

## 20 John Morreall

Regardless of the problems faced by any particular version of the Incongruity Theory, it seems clear that in some sense or other amusement is a reaction to incongruity. In this essay Morreall suggests that we can better understand amusement if we contrast it with two other reactions to incongruity—negative emotion and “reality assimilation” (puzzlement at the strange). When we react to the incongruity with emotions like anger or fear, or else when we try to make sense of the incongruity, it disturbs us; we feel uneasy about it. This uneasiness stems in part from a feeling of loss of control, and it motivates us to regain control by doing something. In negative emotion, we try to change the incongruous situation or our relation to it; in reality assimilation, we try to change our understanding of it. Amusement contrasts sharply with both negative emotion and reality assimilation on all three counts. When amused, we are not disturbed by the incongruity; we do not feel a loss of control; and we are not motivated to change the incongruous situation, our relation to it, or our understanding of it. Once we see the special nature of amusement as a reaction to incongruity we can better appreciate its value in human life.

### *Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity*

In most European languages there is a word for “humorous” that also means “strange” or “odd.” The English word is *funny*—“funny ha-ha,” as we say, and “funny strange.” What the humorous and the strange have in common is that both involve incongruity: Some thing or state of affairs which we perceive, remember, or imagine, strikes us as out of place. But we do not find all incongruity funny; many incongruities evoke negative emotions like fear or anger instead. I would like to explore some of the ways we react to incongruity, with an eye to showing what is special about humor. I will use three main headings: Negative Emotion, Reality Assimilation (for our puzzlement at the strange), and Humorous Amusement.<sup>1</sup>

Before discussing these three reactions to incongruity, though, let's spend a moment on the idea of incongruity itself. I will use the term “incongruity” in a very general way to mean a relation of con-

flict between something we perceive, remember, or imagine, on the one hand, and our conceptual patterns with their attendant expectations, on the other. What we perceive, remember, or imagine is often easily assimilated into our mental flow. It is consistent with our understanding of the way things are supposed to be; it “fits our picture of the world.” We bite into a banana, for example, and find it soft and bland. But sometimes our mental input is not easily assimilated—or maybe not assimilable at all—into our understanding of the way things are supposed to be. What if the next banana you bit into were hard and granular and gave you an electrical shock?

Incongruous experiences such as biting into an electric banana would clash with our established, long-term conceptual patterns and expectations. But there can also be incongruity when much less established, merely short-term patterns are violated. In one psychological experiment, for instance, a person is asked to pick up a series of metal bars. All of the bars are of the same size and appearance, and the first several bars the person picks up are of the same weight. A pattern and so an expectation are set up very quickly, but then seven or eight bars along, the person picks up a bar that is much heavier or lighter than the ones earlier in the series. Jokes, too, may violate either long-term expectations about the world which we brought with us to our hearing of the joke, or short-term expectations built up as we listened to the joke itself.

The expectations which are upset in cases of incongruity also vary in their generality. Sometimes our expectations are very specific—your friend Diane has agreed to stop by at noon, and so when the door bell rings at noon, you open the door expecting to see Diane. If it turns out to be a man dressed in a moose costume, or even just the postman, that would be incongruous. If you had not made the arrangement with Diane, weren't expecting any visitors, and the door bell rang, then you would still have expectations in answering it, but of a more general kind—perhaps only the very general expectation that it will be a person in ordinary dress. In that case the appearance of the postman would not be incongruous, but the man dressed as a moose would still be. Indeed, a moose costume is almost always incongruous just because there is almost no situation in which we expect to see one. The nature of the incongruity in seeing a moose costume will vary, of course, with the expectations of the person who sees it. If you are expecting Diane and get a moose,

that's different from just expecting a *person* and getting a moose.

Now there are many more distinctions which can be made between types of incongruity,<sup>2</sup> but for our purposes we need not go into them. Rather than pursuing such distinctions further, then, let's use our general notion of incongruity—a conflict between some mental input and the framework into which that input is received—to explore the different reactions we have to incongruity.

### I. Negative Emotion

The first reaction to incongruity we will consider is negative emotions, such as unpleasant or painful emotions as fear, anger, disgust, and sadness. I'll be using the term "emotion" in its current sense to refer to episodic states and not long-term attitudes, and the analysis of emotion I'll be assuming is the fairly standard one outlined by Jerome Shaffer, according to which an emotion is "a complex of physiological processes and sensations, caused by certain beliefs and desires."<sup>3</sup>

If we understand incongruity in a suitably wide way as deviation from "the way things are supposed to be," then we can see incongruity as an aspect of the intentional object of all negative emotions which have an intentional object. In these negative emotions we are upset by a violation of what we see as the proper order of things, the order on which our expectations are based. Phrases like "the proper order of things" and "the way things are supposed to be" can be understood here in either a moral or a non-moral sense. Sometimes the state of affairs violating our expectations is caused by a moral agent, as when we react with anger at the mugger who has just assaulted and robbed us. At other times the upsetting state of affairs is a non-moral, natural event, as when we are saddened by a friend's dying of natural causes. It seems that we have a wider range of emotions in reaction to the actions of persons than we have in reaction to natural events, but as emotions the latter may be just as strong and upsetting as the former.

The incongruity to which I react in negative emotion, of course, need not be in someone else's actions or in some state of affairs outside of me. It may just as well be in a moral or non-moral condition of my own, as when I regret having treated a friend in a way that I now see was highhanded, or I feel embarrassed at discovering a hole in the seat of my pants.

In different negative emotions the kind of incongruity upsetting us varies. In fear the person or object is perceived as dangerous to us, in anger it is perceived as frustrating or harming us, in disgust it is perceived as intensely distasteful, etc. But in all negative emotions there is some kind of practical concern about the incongruity. Some situation that matters to us is judged not to be as we want it to be, and we are motivated to react in various ways that have the potential of improving the situation itself or at least our relation to it. The world has somehow slipped out of our control, and we are motivated to bring it back into control. In fear, for example, we are motivated to protect ourselves, in moderate fear by fleeing the situation, in stronger fear by covering our face and screaming for help, by "freezing" so as to escape notice, or by "playing dead." The physiological changes occurring in fear, such as the heightened muscle tension in moderate fear and the rigidity in extreme fear, equip us for these defensive actions. In anger, the motivation is not to flee or to protect ourselves, but to eliminate the person or thing frustrating or threatening us; and again there are bodily changes to equip us for aggressive action. The motivation in jealousy is to maintain our hold on what we have. Human jealousy can be seen as evolving out of the sexual possessiveness and territoriality of lower animals. Indeed, a sexually jealous man acts much like a jealous walrus, say, in keeping close watch on his mate and fending off intruders.

With some other negative emotions it is not as easy to discern the practical dimension; if we consider their evolutionary history, nonetheless, I think that a good case can be made for this dimension. Sadness, to take the emotion which may look least practical, is a defensive reaction like fear, only here some major injury or loss has already been suffered. The motivation in sadness is to prevent further injury or loss, and the action taken is to slow down and withdraw from normal activities. Human sadness, we might speculate, had its origins in the parallel reactions of lower animals to injury or sickness by immobilizing the affected part of the body and reducing bodily movement generally, the practical function of which is to conserve the animal's energy and facilitate healing. Separation from a mate, mother, or offspring may at first produce distress and motivate the animal to search for the loved one, just as it does in humans. But if the search is ineffective, or the loved one turns out to be dead, the animal may slow its activity and experience something akin to human sadness. The negative feeling tone of

sadness serves as a negative-reinforcer, motivating the animal to prevent a recurrence of separation or loss in the future, by sticking close to, and protecting its loved ones. In a social species like our own, then, sadness would have survival value for the individual and the species.

In tracing these human emotions back to their counterparts in subhuman animals, I am not claiming that human emotions today always do turn out to benefit the person in the emotional state. Some negative emotions like jealousy, indeed, seem more often than not to get in the way of successful human interactions. What I am claiming is that these emotions have a practical orientation, in that they evolved as a way of getting an animal to do an appropriate action in a practical situation, and that today they are still ways of handling situations in which the world has slipped out of our control, to bring it back into control.

## II. Reality Assimilation

Our second reaction to incongruity is puzzlement at the strange, or as Paul McGhee has called it, "reality assimilation."<sup>5</sup> Here the incongruity is treated not as emotionally upsetting, nor as amusing, but as a problem in cognitive processing, a problem in making sense of what has been experienced. Something has been presented to our consciousness that does not fit our conceptual schemata, and we try to make it fit. Consider, for example, Roentgen's discovery of X-rays, which came about while he was experimenting with cathode rays and he noticed that a barium platino-cyanide screen in the room glowed when the cathode rays were discharging. Here was a phenomenon Roentgen did not expect, and which he had no way of explaining. Of course, a scientist may have a predominantly practical attitude toward an experiment, and treat it as a plumber would treat the installation of a toilet bowl. And then anything out of the ordinary which happens may be viewed as frustrating the project, and so be reacted to with negative emotions. But for our purposes, let's assume that at least on the day he discovered X-rays Roentgen was the ideal scientist brimming over with sheer curiosity, so that he reacted to the incongruous glowing of the screen not with frustration or anger, but with that desire to understand which Aristotle told us we all have.

In contrasting the emotional response to incongruity with the response of reality assimilation here, I don't want to overlook their similarities. Indeed, I want to stress them for two reasons. First, these similarities show us something about how our cognitive processing, no matter how theoretical, is connected with our practical side. And secondly, most of the features that are shared by negative emotion and reality assimilation as responses to incongruity, will not be shared by our third response—humorous amusement. So by linking these first two responses, I'll have a foil for my treatment of humor.

The most obvious similarity between negative emotion and reality assimilation is that both involve an uneasiness or tension based on unfulfilled desires. Just as we speak of negative emotions as uncomfortable or distressing, we speak of "itching" or even "burning" with curiosity about the solution to a puzzle. The difference between negative emotion and reality assimilation here is that in the former we want the incongruous situation to be different, while in the latter we want our cognitive state to be different. In negative emotion it's the incongruous situation that bothers us, while in reality assimilation it is our not being able to fit the incongruous situation into our current schemata. If I opened today's mail to find a letter from an enemy threatening my life, for example, I would feel fear; what I would want to change is the situation of my life being in danger. But if I opened my mail to find \$1000 in cash from an anonymous source, I would probably react with reality assimilation, I would try to figure out who could have sent me this money. Here what I would want to change is not my receiving the money, but my ignorance about who sent it.

To a large degree the desires we have in negative emotion and in reality assimilation that cause our uneasiness, stem from a certain loss of control which we feel.<sup>6</sup> When we are attacked or we lose a loved one, our loss of control is obvious. But to be perplexed by some incongruity is also to suffer a loss of control. In such a state we stop what we are doing, for we don't know how to proceed. In Roentgen's case, for instance, the unexpected glowing of the screen disrupted his experiment. Anomalous events like this can be disturbing because they suspend our confidence in our ability to predict, and so to anticipate, what will happen next.

We don't have hard evidence about the evolution of reality assimilation in humans, but it seems reasonable to trace it to the

more general orienting reflex in lower animals. When faced with an unfamiliar situation, an animal typically stops what it is doing, freezing momentarily in surprise. Surprise serves as a way of clearing the cognitive channels for new input. The eyes are opened wide; the ears and other senses are directed toward the strange stimulus. Now the strangeness of the stimulus may be extreme, in which case the animal will experience fear. But if fear isn't aroused, the animal will probably experience curiosity instead. It will look and listen and smell, move around and perhaps manipulate strange objects, until features of the situation that the animal can recognize emerge, or at least until it develops a new schema into which this situation fits—until, in short, what was initially unfamiliar becomes familiar.

In this orienting reflex in animals, the "What is it?" question is always bound up with the "What is to be done?" question, and herein lies the practical value of orienting behavior. For an animal not to be able to make sense of some situation is for it not to know what action is appropriate, and so might be to risk harm, or at least to miss an opportunity for, say, a new kind of food.

In humans today the orienting reflex serves our basic survival needs in many situations, just as in the lower animals. But we have developed it, along with the rest of our cognitive repertoire, far beyond our daily practical needs. We want to make sense not only of the immediate situations in which we find ourselves, but of the wider situations we're in—all the way up to the cosmic level, and including the past and future as well as the present. Indeed, there seem to be no bounds to what human beings want to understand. Unlike our distant ancestors, we have the luxury of asking the "What is it?" question all by itself, without the "What is to be done?" question.

As in the orienting reflex of lower animals, our drive to figure things out when confronted with an incongruous situation leads to various kinds of activity. And here we have another parallel between reality assimilation and negative emotion. In negative emotion we act to change the incongruous situation, or our relation to it—by fleeing, attacking, withdrawing, etc. In reality assimilation we try to change our own cognitive state of puzzlement, our inability to relate the incongruous situation adequately to our previous experience. The latter may be attempted in several ways. We may just sit in our armchair and think about what we have experienced. Or we may engage in more observation, along with manipulation of the situation, as I'm sure Roentgen did after getting the anomalous glow on

his screen. We may also, of course, ask other people for an explanation. While some of these ways of trying to figure things out may involve little observable activity, reality assimilation responses to incongruity are frequently much busier than negative emotion responses.

Our first two responses to incongruity, then, are distinguished by the practical concern in negative emotion, which is lacking in reality assimilation; but in the other respects we considered, they are similar. The three main parallels I've drawn are these. First, in both negative emotion and reality assimilation there is an uneasiness based on our desires. Second, the uneasiness and our desires in both are due in part to our feeling a loss of control. And third, both lead to actions, in negative emotion action to change the incongruous situation or our relation to it, and in reality assimilation action to improve our understanding of the situation.

### III. Humorous Amusement

With these three parallels between negative emotion and reality assimilation in mind, we can now turn to humorous amusement, which, as I suggested earlier, is "odd man out" among our three reactions to incongruity. We can see this by considering the three features shared by negative emotion and reality assimilation.

In contrast to the disagreeableness of the incongruity typical of negative emotion and reality assimilation, in amusement the situation that does not meet our expectations is not disturbing to us, nor is the fact, if it is a fact, that we are unable to figure out the incongruity. We do not have desires for the incongruous situation to be different, or for our understanding of it to be different. Indeed, we enjoy the incongruity. Think again of Roentgen in his laboratory. Earlier I supposed that when the screen glowed, he reacted to this anomaly with puzzlement, taking it as a cognitive challenge. But, as I said, he might have reacted with anger at this hitch in his previously smooth-working experiment. In either case, however, the incongruity would not have been satisfactory to him. Yet suppose for a moment that the glowing struck Roentgen neither as an obstacle frustrating his experiment, nor as funny strange—an incongruity to be figured out, but instead as funny ha-ha. In that case, not only would he not have been emotionally or cognitively

upset by the screen's glowing, but he would have taken a certain delight in its incongruity.

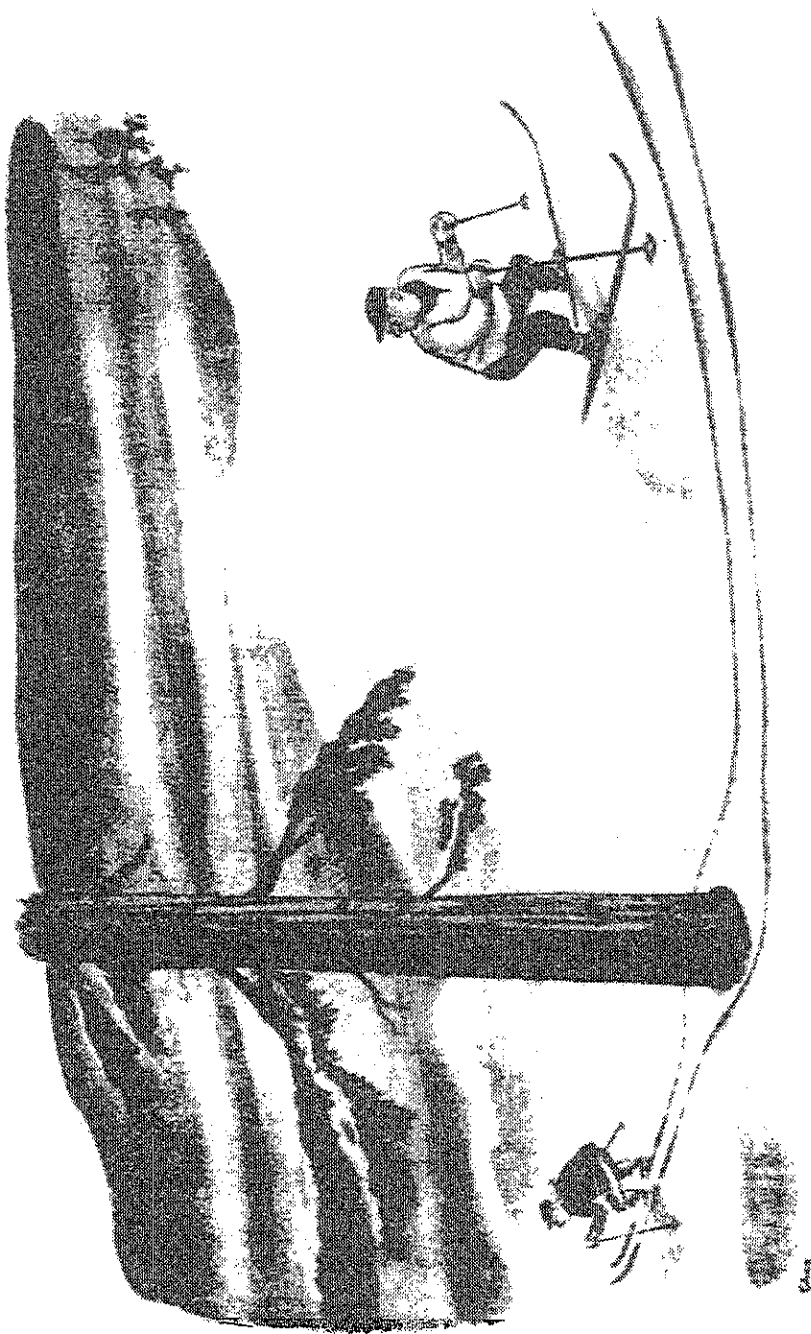
The second parallel I drew between negative emotion and reality assimilation was that the uneasiness we feel in these reactions is due in part to our loss of control. In amusement, on the other hand, we are not uncomfortable, in part because we do not feel that the world has slipped out of our control. When we are amused, just as when we react to an incongruity with negative emotion or reality assimilation, we were not expecting the anomalous state of affairs, and we may not know what is coming next; but in amusement none of this threatens our feeling in control. And because we do not feel a loss of control, it is not troubling to us that our expectations have been violated. Indeed, that is the source of our pleasure in amusement.

The third feature shared by negative emotion and reality assimilation, as we saw, is that both motivate us to change something—the incongruous situation or our relation to it, in negative emotion, and our understanding of the incongruous situation, in reality assimilation. And here again there is a contrast with amusement, in which we enjoy, and so are satisfied with, the incongruity. Because we enjoy the incongruity in amusement, our only motivation might be to prolong and perhaps communicate the enjoyable experience; we do not have the practical concern to improve the incongruous situation, nor the theoretical concern to improve our understanding of it. There is nothing to be done in amusement as there typically is in negative emotion and reality assimilation.

Let me go into more detail about the lack of practical concern and the lack of theoretical concern in amusement. We can begin with the latter. Here the main thing I want to establish is the most obvious—that it is possible to be faced with some incongruity and simply enjoy it, without feeling compelled to figure it out. I make this obvious point only because a number of respected philosophers and psychologists have portrayed human beings as creatures which automatically seek conceptual order and shun disorder. A tradition stretching back to Plato insists that it is perverse to enjoy the frustration of our reason, which is what enjoying incongruity amounts to. Santayana, for example, speaks of an “undertone of disgust” found in amusement at humor, and claims that “man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold.”<sup>7</sup> Among behavioral and social scientists, we can find the same

theme. “Anomaly is inherently disturbing,” writes Barry Barnes, “and automatically generates pressure for its reduction,”<sup>8</sup> In an influential work, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Leon Festinger uses the category of “cognitive dissonance” much as I have been using “incongruity,” for “nonfitting relations among cognitions”; his thesis is that cognitive dissonance, like hunger, automatically motivates us to reduce it and to “avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.”<sup>9</sup> If claims like these were true, there would be no such thing as the nonperverse enjoyment of incongruity. Most psychologists have not claimed that incongruity is never enjoyed, but many have gone almost that far and claimed that only young children enjoy incongruity per se. According to Thomas Schultz, for instance, children over the age of seven and adults require not just incongruity in order to be amused, but the resolution of that incongruity. Mature humor, that is, requires the fitting of the apparently anomalous element into some conceptual schema. Indeed, Schultz is unwilling to call unresolvable incongruity “humorous”—instead he calls it “nonsense.”<sup>10</sup>

Against all the views I have been describing, I would insist that not only do many adults enjoy incongruity for its own sake, but there is nothing perverse or immature in doing so. In looking for cases of the enjoyment of unresolved incongruity, we should not limit ourselves only to jokes, as many psychologists have done. In most jokes, it is true, the incongruity is resolved on some level. There is a punchline which upsets our expectations about how the joke would turn out, that is, but we get the joke because we switch to another schema in which the punchline fits. Not all jokes, however, have punchlines. Consider the joking question “What’s the difference between a duck with one of its legs both the same?” Here the fun lies precisely in our inability to switch to an alternate schema which turns the joke into a coherent question. Many single-frame cartoons are also based on unresolved incongruity. In the cartoon below by Charles Addams, for instance, our amusement is at the absurdity of the ski tracks passing around the tree.<sup>11</sup> To adopt the attitude of reality assimilation and try to figure out how those tracks could have been made is to lose the humor of the cartoon. Indeed, I chose this cartoon as an example here because when it was published in a German magazine in the late 1940’s, many readers wrote in with their “solutions” to it. Instead of being amused by the drawing, they took it as a cognitive challenge.



Drawing by Chas. Addams; © 1940, 1968  
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Humor based on unresolved incongruity can be found not only in jokes and cartoons, but also in real life. Consider, for example, situations in which we have overlooked the obvious, as when we spend several minutes searching for our glasses, only to discover that they are on our head.<sup>12</sup> To be amused by such situations, we do not need to be able to resolve their incongruity—indeed we usually find them funnier if they seem simply absurd. Most actions we call “wacky” or “zany,” too, such as donning an outlandish mask, are gratuitously silly, offering no resolution of their incongruity.

Even in nonabsurd humor, moreover, where we can switch to some alternate schema into which the incongruity can be fit, the new schema will itself be incongruous in some way or other. Consider Henny Youngman's classic one-liner “Take my wife—please.” The first three words set us up to think that Youngman is referring to his wife as an instance of something or other. But then we are hit with the “please,” which is incongruous because it suddenly turns the sentence into a request. In switching from the citing-an-instance schema to the request schema, we resolve the speech act incongruity, but the request itself—to get rid of Youngman's wife for him—is incongruous. And it is this incongruity of hostility coming out of nowhere that makes the joke amusing. If the joke had simply relied on the switch from one speech act to another, where all the incongruity could be resolved by switching to the schema of the second speech act, it would fail as a joke. “Take my wife—this letter” or “Take my wife—to the doctor's tomorrow,” just because their incongruity is completely resolvable, are not funny. Getting a joke, in short, even where it involves switching of schemata, is never the complete elimination of incongruity.

Having seen something about the lack of theoretical concern in amusement, then, let us turn to the lack of practical concern. To be amused by some incongruity, I suggest, is to have a measure of practical disengagement from it. The person who can enjoy the incongruity in a situation is, as we often say, “distanced” from that situation. Suppose, for example, that the incongruity is a deficiency in some machine, say a car that won't start. In order to find the futile sound of the cranking starter motor funny, we must not feel an urgency about this deficiency being corrected. Or if the incongruity is a moral fault in ourselves or another, we must not be morally concerned with it in order to find it amusing. That's why, of course, we object to people who “laugh off” criticisms about, say, their habitual

drunk driving—if they are sincerely amused by such a habit, that shows that they don't care about the serious consequences of their actions and see no urgency about changing their actions.

The incompatibility between finding an incongruity funny and having practical concern toward it shows up even in the physiology of laughter as contrasted with the physiology of negative emotions. In moderate fear, for instance, there are incipient movements of flight, and the bodily changes prepare the person for fleeing. In anger there are incipient aggressive movements and the bodily changes prepare the person for violent action. But in amusement there are no incipient movements of larger actions to come, and the physiological changes are not a preparation for any action. Indeed, heavy laughter is incapacitating—breathing is interfered with and less oxygen is taken in, muscle tone is lost, our legs may buckle and we may be reduced to a spasmodically writhing heap on the floor. Our bodies here show that we are disengaged from the world of doing and caring.

We often exploit this incompatibility of amusement with practical concern to block negative emotions. We joke with people to reduce their fear or anger, and to cheer them up when they are sad. By inducing amusement we can keep people from getting emotional, or can often break the hold which existing emotions may have on them. There is even a psychiatric technique called "paradoxical therapy," used to help people overwhelmed by emotional problems, in which the psychiatrist presents the problem in such an exaggerated form that the patient finds it funny.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. The Value of Humor

With this understanding of the contrast between amusement and our other two reactions to incongruity, we are now in a position to see the value of humor in human life. We can proceed by considering how humor might have evolved in our species. The practical value of negative emotions and reality assimilation has already been traced, and it is easy to see how they would have enhanced the chances of survival of early humans. But how is it that a reaction to incongruity like amusement, which is incompatible with negative emotions and reality assimilation, could also have had survival value? How could a reaction that involved the *enjoyment* of in-

congruity, and that disengaged early humans from practical and even theoretical concerns, have become part of human nature?

I think that part of the answer to these questions lies in the connection between our enjoyment of incongruity and our drive to seek variety in our cognitive input. This drive is not unique to humans, but is found to some extent in all animals with sophisticated nervous systems. Rhesus monkeys will perform a task like bar pressing just to bring about more complexity in their environment, for example, to see photographs instead of a field of plain light, or movies instead of photographs.<sup>14</sup> The nervous systems of mammals, indeed, require varied stimuli even to develop properly. (The brain of a young rat or child deprived of sensory stimulation even weighs less than the brain of its normal counterpart.) If children and adults are deprived for long of varied sensory stimulation, and cannot generate their own stimuli in thought, memory, or imagination, they get very uncomfortable. Variation in stimulation is important because we quickly get acclimated to an unvarying stimulus, so that its effect as a stimulus diminishes. An unvarying sound or smell, for instance, can fade into the background of our attention so that we no longer realize that it is still there.

The survival value of our seeking variety in our cognitive input is that it makes us curious, exploring creatures, and thus motivates us to know our environment better. Improved knowledge of our environment, of course, enhances our ability to cope with it and so to survive. An animal, at least a higher mammal, that was without curiosity, would be at a disadvantage in the evolutionary struggle.

Our craving for varied stimulation would not serve us well, however, if it were unconditional. An animal that sought just any new stimulation whatever, that would, say, walk into a bear's cave or jump out of a tall tree for the sheer novelty of the experience, would not last long. And so the drive for stimulation must be counterbalanced by the avoidance of situations known to be dangerous, and by caution in situations that are so unfamiliar that the animal does not know what actions are appropriate in them. This counterbalancing is achieved largely by the reaction we know as fear, which involves the shunning both of stimuli recognized as dangerous, and of excessively novel stimuli. (Fear of the excessively novel has been neglected in the traditional philosophical literature on fear, but in sub-human animals it is perhaps the more common kind.)

*Novelty vs. fear*

The optimum kind of novelty for animals and early humans, then, would be novelty that is not threatening, both in that it involves nothing known to be dangerous, and in that it is not so extreme as to be disorienting. What is desired is freshness in experience where one's overall control is maintained. And here is where humor comes in, for it involves a kind of novelty—incongruity—under the desired circumstances. When we are amused our expectations are violated, but we do not feel in danger or otherwise practically concerned, and we do not feel disoriented. Incongruity which arouses practical concern, as we have seen, produces fear or other negative emotions; incongruity which puzzles us may produce fear, or where the concern is theoretical rather than practical, reality assimilation.

Incongruity is not only a kind of novelty, but a sophisticated kind. For something to strike us as incongruous, it must not only be different from what we are used to, but it must violate our conceptual patterns. To appreciate incongruity we have to be capable of more than mere animal surprise—we have to be able to compare things and events, at least implicitly, with things and events of the relevant kind. A creature capable of humor, then, needs to have a system of mental representations, especially a system of class concepts. It also needs to be able to operate with its concepts in a non-practical, non-theoretical, in short a *playful*, way, so that the violation of its conceptual patterns won't evoke negative emotion or disorientation. Subhuman animals, with the possible exception of the few apes that have been taught language, are not capable of humor because they lack either class concepts, or the ability to operate with these concepts in a non-serious way. Even where they have something like a conceptual system in an organized set of expectations, they cannot enjoy the violation of their expectations, because their thinking is only about the practical aspects of their current situation. Humans are capable of humor, by contrast, because our thinking is abstract, both in being general and in transcending both practical and immediate considerations.

Because of the abstract thinking in humor, it would have appeared late in evolution, long after emotions (which were already present in subhuman mammals), and probably along with language. It seems reasonable to speculate that language and humor would have developed in a mutually reinforcing way, just as they do in children today.<sup>15</sup> Language is especially important for

*Language*

creating humor: by far the most common, most versatile, and most convenient ways we have of creating incongruity for enjoyment are through language, and it is impossible to imagine non-linguistic creatures developing humor nearly as sophisticated as humans are capable of. We can, of course, introduce incongruity into our experience by producing incongruous things or causing incongruous events to occur, as in many practical jokes. Most of our joking, however, is done not by manipulating things but through language. With language we can create incongruous fictional situations, exaggerate features of real situations, call things by the wrong name or put them in an inappropriate category, say the opposite of what our listeners know we believe, and so on. We can also create incongruity by playing with the morphological, phonological, and semantic features of words themselves, as in puns.<sup>16</sup> Early humans probably stumbled onto these and other humorous techniques, but the delight they experienced would have motivated them to remember and develop them, and so to develop their linguistic abilities. In this way they would have developed their cognitive abilities generally (it is no accident that "wit" originally meant all our mental powers), and thus become more rational. Rationality, of course, has been the master survival strategy of our species.

Humor today goes hand in hand with our rationality, too, and not just rationality in the sense of cognitive sophistication, but also in the sense of a rational attitude toward the world. Part of this attitude is viewing things critically, and people with a well-developed sense of humor naturally look at things critically, because they are looking for incongruity. To be able to create humor, too, they need to cultivate imagination so as to be able to view things from unusual perspectives and create incongruous fictions. This imagination combined with a critical view of the world gives those with a rich sense of humor a flexible, versatile perspective and helps them overcome narrowness in their thinking. One of the most obvious traits of unimaginative, doctrinaire people is their lack of humor.

Space does not permit me to trace all the other values of humor here,<sup>17</sup> but we can see the essence of most of them if we think of humor as our higher-cognitive functions operating in a play mode. At the most general level, the value of humor is that it liberates us from practical and even theoretical concerns, and allows us to view the world from a higher, less entangled perspective, as a kind of aesthetic field. This change from our more ordinary frames of mind



is a luxury to be sure, but in creatures like us, with our seemingly infinite capacity to worry about the past, present, and future, perhaps a necessary luxury. Were we able to experience incongruity only in serious ways, our lives would be fraught with urgency. But because we can also enjoy incongruity, our lives have a certain play to them, "play" in the obvious sense, and also in the older sense of slack or looseness. Voltaire said that heaven had given us two things to allow us to get through life: hope and sleep. Kant, who otherwise seems pretty dour, wisely added a third—laughter.

#### V. Amusement and Other Forms of Enjoying Incongruity

Having presented a quite general characterization of amusement in contrasting it with our other two reactions to incongruity, let me close by going into a bit more detail about the kind of enjoyment amusement is.

As Mike Martin has pointed out,<sup>19</sup> enjoying incongruity is not a sufficient condition for amusement, for we enjoy incongruity in other ways than by being amused. We may enjoy the events in a Richard Brautigan novel, for example, for their sheer bizarreness, without finding them funny. And we have other aesthetic categories besides the bizarre that cover non-amused forms of enjoying incongruity, most notably, the fantastic, the grotesque, and the macabre. Here I won't develop a full account of the difference between amusement and these categories, but let me suggest a sketch for such an account, putting to use our typology of reactions to incongruity.

Our enjoyment of the grotesque and the macabre, to begin, is in part a reaction of negative emotions, most importantly repulsion or disgust, and sometimes fear. There is a traditional question here—a generalized form of the paradox of tragedy—about how we could enjoy or find satisfaction in such emotions, but I can't go into that puzzle here. Suffice it to say that under certain circumstances, most notably in our appreciation of fiction, experiences of repulsion and fear can be enjoyed.<sup>20</sup> The grotesque may be treated as the wider category here, and the macabre as a subcategory involving our repulsion and fear of things associated with death, especially corpses.

Our appreciation of the bizarre and the fantastic, to take our other two categories for non-amused enjoyment of incongruity, is

marked by a reaction of reality assimilation. What we enjoy here is being surprised and puzzled by strange things and situations. The difference between the fantastic and the bizarre is one of emphasis. As the name suggests, in calling something "fantastic" we are relating it to imagination—the imagination of the artist who created it, and our own imagination in recreating and trying to make sense of it. In appreciating something as bizarre, the emphasis is on the phenomenon itself and its strangeness. Nobody need have created the bizarre, and even where someone did, there need be no even implicit relation of the bizarre to someone's imagination. What we enjoy is simply the recalcitrance of the phenomenon to fit into our ordinary conceptual patterns.

What distinguishes the amusing from the grotesque, the macabre, the bizarre, and the fantastic is an absence of negative emotion or reality assimilation. Something which is just amusing—without overlapping these other categories—is something we enjoy merely for its incongruity, without the practical concern of negative emotions or the theoretical concern of reality assimilation. It is something we approach with a playful rather than a serious attitude, not caring about the incongruity but simply letting it delight us.

These distinctions are often difficult to apply to actual cases of enjoying incongruity, because the amusing often overlaps the grotesque, as in black humor, and overlaps the bizarre, as in Brautigan's novels. And different people, of course, can react in quite different ways to the same incongruity, some being amused by it, some feeling repulsion or fear, and some puzzling over it.

That we can enjoy incongruity at all, as I noted earlier, is quite an accomplishment in *homo ludens*. That we can enjoy it even when it evokes repulsion or puzzlement, shows how profoundly aesthetic a species we are.

#### Notes

1. Whenever I use the term "amusement" it will be in the sense of amusement at humor and not the broader sense of passing one's time in an agreeable manner, as by, say, playing cards.

2. See my *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), ch. 6.

3. Jerome Shaffer, "An Assessment of Emotion," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1983), 161-62.

4. See my "Humor and Emotion" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1983), 297-304, for a fuller account of the practical dimension of emotions in general.
5. Paul McGhee, *Humor: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1979), p. 57. My use of "reality assimilation" is narrower than McGhee's.
6. Barrie Falk has recently developed a whole analysis of fear on the idea of loss of control: ". . . to fear a situation is to take it as exhibiting the fact that the world is out of one's control." "What Are We Afraid of?" *Inquiry*, 25 (1982), 186.
7. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Scribner's, 1896), p. 248. For other philosophers' attacks on humor, see my "Humor and Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy*, 15 (1984), 305-317.
8. Barry Barnes, "The Comparison of Belief-Systems: Anomaly Versus Falsehood," in Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 190.
9. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 3.
10. Thomas Schultz, "A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humor," in Tony Chapman and Hugh Foot (eds.), *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (New York: Wiley, 1976), pp. 12-13.
11. The editors of *The New Yorker*, where this cartoon originally appeared, kindly gave me permission to use it.
12. This example is from Merrie Bergmann's paper "How Many Feminists Does it Take to Make a Joke?" Other examples from real life of humor based on unresolved incongruity can be found in my *Taking Laughter Seriously*, pp. 11-12.
13. See Viktor Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, tr. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1960), pp. 204-15; Allen Fay, *Making Things Better by Making Them Worse* (New York: Hawthorn, 1978).
14. Richard Restak, *The Brain the Last Frontier* (New York: Warner, 1980), p. 29.
15. See also McGhee, *Humor*, pp. 120-23.
16. See *Taking Laughter Seriously*, pp. 69-82, for more linguistic forms of humor.

17. See *ibid.*, ch. 7-10.
18. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), p. 179.
19. Mike W. Martin, "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 23 (1983), 74-85.
20. See my "Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature*, 9 (1985), 95-103.