jobs, purchasing, and financial worth, not to mention psychology and college, are all social constructs. You don't have to believe in them! That's what happened to confederate money. That's what happened to all those savings and

loans a while back. That's what happened to several of my jobs.

But then, perhaps everything else is also a social construct. Male and female for example: What is it to be male or female? Chromosomes? "Plumbing?" Dress? Psychological convictions? In which society?

How about the self? Is it just a mentalistic construct, as Skinner said? Or a bundle of perceptions, as Hume said?

Or what is it to be human?

Three very-pregnant women are waiting to see their doctor. The first says "I'm sure I'm having a boy this time, because my husband was on top, and I always have boys when he's on top." The second one says "That's interesting; I guess I'll have a girl, then, because I was on top. The third woman begins to cry, and the other two ask her why she's crying, and she says "I think I'm having puppies!"

These kinds of questions give some people (e.g. David Hume) vertigo. Others (e.g. Jean-Paul Sartre) get nauseous. Kierkegaard felt dread. Many feel angst or terror. To counter these unpleasant feelings, we hold on – some for dear life – to our social constructs. Reality (hell or not) is other people. And anything that attacks that social reality must be denied or destroyed. Criminals, saints, the mentally ill, heretics, foreigners, geniuses, the rude and obnoxious, the truly assertive... all of these are threatening.

Historically, this nihilism is based on the philosophies psychology is rooted in. Hume said that there is no reality beyond sensations. Kant said there is one but we can never know it. Either way, all you can do is construct a reality, and the only thing that provides any solidity to that reality is if others are construing it like you are. I, of course, believe that Hume and Kant and the last few hundred years of philosophy were wrong.

Queen Elizabeth and Princess Di were out driving in the family Bentley when they were overtaken by highwaymen. The thieves demanded all their jewels, but the ladies insisted that they weren't wearing any. After searching them, the thieves decided to settle for the car, and left. As the Queen and Princess were walking back to Buckingham palace, the Queen asked Di, "Weren't you wearing a diamond ring when we left?" Di said "Yes I was. But when I saw the thieves, I hid it up my... well, you know. But weren't you wearing that sapphire necklace Prince Philip gave you?" The queen answered "Yes, but when I saw the thieves, I put it up my...well, you know." They walked a little further and the queen added "It's a shame we didn't have Princess Margaret with us; we could have saved the Bentley!"

One quality of humor in general, and especially off-color humor, is its leveling quality. Even the queen has private parts. Even the president has to pee. We all eat, excrete, have sexual desires, die.

There is, supposedly, a South American tribe where they believe that men do not defecate. Obviously, the men can't really believe this. And I can't believe the women would fall for it, either. But they teach their kids this: When a boy becomes a man, his anus grows shut. This seems ridiculous to us. But didn't many Victorians believe they were above sexuality? Don't many people in our culture believe in eternal youth? And why do we hide public rest rooms in America? Do our architects believe we are exempt from the need to urinate?

A young couple had a hard time talking about sex, so they went to a marriage counselor for advice. He said they should think of some silly, neutral word they could use when they wanted to have sex. They picked washing machine. One night they were in bed and the husband said "Washing machine!" She said "I'm sorry, dear, I'm just too tired right now. Perhaps you could wake me up later" Two hours later, he tries again, whispering "Washing machine!" She says "I'm still tired. Could you give me another hour?" Later that night, she wakes up, now refreshed and says to him, "Washing machine! Washing machine, honey!" And he tells her "Never mind, dear. It was a small load, so I did it by hand."

Off-color humor destroys your social expectations, so you are "falling into nothingness" – but only for a moment: Then you are caught by the soft mattress of sensuous reality! It's very primitive, really. Little babies like to be thrown into the air and caught again. We like to scare ourselves on roller coasters or with scary movies – because we are supported by a realer reality. And we laugh!

An inventor comes to the president of General Foods with a peach. The president says "What's this?" and the inventor says "Taste it!" The president tastes it and says "It tastes like a peach. So what?" The inventor says "Turn it around!" The president turns it around, takes a bite, and says "Incredible! It tastes like a banana." But the president, hoping to steal this idea, says to the inventor "That's pretty good, but if you really want to impress me, make one that tastes like a woman!" The inventor promises to try, and goes off to his lab. A month later, he's back at the president's desk with another peach. He says to the president "Taste it!" The president tastes it...and then starts to gag and spits it out. "It tastes like shit!" he screams at the inventor. And the inventor says "Turn it around!"

Why are so many people turned off by off-colored jokes? Why do so many hate them? I find it bizarre, for example, that the TV Guide, which actively promotes a highly sexual and aggressive media, repeatedly notes its offense at any occurrence of mooning on TV. What's so bad about mooning?

One answer is that a culture that survives is one that successfully convinces everyone that, without it, you are nothing. So the culture needs to condemn, first, all other social or cultural realities (e.g. "other religions are wrong!"), and second, any reality that is stronger than itself – i.e. sensuous reality. So our cultures often forbid us from talking about sex or digestion or other pleasant things....

Jacob needs to rebuild his outhouse and dig out his pit. Some of his cronies tell him he can save a lot of time by using dynamite. "That way, you destroy the outhouse and clean out the pit at the same time!" they say. So Jacob sets up the dynamite under the outhouse and runs a wire out to the barn. As he pushes the plunger, he sees his dear wife running to the outhouse and going in. He runs after her, but it is too late. Everything goes sky high. Miraculously, his wife survives. He asks her "Are you all right, Rachel?" And she says "Ya, but I'm sure glad I didn't let that one go in the house!"

Another answer is that some people are simply more scared than others. Perfectionists (i.e. anal retentives!) seem to build personal structures that they need to defend in the same way that authoritarians need to defend social structures.

We joke about what scares us. But it isn't just whistling in the dark. I'm suggesting that jokes directly, explicitly tell us that there's nothing to be scared of! Behind the relativity of social reality is the solidity of a sensuous reality. As Fritz Perls once pointed out, sometimes we should lose our minds and come to our senses!