

*Taking
Laughter
Seriously*

John Morreall
Department of Philosophy
Northwestern University

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The Superiority Theory

The oldest, and probably still most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person's feelings of superiority over other people. This theory goes back at least as far as Plato, for whom the proper object of laughter is human evil and folly.¹ What makes a person laughable, according to Plato, is self-ignorance. The laughable person is the one who thinks of himself as wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is.² Now we enjoy laughing at such people, but our laughter involves a certain malice toward them, and malice is a harmful thing, a "pain in the soul" Plato calls it. In laughing, furthermore, our attention is focused on vice. We should not cultivate laughter, he argues, lest some of what we are laughing at rub off on us. In heavy laughter, too, we lose rational control of ourselves, and so become less than fully human.

Plato was especially opposed to conventionalized laughter as in comedies; indeed, he claims that it is harmful even to portray people as laughing in literature. "Men of worth must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less should we allow such a representation of the gods." In the *Laws* he is somewhat less harsh. It is valuable to know what ugliness looks like, the Athenian stranger (who seems to represent Plato's point of view) says, and so the portrayal of ugliness in comedy can have a certain educational func-

tion. Nonetheless, there is always the danger of comedy having a morally damaging effect, and so no citizen should spend much time watching or reading comedies—certainly he should never act in a comedy.⁴ Where the writing and performance of comedy are allowed, there should be strict censorship to insure that no citizen is ever held up to laughter.⁵

Aristotle agreed with Plato that laughter is basically a form of derision. Even wit, he says, is really educated insolence.⁶ Now because people do not like to be laughed at, laughter can serve as a social corrective to get wrongdoers back into line. But this value of laughter should not be overrated. Since in laughing we are concerned with what is base, Aristotle insists, too much laughter is incompatible with living a good life. He also says that the joking attitude can be harmful to a person's character inasmuch as it makes him nonserious about important things. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he discusses how the person who laughs too much strays from the ethically desirable mean.⁷ "Those who carry humor to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at any cost, and aim more at raising a laugh than at saying what is proper and at avoiding pain to the butt of their jokes." Aristotle does not condemn the humorous attitude entirely, however; he admits that "those who would not say anything funny themselves, and who are annoyed at those who do, seem to be boorish and dour." What is called for is moderation, but this is seldom achieved. "Most people enjoy amusement and jesting more than they should . . . a jest is a kind of mockery, and lawgivers forbid some kinds of mockery—perhaps they ought to have forbidden some kinds of jesting."

The superiority theory as presented by Plato and Aristotle was influential on subsequent thought about laughter, though little was added to the theory until the early modern period when Hobbes put it into a stronger form. For Hobbes the human race is a collection of individuals in constant struggle with one another. "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of Power after Power, that ceaseth only in Death," he wrote in his *Leviathan*.⁸ Laughter comes in when we are winning in the struggle. It expresses, according to Hobbes, "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."⁹ Laughter, then, is self-congrat-

ulatory; it is based on our finding ourselves better off in the struggle of all against all than someone else is, or than we used to be.

Like Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes was concerned that laughter could be harmful to a person's character. There is something wrong, he felt, with the person who can feel good about himself only by looking down on others. He admits that a person can laugh not from any explicit comparison of himself with others, but merely from "a sudden conception of some ability in himself."¹⁰ Still, he feels that most laughter is at others, and so is a sign of pusillanimity.

[Laughter] . . . is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able."¹¹

Hobbes's account of laughter became the classic form of the superiority theory, and it has been defended many times in the last three centuries. An interesting recent development is the attempt to understand laughter in an evolutionary way as arising from aggressive gestures found in early humans. The ethologist Konrad Lorenz, for example, sees laughter as a controlled form of aggression,¹² and many theorists have been ready with suggestions as to how the physical behavior of laughing shows that laughter evolved from aggressive gestures and still retains this hostile character.

In *The Secret of Laughter*, Anthony Ludovici gives an evolutionary version of Hobbes's theory of "sudden glory"; all laughter, he says, is an expression of a person's feeling of "superior adaptation" to some specific situation, or to his environment in general.¹³ Laughter takes the physical form it does, the baring of the teeth, because originally laughter was a physical challenge or threat to an enemy. This showing of the teeth in laughter, as in the aggressive behavior of dogs, is a way of asserting one's physical prowess. In laughter, Ludovici says, it is our way of telling the enemy that we are strong and better adapted to the situation than he is. We still feel threatened when someone laughs at us, much as when an animal bares its teeth at us, because the laughter is putting himself in the position of an enemy challenging our position. As humans developed, of course,

there were more ways in which one person could be superior to another than just in physical prowess, and so the claim to superior adaptation in laughter came to focus not just on strength or agility, but also on cleverness, intelligence generally, or wealth. We can see this development in the race paralleled in the development of the individual today, according to Ludovici: the first thing that children laugh at is the physical maladaptations of others, while later they come to also laugh at mental and cultural maladaptations.¹⁴

Another attempt to trace the evolution of laughter from hostile physical gestures is Albert Rapp's *The Origins of Wit and Humor*.¹⁵ All laughter, according to Rapp, has developed from one primitive behavior, "the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel."¹⁶ This vocalization of triumph was probably so early in human development, he says, that it came before there was language. And not only would the individual combatant who was victorious laugh in triumph, but if his kin were standing on the sidelines, they would join in the laughter too. In this way, Rapp suggests, citing Donald Hayworth, laughter may have come to serve as "a vocal signal to other members of the group that they might relax with safety."¹⁷

The next step in the evolution of modern laughter was the development of ridicule. Originally people laughed at the black eye and the broken arm of the defeated combatant, but later they came to laugh outside of combat situations at any mark of injury or even deformity because these suggested that the person *had* been defeated in combat, or perhaps, in the case of deformity, that he *would* be. In this way we came to laugh at those who had not attacked us, but who had suffered some misfortune or who were deformed in some way. Frailty, deformity, and error, Rapp says, are "modern substitutes for the battered appearance of one's defeated opponent which once triggered triumph laughter."¹⁸ Even today, he points out, we shun being laughed at for some deformity of ours or for some mistake we have made, just as we shun being laughed at for having been defeated. Indeed, people have been killed for laughing at other people just as they have been for physically attacking them.

In modern humor this element of ridicule is not always obvious, Rapp admits, but that is because we sometimes add to the ridicule an affectionate, benevolent attitude toward the person being laughed at. In genial humor, the "laughter is ridicule tempered with love. When

directed toward a child, it takes the form of mild amusement at weakness or predicament, plus a large quantity of affection. When directed toward a Tom Sawyer or Falstaff it is still laughing at weakness, error, deformity, or predicament in a character toward whom you feel affection."¹⁹

The final achievement in the development of ridicule into its various modern forms in humor is laughter at oneself. The feeling of superiority is still present when you laugh at yourself, Rapp says; what you are ridiculing is a "picture of yourself in a certain predicament."²⁰ In laughing at yourself, the part of you that is laughing has dissociated itself from the part of you that is being laughed at.

Rapp also sees the need for his superiority theory to account for such things as puns and witty nonsense, which evoke laughter but which do not seem to be based on ridicule. I will save a discussion of these, however, until I come to my criticisms of the superiority theory. But before offering my own criticisms, I should note one line of response that has been directed against the superiority theory at least since its formulation by Hobbes. This response consists in simply denying that laughter can be derisive. "Laughter," Voltaire wrote, "always arises from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation."²¹ And in this century we have had writers like Max Eastman suggest that we "dismiss from the topic of laughter at the outset the topic of scorn."²²

What is wrong with this response to the superiority theory is that it denies an obvious fact—that people sometimes laugh in derision at other people. Perhaps we feel that no one *should* do so, but we must not confuse normative questions with factual ones. In point of fact, people often laugh at the misfortunes of others, and seem to have done so throughout recorded history. Surely the Romans who came to the Colosseum to enjoy watching Christians mauled by lions laughed precisely at the suffering and death of those in the arena. And although Christian civilization was supposed to make people more sensitive than pagans to the suffering of others, still public torture and executions were a popular source of amusement through the Middle Ages and into our own "enlightened" centuries. There is a record from the late Middle Ages of the citizens of the town of Mons buying a condemned criminal from a neighboring town so that they could have the fun of quartering him themselves. Even in

Voltaire's day it was common for the rich to amuse themselves by taking a coach to an insane asylum to taunt the inmates.

World literature from its earliest days has made many references to the laugh of derision. It is found several times in the *Iliad*, for example, and is almost the only kind of laughter found in the Bible. In the *First Book of Kings* (18:30) we are told that Elijah taunted the priests of Baal, ridiculing their gods as powerless compared with Yahweh. After deriding them, he has them slain. In the *Second Book of Kings* (2:23) the prophet Elisha is met by a group of children who taunt him for his baldness. So great an offense is this derision to the prophet that he curses the children in the name of the Lord, and immediately two bears come out of the woods to mangle them.

To modern Western ears these passages seem cruel, but that is only because of our relatively recent moral objections to the enjoyment of others' suffering. We should keep in mind, too, that our objections to cruel laughter are not, even today, part of all cultures. Alfred North Whitehead related the following story: "Some of our fellows who were out in Africa . . . during the war tell of how the Negroes went down to a stream for something and came back roaring with laughter. What was the joke? Why, a crocodile had suddenly popped out of the water and snatched one of their fellows off."²³ In cultures like Samoa cruel laughter and the laugh of ridicule seem to be the dominant kinds of laughter. Among the Greenland Eskimo, contests of ridicule were once their only judicial procedure, even for such offenses as murder. Someone who had a complaint against another challenged him to a contest before the clan or tribe in which they took turns ridiculing each other. There was no distinction made between defensible accusations and mere slander; the parties were even allowed to snort in their opponent's face or tie him to a tent pole. All that counted was who got more laughs at his opponent's expense. That person was declared the winner by the assembly, and if the shame of the loser was great enough he and his family were ostracized from the community.²⁴

And we need not travel to Greenland to find derisive laughter; our own children, and ourselves as youngsters, show a remarkable capacity for ridicule. Some children who have been speaking for only a few years are already proficient at making up nicknames with which to taunt other children and adults who have physical defor-

mities, or whose clothing, language, or behavior is different from their own. And studies have shown that what young children find most amusing is someone else's suffering.²¹ It takes a lot of exposure to different kinds of people and ways of life for children to become tolerant of customs, styles of dress, etc., that are not their own. It also takes time and moral training for children to develop a sensitivity to the suffering of others, so that they will be distressed, and not amused, by suffering. As Piaget and others have shown, children do not start out with the awareness that other people are subjects like themselves—this is something they must learn.

A good deal of the natural human propensity to derisive laughter is still left in most adults, I would submit. Our moral training has removed some of it, but it still comes out in many ways, in the glee we feel at the suffering of someone who has wronged us, for example, or in our laughter at ethnic jokes. Even if it is not permissible to laugh at someone's misfortunes in polite company, we still enjoy witty repartee, especially well-phrased insults. Comedians like Don Rickles have built very successful careers not on telling jokes, but simply on singling people out of the audience and mocking them in great detail about their race, accent, clothing, ugliness, etc. The worst manifestation of our taste for this kind of laughter is probably the pitifully childish "situation comedies" that have glutted our television schedules for the past decade or so, many of which have almost no plot but consist simply of a group of family members or friends trading obvious and stupid insults.

It would be foolish, then, to respond to the Hobbesian theory of laughter by denying the reality of derisive laughter. A more reasonable line of criticism, I think, is to show that not all cases of laughter can be explained as involving feelings of superiority, and hence that "sudden glory" cannot be the essence of laughter.

If we look at our list of laughter situations in Chapter 1, we find many that do not fit into the superiority theory. The laughter of the baby, for instance, at being tickled, or at the game of peekaboo, cannot be attributed to a sense of superiority in the baby, because these kinds of laughter begin before the baby has any image of itself in comparison with others, indeed before the baby even distinguishes itself as a being separate from its surroundings.

Older children and adults do evaluate themselves and are capa-

ble of a sense of superiority. But in many situations where we laugh, there need be no feelings of superiority. Adults can laugh, like infants, at being tickled, and they can laugh at seeing a magic trick, or at running into an old friend on the street. No self-evaluation has to be involved in any of these cases; indeed if there is self-evaluation in the case of laughing while watching the magic trick, the person laughing would have to judge himself inferior to the magician who has succeeded in tricking him.

As with the above cases of nonhumorous laughter, so too with humorous laughter—there are many instances of laughter that involves no feelings of superiority. Much merely verbal humor, as in someone's use of a triple rhyme or excessive alliteration to get a laugh, is not directed at anyone and requires no self-evaluation. Many puns, too, are mere verbal play, and are not designed to evoke feelings of superiority.

Absurd or nonsense humor often makes us laugh without involving us in any self-evaluation. Someone for a joke once put a bowling ball in my refrigerator while I was not home. When I next went to the refrigerator and opened the door I broke out laughing. But not at anyone, and not out of any feeling of superiority—I was simply amused by the sight of this object in a completely inappropriate place. Indeed, we sometimes enjoy absurdities of this type not only without feelings of superiority, but even in situations that show us up as inferior in some way. I occasionally get out of bed and make my breakfast before I am fully awake. On one such occasion I remember bringing the coffee pot over to the table from the stove and proceeding to pour about a cup of coffee onto my cornflakes before I snapped to what I was doing. I instantly broke into a laugh. The absurdity of what I had done not only did not enhance my self-esteem in this situation; it detracted from it. Now sometimes people produce a forced laugh upon making a mistake in social situations, in order to appear comfortable in the situation and to forestall harsh criticism. But this was not the case here—I was alone and my laughter was sincere. I was simply enjoying the silliness of what I had done.

There are even people who enjoy sharing with others laughter at their own blunders. I have a friend who once ran out of gas in a tiny foreign car he had just bought. He got the car off onto the

shoulder of the road and set off on foot for a gas station. But when he returned with a can of gas, he couldn't figure out where to put it into the car. He eventually opened the hood and found what appeared to be the right spout. He unscrewed the cap and poured in the gallon of gas. In fact this was the radiator, and so now not only would the car not start, but he had gasoline instead of just water in the cooling system. This was a costly mistake, both in time and money, but he found it very funny at the time. And ever since he has enjoyed telling the story of this blunder, or having someone else tell it. He doesn't have some deep-seated need to punish himself or to have his friends laugh at him. Nor does he tell the story in "self-glory" by comparing himself today with his former self; he freely admits that he's still so unmechanically minded that he could make a similar mistake tomorrow.

Proponents of the superiority theory like Rapp would say that in cases like the above there is still the feeling of superiority, but what the laugher is ridiculing is a picture of himself dissociated from the self who is laughing. "What happens, in effect, is: a person learns to regard himself as though he were someone else. . . He then proceeds to smile amiably and objectively at the antics and predicaments which accrue to his *alter ego*."²⁸ This explanation, however, seems ad hoc. Granted that sometimes in laughing at ourselves, e.g., in laughing at pictures of ourselves as children, we may be laughing at an alter ego with which we do not fully identify ourselves, this need not be the case. Often in laughing at our blunders, I think, we laugh *harder* because it is our very selves—the ones who are laughing—who made the blunder. In laughing at myself for pouring the coffee over the cornflakes, I know that I laughed especially hard because I did not dissociate myself from the groggy person who had made the silly mistake. And I think I know my friend well enough to say that he would not enjoy the story of the gas being put into the radiator half as much if he thought of the bungler who did this as anyone other than himself.

Even if the superiority theory didn't have these cases of laughing at oneself to explain, moreover, it would still have to account for our laughter at incongruity where no one is being ridiculed, a good example of which is the bowling ball in the refrigerator. Hobbes acknowledged that our laughter is sometimes triggered by incongrui-

ties, but he tried to stick to the superiority theory by maintaining that "laughter without offense must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons."²⁹ But what is the force of "at" here once we are no longer talking about laughing at persons? We laugh at, that is ridicule, persons in the superiority theory when we feel superior to them in physical prowess, intelligence, or some other human feature, and prompted by this feeling show a contemptuous lack of respect for them in our actions. In this sense of "laugh at" we cannot laugh at anything other than a person, or something which we can treat as a person, since we can compare ourselves to, and so feel superior to, only things of our kind, namely, other persons. We cannot ridicule inanimate objects, or situations. We can mock a person indirectly, if you will, by seemingly abusing some object connected with him. We might get a group of people to laugh at a fat person in his absence, for example, by parading around with his oversize coat, emphasizing how large it is to accommodate his belly. But here we are not mocking the coat, we're using the coat to mock the person.

We do speak of "laughing at" absurd situations like the bowling ball in the refrigerator, of course, but only in the sense that we are amused by the absurd situation. And this sense of "laugh at" carries no connotations of ridicule, feelings of superiority, or even self-evaluation. We cannot feel superior to or ridicule the bowling ball in the refrigerator, in short, and so Hobbes is guilty of equivocation if he thinks that our "laughing at" incongruous situations such as this is the kind of "laughing at" required by his superiority theory.

At least some of those who have espoused the superiority theory, I think, have been led into thinking that laughter must involve positive self-evaluation because in laughing we are enjoying ourselves, we are feeling good. It is important to see here that the fact that a person is feeling good does not mean that he is necessarily feeling good *about himself* (the expression "enjoy oneself" is misleading in this regard), still less that he is comparing himself to others, or to some earlier state of his own. The mistake here is similar to that sometimes made in ethics when the possibility of altruism is denied on the grounds that since actions are always done by agents who (in some sense) *want* to do those actions, all actions are done *for the benefit* of the agents doing them. What this reasoning overlooks is that someone might well have as the object of his wanting the

benefit of another person, with no explicit or implicit reference being made to his own benefit. Similarly someone can feel good laughing without focusing on himself at all. Laughter need not be self-evaluative any more than action need be self-serving.

Our general conclusion about the superiority theory, then, is that it could not serve as a comprehensive theory of laughter, for there are cases of both humorous and nonhumorous laughter that do not involve feelings of superiority.

3

The Incongruity Theory

In turning now to our second theory of laughter, the incongruity theory, we shift our focus from the emotional or feeling side of laughter to the cognitive or thinking side. While amusement for the superiority theory is primarily affective—it is self-glory or the feeling of triumph—for the incongruity theory amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way. In both theories there is a certain duality or contrast that triggers laughter, but the superiority theory makes the overly restricted claim that this duality must be between the laugher's evaluation of his own importance and his evaluation of someone else's importance (or his own formerly). And as we have seen, this claim is shown false in many cases of laughter. The incongruity theory, on the other hand, though it does not deny that feelings of superiority may be involved in laughter, does not see the duality in laughter as necessarily taking the form of a contrast between the laugher's sense of his own importance and his evaluation of someone else. Instead this theory works with the more general notion of incongruity.

The basic idea behind the incongruity theory is very general and quite simple. We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc.

We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns. As Pascal put it, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees."¹¹

The incongruity theory was first hinted at by Aristotle; though because it did not fit in with the superiority theory of his *Poetics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, he never developed it. His recognition of incongruity as a source of laughter occurs in the *Rhetoric*, where he points out that one way for a speaker to get a laugh is to set up a certain expectation in his listeners and then to hit them with something they did not expect. As an example he cites a line from an unknown comedy: "And as he walked, beneath his feet were—chilblains."¹² The same result, Aristotle notes, is also produced by jokes that depend on a change of spelling or word play.

Because Aristotle said no more about incongruity as a source of laughter, the idea was not even mentioned by most of those who commented on his work. The exception was Cicero, who repeated what Aristotle said about getting a laugh by surprising your listeners, but then went on to try to assimilate this kind of laughter into Aristotle's superiority theory.

The incongruity theory was not to be worked out in any detail until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where its most famous proponents were Kant and Schopenhauer. Kant's theory of laughter is not simply an incongruity theory; it involves the notion of an emotional release, and so also comes under our third heading, "Relief Theories," which we will discuss in Chapter 4. But the idea of incongruity plays a central role in Kant's account of laughter, and so is worthy of our consideration here. "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh," Kant says, "there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.*"¹³ Kant offers several examples of jokes, among them the following:

The heir of a rich relative wished to arrange for an imposing funeral, but he lamented that he could not properly succeed; "for" (said he) "the more money I give my mourners to look sad, the more cheerful they look!" When we hear this story we laugh loud, and the reason is that an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing. We must note

well that it does not transform itself into the positive opposite of an expected object—for then there would still be something, which might even be a cause of grief—but it must be transformed into nothing.¹⁴

Schopenhauer's version of the incongruity theory is somewhat different from Kant's. He says that what we get in the punch line of a joke or in other laughter situations is not, as Kant claimed, *nothing*; our expectations are not simply frustrated and that is the end of the matter. Rather we get something that we were not expecting. Whatever it is, it completes the story or fits into the situation in some way—it just does not fit in the expected or "normal" way.¹⁵ In Kant's joke about the mourners, for example, we do not, as we listen, set up a specific expectation which is simply transformed into nothing. In hearing that the heir was lamenting his inability to arrange a lavish funeral, we form a general expectation that some kind of explanation will be given for this fact in the rest of the story. And what follows is an explanation. What makes this a joke and not simply a story is not that no explanation is given for the heir's frustration, but that the state of affairs appealed to in the explanation is incongruous. Professional mourners are expected to be able to look sad on cue, so a group of them who couldn't hide their pleasure with their high pay would be odd mourners indeed.

If the explanation given in the story were an ordinary one, such as "These April rains will ruin the procession," then there would be no joke at all. On the other hand, if *no* explanation were given, if our expectation that somehow the heir's frustration would be accounted for were simply "transformed into nothing," then there would likewise be no joke. If the story, say, ended after telling us that the heir lamented his inability to arrange for an imposing funeral, we would have frustrated expectation but would be unlikely to laugh.

In Schopenhauer's own account of laughter, he says that there must be an incongruity between a concept—which by its very nature is general and lumps together unique, individual things as if they were identical instantiations of that concept—and those things themselves. "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity."¹⁶ What causes laugh-

ter, if you will, is a mismatch between conceptual understanding and perception.

Having looked briefly at two versions of the incongruity theory, we can now turn to a general evaluation of the theory. Leaving aside individual difficulties which Kant's, Schopenhauer's, or other versions might face, I think that the central weakness of the incongruity theory is that it is not comprehensive enough to explain all cases of laughter. As long as we are considering only cases of humorous laughter, the theory works well—indeed later I'll appeal to incongruity as part of the mechanism of all humor. But there are many cases of nonhumorous laughter which do not involve incongruity.

One theorist who realized the limitations of the incongruity theory was Kant's contemporary, James Beattie. In his own account of laughter Beattie appeals to incongruity, and he uses much the same language as Kant and Schopenhauer, but he makes it clear that only some laughter is to be explained by appeal to incongruity. He distinguishes between what he calls "sentimental laughter," the kind involved in humor, and "animal laughter." The former "always proceeds from a sentiment or emotion, excited in the mind, in consequence of certain objects or ideas being presented to it. . . ." And it is incongruity in the laughter stimulus that causes this sentimental laughter; this laughter "seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage."⁸ Or in more long-winded fashion he says that the cause of humorous laughter is "two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them."⁹

The second kind of laughter Beattie mentions, "animal laughter," does not work at this intellectual a level, and he does not propose to analyze it in terms of incongruity; indeed he devotes only a few sentences to it. Animal laughter, Beattie says, "arises, not from any sentiment, or perception of ludicrous ideas, but from some bodily feeling, or sudden impulse, on what is called the animal spirits, proceeding, or seeming to proceed, from the operation of causes purely material."¹⁰ Animal laughter is the kind found in babies, who have no intellectual capacity for appreciating incongruity; it is their

response to stimuli such as tickling. In adults too we find animal laughter "occasioned by tickling or gladness."¹¹

In Chapter 5 I will discuss in detail the difference between humorous and nonhumorous kinds of laughter, but here we need only note Beattie's point that at least some types of nonhumorous laughter are not to be explained in terms of incongruity. Incongruity is an intellectual or conceptual matter, and the psychological mechanism behind, say, the laugh of tickling, is simply not this sophisticated. We should add here, too, that there are cases of laughter that do involve intellectual understanding but do not involve incongruity. When we laugh on solving a puzzle, for example, or on seeing the perfectly executed acrobatic stunt, this is not mere "animal laughter," but we need not make any judgment of incongruity here. So incongruity is not behind even all cases of what Beattie calls "sentimental laughter."

Beattie adds another important qualification to the claim that laughter is a reaction to incongruity. Not all incongruity that a person notices will trigger laughter, he says. Incongruity will not excite what he calls the "risible emotion" when our perception of incongruity is "attended with some other emotion of greater authority."¹² And this is an important feature of laughter often overlooked in overly intellectual formulations of the incongruity theory. Laughter, even in humor, is not merely an intellectual matter of becoming aware of some incongruity. If I notice an incongruity, but it distresses me in some way, then I am unlikely to laugh. Had I discovered a cobra in my refrigerator instead of the innocuous bowling ball mentioned earlier, my reaction would probably have been not to laugh but to slam the door and run. Similarly, seeing a young child full of life struck down by a car would be incongruous but not laugh-provoking. Fear, pity, moral disapprobation, indignation, or disgust, Beattie says, can override our tendency to laugh at incongruity. This is a point that will be developed later on.

To conclude, we cannot take it as universally true that laughter is a reaction to incongruity. Incongruity may well be involved in all humor, but is not involved in many cases of nonhumorous laughter. The incongruity theory, therefore, will not stand as a general theory of laughter.

4

The Relief Theory

THE last theory I want to consider before turning to my own account of laughter is the relief theory. There are different versions of this theory, but they all have in common a more or less physiological point of view in which laughter is seen as a venting of nervous energy. While the superiority theory focuses on emotions involved in laughter, and the incongruity theory on objects or ideas causing laughter, the relief theory addresses a question little discussed in the other two theories, viz.: Why does laughter take the physical form it does, and what is its biological function?

One of the earliest places we find the relief theory hinted at is in Shaftesbury's essay of 1711, "The Freedom of Wit and Humour." "The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainters."¹ Here we can see a possible overlap of the relief theory with a Hobbesian theory. To laugh in breaking free of constraint can also be to laugh in scorn at those who have been constraining one. In fact, one of the theorists who worked hardest at defending and developing the Hobbesian theory, Alex-

ander Bain, was also one of the first to investigate psychological constraints and the role of laughter in breaking free of them.²

We can also combine the relief theory with the incongruity theory, if we look at our reason and the conceptual systems it builds as putting constraints on us. Schopenhauer, for example, speaks of laughter as involving an escape from the oppressive "Dame Reason." We could say, then, that the relief theory is not necessarily competing with the other two theories of laughter we have discussed; it is simply looking at a different aspect of the phenomenon. With this in mind, let us look at the role of relief in laughter.

There are two ways in which relief might fit into laughter situations. The person may have come into the situation with the nervous energy that is to be released, or the laughter situation itself may cause the build-up of the nervous energy, as well as its release. We can discuss these cases one at a time, starting with laughter and the release of pre-existing energy.

Any prohibition can cause a person to build up an increased desire to do what has been forbidden, and this frustrated desire may manifest itself in pent-up nervous energy. Children, for example, are often forced to sit still and be quiet when they are raring to run and shout. Their pent-up nervous energy shows in their overall muscle tension and in fidgeting. A more serious kind of pent-up energy would be found in those forced to live under the heavy restrictions of a dictatorship.

Many discussions of prohibitions leading to laughter cite traditional societal prohibitions against sex and violence. All cultures forbid some activities connected with sex. Many forbid intercourse outside of marriage, for example, and most have restrictions on when sex can even be talked about. Such restrictions cause people to suppress their sexual desires, according to the relief theory, and so when someone, say a comedian, breaks the taboo and talks about sex, forbidden sexual thoughts are called up and some of the sexual energy which has been repressed is released in laughter. Societal prohibitions on violence are supposed to cause a similar kind of repressed energy. If a schoolboy hates his teacher, for example, he is not allowed to take out his hatred by assaulting the teacher. Indeed, in repressing his hostile feelings he may even put on a show of respect and docility in the classroom. If the teacher should suffer

violence at someone else's hand, however—say the student hears that the teacher was mugged—or if the teacher should simply trip and fall in front of the class, the pent-up energy of the student's hatred will find release in his laughter.

Freud thought that sex and hostility were the only drives whose repression led to laughter,⁷ but in truth any taboo can set the stage for relief laughter. The Eighteenth Amendment made references to drinking alcohol funny in the United States. Antidrug laws have like to see drug use uncontrolled—all they have to do is make al-lusions to using drugs. (As drug use has become more accepted in the last few years and as the legal penalties have been reduced, jokes about drug use have gotten progressively less response.)

The release in laughter, then, may be of nervous energy built up before the person entered the laughter situation. The other kind of release we mentioned is the release, not of pre-existing energy, but of energy built up by the laughter situation itself. When we listen to certain nonsexual, nonhostile jokes, for example, the narrative may arouse certain emotions in us toward the characters in the story. But then at the punch line the story takes an unexpected turn, or the characters are shown not to be what we thought they were, and so the emotional energy which has built up is suddenly superfluous and demands release. The release of this energy, according to the simplest version of the relief theory, is laughter.

Consider the following piece of doggerel by Harry Graham:

I had written to Aunt Maud
Who was on a trip abroad
When I heard she'd died of cramp,
Just too late to save the stamp.

The first three lines evoke in us feelings of sympathy for the poet, who has learned of the death of his aunt just after completing a letter to her. But the last line reveals that he is not at all the loving nephew we thought he was; his concern with the stamp shows that he was not bothered by his aunt's death, and so our sympathy for him is inappropriate. Oscar Wilde's quip, "The youth of today are quite monstrous; they have absolutely no respect for dyed hair," works in the same way. As we listen to it, all the way up to the

second last word, we are led to feel the indignation of the adult generation against the younger generation. If the last two words had been "grey hair," then this feeling would have been appropriate, and our train of thought would have continued along the line that young people should revere the wisdom of their elders. But this train of thought is broken when we reach the words "dyed hair," for elders who dye their hair show that they do not have the wisdom capable of commanding the respect of the young. The emotion we have built up in listening to the earlier part of the quip is suddenly seen to be inappropriate, then, and is released in laughter.

In examining the relief theory of laughter I want to proceed by discussing first a relatively simple version of the theory, that of Herbert Spencer, and then the more complex theory of Freud. Spencer's theory is found in his essay "On the Physiology of Laughter."⁸ There he says that our emotions are, or at least in our nervous system take the form of, nervous energy. And there is an intimate connection between nervous energy and our motor nervous system. "Nervous energy," he says, "always tends to beget muscular motion, and when it rises to a certain intensity, always does beget it."⁹ It is a general law that "feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action."¹⁰ In fear, for instance, we tend to make incipient movements of flight, and if the fear becomes great enough, we will flee the situation. When we are angry at a person, we tend to make small aggressive movements; we clench our fists, for example, and tighten our other muscles in preparation for action. And if the anger reaches a certain level we break into a physical attack on the person.

Laughter differs from the ordinary kinds of release of emotional energy, according to Spencer, in that the muscular movements in laughter are not the early stages of larger movements associated with some emotion. Clenching our fists and stomping our feet in anger work off some nervous energy, but if the anger increases these movements turn into the movements of physical attack. The muscular movements of laughter, however, do not lead to anything else. Laughter, even if intense, does not issue in any practical action. It does not take us out of a dangerous situation, it does not lead to fighting, etc. Indeed, some of the contemporary psychological literature suggests that laughter may serve to incapacitate the laugher, prevent him from, rather than prepare him for, doing anything.¹¹

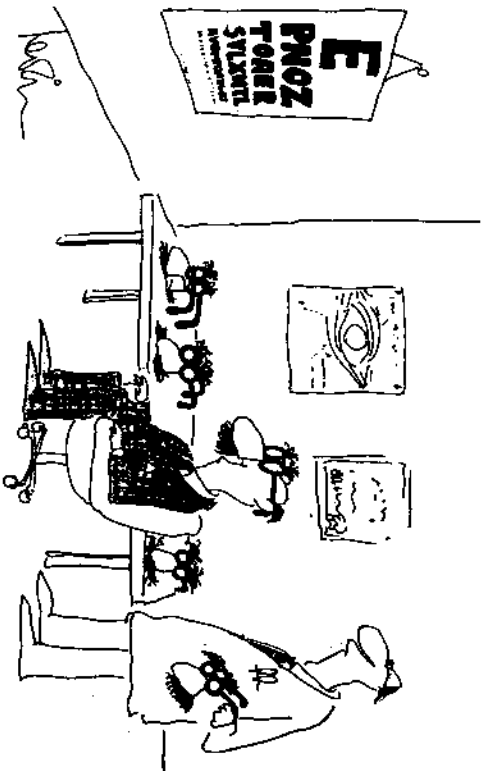
Laughing serves only to release nervous energy, Spencer says; other than that the bodily movements in laughter "have no object."⁸

The release of energy through laughter is accomplished, according to Spencer, when feelings are built up but then are seen to be inappropriate. The superfluous energy of those feelings is released first through the muscles "which feeling most habitually stimulates," viz., the muscles connected with speech.⁹ If this channel of release is not adequate to handle all the nervous energy being discharged, then that energy will spill over into "less habitual" channels—the diaphragm and muscles associated with respiration will be stimulated to hearty laughter and then, if still more energy is to be released, the person may clap his hands, sway back and forth, etc.

Spencer's theory of laughter influenced many subsequent thinkers on the topic. John Dewey, for example, accounted for laughter as "the sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of breathing and the vocal apparatus."¹⁰ And Freud mentions Spencer by name, though he feels that Spencer's theory needs modifying. We will be considering Freud's version of the relief theory shortly, though before that we might offer some comments on the simpler and more general version of Spencer.

Clearly there is a connection between at least some laughter and the relief of tension or the expenditure of energy. We have all had the experience of being in danger, say of falling, and then laughing on regaining our security. The muscular tension of the dangerous state is relaxed as we regain our security. And all of us, presumably, after laughing very heartily, have felt that we have expended a great deal of energy, that in some way laughter has achieved a catharsis of nervous energy.

But it is a big step from observations like these to the claim that all laughter involves, or even is, the release of emotional nervous energy. One difficulty with this claim is that in many laughter situations, particularly humorous ones, there seems to be no emotional energy either brought into the situation, or developed within the situation, which "requires release." The laughter itself involves the expenditure of energy, of course, as any muscular movement does, but that is not energy which has somehow been "building up" within the person, and it need not be connected with feelings suddenly seen to be inappropriate. Consider, for example, Figure 1.



Drawing by Levin, ©1979 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

This cartoon can have its effect on us in a second or two, which is hardly long enough to arouse any emotion in us, much less to arouse some emotion and then to show it to be inappropriate. But then we must have brought some repressed emotion into our situation of viewing this cartoon, which that viewing allows us to release. If the relief theory is to apply to our appreciation of this cartoon. Yet it seems that we can enjoy this cartoon without releasing any repressed feelings at all. The cartoon is not sexual, and so, presumably, our laughter at it is not a release of repressed sexual feelings. And though it is conceivable that someone might laugh in scorn at the two characters portrayed here, and thus release repressed feelings of hostility toward optometrists or people in general, clearly we can laugh at this cartoon with no hostile feelings whatever pent up inside us. And the same seems true of lots of sight gags and jokes that work on similar kinds of incongruity.

If we look at nonhumorous cases of laughter, too, many of them seem to involve no pent-up emotions and no emotions toward whatever it is that makes us laugh. Laughing is unlike crying in this respect, I think, in that while we cannot cry without feeling some emotion toward the thing or situation making us cry, we can laugh without feeling emotion toward whatever it is making us laugh. Indeed, as I will try to show in developing my own account of laughter,

it is often possible to laugh only where we do not get emotionally involved with the laughter stimulus and do not have pent-up emotions.

Another problem with the relief theory is that its notion of feelings suddenly rendered superfluous does not seem to apply in certain cases where there is a build-up of emotion, because the conclusion of the stimulus is just what we were expecting and the feelings we had been building up are perfectly appropriate. Consider the hostile practical joke. If we are walking toward someone whom we dislike to offer him an exploding cigar, our excitement begins to build even before we reach him. And it increases as we offer him the cigar, he accepts, and we light it. When it explodes in his face, we laugh heartily, but not because the aggressive feelings which had been building up in us are suddenly rendered inappropriate. They were and still are perfectly appropriate to the situation—in a way, our laughter at the explosion of the cigar is the full expression of those feelings. This kind of situation is especially troublesome to Spencer's theory, in which the conclusion of a laughter stimulus must involve a "descending incongruity"; our emotions, he says, must change from strong emotion to weak emotion, so that the excess can be discharged in laughter. In cases like the exploding cigar, however, we have just the opposite: what starts as weak emotion gradually builds until it reaches its greatest strength at the moment of laughter.

Before moving on to consider Freud's more complex version of the relief theory, we should mention one last difficulty with Spencer's account. Laughing for Spencer is analogous to the opening of a safety valve in a steam pipe. Just as the opening of the valve releases excess steam pressure built up within the pipe, laughter is supposed to release excess nervous energy built up within the laugher's nervous system. But if this is the case, then we should expect the greatest amount of nervous energy to be released at the very beginning of the overflow, when the excess is at its peak. As the release continues, the amount of energy released, and so the intensity of the laughter, should gradually diminish; just as the steam released from a safety valve is at its greatest pressure at the moment the valve is opened, but after that initial outburst gradually diminishes. Now sometimes laughter is like this—there is a powerful outburst that trails off to mild chuckling and then no laughter at all. But often laughter starts

out very weak and increases in strength; or there is an initial outburst followed by a period of no laughter, and then more laughter. If we explain laughter with a more mentalistic theory than Spencer's, as the expression of amusement, say, then we can account for such cases. As the person reacts to some laughter stimulus, he may at first be only mildly amused, but then as he thinks about it he becomes more amused. Or he may be amused, switch to thinking about something else for a moment, and then have thoughts of the laughter stimulus come back to make him laugh once more. But with a theory like Spencer's, which posits a fixed amount of surplus nervous energy to be released, it is hard to explain how there could be all this variation in the "overflow." The greatest intensity of stored nervous energy being released should come in the initial outburst, and then there should be a continuous decline in the strength of the laughter until all the surplus energy has been released. The fact that laughing does not always follow this pattern, and that often the laugher seems to "pick up steam" as he continues to laugh, shows us that Spencer's account is inadequate.

Let us turn, then, to another version of the relief theory, that of Freud. As is well known, Freud made a lot of the notion of psychic energy. And he was attracted by the way his friend Theodor Lipps and Spencer had worked the concept of psychic energy into a mechanical explanation of laughter. But Freud had to accommodate the relief theory to his general psychoanalytic theory, and this proved to be difficult.

Freud's basic work on the theory of laughter is found in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. "In this book he distinguishes between three kinds of laughter situations, which he calls "jokes," "the comic," and "humor." The core of his theory is that in all laughter situations we save a certain quantity of psychic energy, energy that we have summoned for some psychic purpose but which turns out not to be needed, and this surplus energy is discharged in laughter. In joking, he says, we save energy that is normally used to suppress forbidden feelings and thoughts; in reacting to the comic we save an expenditure of energy in thought; and in humor we save an expenditure of energy in emotion.

Freud devotes most of his attention to jokes, and so, in examining his theory of laughter, we shall too. Let us start with Freud's

views on the development of joking in the individual. At a certain stage, he says, children begin to play with words and ideas by juxtaposing them in a random way. Such play is not yet joking. As the child gets older, however, pressures are put on him to think logically and rationally, and this pressure extends even to his word and concept play. And so a second stage, which Freud calls "jesting," begins, in which the child puts words and ideas together in silly ways, but in ways that have some rational structure to them, just as adult jokes do. The third and final stage is true joking, in which the silliness of the jest is made to serve sexual or aggressive motives. Freud sometimes speaks of "innocent jokes" or "nontendentious jokes," but such phrases do not really belong in Freud's theory, as he sometimes reminds himself. "We must not forget that strictly speaking only jests are nontendentious."¹² If something is truly a joke and not merely a jest, then "it is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)."¹³ The harmless playing with words and ideas found in children's jesting survives into adulthood, Freud thinks; he admits that there is such a thing as adult jesting. But he insists that our pleasure in jesting is of a different kind from our pleasure in joking, and is significantly less than the latter. Lacking the hostile or sexual purpose that a joke has, the jest works only on clever technique and not on content.¹⁴

We use jokes, Freud says, in order to let into our conscious minds forbidden thoughts and feelings, which our society has forced us to suppress. This is not a conscious process, for the suppressed thoughts and feelings originate in the unconscious. Joking, or at least the thinking up of jokes, is an involuntary process.¹⁵ In this respect joking resembles dreaming, which is also a bringing out of suppressed thoughts and feelings from the unconscious.¹⁶ Freud's claim here is doubtful at best, for at least some inventors of jokes—professional gag writers, for example—consciously and often systematically put jokes together. But we can overlook this point, for it is not crucial to our discussion.

More central as a difficulty in Freud's theory is his explanation of how jokes give us pleasure. The natural way for Freud to explain the pleasure of jokes would seem to be for him to say that it is pleasurable to release sexual or hostile feelings which one has been

suppressing, for this satisfies natural urges. And Freud does sometimes explain the pleasure of jokes in just this way. The hostile and sexual elements in jokes, he explains in one place, allow us to "evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible."¹⁷ The pleasure in joking "arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place. That a satisfaction such as this is a source of pleasure calls for no further remark."¹⁸ Had Freud left his account of the pleasure of laughter with these comments, his version of the relief theory would have been readily understandable, and would have been supported by some of the ordinary facts about laughter mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. But Freud's theory is greatly complicated by the fact that he gives another explanation of the pleasure of laughter, much less plausible than this simple one. The basic pleasure in laughter, he says, comes from a saving of psychic energy; laughter is the discharge of the saved energy. With this hypothesis Freud proposes to explain not just laughter at jokes, which he could already partially explain as the release of suppressed psychic energy, but also laughter at the comic, and laughter in humor, which could not be explained in that way. Because the saving of psychic energy operates differently in these three kinds of laughter, we should consider them one at a time.¹⁹

We can start with joking laughter. In our ordinary serious moments, Freud says, we use psychic energy to suppress our sexual and aggressive thoughts and feelings. But in joking we get to attend to these thoughts and express these feelings, rather than continuing to suppress them. The energy normally used for inhibition suddenly becomes superfluous, therefore—it is "saved"—and this energy is released in laughter. Notice here how Freud's account differs from the simpler account given by Spencer. In Spencer it is the energy of some emotion already aroused that is suddenly rendered superfluous, whereas in Freud it is the energy normally used to suppress the emotion that becomes superfluous. The pleasure of laughter in jokes, according to Freud, matches in intensity the effort it would have taken to suppress the feeling to which the joke gives release. "The hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychological energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off."²⁰

The difference between Freud's theory and the simpler relief

theory of Spencer might not at first seem to amount to much. After all, what is the difference between saying that the energy released in laughter is the energy of some built-up feeling, and saying that the energy released in laughter is the energy that has been summoned to suppress that feeling? But the problem with Freud is that it is hard to get a grasp on his notion of the energy of inhibition. The notion of psychic energy itself is problematic; certainly it is not well defined in Spencer. But we tend to let its vagueness go by in accounts like Spencer's, because we are able to think of some of our experiences of laughter in terms of the release of energy. We have all at some time experienced a relaxation after laughing, and so we have some idea of what Spencer is getting at when he says that laughter relieves the build-up of excess nervous energy. In Freud's account, however, not only is the notion of psychic energy vague, but the kind of psychic energy supposedly released in laughter is some new kind of energy, the energy of inhibition, about which we have few or no intuitions.

We have some idea of emotional energy building up and requiring release. There are times when we find it helpful to get outside and run, or punch a punching bag, for example, to "work off" our mounting anger at someone. The notion of releasing excess emotion, indeed, goes back at least as far as Aristotle's discussion of the catharsis of emotion in his *Poetics*. But the notion of a psychic energy used to inhibit feelings, which can be released when it is not needed, is not at all familiar. We do tell people "Try to control your emotions," but it is not at all clear that this commits us to the idea that there is a certain amount of psychic energy required for this control. The tension and uncomfortableness of containing one's emotions when they are very strong might simply be explained by saying that an urge is being frustrated; feelings calling for expression are not being expressed. If Freud wants to explain laughter in joking as the release of "saved" inhibitory energy, in short, he should first explain just what this kind of energy is and how we might measure, or at least detect, it. Until he does so, claims like the above that "the hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychological energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis" will not have much explanatory value.

If the notion of inhibitory energy is problematic, so is Freud's notion of the saving and subsequent discharge of this energy. In

Spencer's theory, remember, emotional energy builds up to a certain level, the person suddenly realizes that that energy is unnecessary, and then it is released in laughter. The energy released, that is, is actual energy built up in the nervous system. But notice how different Freud's notion of an "economy of psychic expenditure" is. If I tell a joke about television repairmen as a way of expressing my hostility toward television repairmen, then in that situation I am not suppressing my hostile feelings toward television repairmen. We might even accept Freud's notion of inhibitory energy for the moment and say that there is a saving of the inhibitory energy I usually would have expended if the topic of television repairmen came up and I did not reveal my feelings toward them. But even if we go along with Freud this far, why would we say that the inhibitory energy I do not have to expend here is *actual energy* in the mind or nervous system, which is "left over" for discharge through laughter? To accept Freud's account here we would have to say that when we express a hostile feeling instead of suppressing it, we "summon" the energy to suppress it anyway. When someone mentions television repairmen, that is, I always generate the psychic energy required to suppress my hostile feelings toward them even if I am not going to suppress those feelings but instead express them in a joke I am about to tell. But all this sounds counterintuitive. It sounds much more plausible to simply say that when I am expressing my feelings, I neither suppress them nor summon the energy to suppress them. Even if we want to talk about the inhibitory energy that is saved, then, we should not think of it as actual energy in the mind or nervous system. Saved energy is not real energy that has to be discharged—it's simply energy that was never generated. Freud's reasoning here is mistaken in the same way as a sales pitch I heard once in a television commercial for a company that sold swimming pools: "And with all the money you save on the pool and filter, you'll be able to buy our deluxe diving board."

Before we turn to consider Freud's explanation of laughter at the comic and laughter at humor, we should mention one last difficulty with his account of jokes. Though key parts of his theory suffer from vagueness, as we have seen, the theory has certain general consequences. If Freud is right that the enjoyment of jokes comes from the release of energy used to suppress aggressive and sexual feelings, then we should be able to predict that the people who will enjoy aggres-

sive jokes the most will be those who usually suppress their aggressive feelings, and that those who find sexual jokes the funniest will be those who usually suppress their sexual feelings.²¹ But in the small amount of empirical research done in this area, these predictions have turned out to be wrong. Experiments by Eysenck have shown that people who generally express their sexual and aggressive feelings tend to enjoy sexual and hostile jokes more than those who generally suppress their feelings. "This means," Eysenck comments, "that a person's 'typical' behavior extends to his preferences in the humor field, instead of 'repressed' trends finding an escape through humor, as Freud had maintained."²²

As we said earlier, Freud uses the notion of a saving of psychic energy to explain not just joking laughter but also his other two categories, comic laughter, and laughter at humor. We can consider these latter two categories one at a time.²³

Our experience of the comic, Freud says, involves an economy of psychic energy in *thought*. In watching a circus clown stumble in his attempts at some simple task, for example, the economy is based on our comparison of the effort the clown is exerting to accomplish the task, with the much smaller effort we would exert to accomplish the same task. The comparison results in a saving of psychic energy, which then is released in laughter. The energy saved is not the energy that would be used to carry out the clown's movements or our own; it is the energy used to *understand* these movements. To understand a physical movement, or indeed anything at all, according to Freud, we go through a "mimetic representation" of the motion, object, or whatever, in our minds. And in this mental activity we expend psychic energy, a great amount to understand something big and a small amount to understand something small. Our mental representation of the clown's movements, then, calls for more psychic energy than our mental representation of what our own movements would be in the same situation, and the surplus energy here is released in laughter. "These two possibilities in my imagination amount to a comparison between the observed movement and my own. If the other person's movement is exaggerated and inexpedient, my increased expenditure in order to understand it is inhibited in *statu nascendi*, as it were in the act of being mobilized; it is declared

superfluous and is free for use elsewhere or perhaps for discharge by laughter."²⁴

Freud applies his "economy of psychic energy in thought" formula to other kinds of comic situations, but I don't think that we need go into them because his basic formula is so implausible. First of all, the principle that in understanding something big we expend great amounts of psychic energy, whereas in understanding something small we expend only a little energy has absurd consequences. Using it we would predict that astronomers, for example, must expend huge amounts of psychic energy, whereas watchmakers must expend almost none at all.

A second problem lies in explaining the mechanics of the discharge of the "surplus psychic energy" in laughter. According to Freud we use one small packet of psychic energy to understand how we might perform the task the clown is performing, and we use a larger packet of psychic energy to understand the clown's movements. And somehow as this latter packet of energy is being summoned, in *statu nascendi*, as Freud says, it is compared with the smaller packet and seen to be larger. But even if we were to follow Freud this far, it would not follow that the difference in psychic energy was somehow "superfluous" and available for discharge, as Freud claims. The energy he is talking about here, remember, is not energy that is going to be used to perform a physical movement (that kind of energy might conceivably be summoned and then be found unnecessary); this energy is psychic energy summoned to *understand* our own imagined movements and the movements of the clown. And though there is a difference in the amounts of psychic energy (following Freud for the moment), nothing is superfluous—the small packet is used in mentally representing the small movements we would make, and the large packet is used in mentally representing the large movements the clown is making. Here Freud might respond that we do not really "carry out" the understanding of the movements of the clown; the psychic energy is superfluous because it is not used for understanding the clown's movements. But if we do not in fact understand the clown's movements and what they are intended to accomplish, then it seems impossible to see how we could realize that they were extravagant. And how would we come to form

any idea of what motions we might perform to accomplish the same task? If the psychic energy summoned to understand the clown's motions were not used to do just that, in short, the comparison Freud talks about would not occur.

Moreover, even if we ignore these problems and simply assent to Freud's claim that when the comic character expends more energy than we would, there is a saved energy of thought which is discharged in laughter, we face another difficulty. For there are many comic characters who make us laugh because they expend less energy, physically and mentally, than we would in the performance of some task. The comic-strip character Beetle Bailey, for example, is often funny just because he is so lazy and puts so little effort into whatever work he is doing. Freud tries to account for such cases by saying that in them there is still a difference between the energy the comic character expends and the energy we would expend, even though we would expend more, and that the comic effect depends only on the existence of this difference "and not on which of the two the difference favors."²⁵ But here Freud is changing the mechanics of his account significantly; if he wants to retain the notion that laughter is a discharge of superfluous energy, then he owes us an explanation of just what psychic energy is supposed to be superfluous.

And again, even if we let Freud get by with his expanded formula that we laugh because there is some difference between what the comic character does and what we would do, there are still comic cases not explained. Many comic situations involve a person trying to extricate himself from some predicament in just the ways any of us might, should we find ourselves in his shoes. The silent movies were full of such situations. When we watch Harold Lloyd get stuck out on a window ledge twenty stories above the pavement, and try various means of getting back inside, we can laugh even though he is neither extravagant nor lazy in his motions. Faced with such cases, Freud changes his account once more, and says that here we laugh because of a comparison, but not of the comic character with ourselves; we laugh because we compare the present state of the character to his former untroubled state.²⁶ But Freud's appeal to the difference here between the two states of the comic character will be plausible only if that difference somehow causes an excess of psychic energy in the person watching the comedy, an excess which is to be

discharged in laughter. The same is true of Freud's extension of his "comparison" formula to cover comic incongruities in general:

It is a necessary condition for generating the comic that we should be obliged, *simultaneously or in rapid succession*, to apply to one and the same act of ideation two different ideational methods, between which the "comparison" is then made and the comic difference emerges. Differences in expenditure of this kind arise between what belongs to someone else and to oneself, between what is usual and what has been changed, between what is expected and what happens.²⁷

Judging by his comments on comedy of situation,²⁸ Freud would probably say that by empathizing with the character in the predicament we experience a small expenditure of psychic energy when he is in the safe situation, and then a large expenditure of psychic energy when he is in the predicament. But even if this is true, and even if we could show that all cases of comic laughter involved two expenditures of psychic energy of different quantities, it has not been explained where there is any superfluous energy in all this, which gets discharged in laughter. Unless Freud can offer such an explanation, I suggest, we should either reject his theory of comic laughter, or else take it, in its fully stretched-out form above, as a version of the incongruity theory, ignoring the references to psychic energy altogether.

Freud devotes only a few pages at the end of his book to his third category, laughter in humor, but it is here, perhaps, that his notion of a saving of psychic energy is applied most plausibly. Humor arises, Freud says, "if there is a situation in which, according to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect in *statu nascendi*. . . . The pleasure of humour . . . comes about . . . at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: it arises from an economy in the expenditure of affect."²⁹ As an example of humor, Freud cites Mark Twain's story of his brother who was working on building a road. An explosive charge went off prematurely and blew him into the sky, so that he landed far away from the work site. At this point in the story, Freud comments, we have summoned concern and pity for the poor man. But the end of Twain's story is that when his brother landed, he was docked half a day's pay for the time he was in the air "absent from his place of employment."³⁰ As we listen to this twist in the story,

we realize that pity would be inappropriate here. "As a result of this understanding, the expenditure on the pity, which was already prepared, becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off."³¹ Other pieces of humor operate with different emotions (Freud uses the term "emotion" in a broad way to cover not only pity and anger but also tenderness and piety), but in each case the emotion is summoned only to be seen as superfluous and hence suitable for discharge in laughter.

Perhaps one reason why Freud spent so little time sketching his theory of laughter at humor is that it is virtually a retelling of Spencer's account of laughter in general. As such, it requires no critical comments except what we have already said about Spencer's theory. Relief of tension or built-up emotional energy, as we saw, is sometimes part of laughter situations, but cannot be taken for the essence of laughter, since many laughter situations do not include it. Freud might respond here that laughter that does not involve the release of emotional energy is not troublesome for his theory, because, unlike Spencer, he does not purport to explain *all* laughter as the release of emotional energy, but only laughter at humor. This response, however, could only serve to defend Freud's theory of humor (not his theory of jokes and of the comic), if he could tell us what distinguishes humor from the comic and from jokes without simply saying that humor involves the release of emotional energy. That is, Freud cannot *define* humor in terms of a release of emotional energy in order to defend his theory that humor involves a release of emotional energy; if he did so, he would be left not with a theory of humor, but merely with the tautology that situations involving the release of emotional energy involve the release of emotional energy.

If we had workable characterizations of Freud's other two categories of laughter—joking laughter and laughter at the comic—we might be able to figure out by a process of elimination what humor is for Freud, and then inquire whether all cases of humor do involve a release of emotional energy. But we do not have such workable characterizations, for, as with humor, Freud tries to distinguish joking laughter and laughter at the comic in terms of which kind of psychic energy is released in each of them. And as we have seen, we have good reasons for doubting the existence of a release of inhibitory

energy (his definition of joking laughter), and of a release of energy resulting from a comparison in thought.

Freud's complex relief theory, to conclude, is plausible only where the simpler relief theory is plausible, and that is in pointing out that laughter situations sometimes involve a release of nervous energy. Since the simple relief theory cannot stand as a comprehensive theory of laughter, however, neither can Freud's theory.