

SOME THOUGHTS ON FUNNINESS

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I believe that what is funny about things admits of no logical explanation. That is, I see serious category problems in trying to explain *why* something is funny. Extensionally defined, *what* is funny is what produces the urge to laugh. And laughter, I want to claim, is an emotional/physiological response causally related to previous states of the person laughing.

Intensionally, it would seem that the property of being funny follows from no other properties asserted of a state of affairs. We may ask why a person laughed at a given event and receive the answer that he thought it was funny. If we then follow up with the question, "Why did he think it funny?" we will get no satisfactory rational answer. We might get a satisfactory causal sort of answer, about prior conditioning to laugh. But we will never, I believe, be given a convincing set of reasons for believing that something is funny. We accept the person's claim that the event is funny to him on the evidence of his laughter and other sincerity criteria, but not on the basis of an explanation which in any sense *proves* the funniness of the event.

So in this short paper I want to defend the truth of the following claims: (a) that funniness is only definable as that which produces the urge to laugh, (b) that it is categorically inappropriate to say of something that it is not funny because of moral reasons, and (c) that laughter in typical contexts does not constitute an expression of belief.

I

I take it as a first premise that being laughed at by someone is a sufficient condition for something's being funny. It is not a necessary condition, however, since one may have the urge to laugh but suppress laughter. It is, I think, a necessary and sufficient condition for something's funniness that someone have the urge to laugh at it, where I take the urge to laugh to be a feeling phenomenologically evident to all as that which immediately precedes sincere laughter. Further, I take all descriptions of the sort, "X is funny" to be elliptical for "X is funny to P at t," where X is an event or state of affairs, P is a person, and t is a time.

I am not particularly worried about counterfactual and unobserved events. And I further want to restrict this analysis to cases of an urge to laugh *at* and not merely the urge to laugh. Thus I do not deal with tickling, lunacy, and laughter as a nervous response. What I am thinking about is laughter that "takes an object" and thus is connected to at least a minimal

cognitive response to that which is laughed at. But this is certainly not to say that the urge to laugh itself should be thought of as a cognitive response. It is rather an emotional/physiological response which may be caused by a cognitive event.

Given these sorts of premises, it should be clear that I recognize no inherent restrictions on what is funny. Something is funny just in case someone has the urge to laugh at it. And I see no possibility of giving a satisfactory independent characterization of the funny. It seems clear that there is no set of essential properties which an event must possess to be funny. Thus I think the classical analyses, to the extent that they try to isolate such properties, are bound to fail. Whether or not a person finds a situation humorous seems clearly to depend more on the mental and physical states of the person than on the nature of the situation. Yet there do not appear to be even a set of mental/physical properties (except the urge to laugh) which are sufficient for something's being found funny by a person. It is surely true that the classical analyses have isolated properties of events which are frequently laughed at, e.g., pompousness made silly, but they, nevertheless, have not provided analyses of conditions sufficient for something's being funny.

If the preceding remarks are accepted, then it must also be accepted that the sole criterion of something's *not* being funny is the universal absence of the urge to laugh at it. Since this claim leads to more controversial ones, let us examine it more closely. First, we should note the apparent lack of contraries and contradictories to 'funny.' Aside from 'unfunny,' there appear to be none. We can imagine counterexamples to all the candidates, such as 'sad,' 'serious,' 'depressing,' and 'painful.' That is, we can imagine situations which would be appropriate to describe as simultaneously funny and sad, funny and depressing, and so on. Scenes from Charlie Chaplin —especially "City Lights"—come to mind here. By this, I mean to say that a particular person at a particular time may find a given event both funny and sad, or may simultaneously laugh at a situation which he takes very seriously. I think mixed emotional responses are common enough that we do not need to pile up examples.

Thus *prima facie*, at least, there appear to be no concepts which, if applied to a situation, entail its unfunniness. This would seem to hold as well for moral notions. To describe a situation as immoral does not entail that it is not funny. Indeed, one of the few areas of humor which seems nearly universal is that concerning sexual immorality. And it is rather difficult to think of a common moral failing which has not been repeatedly exploited for laughs by the most respectable of playwrights. In short, the history of comedy simply does not support the claim that immorality entails unfunniness.

II

Given the urge to laugh as the criterion of the funny, we should be surprised to find a moral concept with logical relations to funniness. The urge to laugh is an involuntary response to a situation and not the sort of thing that represents a choice. It seems to me entirely inappropriate to demand of someone that he give a rational account of his urge to laugh in a particular circumstance—like the demand that he give such an account of his urge to tremble in fright. We simply never do talk people in or out of the urge to laugh; it is a spontaneous reaction.

Thus I want to say that any moral claim of the sort, "P ought not to have the urge to laugh at X," is categorically inappropriate. And given my definitions, I would make the same claim about statements of the form, "P ought not to find X funny." And finally, I believe the same thing holds for statements of the form, "X is not funny because it is racist, sexist, cruel, degraded, and otherwise morally offensive." Quite simply, if funniness is a function of the urge to laugh and if the urge to laugh is not voluntary, then what is funny is not properly subject to moral judgment.

Now, might one use such a sentence to explain one's own failure to be amused at something? That is, can it make sense to say, "I don't find X funny because it is racist"? What sort of report would this be? Is it based on the empirical fact that I never happen to have the urge to laugh at things with racist overtones? Such an empirical generalization does not serve, I would say, as a reason for choosing not to be urged, even if such choice were possible. It also happens that I never have had the urge to laugh at any sentence about Rudolph Carnap. But as a mere empirical generalization, this explains nothing. Certainly, it would not be appropriate to cite as an explanation for why I failed to laugh at a colleague's joke about Carnap. Further, it would seem that the claim really involved here is of the sort: "I choose to have no urge to laugh at X because X is racist." And to this I can only say that I have no idea what it would be like to choose to have or not have urges. Urges simply seem to be the kinds of things that *happen to me*, not the kind that are *done by me*.

III

What has been said about the urge to laugh does not apply directly to actual laughter. Since laughter is suppressible, it can be considered a voluntary act. Thus it is not categorically inappropriate to assert, "I did not laugh at X because it was racist." If my laughter in some context would be taken as an implicit endorsement of racism, then I ought to withhold laughter. There are all sorts of contexts in which one's laughter may be interpreted in ways which are painful to others. Surely these are contexts

in which laughter ought to be withheld. This is not to say, however, that all these are contexts in which it is appropriate to interpret laughter as implicit endorsement of racism, sexism, or other morally offensive positions. Rather, I would contend that sincere laughter (i.e., yielding to the urge to laugh) entails no proposition other than perhaps that something is found funny. That is, from the fact that P laughs at a racist joke it does not follow that P has any racist beliefs or approves of racism in any way—just as from the fact that P does not laugh at a racist joke it is illegitimate to infer that P has no racist beliefs and does not approve of racism. Laughter is non-propositional—like crying, blushing, and trembling.

And even though incorrect inferences of the sort mentioned above are quite frequently drawn, I see no reason to believe that people only find humorous that which they approve of or believe in. Through empirical observation, we might find this to be true of some particular person, in which case I would think we would have discovered a rather remarkable fact about him. For most of us, such a correlation of urge and belief simply does not hold any more than it holds between other sorts of urges and relevant beliefs. For example, if I cry at the death of another does it follow that I believe this death morally wrong? Or if I get angry at a racist joke, does it follow that I am not a racist? It is quite easy to imagine situations in which a person would get angry at the telling of a racist joke but still be a racist, for example, one who gets angry at the mere mention of a particular race.

Thus I want to say that while situations often do require laughter to be suppressed for moral reasons these are nearly always situations in which the mistaken belief is held that laughter signifies acceptance of some proposition. (Note: the only cases I can imagine where this is not the case are those in which everyone has at least tacitly agreed that some person's laughter will serve as a sign or signal of something. E.g., if the emperor laughs during the performance of the comedy, the actors will be well paid.) Thus not only is the urge to laugh a morally neutral event, but further, actual laughter ought to be seen as such in most contexts. And only when misinterpretation is likely does laughter take on a moral dimension. If one's laughter could be expected to cause pain or humiliation in another, then one ought not to laugh even though the urge is felt. I grant this, but not without reservations, for it sounds suspiciously like an argument from a few years back. Then it was said that legal demonstrations against the war should not occur since they would be misinterpreted by members of the administration who would thus resolve to prosecute the war with greater fervor. The two cases are different to be sure, but the question remains about what lengths are morally required to prevent mistaken interpretations by others of one's actions.