Humour and Release

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The third article in this series looks at Freud's attempt to explain humour and laughter in terms of the release of 'psychic energy'.

At the beginning of this series, I observed that it was common to divide theories of humour and laughter into three main categories, focusing, respectively, upon incongruity, superiority and the release of energy. We have reached the third of these themes, and it brings us to one of the best known of all thinkers to have written on humour: Sigmund Freud. Freud is by no means the only figure in this theoretical tradition, but owing to space constraints, I will concentrate exclusively on his view, since his is probably the most elaborately worked out, and certainly the best known, 'release' theory. [1] My focus will be upon some major aspects of his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious.*

Freud's view of joking

'The techniques and purposes of jokes'

Freud's account opens with a discussion of the 'techniques' and 'purposes' of jokes. Joke 'techniques' are basically just different kinds of joke, such as various kinds of 'double meaning' (e.g. *doubles entendres* and the literal interpretation of metaphors). Common to all 'techniques', Freud claims, is 'condensation' or 'economy'. This shows itself in various ways: sometimes a joke may express a thought particularly succinctly; in other cases, such as in *doubles entendres*, one gets two meanings for the price of one.
What of the 'aims' or 'purposes' *(Tendenz)*of jokes? Here, Freud's distinction between 'tendentious' and 'innocent' jokes is important. In the latter, 'the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve such an aim' (p. 132). So tendentious jokes are ones with 'purposes'; innocent jokes are those without. In general, the pleasure derived from innocent jokes is less than that derived from their tendentious cousins. Hence, Freud claims, tendentious jokes *'by virtue of their purpose*, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access' (p. 140, my emphasis).
And what *are* these purposes? There are two kinds: a tendentious joke is 'either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)' *(ibid.)* Tendentious jokes thus satisfy purposes, such as aggressiveness, which could not, in civilized society, be satisfied in any other way. What opposes the satisfaction of these purposes is either an *external* factor, such as the higher standing of the person one is addressing and hence the possible dangers of getting on the wrong side of him, or an *internal* impulse such as an inner aversion to undisguised hostility or coarse smut. When a joke 'comes to our help', one of two things happens. If the obstacle is internal, the joke allows the obstacle to be overcome and the inhibition is, at least temporarily, lifted. Alternatively, if the obstacle is external, by making a joke we avoid having to create the psychical inhibition that would otherwise be necessary to restrain ourselves.

'The mechanism of pleasure'

In either creating or maintaining such a psychical inhibition, we are told, some expenditure of psychical energy is required. When pleasure is obtained from a tendentious joke,

'it is therefore plausible to suppose that *this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved'* (p. 167). The psychical energy that has thus been saved can be discharged in laughter. Freud's important principle of 'economy' has re-emerged; the secret of the pleasure derived from tendentious jokes is *'economy in expenditure on inhibition or suppression' (ibid.)*

But if, as Freud believes, tendentious jokes 'are able to release pleasure even from sources that have undergone repression' (p. 185), how exactly is this achieved? Take the urge one might have to insult a particular person. What would ordinarily prevent this urge from being acted upon, Freud suggests, might be the constraints put upon one by a feeling of propriety. Suppose, however, that instead of a bare-faced insult, a good joke can be made 'from the material of the words and thoughts used for the insult' (p. 187). In this way, a relatively small amount of pleasure may be generated from the *technique* of this joke. Freud thinks that this pleasure-the 'fore-pleasure' (p. 188)-acts as an 'incentive bonus' *(ibid.)* by means of which the 'suppressed purpose can ... gain sufficient strength to overcome the inhibition, which would otherwise be stronger than it' (p. 187). Once repression is thus overcome, and the veiled insult or sexual reference made, the 'incomparably greater' *(ibid.)* amount of pleasure derivable from the *purpose,* as opposed to the technique, can be released. Hence, overall, 'with the assistance of the offer of a small amount of pleasure, a much greater one, which would otherwise have been hard to achieve, has been gained' (p.188).

In summary, to create or maintain an inhibition against sexual or hostile urges, we are told, we need to expend psychical energy. But when a tendentious joke allows us to circumvent the obstacle which stands in the way of the satisfaction of the sexual or hostile urge, the yield of pleasure we thereby obtain corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved, and this saved psychical energy then becomes available for discharge in laughter. In other words, the listener 'laughs with the quota of psychic energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off' (p. 201). Also, 'the expenditure economized corresponds exactly to the inhibition that has become superfluous' *(ibid.).*

So much for tendentious jokes; what about the innocent variety? Freud explains this, too, in terms of our economising upon psychical expenditure. For instance, in plays upon words, such as those of the *double entendre,* he claims that our psychical attitude is focused upon the *sound* of a word rather than its meaning. We may therefore suspect, Freud thinks, that we save upon 'psychical work' in so doing.

Jokes, 'the comic' and 'humour'

In the last section of his book, Freud distinguishes 'jokes'-the topic of his discussion so far-from 'the comic' and 'humour'. 'The comic' is illustrated by 'the comic of movement' (p. 249)-such as the exaggerated antics of a clown-and 'the comic which is found in the intellectual functions and the character traits of other people' *(ibid.).* In the former case, says Freud, we recognize that these movements are exaggerated and inexpedient, and laugh as a result of comparing such movements with those which we ourselves would have made in similar circumstances. Freud thinks that the amount of energy that accompanies the process of thinking 'is larger when there is an idea of a large movement than when it is a question of a small one' (p. 252).

Thus in thinking of exaggerated movement, I expend greater 'thinking energy'. And hence, in comparing the exaggerated movement with my own:

my increased expenditure in order to understand it is inhibited *in statu naseendi,* as it were in the act of being mobilized; it is declared superfluous

and is free for use elsewhere or perhaps for discharge by laughter. (p. 254)

Freud illustrates his second subclass with the kind of 'comic nonsense' *(ibid.)* produced by ignorant exam candidates. Here, we have precisely the opposite of the comedy of movement; *a mental* function, as opposed to a physical one, becomes laughable 'if the other person has *spared* himself expenditure which I regard as indispensable' (p. 255), as in the case of the incompetent examinee. Overall, we are told that 'a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones' (p. 256). On the other hand, if this balance is reversed, 'we are filled with astonishment and admiration' *(ibid.).*

Freud next discusses 'humour'. The greatest obstacle to the emergence of the comic is 'the release of distressing affects' (p. 293): pity, anger, pain, etc. In contrast, 'humour' emerges in situations where ordinarily we would release such an affect but where for some reason that affect is suppressed *in statu nascendi.* So the pleasure of humour arises 'at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: it arises from *an economy in the expenditure of affect' (ibid.).* For example, take gallows humour (e.g. St Lawrence who, while being burned at the stake, requested: 'Turn me over; I'm done on that side'). The affect we would ordinarily feel here is pity, but as soon as we understand that the condemned man is capable of seeming unconcerned at his fate, our pity 'becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off' (p. 295). 'An economy of pity', Freud tells us, 'is one of the most frequent sources of humorous pleasure' *(ibid.).*

In summary, then, the pleasure derived from jokes, the comic and humour, is all explicable in terms of an *economy in expenditure :*on inhibition in (tendentious) jokes; on 'ideation' or thinking in the comic; and on feeling in humour. And, as we might expect from Freud, there is an important link with childhood:

> All three are agreed in representing methods of regaining from mental activity a pleasure which has in fact been lost through the development of that activity. For the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy-the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life. (p. 302)

Problems with Freud's theory

'The purposes of jokes'

1 Let us begin our critique of Freud by recalling his claim that tendentious jokes generally produce more pleasure than innocent ones. Three points are worth making in connection with this. Firstly, this exemplifies the Freudian tendency to base his theory on a general view of humans which overlooks individual diversity. He ignores the vast differences in individuals' senses of humour. Many will be able to derive tremendous pleasure from innocent jokes; especially if we bear in mind something Freud admits: that innocent jokes need not be trivial; an innocent joke may 'be of great substance, it may assert something of value' (p. 134). Freud overlooks the pleasure, neither lustful nor hostile, which is obtainable from such jokes, as their hearer recognizes a profound truth.

Also, Freud unjustifiably assumes both that the amount of pleasure derived from a joke is quantifiable, and also that it can be measured by the amount of *laughter* it generates. These assumptions are unwarranted, and ignore the many different levels of sophistication in jokes, and the corresponding different levels of pleasure taken therein. A more sophisticated

pleasure - such as appreciating particularly clever wit - is not necessarily expressed in laughter. And yet we would be mistaken to think that this necessarily means the pleasure derived from such wit is less than that derived from the *double entendre* which, maybe due to social pressures to laugh at such jokes in certain company, one may greet with raucous laughter. Laughter is simply not an accurate measure of the degree of pleasure taken in a joke.

Thirdly, Freud invalidly moves from the idea that tendentious jokes generally give more pleasure than innocent ones, to the claim that therefore 'tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access' (p. 140). This does not follow; Freud is reasoning from what generally *tends* to be the case, to a conclusion about the entire class of tendentious jokes. But what about tendentious jokes which are perceived as poor? Such jokes, by virtue of being tendentious, have purposes, which highly amusing innocent jokes do not. So if the greater pleasure usually derived from a tendentious joke is to be explained precisely in terms of purpose, what goes wrong in a poor tendentious joke: why, despite its having a purpose, is it poor?

Freud's answer would presumably be that, in such a case, the technique of the joke is insufficiently good to offer sufficient 'forepleasure' to circumvent the obstacle which stands in the way of the satisfaction of the lustful or hostile instinct. But Freud's understanding of 'technique' renders this answer inadequate. We observed that Freud's 'techniques' are essentially just kinds of joke. For instance, there can be both innocent and tendentious 'double-meanings'. But what happens if someone prefers a witty innocent 'double-meaning' to a 'Carry On' *double entendre?* According to Freud, both jokes have the *same* technique: 'double-meaning'. In addition, the tendentious joke has a purpose. So how can the innocent joke possibly afford more pleasure?

Clearly, in order to do so, it must have some quality which its tendentious rival lacks. Perhaps it is 'cleverer'; wittier. The 'cleverness' of jokes is an important factor in their appreciation, which Freud has overlooked. A 'doublemeaning' joke might appear 'clever' due to the sheer *originality* of the double-meaning used. One might prefer such a joke to its tendentious competitor on the grounds of this originality; something whose humorous potential one has never before seen tapped, as opposed to yet another sexual innuendo. If so, the different receptions our two jokes receive cannot adequately be explained in terms of technique. Or at least, not without a far more sophisticated understanding of 'technique'; one that takes into account factors such as the appreciation of a joke's 'cleverness'.

2 We can also question the limitations Freud places on the purposes of tendentious jokes; that they must be related either to, broadly, sexual or aggressive instincts. [3] There seems no reason to accept this. In particular, Max Eastman makes the point that sex and aggression can themselves be 'ideal standards against which some people are in suppressed revolt'.[4] For instance, take this Rodney Dangerfield gag:

I said to my wife, "All things considered
I think l'd like to die in bed".
She said, "What, again?"

A plausible explanation of the pleasure taken by males in such a joke might be in terms of empathy with Dangerfield, and the attainment of a momentary release from a certain social pressure to live up to an ideal of sexual potency.

3 There is a further problem with Freud's analysis of hostile jokes. Why accept Freud's claim that a joke is a 'safe' way of venting a hostile urge? The problem with this claim is as follows. To be on the receiving end of a witty 'put-down' is often worse than being insulted outright. With an outright insult, there is no sense of being outwitted; but witty

repartee is a much-admired quality. To to be on the receiving end of such repartee, therefore, can have the effect of making one feel one has been made to look ridiculous; the idea that it is a witty comment *at one's expense* will often be uppermost in one's mind. Therefore, for the joker who makes fun of his 'superiors', this joking is a far more risky business than Freud allows; there is no telling what resentment this may foster in someone who cannot 'take a joke' (even if they recognize the need to appear to do so), and hence of what damaging repercussions may result from their taking their revenge at a later date. The interesting question that arises from this is what it is about the pleasure derivable from joking which sometimes makes such a risk seem irresistible.
Yet to this Freud offers no answer.

'The mechanism of pleasure'

4 There are big problems with this crucial aspect of Freud's theory, which seems highly speculative. It is hard to see what would count as evidence for the claim that psychical expenditure is needed to create or maintain inhibitions; or that the pleasure yielded from tendentious jokes 'corresponds to the psychic expenditure that is saved' (p. 167). *Why* is the latter, especially, supposed to be 'plausible'? As Wittgenstein said of Freud's theory of dreams, 'the reason why he calls one sort of analysis the right one, does not seem to be a matter of evidence'.5 The reader could be forgiven for feeling similar puzzlement about his theory of joking. Take, for instance, one of Freud's classes of innocent jokes; that of 'faulty reasoning', absurdity and nonsense. One of the pleasures of nonsense verse is in trying, and failing, to make sense of it. Intuitively, it would seem that trying and failing to do so would involve greater psychical expenditure than instantaneously making sense of something in the usual way. Yet this is precisely the opposite of what Freud claims; in enjoying nonsense, we are supposed to save psychical energy by being released from the constraints of having to think logically or put thoughts together so as to make sense. Moreover, John Morreall has pointed out that part of Freud's argument in this regard that concerning the comedy of exaggerated movement-is downright incoherent. Remember that in laughter at the comic we are supposed to save 'thinking' energy. The energy summoned to understand an exaggerated physical movement, Freud claimed, is greater than that required to understand the movement one would need to make oneself in order to achieve the same end. So the increased expenditure required to understand the first is rendered superfluous and discharged in laughter. But in what sense is it superfluous? In order for the comparison upon which Freud's case depends to take place, the energy required to understand each movement must actually be expended; otherwise we would have no way of knowing that the movement at which we laugh is exaggerated.[6] So while Freud's line of reasoning previously seemed merely implausible, in the case of the comedy of exaggerated movement it seems totally incoherent.

5 The notion of 'fore-pleasure' is also problematic. We can question, as does Richard Wollheim, how the fore-pleasure is of sufficient strength to make sure that an inhibition is lifted. 7 Fore-pleasure, remember, is that derived from the technique alone of a tendentious joke. Freud admits that this is a 'small amount' (p. 188) of pleasure. And yet we are asked to believe that it is sufficient to overcome, at least momentarily, deep-rooted inhibitions. It is very difficult to see why. And given the importance of the notion of forepleasure in Freud's account, this is a major problem.

'The comic' and 'humour'

6 As well as the objection made, in (4) above, to the coherence of Freud's explanation of the

comedy of movement, there are further problems with his discussions of 'the comic' and 'humour'. His determination to explain everything in terms of differences in psychic energy makes his discussion of the comic in character look reductionist and highly implausible. The claim that a character is comic to the extent that he expends, in comparison to oneself, more energy on the physical and less on the mental, is unsupportable. Who expends more energy on the mental, via his daydreaming, and is comic because of it, than James Thurber's Walter Mitty? Moreover, Freud's example here, of laughter at the ignorant exam candidate, is particularly bad. Precisely the opposite of what Freud claims is true. If the pleasure is derived from an enjoyment of one's superiority over those more ignorant than oneself- a form of *Schadenfreude*, basically - this may be heightened if the person at whom one laughs puts in considerable mental expenditure in order to produce the 'comic nonsense' which constitutes his answers. The candidate who tries hard and produces rubbish is more comic than he who, realizing he cannot do the exam, spends just half an hour and n1inimal psychical expenditure writing his 'comic nonsense' and then, with a carefree attitude, walks out. Indeed, the candidate who has studied hard and yet is finding the exam difficult, although he will do much better" than the carefree student, may even feel a sneaking 'astonishment and admiration' for his lazier, more laid-back colleague, whereas this is what we are supposed to feel for those whose mental expenditure is greater than our own.

7 Furthermore, to stress differences in psychical energy is to explain inadequately cases of 'the comic' which depend upon shared experiences and predicaments in life. Often a character is comic not because of any difference between the amount of his mental 01" physical expenditure and ours, but because he finds himself in the same predicament that we have done. 01" alternatively, as Morreall suggests, when we see him in a predicament which we have never experienced, we laugh precisely because we recognize that if we *were* in such a predicament, we would have no alternative but to act in the same way as he does. Consider a farce in which a semi-naked lover, hiding on a window ledge until the coast is clear, rinds himself locked out and has to find a way of reaching safety. If we find this amusing, this can be explained either by *Schadenfreude,* or by empathy with the lover and his predicament, depending upon our attitudes towards adultery and to that particular character. There is no reason to suppose, however, that our amusement depends in any way upon perceiving any difference between the lover's psychic expenditure and what our own would be.

8 Finally, the problem of psychic energy emerges yet again in Freud's explanation of 'humour'. We mentioned gallows humour. In such cases, contrary to Freud's claim, it is not that pity is built up and then becomes unutilizable. Indeed, a genuine feeling of pity will *prevent* the appreciation of gallows humour; to appreciate such humour, we need to be sufficiently 'distanced'. This condition is only fulfilled if little or no pity is built up. And if no pity is generated in the first place, we have the problem that the energy upon which Freud claims we 'economize' is not actually existing energy.

Summary and conclusion

I have tried to show that there are major problems with Freud's theory. It is worth recapping the most important objections at this point. These included questioning his assumption that innocent jokes necessarily afford less pleasure than tendentious jokes. This may be true as a generalisation, but largely ignores crucial factors about individual differences in sense of humour; is naively trusting about the reliability of laughter as a measure of 'funniness'; and makes a logically unwarranted inference from the general to the particular. Also, we pointed out that jokes can serve more 'purposes' than the venting of lustful

and hostile instincts, two of these additional purposes being release from the pressures of sexual potency and aggressiveness as cultural ideals; the converses of the very pressures which Freud stresses. On the 'mechanism of pleasure', we noted the speculative nature of Freud's theory. (Wittgenstein again: 'Freud is constantly claiming to be scientific. But what he gives us is *speculation* – something prior even to the formulation of an hypothesis' .[8]) Freud offers no evidence to support some of his most central claims, such as why we should assume that the pleasure derived from a joke should be equivalent to a saving in psychical energy. There seemed no good reason to accept Freud's claim that when we hear a joke, we summon inhibitory energy in case it is needed, and then realize it is superfluous and discharge it. Furthermore, when applied to areas such as the comedy of exaggerated movement, this notion seemed incoherent. Indeed, Freud's explanations of 'the comic' and 'humour' generally seem rather contrived-all stemming from his determination to mould the evidence to fit his hypothesis, desired conclusions simply being read into his material.

One of the key problems with Freud springs from his taking the concept of 'energy' too literally, and trying to give an account of laughter within which psychical energy is understood as one would understand other kinds of energy. Indeed, since this energy is supposed to be dischargeable as laughter, Freud is supposing that, when an organism has a surplus of stored energy, there is a tendency for it to be converted to a kinetic form. This supposition leads him inappropriately to *quantify* psychical energy. As Wollheim remarks, Freud 'sometimes treated propositions about energy and Hs liberation as though they were descriptions of observable or even introspectible phenomena'.[9]

However, provided we think of psychical energy in less literal terms, the central idea behind Freud's theory has a definite plausibility. In general, it may be said that we operate under a number of constraints, and that laughter' can act as a 'safety-valve'. We are under pressure to conform to social norms and moral codes; to obey the laws of reason and logic; even the need to be serious for most of the time can be felt as a constraint. We can see that it makes sense to claim that humour which breaks these rules can afford us a release, albeit transitory, from these constraints. In an essay on 'dirty joke' seaside postcards, George Orwell writes: 'Whatever is funny is subversive, every joke is ultimately a custard pie ... A dirty joke is ... a sort of mental rebellion, a momentary wish that things were otherwise'.[l0] The same applies to other jokes, which, centring around 'cowardice, laziness, dishonesty or some other quality which society cannot afford to encourage',[11] give the subversive side of human nature a momentary freedom. One of the benefits of laughter, then, is that it can act as a 'safety-valve', allowing us a momentary freedom from the constraints life puts upon us.

However, it is in attempting to advance upon this basic notion of laughter as release, and to flesh it out into a more elaborate theory, that the problems with Freud start to become apparent. The intangibility of key aspects of his theory makes it difficult to deal with. The most obvious respect in which this is true concerns the whole notion of psychical energy, the details of which Freud leaves extremely vague. Morreall argues that this new kind of energy of inhibition is one about which we have 'few or no intuitions ... If Freud wants to explain laughter in joking as the release of "saved" inhibitory energy, in short, he should first explain just what kind of energy this is and how we might measure, or at least detect, it. [12] While such an attitude is more positivistic than my own, it is true that the purely speculative role 'psychic energy' plays in Freud's theory is precisely the kind of problem which makes him difficult to assess. Perhaps the final appeal can only be to the theory's degree of plausibility; and the details, if not the general idea, of his theory, are simply insufficiently plausible to convince the careful reader.

Having outlined and criticized key aspects of the incongruity, superiority and release traditions, we will next explore a very different approach to humour and laughter than the

'theoretical' one with which we have been concerned so far. This involves focusing upon the *existential* significance of our phenomena; and exploring, through an engagement with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the idea of viewing humour and laughter as attitudes to human existence.

Notes

1. Two brief reviews of theories in this tradition, which mention more thinkers than Freud, but in very little detail, are: KEITH-SPIEGEL, P. (1972) Early conceptions of humor: varieties and issues, in: Jeffrey H. Goldstein & Paul E. McGhee, *The Psychology of Humor,* New York and London, Academic Press; and RASKIN, V. (1985) *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor,* Dordrecht, Reidel, pp. 38-40. Also, MORREALL, J. (1983) *Taking Laughter Seriously,* Albany, State University of New York Press, chapter 4, has been a considerable influence on this article.
2. FREUD, S. (1905) *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (trans. and ed. James Strachey) as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,* Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1976 (page references are to this edition). In its time, *der Witz* has been translated both as 'jokes' and 'wit'. Neither is entirely satisfactory, 'joke' covering *Scherz* as well; but 'jokes' is the lesser of two evils, since 'wit', as ordinarily used in English, has far too narrow a meaning to cover many of Freud's examples. Since my primary concern here is with Freud as a release theorist, I shall not go into detail on either the connections he draws between jokes and dreams-for those interested, see *Jokes* Part C-or a later article, 'Humor' (1928) in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,* 9 (1), in: John Morreall (Ed.) *(1987) The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor,* Albany, State University of New York Press.
3. Although initially Freud explicitly says there are only these two, he later discusses 'cynical' jokes, in which aggressiveness is directed against institutions or prevailing attitudes rather than particular people, and 'sceptical' jokes, which are also hostile; they attack the certainty of our knowledge itself. In places, Freud reads as if these are new categories, but generally, they seem to be intended as subcategories of 'hostile' jokes.
4. EASTMAN, M. (1937) *Enjoyment of Laughter,* p. 287, London, Hamish Hamilton.
5. WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1966) *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious*

Belief (ed. Cyril Barrett), p.42, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
6. See Morreall (1983), pp. 33-34.
7. WOLLHEIM, R. (1973) *Freud,* p.102, London, Fontana.
8. Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
9. Wollheim, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
10. ORWELL, G. (1961) The art of Donald McGill, in: *Collected Essays,* p. 176, London, Secker & Warburg.
11. Ibid.
12. Morreall (1983), p. 30.