

TWO RESPONSES TO BAUCHELLO AND ARNARSSON

1. 'True' Humour

Richard Prust

My guess is that most of us who have read Baruchello and Arnarsson's informative paper didn't bring to it any firm convictions about what, if anything, makes humour 'true humour'. But having read the paper, we can now see that the top contenders for that criterion— superiority, incongruity and relief— all seem plausible across a range of cases but leave out others that would also strike many as humorous. In the end, I found myself agreeing with the authors that we ought to look for a way to negotiate among the three, perhaps even a way to combine them.

There are those who would find this goal misplaced. They might advise us to think of 'humour' as a sort of basket-term, following Wittgenstein's advice to look for 'family resemblances' among examples of humour, not for some 'true' genus-difference definition. Yet, if we simply turn back the question that way, we miss the chance to explore something distinctive about human agency. Consider: we are the only species defined by having a 'true' sense of humour. That is, for us, having a sense of humour enables us to be fully who we are. We are being 'true' to ourselves most fully when we are in good humour.

How humour marks agency as personal should put discerning its nature high on the agenda of any philosophical anthropologist, so, as one such practitioner, let me venture an answer. I trust that we can all agree on two anthropological givens. First, we are multi-intentioned agents; we do many things at a time. These various actions of ours are all 'present' in the present-continuing sense of 'present'. I'm writing this sentence, I'm teaching a course in the philosophies of human nature, I'm functioning as a power-of-attorney for someone with dementia, I'm writing a book on how we characterise our actions, I meet weekly for dinner with an old friend. Second, not all of the various present-continuing involvements, undertakings, habits and relationships are for public consumption. The ones I listed are, but, for me as for you, there are elements of my active life that remain shielded from public view. It might be interesting to try to diagnose the cause of bifurcating our lives like that, but that is not our challenge here. Whatever the cause, it does seem true that we all feel the need to maintain a zone of privacy, and we resent intrusions into it. It's as though, by some logic elusive to us, there are incongruities among our public and private lives, and if we revealed too much of the latter, we'd undermine our public persona. In one of his journal entries from 1836, Søren Kierkegaard ponders this complexity in personal identity.

It almost seems as if it takes two individuals to form one whole man; this explains the enthusiasm for the prince or lord which the fool often displayed. When I say that it takes two to make one individual, I of course do not mean the knight's relation to his squires, for they did not play any independent role, but to the fool, who represented intelligence.¹

The medieval fool in an English court was given leave to entertain the prince and his guests by revealing and revelling in matters usually shielded from polite society. When the fool played his part well, he added to the general good cheer of the party. The honesty of his humour made his audience laugh at themselves and their incongruities. The targets of the fool's humour, like the targets of humour today, are all walking contradictions. Kierkegaard played the fool as a philosopher to reveal the contradictions besetting us all. We are wise and foolish, resolved and dissolute, *simul justus et peccator*, aesthetic and ethical, religious and rational. It's these contradictions that would make our public self ambiguous if they were entirely known, so we hold back from manifesting the odd bits that confound

¹ Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds., Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2 (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press), 1970, p. 249.

simple projection. We are walking mysteries, each of us masquerading as a simple, truthful, sincere identity.

Let me suggest that the fool's humour can be taken as a paradigm for 'true' humour.' When it was true, what it was true to were incongruities in the life of its target; it disclosed the universally confounding complexity in human agency, including that of the prince. The fool's humour disclosed personal truth, the truth that some of every person's intentions are incongruous with what he gives others to know.

The effect of the fool's humour—to give a glimpse of what makes his target truly human—enlivened the party. How so? By affirming to the butt of the joke that he was accepted in that company for who he was. In that sense, the fool's humour could be called a loving act, since only love accepts the entirety of someone's intentional life. In that sense, 'true' humour is divine comedy, the acceptance of others that engenders in them the courage to be the incongruous beings that they are. Defining true humour as what affirms and enlivens people defines false humour by exclusion; it's the kind that lays bare the incongruities to demean the person bearing them. Kierkegaard called that kind of disclosure 'demonic' humour.²

If we bear in mind both the positive function humour can have and the demonic edge it can wield, the traditional contenders for 'true' humour can be put into a synthesizing perspective. The view that 'true' humour always involves the incongruous is clearly congenial with ours. In fact, it expresses the fundamental insight into human agency our view is premised on, that the multiplicity of our tangle of intentions include some that are incongruous with others. Relief is just as plausible. Laughter relieves us in the sense that we feel a loss of tension. That loss can be so great that we 'double over,' unable to maintain our public posture. What Kierkegaard bids us to see is that the relief humour provides is not just the loss of tension but the loss of the contention that causes the tension. Some of our incongruous actions, if left unacknowledged, can tear us apart. Think of the tragedies of Euripides and how they derive their pathos from this strife. The only help for a tragic hero is the humour of a holy fool, for when the incongruity is accepted by another, in that interactive moment at least, there can be relief from the pretence.

This brings us to the third proposed essence of true humour, the sense of superiority the humourist is said to have over the target of his wit. I suggested above that the fool's humour accepts the target's foibles as a way of accepting him for who he is. This does not make him superior to his target. Quite the opposite, by presenting the incongruities displayed as part of the human condition, the fool puts everyone on the same level, for a moment at least. That's how he can make even the person of the prince intelligible.

But it must be admitted that not all humourists are creators of shared mirth. Some, perhaps most, do claim superiority by demeaning their targets. In fact, so much run-or-the-mill humour has a demonic edge that it sounds only faintly cynical to claim that it's the defining attribute. Being truly humorous is a touchy business. The court fool had to have his wits about him in both senses. His job was to amuse the prince's guests. To do this well, he was relieved of the usual protocols of court and courtesy and allowed to 'break the ice' by being funny much the way the master of a celebrity roast might today. But woe to that jester who steps over the line and hurts the guests. He then ceases to amuse, for then he plays at being superior rather than playing at being the fool.

You may be inclined to think that Kierkegaard's vision of humour as a divine comedy is too parochial to be the basis for a general theory. But his depiction is based on an insistence on the many-faceted and incommensurable structure of human agency, and that's an insistence personalists tend to share. That our incongruities need to be accepted by ourselves and others is not only the insight of Christian existentialists but of wise counsellors of many traditions. Acceptance of incongruity, to the relief of a troubled soul, is a healing and loving act, the emblem of divinity in action.

²Ibid., p. 263.

2: Animals and Practical Jokes*

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Someone said that man is the animal that laughs. Biologically that is true, because animals lack the muscles needed for making facial expressions, except that of baring their teeth, and have few abilities to make sounds with the mouth and throat. But does that mean that none of them can have something like a sense of humour expressed in practical jokes? The only evidence that I have for affirming that they can, is my encounters with our now deceased and much-loved cat, Plato, whose mother was a pedigree Abyssinian (yes: their ancestors were worshiped as gods) while his father was a local black tom. While he was still a young kitten, I noticed that sometimes when I had reached the top of the stairs in our house, I found him under my feet. One day when I appeared at the bottom of the stairs, I saw him poke his little head around the banister and then quickly withdraw it. Ha! Now I knew what he was doing. So, when I neared the top of the stairs I leant over the banister and said 'Boo' to make him jump.

More tellingly, when he was a fully grown cat and slept all day in the house and then went out between 5pm and 7pm, returning about 9pm for his saucer of milk-less tea (they can also tell the time), at 7am we heard miaowing outside our bedroom window. I tried to shoo him away but he wouldn't move. So I went to bathroom, filled the tooth-mug with water, opened the window, stuck my arm out and tipped the water on him. But he saw it coming and ran out of the way. The next morning he did the same but this time I threw the water at him and he didn't escape it. On the third morning he miaowed again. I looked out of the window and saw him sitting on the low wall on the far side of the front garden. He could not smugly grin at me but he surely felt some feline analogue of our success at playing a successful practical joke. He didn't do it ever again, nor anything like it. Thus, I conclude that we human beings are not the only intelligent beings who can at least play practical jokes.

** This is a revised version of my response.*

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