

# SOPHISTICATED AND SUPERIORITY: AN APPRAISAL OF ‘TRUE HUMOUR’

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we address *true humour*, which three luminaries in Western thought have already sought to resolve. They were, respectively, Joseph Addison in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, Arthur Schopenhauer in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Germany, and Luigi Pirandello in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Italy. First, we present their reflections about humour in general and their specific conceptions of ‘true humour’ in particular. Second, we offer a concise rendition of the three main theories of humour in Western philosophy, i.e., superiority, incongruity and relief. In the third and last place, we discuss true humour in the works of Addison, Schopenhauer and Pirandello, indicating how it constitutes an instance of the superiority theory of humour, despite this theory being, in modern times, the subject of extensive criticism. We conclude with some reflections on how the three main theories of humour can be combined.

## **Key Words**

Addison, incongruity, Pirandello, relief, Schopenhauer, superiority

## **1. Introduction**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the great French novelist Victor Hugo stated peremptorily that ‘[f]un is (like cant, like humour,) an exceptional, untranslatable word’. In all likelihood, only the Britons knew what all these strange words actually meant. Ironically, the Britons of Hugo’s day were also quite unsure about this matter, or at least about ‘humour’, to be precise. For one, the prolific author and Protestant dissenter, Edwin P. Hood, noted: ‘No doubt, we feel better what humour is than we can describe it’; even its ‘etymological sense’ can be of little help *vis-à-vis* finding a clear definition, although it points interestingly toward ‘good humour’ and ‘the incessant play of lively and natural feeling... which extends its sympathies to all be. The passing of time did not help much, in Britain and elsewhere. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the great G. K. Chesterton could still write:

Humour, in the modern use of the term, signifies a perception of the comic or incongruous of a special sort; generally distinguished from Wit, as being on the one side more subtle, or on the other side more vague. It is thus a term which not only refuses to be defined, but in a sense boasts of being indefinable; and it would commonly be regarded as a deficiency in humour to search for a definition of humour.

In the second half of the last century, the famous Italian writer and semiologist Umberto Eco observed, a tad sarcastically:

The greatest thinkers have tripped on the comical. They managed to define thought, being, God, but not why we laugh madly at a gentleman who is walking down the stairs and suddenly trips and falls. When they came to explain this, the greatest thinkers got entangled in a vast net of contradictions, whence they emerged, after huge efforts, with very thin answers.

In our brave century of computerised models and big data science, some researchers have, quite simply, given up. For instance, having found this ‘folk category’ too semantically frustrating, the linguists Phillip Glenn and Elizabeth Holt prefer dismissing it altogether as ‘a particularly useful, analytic category’, focussing instead on artificial yet more easily-measurable terms.

## 2. True Humour

It is therefore somewhat puzzling, and somewhat amusing, that there may have been thinkers who believed that they could determine not just what sheer 'humour' was, but indeed 'true humour' itself. They are not many, truth be told. Maybe just three and four, to be precise.

### 2. 1. Joseph Addison

Piling paradox upon paradox, the first recorded voice in this small yet distinguished 'true-humour' chorus is that of Joseph Addison, the father of the London's 18<sup>th</sup> Century *Spectator*, who admitted that it was 'much easier to describe what is not Humour, than what is'.

Nevertheless, Addison gave his best shot at this seemingly hopeless task by listing the 'Qualifications' of the 'Genealogy' that should apply to 'Humour', were humour ever to be conceived of as 'a Person' in flesh and blood. 'Truth' would then be 'the Founder of the Family', 'Good Sense' its son, who would beget in turn 'Wit, who married... Mirth, by whom he had Issue Humour.' *Qua* child of such an 'Illustrious Family', 'Humour' is said to have to be able to please the various relatives by adapting to their 'different Dispositions': 'sometimes' it should be 'grave' and 'solemn', 'sometimes airy... and fantastick', other times 'serious' or 'jocular'. Under any and all such circumstances, humour 'never fails to make his Company laugh'.

Addison also drew two parallel genealogical tables, opposing and distinguishing between 'True Humour', which 'generally looks serious, whilst every Body laughs about him', and 'False Humour', which 'is always laughing, whilst every Body about him looks serious.' The proof of the authenticity of humour would therefore be, as it has been proverbially the case for pudding, in the eating. False humour laughs aloud and ceaselessly but leaves its audience unimpressed. 'True humour', instead, makes people laugh while feigning gravity: 'Ridicule is never more strong, than when it is concealed in Gravity'.

Unfortunately, even eating the pudding may not be good enough a standard for appraisal. As Addison's collaborator Richard Steele observes: '(I)n Elections for Members to sit in Parliament', one can witness shrewd individuals who parade most successfully a degenerate 'Capacity for prostituting a Man's Self in his Behaviour, and descending to the present Humour of the Vulgar'. Among uneducated and unsophisticated sorts, unrefined 'Raillery' that 'is full of Motion, Janty and... Impertinence' does 'commonly pass, among the Ignorant,' as 'Humour.' And as Addison concedes, in a mirror-like reflection: 'It must be confessed that good Sense often makes a Humourist; but then it unqualifies him for being of any Moment in the World, and renders him ridiculous to Persons of a much inferiour Understanding.'

### 2. 2. Arthur Schopenhauer

The second voice in the tiny chorus is that of Arthur Schopenhauer, who thus went to show the world that Germans, *pace* much malign prejudice, might know a thing or two about humorous matters. Specifically, in his hefty masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer pens a definition of 'humour' (Germanised into *humor*) by way of opposition to 'irony': 'if... the joke is concealed behind seriousness, then we have irony. [...] The converse of irony is accordingly seriousness concealed behind a joke, and this is humour. It might be called the double counterpoint of irony'.

Britons had got it all wrong. Addison's earlier intuitions on 'True Humour' are turned upside down. It is now irony that makes fun by feigning seriousness, e. g., 'Socrates' *vis-à-vis* 'Hippias, Protagoras, Gorgias, and other sophists, and indeed often to his collocutors in general.' Humour, instead, is seriousness feigning fun.

Schopenhauer's distinction between irony and humour does not stop here, however. As he writes: 'Irony is objective, that is, intended for another', whether it is the audience or the adversary, so that they may eventually learn something. 'Humour', on the contrary, 'is subjective, that is, it primarily exists only for one's own self', who is 'in a serious and sublime mood', but at the same surrounded by an inescapable and inescapably silly or obnoxious 'external world... to which [the self] will not give itself up' and therefore retort by casting something deep and often gloomy in a 'joke'. Whereas '[i]rony

begins with a serious air and ends with a smile', the opposite is true of 'humour', e. g., Hamlet saying to the annoying Polonius, who was taking his leave from his prince with all sorts of pompous apologies: 'You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal, except my life, except my life, except my life.'

The sublime seriousness, or serious sublimity, lurking behind 'humour' and the work of the 'true humourist' are also said to be rooted in the very etymology of the term, insofar as 'humour depends on a special kind of mood or temper (German *Laune*, probably from *Luna*) through which conception in all its modifications, a decided predominance of the subjective over the objective in the apprehension of the external world is thought. 'Nevertheless, Schopenhauer complains that 'at the present day the word humorous [*humoristisch*] is generally used in German literature in the sense of comical [*komisch*]', so that cheap jokes and vulgar comedies are given 'a more distinguished name than belongs to them.' Yet, as he insists, 'humour is borrowed from the English to denote a quite peculiar species of the ludicrous,' namely one that 'is related to the sublime, and which was first remarked by them.' In Schopenhauer's view, 'it is not intended to be used as the title for all kinds of jokes and buffoonery, as is now universally the case in Germany, without opposition from men of letters and scholars.'

Whether this opposition ever emerged and got adequately discussed by Teutonic *literati* and academics, it is not clear. Certainly, the ordinary, unsophisticated use of 'humor' to refer to all sorts of funny things continues to this day, *pace* Schopenhauer's protestations. The history of natural languages, German included, is evidently full of ironies.

### 3. Luigi Pirandello

Having completed his doctoral studies in Germany and coming from the country that had civilised the Britons in the first place, Luigi Pirandello felt well-suited to tackle the issue of 'true humour' a third time, in a lengthy essay entitled *L'umorismo*. In point of fact, in the puny chorus that has been identified hereby, Pirandello is the voice who gets the longest and most articulate bits to sing solo.

Echoing Schopenhauer, Pirandello claims that it is possible to distinguish between 'humour understood in a broad sense, as commonly done, and not just in Italy;' and 'a narrower and particular sense, with well-defined and peculiar characteristics, which is for [Pirandello] the right way to understand it.' On the one hand, the 'much broader sense comprises... the comical in its various expressions'. On the other hand, there can be, as Addison had already written, 'true humour'. This more sophisticated and authentic version of humour is not confined to either modern or Anglo-Germanic literature, but it can be retrieved 'in the ancient as well as modern literature of every country, ... but in considerably lesser amount; indeed, in only few exceptional instances'.

The entire second part of Pirandello's essay is about the characteristics of 'true humour'. However, already in the first part, Pirandello anticipates a number of these characteristics or, at least, some instances of 'humour', if not 'true humour' proper. Thus, for one, Pirandello follows the German philosopher Theodor Lipps' lead in exemplifying 'humour' by reference to 'Socrates attending *The Clouds* at the theatre and laughing with the audience at how [Aristophanes] ridicules him'. For another, Pirandello highlights in a quote from Antonio Panizzi (an Italian literary critic who had lived and worked in England for many years) the description of Francesco Berni's Renaissance poetry as marked by 'the peculiar benevolence whereby [Berni] looks, with indulgence, ... upon human errors and ills.'

Well aware of its geo-etymological origins, Pirandello mentions the archetypally 'English... humour', i.e., 'the facetiousness of those who keep a grave demeanour while joking.' In its 'true' form, this 'humour' is then distinguished from 'art in general, as this was taught by rhetoric', because of its 'intimate, inaccurate, essential process that, inevitably, de-structures, dis-orders, dis-accords'. In particular, the medieval poet Cecco Angiolieri is singled out for the sharp contrast between his conspicuously light-hearted tone and the clear perception by the reader that 'Cecco never truly enjoys [, as he declares,] his torment, though he casts it in a clever and lively shape' that, according to Pirandello, is typical of 'Tuscan... popular' culture.

Humour is not 'irony', Pirandello claims, since the latter 'is almost always comical yet without pathos'. Instead, citing *verbatim* the literary critic Momigliano, Pirandello underlines how 'humourists' make fun of their own 'melancholy', thus displaying a 'painful dualism', which is 'the true consolation

of desperate people.' Above all, 'Don Quijote' is celebrated as an astounding specimen of 'humour's laughter', such that, 'the comical is overcome, not by the tragic, but through the comical itself.' As a result, when reading Cervantes' famed novel, '[w]e commiserate while laughing, or laugh while commiserating'.

'[T]rue humour', finally, is said explicitly and expressly to consist of 'the feeling of the contrary' [*sentimento del contrario*], i.e., sensing 'how every ridiculous event... is followed by deep bitterness, like shadows follow each and every one of our steps'. Thus, the personal credo of the Italian monk, philosopher and cosmologist Giordano Bruno is claimed to be nothing less than 'humour's motto': *In tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis* ['Happy in sadness, sad in happiness']. (Condemned as a heretic, Bruno was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600. Despite his motto, he did not laugh while being set ablaze.)

This deep psychological spring of humour is the reason why, in the second part of his essay, Pirandello can explain the enormous disagreement among philosophers, *literati* and psychologists about the exact characteristics of humour. According to Pirandello, this pivotal 'feeling of the contrary' can be elicited in all sorts of ways, by reference to all kinds of human circumstances, under all varieties of stylistic constructions, and by burrowing into all manners of 'contradiction', or incongruity, such as: melancholy and forgiveness; melancholy and resentment; ridiculousness and seriousness; illusion and reality; morality and calculation; intimate feeling and social convenience; habit and logic; consciousness and substratum (i.e., the unconscious); justice and injustice; hope and fear; our past selves and our present selves (as discussed by Pascal); busy daily life and life's emptiness or meaninglessness; genius and insignificance; etc.

Psychologically, the first step in the whole 'feeling of the contrary' is observing a person's 'alertness to the contrary', e.g., when we meet an old lady covered in 'make-up' and 'youthful clothes' in the vain attempt to look much younger. Such an odd sight is laughable and it is the very essence of 'the comical'. The second step takes place when the same person starts reflecting, however briefly, on the reasons why the old lady may be doing that, e.g., 'to pitifully convince herself that she may be able to get her much-younger husband to keep loving her'. At that point, the person at issue steps beyond the initial simple alertness, and well into 'the feeling of the contrary'. That is where 'the humorous' resides, according to Pirandello.

Artistically, as Pirandello comments on Russian, Italian, French, Spanish, German and British literary sources, 'reflection' seems to play a fundamental role in 'humorously' breaking, or interfering with, the 'spontaneous' imaginative inertia and compositional 'harmony' of the fictional creation, e.g., by way of 'intrusion', 'variations and digressions', but only as long as this 'reflection' is as 'spontaneous' and organic to the fictional creation as the original inertia and harmony.' [G]enuine humour' cannot arise from 'mere verbal contradiction', 'rhetorical decoy' or conceptual 'contrast between ideality and reality', but requires an 'immediate doubling' of any 'feeling' or 'thought... into its contrary', as though the feeling or thought immediately reflects back onto itself and traces in its opposite its own very point of origin.

According to Pirandello, this crucial 'doubling' [*sdoppiamento*] of feeling and/or thought does not occur in 'the comical, the ironic, the satirical', while it reveals itself in the creations of sophisticated 'humourists', who are artists possessing, within their heart, the bittersweet duplicity which allows them to create 'that which looks like them'. Unlike 'comics and satirists', humourists are not cold or stern judges, even in the face of 'theft' and 'murder'. Unlike 'sociologists', they grasp objectively the sad and troubling truths about living people, but also empathise with them. Unlike 'epic or tragic poets', humourists do not present 'heroes' facing bravely life's 'contrary and repugnant elements'. Indeed, humourists may 'dislike reality', experience all the painful contradictoriness of 'Being' and the meaninglessness of 'the naked life', and even enjoy 'unmasking' human mendacities and inconsistencies; but they are not 'angered', distanced, or ennobled by any of this, about which they say, humbly: 'that's life!' That's all that, *au fond*, 'humourists' can state in their 'deconstructing' works of 'humour'.

### *Digression*

A completely different interpretation of 'true "humour"'—the adjective being cast tellingly between quotation marks—was suggested by humour scholar Simon Critchley in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Specifically, Critchley equates "'true' humour' with personally and/or socially 'radical' or 'critical' forms of humour, e.g., corrosive comedies, biting satires and scathing jokes that are not 'reactionary' and that can lead to progressive 'change', whether individually or collectively.

### *Three Theories*

Back in the enlightened century of Addison and *The Spectator*, the British physician and philosopher David Hartley had already compiled many interesting observations on, *inter alia*, the fun that most people have at noticing the errors of unsophisticated 'children, rustics, and foreigners when yet they act right, according to the truly natural, simple, and uncorrupted dictates of reason and propriety, and are guilty of no other inconsistency, than what arises from the usurpations of customs over nature'.

Seemingly innocent, this widespread form of fun recalls a well-established tradition of philosophical characterisation of laughter *qua* mockery, derision, ridicule, or scorn. This tradition underlines the fun that we have, implicitly, whenever taking delight in our being better than someone else, or in being better at something than someone else, or at least in thinking that we are so. As a child uttered naughtily in a Scottish primary school in the mid-1980s: 'Keep Scotland clean; throw your litter into England.'

Implying a superiority of the Scots with respect to their southern neighbours, this childish joke is just one of countless instantiations of the so-called 'superiority' theory of laughter and, of late, humour. The superiority theory is however only one of three recurrent philosophical theories of laughter and humour, all three of which we are going to summarise concisely in the next few paragraphs.

## **1. Superiority**

The superiority theory focuses on the evil that laughter and, most probably, humour, seem to contain on many occasions, insofar as they pivot around temporary or lasting forms of social inclusion/exclusion, hierarchical separation, and/or outright disparagement. Examples of this sort of laughter are legion, whether we look at current literary sources or ancient ones. They include, for instance, schoolboys' pranks, soldiers' practical jokes, ethnic and group-based jokes, such as Austrian jokes in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany (and *vice versa*), blonde and Polish jokes in 20<sup>th</sup> century USA, *carabinieri* jokes in today's Italy, and Danish jokes in contemporary Iceland. Albeit somewhat *passé* and frowned-upon in polite circles, every nation has had its own recurring target/s and every mentally able, adequately socialised person can understand these jokes. Clearly, they would not count as 'true humour' *à la* Critchley.

The characterisation of laughter as mixing good (e.g., pleasure) with evil (e.g., humiliation) and its centring on mild or even forceful mockery of another, if not of oneself at times, have been predominant in the history of Western philosophy. Though short and sparse, many major thinkers have uttered comments on these negative connotations of laughter, e.g., Plato (*Philebus*), Aristotle (*Poetics*), Cicero (*De oratore*), Hobbes (*Leviathan* and *Human Nature*) and Descartes (*The Passions of the Soul*). In particular, Plato wrote of *phthonos* [envy] *qua* necessary malicious ingredient of all laughter. It is, however, Thomas Hobbes' much-later notion of 'sudden glory' arising from 'comparison' between the enjoyer of a joke and the butt of one that has become the scholarly shorthand for this theory of laughter and, in times closer to us, humour, which acquired its present meaning only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## **2. Incongruity**

As proud and as 'superior' to his fellow humans as the notoriously misanthropic Schopenhauer may have felt in real life, the definitive 1859 edition of his already-cited *World as Will and Representation* contains a chapter devoted to 'the ludicrous' articulating a very different theory of laughter and, nominally too, humour. Specifically, Schopenhauer formulated therein a version of the so-called 'incongruity' theory, which he explains as based on 'the opposition... between perceptible and abstract ideas'. Such an opposition generates 'paradoxical, and therefore unexpected, subsumption[s] of an object [or more] under a conception which in other respects is different from it. Accordingly, the

phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it,' e.g., juxtaposing a piccolo and a tuba as 'musical instruments'.

Concerning the birthplace of the incongruity theory itself, most scholars agree that it is probably a brief set of reflections penned by Francis Hutcheson in 1750, whereby Hobbes' idea of 'sudden glory' is forcefully criticised and 'laughter' is reconceptualised as a positive instrument that allows people to feel good with one another, reduce mutual 'resentment', and find ways to 'reconcile' after quarrels. Moreover, Hutcheson supplies instances of amusing association of contrasting ideas, e.g., puns and witticisms, all of which do not seem to imply any comparison or denigration. Though often cited in the literature about humour, it should be noted that Hutcheson's work focuses on 'laughter' alone and mentions humour solely *qua* 'humourists', and only once in the whole text.

Today, the incongruity theory enjoys much currency. Noël Carroll claims the incongruity theory to be the most popular today among philosophers. To boot, Terry Eagleton's reduces most contemporary 'minor' or alternative theories to it: 'the play theory, the conflict theory, the ambivalence theory, the dispositional theory, the mastery theory, the Gestalt theory, the Piagetian theory and the configurational theory.' In addition, linguists, not just philosophers, are keen to describe incongruity as a 'violation' of Grice's 'principle of co-operation' between speaker and audience, i.e., saying as much as needed of what is believed to be true and relevant, while avoiding 'obscurity... ambiguity... prolixity' and disorder. In other words, the heart of laughter and humour is to be found in a conflict between a normal mode of communication and an intentionally abnormal, hence funny, mode. Indeed, the normal mode is said to be presupposed also when 'mode adoption' occurs, i.e., when a person's 'first humorous remark' is followed by another's 'additional indirect humour'.

### 3. Relief

18<sup>th</sup> century Britain was also the birthplace of the third and most common theory of laughter and humour. Here we must recall the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, who was probably the first thinker to pen a substantial essay carrying explicitly in its title the fully de-medicalised, modern notion of 'humour'. In this so-called 'letter' of his, or 'essay on the wit and humour', Shaftesbury did not provide any exact definition of 'humour', but wrote repeatedly about it in conjunction with his defence of the willingness to 'rally with good grace and humour', i.e., to debate freely, fairly and frankly, but also respectfully, calmly and kindly, on any subject, not least the 'grave and solemn' ones related to religious 'bigotry'.

This sort of sophisticated, 'urban[e]' conversation is, according to Shaftesbury, an admirable but difficult art, which requires time and practice so as to 'refine itself' and turn into a conversational instrument of 'humour' that is 'agreeable' and worthier than mere 'play on words', 'puns' or 'scurrilous clowning.' As Shaftesbury states in his essay: 'It really is hard work learning to temper and regulate the humour that nature has given us so that it works as a more lenitive remedy against vice and a kind of specific against superstition and melancholy delusion.'

Nevertheless, Shaftesbury believed this learning effort to be a valuable and rewarding one, for mastering how to 'rally with good grace and humour' can teach us the 'big difference between trying to raise a laugh from everything and trying to discover in each thing what there is that can fairly be laughed at.' Engaging frequently in duels by 'wit and argument' is said to sharpen the mind, cause 'reason' to be 'tested' candidly and carefully, and condemn the intolerant 'zealot' to show his or her true colours in the end, namely 'harsh severity on one side and awkward buffoonery on the other.'

Refined raillery was also described as conducive to better health than its persistent avoidance. In what constitutes the first expression of what is known today as the 'release' or 'relief' theory of humour, Shaftesbury states that 'the natural free mental spirits of clever men, if they are imprisoned and controlled, will discover other ways of acting so as to relieve themselves in their constraint.' One way to seek relief is by speaking 'ironically', which Shaftesbury assumed the reader to know how to do (i.e., saying one thing but meaning another). Another way, if irony is not cautious enough a solution, is to 'redouble their disguise, wrap themselves in mystery, and talk in such a way that they'll hardly be understood' by their persecutors.

Either way, 'bantering' will go on, for it has been 'aroused' by the 'persecuting spirit' of the enemies of freedom. These foes, according to Shaftesbury, may force 'raillery' to 'go to extremes', such as irony and apparent nonsense, but they cannot extinguish it altogether, analogously to what happens to a living body that has been imprisoned and restrained:

What happens here is like what happens in strong and healthy bodies that are debarred from their natural exercise and confined in a narrow space. They are forced to use odd gestures and contortions. They have a sort of action; they do still move; but they do it utterly ungracefully. That happens because the animal spirits in such sound and active limbs can't lie dead, i.e., unemployed.

The relief or release theory of laughter was further developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Herbert Spencer, who argued that psychic energy, pretty much like any fluid, can build within a body, up to a certain limit, and thereafter seek release through particular physical pathways and related mental phenomena. Laughter, and the related mental experience of fun or amusement, is one of the channels whereby this discharge takes place. This theory was additionally enriched and made famous by Sigmund Freud, who argued that 'the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.' In short, we enjoy laughing because it spares us anger, embarrassment, or having to be polite, dutiful, reasonable, or even logical.

### 3.1. Three Reasons

Addison's account of 'True Humour' does not hide its elitist character at any point. Indeed, in an influential discussion of 'Mr Hobbs' theory of laughter, Addison acknowledges the many good reasons for upholding such a theory, while also distinguishing between sophisticated and unsophisticated versions of our 'secret[ly]' prideful laughter, and cautioning his readers *via* a cleverly selected quote from Martial, the so-called Roman 'father of the epigram', i.e., 'ride si sapis' [laugh if you are wise].

It is, however, the case of Schopenhauer and Pirandello that we want to focus on in this section. Both, in fact, are routinely associated with the incongruity theory of laughter and humour. The former because, as we have seen, states 'incongruity' to be the core-element of humour. The latter because, in addition to expressing and emphasising the many forms that the 'contradiction' originating the 'feeling of the contrary' can take, exemplifies extensively such forms in his plays, novels and short stories, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934.

#### 3.1.1. A Modicum of Callousness

Concerning the many cruelties of life, 'true humour' is deemed capable of arising in the face of all kinds of accidents, fatalities, errors and horrors, by both Schopenhauer and Pirandello. Indeed, the seriousness of these horrors is precisely that gloomy depth which feeds the sublime mood of the true humourist, insofar as these horrors furnish him or her with the pathos that, combined with superficial comicality, generates the 'incongruity' (Schopenhauer) or 'contradiction' (Pirandello) required for 'true humour' to emerge.

Significantly, Schopenhauer's chosen quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* deals with death in one of its most terrible modalities, i.e., suicide, which the titular character is contemplating before a baffled Polonius. In parallel, Pirandello's exemplification of 'true humour' refers to a desperately made-up and provokingly overdressed old lady, whose age conspires against her prospects of keeping her younger husband attracted to her. Besides, *Hamlet* is itself a tragedy, while dramatic age-uneven romances are far from unfamiliar, real as well as fictional. How can anyone even smile in amusement, not to mention laugh, when confronted with such tragic aspects of the human condition?

The answer to this question is, simply, a modicum of callousness. Indifference in the face of someone else's suffering is part of the picture, necessarily. In the realm of fiction, to which both *Hamlet* and Pirandello's oeuvre belong, the playwright or writer at work, if s/he wants to be successful in achieving 'true humour', must engage in conscious acts of active brutal cruelty, which consists precisely in creating adequate diversions to the depicted sufferings by way of comical counterpoints, so as to facilitate the lowering of compassion in his/her audience or, if compassion needs no lowering, its keeping it well where it is. In what is possibly the most famous philosophical work on laughter of

all times, Bergson's *Le rire*, 'The Comical' is said to necessitate nothing less than an 'anaesthesia of the heart'.

On their part, the spectators and/or readers must also engage in such an 'anaesthesia' to be able to enjoy the humorous piece as humorous. In other words, they must be willing and capable of going along with the humourist's strategy and allowing a personal departure from, or diminution of, one's own sympathetic feelings in the face someone else's suffering.

### 3.1.2. *A Modicum of Ferocity*

Perhaps unrecognised, sadism remains part of the picture too. Insofar as the comical component is pursued, even the most refined humourist is going to be actively sadistic, to some degree. On their part, all humorous persons enjoying the former's work are passively sadistic, since they find the comical component funny. Enjoyment of someone else's suffering, in other words, must be present as well. It is true that 'true humour' stresses sympathetically the sorrowful plight of the humorous character, or real person, more than the corresponding 'false' humour, which is concerned with laughter alone and, consequently, does not have to perform the same sympathetic operation. However, while there may be much tension or ambiguity between comicality and tragedy, the latter element is never allowed to triumph, lest humour, especially *qua* 'true humour', disintegrates.

Are you still unconvinced? It may be apt to reflect on the observations about these matters penned by a contemporary of both Bergson and Pirandello, namely four short paragraphs on 'the comical', 'wit', 'humour' and 'the grotesque' that lie buried inside a much larger work of aesthetics authored by the Spanish-American philosopher, poet and novelist George Santayana.

Superficially, Santayana endorses the incongruity theory of humour *de facto*, i.e., by finding 'juxtaposition... tension... complication' at its very heart, as well as *ipso dicto*, i.e., by calling laughing matters the offspring of 'incongruity'. Additionally, Santayana observes how 'humour' can be separated from 'laughing' by increasing 'the sympathy with which we are expected to regard' other people, or the 'reason' whereby we try to understand their 'foibles or absurdities'. If we proceed too far along the path of 'sympathy', we can change 'satire' into 'pathos' and fall 'out of the sphere of the comic altogether'. If we pursue the path of 'reason' too much, we end up doing something completely different than comedy or parody, e.g., psychology, which would simply stop 'amusing us'.

According to Santayana, humour *qua* artistic technique tries to strike a balance between the 'agreeable' yet unsympathetic observation of people's irrational behaviours (i.e., 'the satirical', which 'is closely akin to cruelty' *tout court*) and 'the luxury of imaginative sympathy,' i.e., 'the expansion into another life', which we find aesthetically rewarding, albeit 'painful' at times. As Santayana explains, the former 'satirical' element is quite simply necessary in order to preserve the 'sensuous and merely perceptive stimulation' lying at the heart of anything that is 'ridiculous', comical or funny. The latter element, instead, is required for the sake of ennobling the fun that we have, seeking 'touches of beauty and seriousness' and the 'aesthetically good'. As Santayana writes: 'The juxtaposition of these two pleasures produces just that tension and complication in which the humorous consists.' Therefore, 'the essence of what we call humor is that amusing weakness should be combined with an amicable humanity... We are satirical, and we are friendly at the same time'.

In acknowledging the 'cruelty' of 'satirical delight', which enjoys other people's '[d]efect and mishap' in the same way as 'blood and tortures excite in us the passions of the beast of prey', Santayana pays due credit to the superiority theory of humour. Consistent with this tradition, he claims something 'vulgar' and 'bad' to reside within 'the comic' at large, which gives us some degree of 'pleasure' by way of 'novelty... freedom... shock' and whatever intense 'stimulation' may be at work thereby, such as 'attracting our attention,... stimulating passions, such as scorn, or cruelty, or self-satisfaction (for there is a great deal of malice in our love of fun)'.

There may be a deep and unsettling truth to 'the suggestions of evil' associated with humorous fun because the bonds of sympathy are sometimes simply too strong, too profound and too entrenched within a person's bosom and self-understanding for any gaiety whatsoever to emerge. As Santayana writes: 'we never enjoy seeing our own persons in a satirical light, or any one else for whom we really feel affection.'

### 3.1.3 *De haut en bas*

On the one hand, Schopenhauer's humourist is a Romantic soul, a proud token of superiority. Hamlet and his select spiritual peers are capable of experiencing and grasping sublime, profound truths, which the common people around them cannot begin to fathom. It is only insofar as the superior types are forced to interact with the inferior ones that the serious truths grasped by the former come to be expressed in facetious words. The latter find these truths puzzlingly amusing or, as Polonius in Shakespeare's tragedy, amusingly puzzling. 'True humour' is, according to Schopenhauer, gloomy seriousness dressed deceitfully in gleeful levity, *pace* Addison's claims to the opposite—what an irony! The sublime soul, by performing this duplicitous operation, is actively ridiculing the people surrounding him or her, while the spectator or reader is invited to participate in the sophisticated act of clever denigration that is being performed. In this manner, the latter group can be reassured about the fact that they are not, as Addison would write, 'Persons of a much inferior Understanding'.

On the other hand, Pirandello's 'true humour' is also based upon a modulation of interpersonal superiority. The Sicilian dramatist is not so openly dismissive as Schopenhauer of those souls who cannot experience the same complex mixtures of emotions and thoughts that the sensitive, cultured humourist grasps instead. Nevertheless, Pirandello's humourist and, in all likelihood, the readers and spectators who can follow the humourist's subtle art, must necessarily apprehend the comical component at play, which requires recognising the obvious inferiority of the joke's butt, whom is then pitied, in a further instantiation of hierarchical positioning: *de haut en bas*. Pirandello's 'true humour' does not deny the hierarchy established by grasping the immediate comicality of another. Quite the opposite, his conception of humour requires hierarchy for 'true humour' to be possible and to commence unfolding. On top of it, it adds the implicit spiritual hierarchy whereby the same insightful person can also commiserate the comical 'other', whose inferiority is consequently twofold.

## 4. *Concluding Remarks*

'[T]he works of Freud' had made the relief theory of laughter and humour very popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the second half of the same century, the 'relief' theory and Freud's very status as a respectable, significant scientist lost considerable ground. As the curricula of most Western universities easily attest, psychoanalysis is rarely taught these days in mainstream psychology and medical schools. When it is taught, it is as part of a historical account of psychology, rather than as a valid scientific approach.

At the same time, the superiority theory has had very few supporters in the last few decades. Charles R. Gruner's 1997 book, *The Game of Humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*, is possibly the most articulate case to be mounted in its favour in recent years. As Gruner argues, *pace* Hutcheson and his heirs, the seemingly innocent incongruities of puns and witticisms are said to exemplify superiority, at least historically, for they arose within social games implying winners and losers. Moreover, taken in their pragmatic context, all comic incongruities entail a hierarchy between the clever jokester and the not-so-clever recipients, e.g., possible competitors, the targeted laughingstock, and/or the awed audiences. This is, in short, the argument that Gruner presents.

However, we believe that we do not have to choose one theory and discard the others. Rather, we should realise that each approach has its own focus, and a single jest can be explained by all of them at the same time: superiority regarding how the jest plays out in the social context; incongruity about the logical, physical and/or verbal clashes of the jest; and relief with regard to the way in which the jest is experienced by some, or all, of the participants. The three theories are by no means mutually exclusive and have been continuously mingled by thinkers who have dealt with laughter and humour. Understood as ideal types of humour, they can establish nonetheless a useful frame of reference, which can help students and artists to approach and analyse the biological, cultural, social, ethical, linguistic, logical and psychological factors that are relevant to humour.

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