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Humorous Developments: Ridicule, Recognition, and the Development of Agency

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HUMOROUS DEVELOPMENTS

RIDICULE, RECOGNITION, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AGENCY

KEVIN ANDREW AFFLERBACH

JULY 11, 2015

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Introduction

Humor is an under-examined aspect of human interaction which plays an integral role in individual agency and social development. Understanding how humor works helps to explain how agents are formed through linguistically-mediated perspective taking; especially through the impression that one is recognized by others. The theories of George Herbert Mead and Axel Honneth are essential toward understanding the role of language and the Other in the creation of a self-conscious socially-aware agent. This creation and perpetuation occurs, to a great extent through humor, which is especially important in communication, emotional expression, and cognitive development.

What will be given in this thesis is primarily a description of humor's obvious, and not-so-obvious, functions in cognition and social development. This will be first and foremost a functional description, as opposed to an essential account of how humor must always be. As such, the analysis of humor provided within this thesis will aim to provide insight into humor's functions, rather than an essential notion of what humor must include, or of the elements that form the bare minimum for something to be funny.

In the process of mapping of humor's various roles and functions, there are certainly aspects that could be seen as essential. This will obviously occur to some extent, as the various private and public roles of humor are outlined; but this will not be the central focus, nor will it imply that humor is necessarily solely constituted by these elements. What I intend to offer, however, through this functional account of humor, which will include its various roles in shaping our thoughts, actions, is how it may be used to understand and effect individual and social development.¹ Understanding how humor has shaped the various discourses up to this point is invaluable toward the goal of developing an accurate picture of

¹. Let me clarify here that the account offered within this thesis is a functional account based on a both empirical and normative theory of agentive development. This is not to be confused with structural-functionalist accounts of social action or social systems. The conception of the functions of humor offered work strictly in the context of such a theoretical framework, as laid out by Mead and further developed by Honneth and others. It is my aim to integrate existing humor theories as elements in the latter outlined process of development, which as such entails crucial functions for self-conscious agency, and which can be shown to develop through, and to be expressed by, certain modes of humor.

agency generally, and the social and cognitive functions of so-called “non-serious” communication.²

This knowledge is applicable to both theoretical and practical aspects of human interaction and development. On a theoretical level, an awareness of humor’s roles and mechanisms demonstrates that Mead and Honneth are correct about the social nature of self-consciousness and identity, by way of the conceptually-mediated internalization of the perspectives of the Other. On a practical level, humor is able to address issues that are very difficult through other modes of communication and understanding. While humor is ubiquitous it remains a commonly misunderstood means of expressing emotional and cognitive content. It allows for shared recognition and solidarity, the covert expression of hostility, and the organization of society through the exposure of error and the threat of embarrassment.

Although conceptions of humor have evolved over time, it is still said to fall into one of the three traditional humor frameworks: Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief.³ These relate to and inform one another. Through these ideas of humor, and some related contemporary versions one is able to gain insight into the process of individual development and social relation. Mead's discussion of games and play relate to these theories in important ways and is helpful in understanding how agency comes about and grows within a social context. This analysis especially fruitful as it relates to the often overlooked ethical effects of humor on self-development, and the use of humor to rectify social ills.

In the work of George Herbert Mead and Axel Honneth, regarding the development of agency, it is made clear how self-conscious agency emerges through language and social interaction, and develops through the recognition of others. Mead's pragmatic view of how self-consciousness emerges through the process of symbolically-mediated perspective-taking is essential to understanding how minds

². Communication, as indicated here will apply to both the interpersonal and intrapersonal. As will be shown through the work of Mead, the communication of one with oneself is fundamental to self-conscious agency and the development of sociality generally.

³. As will be demonstrated, it is most often the case that humorous events and actions may be interpreted as a combination of these elements, rather than neatly falling into one or another category.

develop out of a social context. Mead's conceptions of the "me" and the "I," as well as the "generalized other," are important in the explication of such processes, which are the basis for self-consciousness and agentive deliberation. Axel Honneth's conception of the "spheres of recognition," from his work *The Struggle for Recognition*, is likewise integral to understanding of the role of recognition of others in agentive development. His theoretical analysis provides important tools for understanding how actualized agents come about.

The concept of humor's social power, central to this thesis, finds its theoretical grounding in Honneth's *Three Spheres* model, and his complementary theories on the denial of respect. The theories of Honneth are directly applicable to this analysis, although these theoretical frameworks require some correction due to the fact that Honneth does not fully incorporate the importance of historical context and embedded subjectivity into the most basic level of disrespect; and he makes hard distinctions between the levels and types of harm when, in fact, they are interrelated and interdependent.

The humor theories discussed are essential to understanding the social roles and effects of humor as it relates to the game of social interaction, as well as the demonstration of recognition and disrespect. In addition it will be made clear how ridicule, a means of denial of recognition and disrespectful objectification, is an essential element in social development and growth. Rather than being viewed as a purely negative thing, ridicule also provides opportunities for development by causing irritation which a. potentially facilitates self-conscious introspection, b. provides the threat of embarrassment, acting as an incentive toward group cohesion, and c. in the cases of severe disrespect may act as an impetus toward the realization of such denial and the demand for recognition.

Humor has the capacity to foster enormous growth, as well as to hinder it. This transcends the false dichotomy of positive and negative humor, where ridicule and other tendentious humor are merely bad, and seemingly innocuous humor is necessarily positive. Ridicule and satire are in fact key components

of social interaction which are potentially ethically justified and positive forms of expression. This justification is not purely arbitrary however, as there are certain guidelines that can be followed to make it more ethical and productive. These include the conception of context and consent, and the avoidance of punching down.

This form of interaction forms the basis for a great deal of human interaction and imagination, and the play function of humor can, like few other things, allow for engagement with uncomfortable topics and our own previously uncontested beliefs. That can only however happen if it is taken seriously as a powerful element of interaction and growth of agents, and simultaneously given the opportunity to be the tentative, and non-serious form of discursive relation that it is.

Why Humor?

*Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."*⁴

- E. B. White

Humor is a notoriously difficult topic, and many people consider it a waste of time to try to investigate or discuss something as ephemeral and subjective as humor.⁵ There are many who claim that humor is difficult to understand, dauntingly complex, or a source of too much disagreement, and that it therefore must be avoided as a subject of inquiry. However, many other important topics are complex, disputed, or lack a single explanatory model that shores everything up neatly in terms of description or prescription. The study of ethics for example is such an area, with its various deontological, virtue, and consequentialist theories. Theories of ethics compete and overlap, and often seemingly only resolve in

⁴ E.B. White "A Subtreasury of American Humor" 1941

⁵ Others, see humor as so straight-forward and objective as to not warrant further explanation. Doing so is seen as needless theoretical dithering of little real practical import. They overlook the fact that what appears to be obvious to them is not so easily pinned down.

either overly reductive interpretations or strained and convoluted forms of casuistry, yet we still persist in the study of ethics because of how important the topic is to human existence and well-being.

The same, is true of humor. Theorists also tend to avoid studying humor because it is seen as frivolous and not serious, and therefore to be avoided by thinkers and researchers who aim to be taken seriously within their fields. This also could not be further from the truth. Humor is one of the most pervasive social phenomena, with significant effects on the way that individuals treat one another and think about the world. It is therefore quite seriously one of the most important elements in the analysis and practice of human social interaction and individual psychological functioning. Insofar as we find those things valuable a working understanding of humor is important to the project of societal development.

It will become clear that while the many theories of humor all touch on different aspects, a functional view of humor as a sort of play is the most helpful to grasp its role in individual development and social life. This first brings us to the socially situated agent and its emergence from the social whole. Before humor is discussed in greater detail we will lay a basic foundation by outlining what is meant here by the concept of *agency*, and the role that it plays in society.

Why Agency?

To examine the role of humor in a social context we must look closely at what can be said to be the most fundamental unit of societal participation and development: the agent. Some of the same criticisms may be leveled at the study of agency as are directed at the study of humor: theoretical disagreement and indefinability, or alternately that personal identity and responsibility are so patently obvious as to be unworthy of investigation. This could not be further from the case, and due to the role that agency plays in the continued development of our shared social world it is not only helpful to understand how responsible and actualized selves are formed, it is essential to this task.⁶ The term

⁶. There are various other social theories which consider the agent to be too epistemically unstable of a subject to base an

agency, as it will be used, relates to an individual's capacity for self-conscious reflection and action within a social context.

The process of developing and growing agentic participants is dependent on and constitutive of the continuation of society. Due to the fact of the intersubjective constitution of selves and society, this is the foundation for the existence of a reciprocal ethical debt between individuals, as well as between society and the individuals which form it, and toward the recognition and actualization of members of such a society. This will be explained later in greater detail. This being the case, the actualization of selves is something which will be presupposed as a good for society. Actualization allows for greater contributions by individuals to the whole so that it may thrive, and for individuals to reach the fullness of their own developmental potentials.⁷ This will be understood to exist in a sort of reflexive equilibrium or balance and interdependent development.

In order to offer an account of this normative grounding and how selves emerge from the social context I will introduce George Herbert Mead's work on agency, consisting of a pragmatic account of reflexive self-consciousness through linguistically-mediated perspective-taking. Additionally, Axel Honneth's complementary work with the concept of *recognition* will be used to show how the respect or recognition of other agents largely defines the possibilities for agentic development and actualization. These ways of understanding the development of agency will be combined with theoretical insights about humor to provide a greater insight into the importance of agentic formation and participation, and humor's role in such development.

On first blush humor and agency seem to be somewhat disconnected areas of inquiry; however, it will become clear how the knowledge of one complements the other. The role of humor in the development

ethical model of progress and development. I argue that this is not the case.

⁷ I will be adopting, generally, Honneth's conception of 'the good,' which pertain to the 'structural elements of ethical life' enabling personal integrity. The satisfaction of the demands for recognition are seen, as such, as the "quasi-transcendental interests" of the human race. (Fraser and Honneth 2002: 174)

of individual agency is under-examined, as well as its role in shaping and influencing social practices, and our very framing of the world. To this end the major theoretical conceptions of humor that have been forwarded up to this point will be analyzed in terms of what they disclose about human interaction. Utilizing an approach that employs a combination of revelations from these theories I will analyze humor in terms of its social effects on agency, by way of its effects on social cohesion, norm formation, and psychological expression/repression, and demonstrate that conceiving humor as a sort of game or play allows for a better understanding of its form and effects.⁸ To understand these roles we must first understand what is meant when here referring to humor.

What is Humor?

The question of what humor is would seem fairly simple to answer, since it is such a ubiquitous experience. However, providing a definition has historically proven to be particularly tricky. To paraphrase Augustine on the concept of time: “What then is humor? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.” Aristotle posits that laughter is fundamental to our humanity and exclusive to humans.⁹ Human beings, Aristotle argued, are the only animals which laugh, and depending on how one stretches the definition, that still may be the case.¹⁰ That depends largely on how laughter is being defined, because in the broader sense it is clear that non-human animals do something very much akin to it. Biologists show that rats laugh when tickled, dolphins squeak with joy during play, chimpanzees seem to fool around and make elated sounds of joy and victory. However, in the more narrow sense, physiologically, only humans and bipedal animals with

⁸. The coordination that humor provides is essential to the development of social life as we know it, as it allows for and rewards with mirth one's conceptual play, forging of agreements and discriminations, venting “anti-social” emotions, the pleasurable experience of cognitive error checking, the tentative assertion of opinion and identity, the creation of common ground, making and breaking bonds of social solidarity, and most of all the showing and denying respect and recognition.

⁹. Aristotle's classic example of a baby laughing at 40 days of life. While not scientifically accurate, this establishes how central laughter is believed to be to humanity, even as early as Attic Greece.

¹⁰. “That man alone is affected by tickling is due firstly to the delicacy of his skin, and secondly to his being the only animal that laughs. For to be tickled is to be set in laughter, the laughter being produced such a motion as mentioned of the region of the armpit.” Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*: Book III

breath control can produce laughter as we generally know it; and more to the point, we seem to be the only creatures to manipulate concepts for humorous effect, and laugh in response.¹¹

Though sometimes conflated in everyday discussion humor and laughter are distinct, though obviously often intimately related phenomena. Laughter is a physiological response, and a largely social phenomenon. Humor is tied to laughter, but not exclusively. There are jokes and circumstances that individuals may find humorous without ever laughing, and conversely there are a good number of reasons that humans laugh without finding anything enjoyable or humorous, the aforementioned example of tickling, or nervous laughter.

Robert Provine, who has written extensively on the topic of laughter and the self, who argues that laughter in humans evolved from the panting of primates, which signifies playfulness and non-threatening attitudes. Provine's work on laughter demonstrates the essentially social nature of laughter, showing that there is much greater likelihood of individuals to laugh in the presence of others, specifically 30 times more likely in social situations as opposed to solitary ones. In situations of solitude it is much more likely that a person will talk to herself than laugh or smile. In social situations laughter is not just a response to the utterances or actions of others, but as well one's own.

Speakers use laughter to punctuate their own speech, and are 46 percent more likely to laugh than their audiences. Often this laughter is a result of nervousness, or used as a social cue, since according to the studies only 10 to 15 percent of pre-laugh comments could be construed as funny, and instead are statements like "Well, I have to go." Here laughter serves as a sort of punctuation, performing a particular role in the flow of speech, moving it along and reaffirming status or goodwill. One might say "I'm going now, haha," but not "I'm going, hahaha, now."

¹¹. Provine 2004

In another study Provine found that congenitally deaf people laughed, through sign language, at the same points that hearing people do in speaking conversations.¹² Like their hearing counterparts they laugh as a conversational social cue, or an emotional response having little to do with mirth or cleverness. These findings lend credence to the idea that laughter plays an integral role in social bonding and conversation, not always related to humor, to the point that interpretations of humor may get read back onto conversations where mere social laughter was being expressed.

Provine's argument that laughter evolved from the panting and breath control of our hominid ancestors during play and eventually became the social cue and response that we know today helps to give a better picture of its role in social life.¹³ Laughter, understood this way, accounts for its roles as a disarming mechanism, an opportunity for breath and distance, a nervous response, a social lubricant, an expression of dominance. Such an understanding of laughter dovetails nicely into the theories of humor to be discussed, which consider human laughter to have evolved from animal play, rewarded cognitive debugging, and the relief experienced from the release of tension at the realization of a false threat. Laughter, has anesthetizing and endorphin-releasing power which relaxes the listener.¹⁴ When shared, it builds affinity toward fellow laughers, and signifies fellow-feeling. This gives some sense of how laughter is defined and how it differs from humor. For the purpose of this paper we will rely on the distinction made by renowned humor theorist John Morreall between humor, which involves a cognitive shift that results in an emotional response, and laughter, which is a physiological reaction that can be, and often is, the result of such a shift.¹⁵ The link is so close in many cases that there are those who question which of the two comes first in terms of causal relations, the physiological reaction or the cognitive realization.

¹². Winerman 2006

¹³. Provine 2004

¹⁴. Dunbar et, al. 2012

¹⁵. The term *comedy*, used herein, will mean the intentional creation of expressions intended to provoke a humorous response.

The Strong Link: Which Comes First?

Some theorists, like Nietzsche, remark that we do not laugh because we find something funny, but rather that we have the order reversed: we find something funny because we laugh. This is an interesting take on the issue, and one not altogether without merit.¹⁶ Individuals do not decide to laugh (in the sense of genuine, or so-called Duchenne, laughter) and it could very well be that in certain circumstances the observation or experience of our own laughter leads to the realization that something is humorous. This reversal of expected order is somewhat similarly borne out in the fact that smiling on purpose can result in psychological and physiological changes, and is recommended by certain psychologists in order to effect positive effects, such as greater relaxation.

Humor and laughter are linked in a deep way, and it is difficult to tease out the specific cause and effect relationship in all cases. However, while I do not doubt that the disposition to laugh more easily correlates to certain cognitive and emotional reactions it seems that in most relevant cases the realization or recognition is often what elicits the response, rather than the other way around; whether or not one is fully conscious of the cause. This relationship between humorous laughter and one's conscious understanding of the thought or feeling that caused it will be explored in greater depth in the sections relating to *Relief Theory* and *The Misattribution Theory of Tendentious Humor*.

Humor, while spontaneous and often surprising, is not a complete mystery in terms of its causes and mechanisms. In humor, laughter has some mental stimulus, some form of content which evokes, and justifies, a reaction. It is an experience that incorporates the worlds of language, social expectation, intersubjective relation, and aesthetic experience. It potentially involves many various aspects of our experience, and can lead to laughter, enjoyment, and recognition. When shared with others the effects can be very positive, at least for those included through understanding, agreement, and recognition.

¹⁶. Neurological experiments showing reactions in the brain before conscious realization might back such conclusions, like the neurological experiments of Dr. Benjamin Libet, which are often cited as evidence against the existence of free will.

The effects change quite significantly if one is excluded from the laughter; and even more so when one is the target. Humor is not merely an innocuous and toothless thing that makes us laugh with amusement, it is something that has real power to hurt, to heal, and to affect change within individuals and societies. Because of this humor requires serious study to understand its causes and effects. Without such an understanding, not only will we be unaware of its effects on us, or of the ethical and practical effects of our actions on others, we will also be ignorant of one of the most uniquely human aspects of ourselves.¹⁷

Humor's Power

*In human affairs, we can see that there are forces making for happiness, and forces making for misery. We do not know which will prevail, but to act wisely we must be aware of both.*¹⁸

Bertrand Russell

Humor is a powerful and ubiquitous human experience, able to evoke strong reactions within ourselves and call out responses in others. What causes humor to be such a moving experience and what why does it have such social significance? To answer these questions we will examine the three primary, classical humor theories to determine how humor has been understood up until this point, and discuss what each theory reveals about the way that humans interpret the world and interact with one another. Seeing humor in terms of superiority, relief, and incongruity will allow for a greater understanding of our emotional and psychological motivations for laughter, and of the effects that humor has on individuals and the social order. These, coupled with Mead and Honneth's views on agency and recognition, will show how humor, viewed as a sort of play (tied to Mead's conceptions of *role-taking* and *games*) is helpful in the development of critical and actualized agents.

¹⁷. Aristotle, who argues that laughter is what sets humans apart from the animals, says that infants do not get souls until they laugh, which according to him was around the 40th day of life.

¹⁸. Russell 2009

Humor, while often viewed as an unqualifiedly positive means of enjoyment, is not so innocent. And comedy, though generally regarded as a positive and playful means of directing these realizations, is in fact a powerful tool for repression, expression, and social change. Humor, theoretically, is ethically neutral, that is to say, neither negative nor positive in the hypothetical. In practice, however, within the social context, its effects are often anything but neutral. Jokes rather always have some social weight and function. These effects, whether deleterious, positive, or mixed, depend on the context, and the perception and intention of the participants.

There is a general misconception that humor is overwhelmingly positive in terms of intentions and effects. As will be demonstrated, humor is not as benign as generally believed.¹⁹ What one laughs at reveals dispositions, frames of reference, and beliefs. The same can be said for what does not laugh at as well, since there are times where one expected to laugh in solidarity or agreement, and times where laughter is taken as an insult or at least a failure to understand. Jokes can forge bonds, engender goodwill, change hearts, and allay fears. Likewise, they can do the very opposite of each of these as well. As a result of this we must examine more explicitly what humor tells us about ourselves and the way we interact with one another; and the opportunities it offers to do it better. This will begin with the three classical theories of humor, starting with *Superiority*.

¹⁹. Billig 2005

Ch I. Theories of Humor

Superiority Theory

“Look for the ridiculous in everything and you will find it.”

Jules Renard

Superiority Theory is commonly believed to be the first chronologically given as an explanatory model for why human beings find things funny. Both Plato and Aristotle speak to the feeling of superiority as being an important element in many experiences of humor.²⁰ Theories of humor in the West begin with their work: a. in the *Philebus* where the character of Socrates refers to the ridiculous as ignorance in the weak who are unable to retaliate when this ignorance is pointed out through ridicule; and b. in Aristotle who argues that humor is related to a twist of surprise that defies the expected. Aristotle also addresses the topic in the *Poetics* where he notes that humor is often predicated on an ugliness that does not disgust.²¹ While neither of the two give full accounts of a theory of superiority, or of necessary or sufficient conditions for humor, their descriptions of superiority's psychological role in the experience of humor is important starting point.

Superiority, briefly stated, is the view that humor is primarily found in the enjoyment at one's own abilities or status, contrasted with those of a “lower” or “foolish” person or being. It so called because one derives mirth from the realization or recognition of being superior to another individual, or of observing their folly. According to Thomas Hobbes, who is most commonly associated with the superiority thesis, humor can be described in this way:

²⁰. Neither of these is surprising given Aristotle's aristocratic bearing and view on natural slaves, and Plato's ideas of the common good and teaching through subtly sarcastic “Socratic irony.”

²¹. Plato's *Philebus* p. 49b and Aristotle's *Poetics* p. 1449a, pp 34-35

*[T]he passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of other, or with our own formerly.*²²

The audience laughs at the drunken old fool who trips on his own robes and falls on his face. His misfortune is not theirs, and they likely view themselves as being above him because they are not drunk, old, or prone to similar mistakes which would turn them into awkward, undignified laughing stocks. Superiority is predicated on explicit and implicit value judgments, whether they are thoroughly justified or not. It is an emotional reaction to a judgment, and that is nearly always at the expense of something or someone else. The defenses against the charges of cruelty follow a general pattern: a. “What? It’s funny.” (objectively funny defense), or b. “They deserve it.” (moral desert defense). One relies on the objective truth of the humor itself, or the desert of the target.

Humor has always, among other things, served the role of exercising negative emotions, social policing/reification of the social order by training agents to make discernments about themselves and others, and objects. Individuals are rewarded by feelings of dominance, or righteousness through the experience and exercise of superiority humor, and this shows up most commonly and obviously in the form of ridicule.

Ridicule

Ridicule, is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the act of making fun of someone or something in a cruel or harsh way: harsh comments made by people who are laughing at someone or something.”²³ At some point in everyone’s life they experience ridicule, likely as the recipients as well as the inflictors, and as such it is an experience that all humans have access to. I would argue that this experience is a necessary part of being human that helps us to understand what it means to be self-

²². Hobbes (1640) 42

²³. Merriam-Webster entry on “Ridicule.” While dictionary definitions are not the whole story, this definition does nicely for our purposes.

conscious participants within a society, who are held to standards, and whose words and actions have effects on others. So that there is no confusion *ridiculous* will be taken to mean that which is “*arousing or deserving of ridicule: extremely silly or unreasonable: absurd or preposterous.*”²⁴ The experience of finding something to be ridiculous is also a universal human experience. What or who we find to be ridiculous and how we respond differs, but the universality of the experience can hardly be disputed.

There are those who argue that some things, people, or states of affairs are justifiably referred to as ridiculous, as if this evaluation of someone or something deserving derisive laughter is woven into the universe. Others will argue that the ridiculousness of a person/thing/idea is not a fact, but that it is pragmatically justified or expedient to treat it as such. This goes to the deeper argument regarding whether there are such things as facts with metaphysical weight which underpin our moral, epistemic, and aesthetic observations. Such a discussion is outside the scope of this thesis, but is clearly related due to the fact that humor has real effects on how agents think and relate to one another.

The point of the this project will be more modest, to explain how ridicule, and humor generally, is used in a social context, what its use says about our general intuitions and reactions, and the general effects that it may have on agentive development. The broader arguments regarding claims universal truth and goodness will be shelved for the time being, with the qualification that whatever one believes about the issue, it is a strong statement indeed to say that “something *is* funny,” especially when used to explain or defend aggressive humor. What is important for the time being though is that the experience of finding something ridiculous is universal, and although individuals disagree on what and why this or that is ridiculous, we all find something ridiculous. Additionally, it is undeniable that ridicule brings most, if not all, individuals who employ it a sense of enjoyment though it is generally agreed that ridicule is punitive, often to the point of viciousness. “Punitive” and “vicious” are adjectives which few

²⁴. Merriam-Webster entry on “Ridiculous”

people would choose to describe themselves and their own actions. If that is true, how then are we to make sense of the fact that many find enjoyment in such viciousness? To help answer this question we shall examine some of Socrates views on comedy and the *ridiculous*.

Ridicule and the Justified Enjoyment of Antipathy

Humor, clearly can be, and often is, used as a weapon. We are rewarded with mirth for aggression toward certain ideas and people that we find threatening or absurd. Many times we feel that it is justified: by our own laughter and the reasons we give to explain it. Socrates offers a theory in the *Philebus* of how the feelings of pleasure and pain are merged through the “malice of amusement” in comedy; noting that “our state of mind in comedy...involves a mixture of pleasure and pain...”²⁵ Conceding that this is a complicated topic, and that there are other instances where pleasure and pain are mixed, he qualifies his statement:

*Since it is such an obscure matter, let us be all the careful. For this will help us to recognize more easily when there is a mixture of pain and pleasure in other cases as well.*²⁶

Socrates here argues that “if we laugh at what is ridiculous about our friends, by mixing pleasure with malice, we thereby mix pleasure with pain.”²⁷ In this he does not mean the mix of our pleasure with the pain of others through ridicule, but rather that through being malicious one tends to harm oneself. Malice, as he sees it, is a “pain of the soul,” however, he argues that the pleasure in delighting in the destruction of one's enemies and the exposure of vice is unproblematically positive. In this circumstance, Socrates argues, the soul-pain of being malicious and enjoying it is justified, even warranted by the ignorance and unvirtuous of the target.

²⁵. Philebus 48a

²⁶. Philebus 48b

²⁷. Philebus 48a

Central to the Socrates' mythos is the idea of ignorance of oneself as the greatest enemy. The character of Socrates was, as the story goes, the “wisest man in Athens” because he knew the limits of his knowledge. He spends most of his time in Plato's dialogues using *Socratic irony*: feigning ignorance and asking for people to define what they supposedly know well, or care for greatly, for the purposes of demonstrating that they did not know. This lack of self-knowledge, being unaware of one's own shortcomings, is what he defines as genuinely ridiculous.

In the *Philebus* he explains that there are three possible ways to fail to know oneself: to see oneself as richer, more physically advantaged (taller, handsomer, etc.), or virtuous than one is in actuality.^{28 29} He defines the ridiculous as those who are unvirtuous in one of the three ways just mentioned, and who are additionally too weak to inflict harm on those would laugh at them for it. Those who can revenge themselves are called “dangerous and hateful,” or “odious.”^{30 31}

Ridicule serves as a way derive amusement and superiority over those ignorant persons who fail to live up to Socrates' central maxim of *know thyself*.³² It rewards the mocker and punishes the mocked, serving the dual function of correction and reinforcement. It acts as a means of making one know himself through the denial of positive recognition, and/or demonstrate to others what the standards are and the consequences of failing to meet them. This, of course is from a perspective and reinforces a particular set of rules and status arrangements; standards which the target of the ridicule is said to have not met.

One does not wish to be seen as unworthy of respect, the object of ridicule of a group or community, so it is a ready object lesson: know what one's society demands in relation to the standards of the prevailing social order, to avoid being seen as vicious or silly. Humor can be used to teach many

²⁸. *Philebus* 48a-d

²⁹. Or, rather, as estimated by those who are making the determination.

³⁰. *Philebus* 49c

³¹. Those who put him on trial would likely fall into the latter category. More on this in the discussion of ridicule vs. satire.

³². Agency is predicated on one being self-aware and able to discern one's own capabilities, limits, and effects.

lessons, but ridicule is one of the most direct and demeaning methods of attaining this end. Through being taught what to laugh at, and by being laughed at, one is shown the rules and expectations of society.³³ Without explicitly saying that is what it is doing, the play of humor habituates children into certain views of the world. Through being shown by parents and peers what is laughed about, what is ignored, and what is forbidden, the child learns to navigate the social terrain. With ridicule, one experiences the enjoyment of laughter at something or someone's expense, and when others agree with the assessment by laughing along the opinion is further reinforced. As a witness to this process, or a target of it, one also learns what standards are held in common, and the penalties of missteps.

Through this demonstration of the denial of solidarity, one is made to fear being treated as a ridiculous object of mirth or derision, and is trained what to believe and how to act. Victors and in-group members on one side get the enjoyment of mirth and felt superiority, and recipients of ridicule have the sting of ostracism and humiliation; their transgressions punished through embarrassment. These extremes flesh out the boundaries of expectation, rules, and roles central to what Mead refers to as the generalized other, in a process which imprints the expectations of society onto the individual. Having the “ridiculous” person serve as an example serves multiple purposes: a. training him through embarrassment and ostracism (through being made into a humorous object, rather than an respected subject) that such behavior is unacceptable, prodding him back into right action; b. offering him as a ready example to others of what constitutes unvirtuous action; c. and providing mirth to those who laugh at his foolishness and feel better about themselves; arguably a social good, even if it may be a cruel sort of enjoyment and may contribute to the mockers’ own lack of realistic self-awareness.

For something predicated on something as light as laughter, the effect of ridicule is great. Humans are, as Aristotle accurately noted, “social animals,” and by denying such a person membership and esteem

³³. Billig 2005

within the community, their social value and dignity is degraded for all to see. This is a powerful lesson indeed. The broader effects of such a lesson will be expounded upon in greater detail, but in brief:

When Socrates points out to his younger friend that certain people are ridiculous, due to their unknowing lack of virtue, such a discourse demonstrates a certain knowledge of themselves and forms a framework for their social world, defining acceptable behavior and leaving those deemed “ridiculous” outside of the *generalized other*. This has the practical and immediate effect of defining social roles in opposition to the perceived folly of these exemplary fools.³⁴

This social policing works to correct behavior, but as well, consciously or not, has the effect of leaving for many only roles as demons, natural slaves, laughing stocks, and cautionary examples within a system that will call them justifiably ridiculous and hold them personally responsible for it. This will be dealt with in greater detail in the later chapters about agency and ethics, but for now it will suffice to say that the effects of ridicule on individuals and groups is large and often underestimated. The refusal to take something or someone seriously, to hold them outside of serious discourse, has the function of exerting control over them through denying the person empathetic engagement and framing the narrative with them as unwilling or unwitting clown. Such a social tool is a double-edged sword, as ridicule relies on subjective reactions and agreements, and so it may be turned on those who before had wielded it. If a joke falls flat or the joker is seen as vicious, they are unlikely to garner much sympathy from spectators and previous victims.³⁵

Socrates himself becomes the butt of the joke and an object lesson to others, in the satirical play *The Clouds* by Aristophanes, where he is depicted as a thief, sophist, and a fraud unworthy of respect or

³⁴. For a similar and parallel discussion of this issue of the excluded other who is either ignored or against whom society is defined in opposition, see Foucault’s works on madness and deviancy: *Madness and Civilization* (1964), and *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

³⁵. Billig uses the example of Berlusconi’s attempt to insult a German member of EU parliament with a joke about Nazis. The joke fell flat and Berlusconi looked like an unfunny bully; becoming, himself a butt of many jokes as a result. This likely also helped to dry up support which he might have had when later facing corruption charges in Italy.

recognition. The play that beat out *The Clouds* that year (423 BCE), *Connus*, was also lampooning Socrates, but *The Clouds* is implied in the *Apology* to have contributed to Socrates being put on trial.³⁶ Whether this is truly the case, humor has the effect of influencing the ways that people are seen and treated.³⁷

Superiority, and particularly ridicule, rewards the laugher with the feeling of being better than the target, bribing them with a feeling of power over others, or the escape from one's own helplessness or non-virtue. The laugher is anesthetized to the pain of the target and distanced from her perspective. It is humor with the power to hurt, whether we consciously think of it that way or not. What gives it this power?

Embarrassment

Where does ridicule get the bulk of its social power? In one word: embarrassment. The embarrassment that was previously mentioned is the motivating factor for avoiding ridicule, and for using it against others. Through embarrassment ridicule exerts social control on the behavior of others who have transgressed some normative boundary. It is through the threat and infliction of shame and humiliation that ridicule and satire gain much of their social power. In his essay "Embarrassment and Social Organization" (1956) Erving Goffman famously examined the role of embarrassment in society, arguing that it is an incredibly powerful social force, which directly shapes human behavior.

Embarrassment, according to Goffman, is essentially the glue that holds society together.

The fact that members of a culture follow particular customs, share a language, and coordinate meanings is in large part due to the ever-present threat of embarrassment. As such it is an essential

³⁶. He is depicted rather, as an object of ridicule and perhaps pity. For those who believe, as Nietzsche does, that "to show pity is felt as a sign of contempt because one has clearly ceased to be an object of fear as soon as one is pitied," the ridicule toward Socrates' perceived weakness is a huge sleight. This was one of the primary function of Greek comedies in Athens. Of course if one cannot laugh at themselves...

³⁷. This is the reason why satire and other humor at the expense of those in power is punished severely in tyrannical states; a practice likely as old as history itself. Aristotle and Aristophanes both recorded the torture and execution of Pauson, an artist who had lampooned the leaders of Athens.

factor in maintaining group cohesion through norm policing. The trains run on time, so to speak, not merely from the positive, direct rewards that people receive for doing well, but also from threat of embarrassment of disrespect. Fear of running afoul of these social forces is real as are its social consequences. When one is not taken seriously, laughed at, one's status and power can diminish significantly. The feelings associated with embarrassment leave the recipient feeling humiliated, anxious, vulnerable, and foolish. It is no coincidence that public speaking is again and again stated as the number one fear of Americans surveyed since in those moments one is the most vulnerable to ridicule.³⁸ Embarrassment holds great power over individuals because it threatens their view of themselves as lovable, competent, and worthy of esteem, as well as associated effects on one's social power; up to the point of not being seen as a person at all.³⁹

Humor is used in a number of ways to prevent or cover embarrassment in oneself, and to inflict it upon others, and ridicule is one of the most efficient ways of stripping individual security away, through embarrassment. By taking pleasure in the mistakes or misfortune of another person, mockers hold the target outside of serious discourse, treating them as an object of common laughter rather than an equal subject. Delighting in the embarrassment or misfortune of others is a common occurrence, and has the German name *schadenfreude*, which translates literally to “damage pleasure.” Such pleasure, most would argue, is sometimes justified, and even necessary to effect positive social change. I would agree that this is the case.

One example of justified ridicule is that which is directed at tyrannical rulers or bigoted persons who actively spread racism. In such cases humorous embarrassment is arguably used toward positive ends,

³⁸. The Chapman University Survey on American Fears

³⁹. Honneth tends to focus on the effects of recognition, through respect and its denial, upon its recipients. He neglects the role of social policing on groups generally, and of the psychological effects of the recognition on those doing extending or denying it.

to illustrate what behavior is not acceptable, while at the same time taking enjoyment in doing so.^{40 41}

The blowback which may result from such an act however, such as violent reprisals, sympathy for the target, the doubling down on the negative message, and the dissolution of potential dialogue, are real dangers to be borne in mind. All of which point to the incredible, and oft ignored, social power of humor. Often, however, it is the case that it is less obvious that the target has done anything to warrant such attacks, although the mocker feels justified. Through the use of superiority and ridicule the jokester and laughers are rewarded with laughter and confirmed in their judgments.

Those in on the joke are also offered the defense against charges of cruelty by the idea that it is “funny because it is true,” or “is just a joke.” Meanwhile these jokes have the very real power to inflict discomfort, to harm social status, and to encourage pleasure in another's misery. While these aspects and uses of humor are as likely functional as they are essential, their ubiquity bears witness to the major role that they play in the creation and maintenance of selves, and of the social order. Taking aim at another person vents hostilities, and gives an ego boost to those fortunate enough to be on the winning side of the narrative, while correcting or punishing the target with the pain of embarrassment or helplessness as their self-conception is called into question.

Ridicule/Superiority offer explanations for why we might enjoy cruel humor, and it has been shown how some cruel/caustic humor might serve a positive role (ex. ridiculing racism). More than this though, such a realization lays the seeds for understanding how dehumanization and marginalization through the denial of recognition occur in both serious and non-serious discursive exchanges. Humor's power to both cause and highlight harms is commonly overlooked, since humor is generally seen to be positive and friendly; an escape from serious talk into frivolous play. This is obviously not however the

⁴⁰. Whether ridiculing racists and tyrants is the most effective way to change their minds is debatable.

⁴¹. Fremdschämen is similar to schadenfreude, but is rather in many ways its opposite, and is the feeling of embarrassment on behalf of someone else. Rather than pleasure at another's misery one experiences a sort of empathetic anxiousness at another's humiliation. Germans have a word for everything.

case, and superiority theory provides a ready example of how humor is often used as social corrective, exposing people's follies and shortcomings to social scorn to change them, make an example of them and teach others. It functions as a form of play, but one with very real consequences.

Viewed as a form of play that habituates individuals into certain modes of action and thought, humor begins to make more sense and the functions that it might play become clearer. Humor allows for a constant process of training and adjustment into expected social roles, norms, and expectations.

Superiority makes sense as the pleasurable feeling one gets through the perceived mastery of these roles, and ridicule exists as a means of policing and critiquing the constellation of beliefs and actions surrounding them. It is obvious that superiority plays a large role in humor, and society, since there are ways to frame most humorous reactions in this way. However, it seems to be a stretch to say that all humor is a direct function of superiority for anyone other than the two-dimensional villains of silent movies.⁴² Even the devil likes a good pun.

Superiority tells us a great deal about how humor's function within society and individual psychology, and can explain a great deal of humor, but not all of it. It does not provide a sufficient condition for humor, for one may experience feelings of superiority with no associated feeling of mirth. A person might be disgusted by something inferior, for example, but not amused. So, as a theory it lacks the full explanatory power of giving necessary or sufficient conditions for humor. Still it is undeniable that superiority plays a large role in terms of how humor is felt individually and how it is used in a social context. The fact that superiority can be applied to many if not most instances of humor bears witness to this, but more importantly it shows that our motivations for laughter are not so innocent as we

⁴². Alternately, Robert Solomon develops the basis for a theory of *inferiority*, arguing that humor can largely be framed in terms of impulses toward self-deprecation and relating, therein demonstrating virtuous humility and solidarity. This could be seen as a balancing force within socialization, rather than a mutually exclusive explanation.

believe them to be, and that humor can act a powerful force for processing, developing, and expressing ideas and emotions.⁴³

Humor then, rather than being merely a way to experience mirth and joy can be, and often is, used to cause pain and express hostility, even without the subject knowing it. This is not, however, how it is often viewed; both because we want to maintain the notion that humor is a pleasure which is uncomplicated by the ugliness of malice, and because we would prefer to see ourselves as having more innocent motivations than we often actually do. For these reasons it is unsurprising that ridicule and superiority are less frequently offered as explanations for one's motivations for laughter since they are seen as promoting harshness, viciousness, or smugness.

That is not to say, however, that since the explanations are more forgiving of our intentions than they might have been before that our humor is necessarily any kinder. Reality shows (Max X, COPS, Hell's Kitchen, American Idol, Honey Boo Boo), adult cartoons (Family Guy, South Park, and Archer), and similar programs churn forward, fueled largely by humiliation, embarrassment, ridicule, and show very little sign of slowing down. They may be more complex in their references, more sophisticated in their commentary, but the impulses they feed and exercise remain largely the same as ever. What has apparently changed is the likelihood of viewers to admit to themselves or others the real motivations for their laughter: aggressive, anti-social impulses, concealed in jokes.

Embarrassment is not merely an incidental effect of aggressive humor, it is one of the central, if unstated, motivations for it. The repressive influences of society run counter to the exercise of such anti-social impulses, so they are discouraged, and when they do come out they are denied conscious expression and when are brought into conscious thought are ascribed alternate reasons, or

⁴³. The motivations behind casting it in such a light become clearer if we see how and when the theories come into vogue.

interpretations. This is where *Relief Theory* enters the picture, and helps to explain how humor is often an outlet for hostility and frustration, often without the awareness of those involved.

Relief Theory: The Release from Repression through Humor

Living in a society brings with it a multitude of benefits, but those benefits also come at the cost of having to stifle certain impulses which might be detrimental to the smooth functioning of society. This is the process of repression that all individuals must endure to be a part of civilization. The theories of humor through *relief (or release)* are most closely associated with social interaction and the psychology and physiology of social repression. *Release* refers to the discharge of one's energies pent up through social repression, and *relief* to the motivation for the discharge of those uncomfortable emotions.

Awkwardness, despair, hostility, and lust in many cases amplify the response to innocuous humor, and are often the driving force behind instances of targeted humor.^{44 45} It is not merely that nervous laughter is produced to vent social awkwardness, but rather that much of humor is driven by, and structured around, feelings of anxiety, frustration, and hostility.

Theories about relief are most commonly associated with social psychologists like Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud. The view, in short, is that all humans have within them instincts toward anti-social or pre-social behavior, which are socially disruptive, and in order to maintain social order and cooperative development, they are subjected by one another and by society generally, to repression in order to keep these anti-social impulses in check. Social interaction, consequentially, is only possible through the continued enforcement of norms and systems which run counter to individual desires.

Repression, keeps a tight lid on these energies with the goal of keeping society functioning and

⁴⁴. This would have been explained by Hubert Spencer in terms of the hydraulic neurological energies conserved in these processes. Though hydraulic theories have ceased to be seen as literally true, relief theories are still useful for the insights they provide about the precognitive or latent emotional content expressed through humor and jokes.

⁴⁵. The epidemic of contagious laughter that occurred in Africa would be one example of laughter, being born almost exclusively from these forces, but apparently not humor, since it lacked apparent cognitive content.

directing these energies into more positive modes of expression.⁴⁶

According to Freud this (or at least some) repression is necessary for the continuation of civilization.

The destructive and irrational urges of the id are stifled and ideally sublimated into more productive and socially positive avenues. This is an imperfect process, however, and the repressed energies build up and spill out in unexpected ways. The cathartic release of humor allows for these energies to be vented, often without the subject realizing that is what is happening. This is one way that humor functions as a defense mechanism, allowing one to vent harmful emotions, held back by social repression, and as well avoid the pain of facing the discomfort or its causes head-on.⁴⁷

It is Freud's contention that we often don't know what makes us laugh or tell the jokes that we do. He makes a distinction between humor, as a larger category, and the purposive activity of making jokes, the latter almost exclusively motivated by the alleviation of pent up energies. In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* Freud says that wit ("the joke" in some translations) is "an activity whose purpose is to derive pleasure—be it intellectual or otherwise."⁴⁸

He divides wit, or jokes, into two categories: *abstract*, or "harmless" wit, essentially puns and the like; and *targeted*, or "tendency" wit, jokes with a target or purpose. Both employ what Freud would call *joke-work* to arrive at a humorous effect. *Harmless wit*, according to Freud, is generally moderate in effect, and "all that it can be expected to produce in the hearer is a distinct feeling of satisfaction and a slight ripple of laughter."⁴⁹ On the other hand, purposive, or *tendency wit*, may on the other hand evoke a "sudden irresistible outburst of laughter," due to the fact that it has at its disposal sources of pleasure to which harmless wit has no access.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Freud *Civilization and Its Discontents* 1930

⁴⁷ "Humor can now be conceived as the loftiest of these defense functions. It disdains to withdraw from conscious attention ideas which are connected with the painful affect, as repression does, and it, thus, overcomes the defense automatism." Freud 1916 *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* A. Analysis of Wit III. The Tendencies of Wit 1916

⁴⁸ Freud 1916 *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* A. Analysis of Wit III. The Tendencies of Wit 1916

⁴⁹ Freud 1916

⁵⁰ Freud 1916

In other words, tendentious humor, which has a topic or a target, is about to evoke stronger responses because the emotions behind it are tapping into a deeper well of emotional content, and is therefore more powerful than the mere amusement derived from innocuous wordplay. Tendentious wit is, by Freud's reckoning, motivated by and expressive of repressed feelings of hostility or lust. In this, I would argue, Freud is obviously correct. Many of our jokes come to mind without each implicit assumption or motivation clearly marked, and these jokes are very often driven by feelings and thoughts to which we have little access, and would be hesitant to claim if we did.

Freud is right as well to make the distinction between humor and between jokes that are entirely wordplay or puzzles and jokes that are about something. While both are potentially used to vent repressed energies, the tendentious kind are clearly more directly linked to strong negative emotions, and more deeply held beliefs. If punny, *abstract wit*, is a camp stove, *tendentious wit* is a blow torch; and problems can arise because people tend not to know which they are using and why.

Let us briefly explore the mechanisms behind these pointed jokes a bit more in order to understand how they function socially to either subtly vent or imply what cannot be explicitly stated. Tendentious humor, when delivered through clever joke-work, skirts the traps of addressing taboos and giving voice to impulses such as lust and hostility directly and seriously. Instead these impulses and emotions are expressed under the cover of wit and ambiguity, to be taken up by those who would view the joke, and themselves as more innocent than if the more volatile content were to be explicitly and frankly stated.⁵¹ Tendentious wit is very rhetorically effectively as “it bribes the hearer with pleasure into taking sides without very close investigation.”⁵²

⁵¹. Freud 1916 "Strictly speaking, we do not know what we are laughing about. In all obscene jokes we succumb to striking mistakes of judgment about the 'goodness' of the joke as far as it depends upon formal conditions; the technique of these jokes is often very poor while their laughing effect is enormous."

⁵². Freud 1916 Also, "Where the argument seeks to draw the hearer's reason to its side, wit strives to push aside this reason. There is no doubt that wit has chosen the way which is psychologically more efficacious."

So, as previously stated, humor is not always so innocent. That, however, is not always a bad thing. Emotional leakage might be a difficulty, especially if it registers on some level with the recipient of the hostility; but it is likely overall better than if there were no relief valve for repressed energies whatsoever. In order to test whether or not Freud was correct in his estimation that animosity and frustration amplified the experience of humor and that individuals laugh at innocuous joke-work, often unaware that their responses are shaped by other socially unacceptable emotions and dark subtexts, media theorists Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant conducted experiments. What they found supported Freud's theories that laughter is magnified by other emotions like hostility, with the subject often merely attributing the laughter to the joke, however good or bad. This they refer to as *The Misattribution Theory of Tendentious Humor*.

The Misattribution Theory of Tendentious Humor

Zillmann and Bryant's theory carries on the distinctions made by Freud regarding humor. To prove their hypothesis they conducted an experiment which involved subjecting test participants to either rude or normal treatment by an experimenter in order to establish a particular affective disposition toward her. The subjects then witnessed the experimenter in one of three different conditions: a. one with innocuous humor cues and no misfortune, b. one with the same humor cues and some misfortune, and c. one with no humor cues but misfortune. The expressions and reactions of the test subjects were recorded in secret by naïve judges. The positive affective response of participants was more than doubled in the presence of innocuous humor when there was animosity toward the target.

These findings, coupled with the *Dispositional Theory of Mirth* (Zillmann & Cantor 1976), where subjects predictably enjoyed witnessing the demise of a hated character, point to the fact that humor is amplified and often rooted in negative emotions. These emotional motivations are often a secret, even, and often especially to the ones who are laughing. Humor, in these cases has the power to function as a catalyst for the expression of negative repressed emotions, and to cover the venting with the idea that

the humor lies in the technical quality or subject of the joke, rather than the deeper subtext.

Most modern comedies, such as sitcoms, have a great deal of humor based on the ambiguity and misattribution of humor. The underlying tension and subtext give greater weight to the witty wordplay, and conversely the wordplay allows what would otherwise be seen as hostile or unpleasant to be taken, at least by some participants, as merely or primarily humorous. When John Stewart and a correspondent on The Daily Show banter back and forth over some trivial wording in a funny way, during a piece on poverty or racist police enforcement. The witty jokes are what the audience thinks that they are laughing at, but it is really the weightier subject that brings about the larger humorous shift, and cathartic release of frustration or hostility. The hostile nature of the underlying subtext is brought along covertly in the nicer package of clever, innocuous joke-work.⁵³ This brings up the fact that humor, as it functions a large amount of the time is emotionally driven, but it fundamentally requires some conceptual play as a vehicle and camouflage. It is now to the role of conceptual play in the social and psychological experience of humor which we now turn.

Incongruity: Humor through Cognitive Realization of Absurdity

Two fish are in a tank.

One turns to the other and says: "Do you know how to drive this?" ⁵⁴

Incongruity Theory is a blanket term referring to a group of theories seeking to explain humor in terms of a cognitive realization or shift within the perceiver through the apprehension of incongruity between a concept and the reality. It encompasses varying ideas of absurdity, irrelevance, inappropriateness, and

⁵³. Here Michael Billig demonstrates this function of humor by way of Freud's "umbrella joke": "A wife is like an umbrella. Sooner or later one takes a cab." *Freud explains that the joke condenses two thoughts, one of which can be spoken outright while the other must be discussed. The first thought is that an umbrella does not provide full protection against the rain. Sooner or later one has to take a cab to avoid a heavy downpour. The second thought is that one marries 'in order to protect oneself against the temptations of sensuality' Just as the umbrella fails to provide protection against heavy rain, so does the wife fail to protect against her husband's frustration. Consequently, a man must hire a woman, as he might hire a cab.*" Billig 2005 162

⁵⁴. From a page on Incongruity Theory written by Richard Wiseman <http://www.richardwiseman.com/LaughLab/incon.html>

logical impossibility.⁵⁵ A ready example of this is tiny hat, too small to be of use for its apparently intended purpose. There are a number of theorists who put forward incongruity theories including Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and John Morreall. Most modern theories are founded on some idea of incongruity. There is a great deal of overlap between the humorous and other uncanny experiences, but the experience of humor, unlike horror or fantasy, resolves the shift in a positive realization of familiarity, a connection must be made cognitively otherwise the joke does not “land” and it is not, as such, humor. For this to occur, humor must relate to what is most familiar to us, ourselves, human ideas and the social world.

Henri Bergson, in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* makes the point that the comic is fundamentally related to people:

The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it,--the human caprice whose mould it has assumed. It is strange that so important a fact, and such a simple one too, has not attracted to a greater degree the attention of philosophers. Several have defined man as “an animal which laughs.” They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to. 56

⁵⁵. IEP entry on “Humor” www.iep.utm.edu/humor/

⁵⁶. Bergson *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* 1911

It may be an oversimplification simply saying “some human attitude or expression,”⁵⁷ however, Bergson is getting at an important point: humor is grounded in the reactions to the human social world. Tiny hats are funny, because they have an intended purpose which they do not serve due to their diminutive size. One laughs at the maker of the hat and their mistake or intention, laughs picturing another person or oneself and looking foolish, or laughs at oneself for previously thinking that it might fit or do the job of a hat.

The agentive aspect matters. Sunsets, if strange in some way would be alarming, or fantastical, but not silly or humorous. If the Sun began to glow purple, or to whistle and bob about the horizon in a whimsical fashion, the appropriate response would not be to laugh, but something else entirely, like see a doctor. One might construct a humorous story, relating one's reaction to scary or strange sunset, but it would be an unusual reaction to laugh at the event itself without the narrative distance of placing it in the context of a story.⁵⁸

Humor is, as Bergson points out, directly involved in human worlds—at people and people-like behaviors—and directed at social/emotional/cognitive incongruities. This is no coincidence, since, according to Bergson's theory humor plays the role of snapping an individual out of thinking which has become too rigid for the circumstance. Such rigidity is the very sin that one commits when one confronts a joke with serious resistance, her sober response opening her to the further criticism that she does not “get the joke,” which will result in more laughter at their expense.⁵⁹ Bergson's view is in line with the conception of humor as a type of play or game, often rewarding the agent with laughter for making social or cognitive corrections or connections. Confronted with the problem of an inflexible

⁵⁷. The uncanny valley is a related concept pertaining to our experience of non-human creatures, fictitious or otherwise embodying human characteristics; representing as human/anthropomorphized. If a creature, real or fictitious, acts like a person, but is not familiar in certain ways that humanize them, we take them as too dissimilar to relate to. Cockroaches could act like people, acting out the most familiar comedy scenes in human, but with black eyeballs and chitinous appendages, we could not extend empathetic understanding and the juxtaposition would be all the more horrifying.

⁵⁸. Morreall's “bowling ball in the refrigerator,” might seem to provide a counterexample, but when one laughs at such a thing, in all likelihood one is laughing at the strange puzzle of who placed it there. Or laughing at one's own life where bowling balls end up in fridges without explanation.

⁵⁹. Jonathan Swift made this point.

world the sting of humor snaps one out of rigidity and back into a proper dynamic, flexible mode of thought.

With *incongruity* we are rewarded for playing the game of sense-making: exploring rules, drawing comparisons, and pointing to gaps between reality and concept. This view fits Mead's behavioral theories that play is the way that an individual attains a practical relation-to-self through role-taking, through engaging with other individuals, then by taking on the rules of a game and the expectation of participants, one can understand itself as a self-existing within a framework of moral expectation, with the potential for particular achievement.

From a social evolution standpoint it makes sense that the cognitive play described through incongruity theory would be rewarded, since it used to engage with others, to learn social and technical rules and to play with them in a tentative fashion, gaining mastery of them in the process. Incongruity is predicated on observation, the comparison of dissimilar things, and the combination familiar things in strange ways, something that can only be accomplished after a basic understanding of them is attained. This cognitive conception of humor is commensurate with modern evolutionary theories of laughter as a reward for cognitive debugging as Alastair Clarke explains:

*The theory is an evolutionary and cognitive explanation of how and why any individual finds anything funny. Effectively, it explains that humour occurs when the brain recognises a pattern that surprises it, and that recognition of this sort is rewarded with the experience of the humorous response, an element of which is broadcast as laughter." The theory further identifies the importance of pattern recognition in human evolution: "An ability to recognise patterns instantly and unconsciously has proved a fundamental weapon in the cognitive arsenal of human beings. The humorous reward has encouraged the development of such faculties, leading to the unique perceptual and intellectual abilities of our species."*⁶⁰

⁶⁰. Pyrrhic House 2008 quoting Clarke from forthcoming book on humor.

Incongruity theories help make sense of the function that humor rewards the debugging of one's mental maps with the pleasant surprise of puzzles and one's superiority over some previous version of oneself that held such misconceptions. The roots of incongruity, as an explanation of humor, can be found in the *Rhetoric* (III, 2), where Aristotle offers that the best way to elicit laughter from an audience is through setting up and then violating an expectation, either conceptually or linguistically surprising them with something that “gives a twist.”⁶¹ However, it wasn't however until after Descartes that incongruity theories came into full force. Until this point, Superiority Theory held sway.

Social philosopher Michael Billig suggests in *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* that the transition from seeing humor as something often unkind into viewing it as a form of benign cognitive play was not a mere accident. As society changed the moral messiness of the superiority functions gave way to a much more antiseptic view—that of *incongruity*—where amusement is derived from cognitive shifts. This change, Billig argues, was motivated by a self-serving notion of intellectual superiority and an impulse to describe one's own motivations as purely intellectual, ignoring the emotional and ethical questions associated with the exercise of humor. According to these theories of incongruity, surprising conceptual connections, rather than social jockeying or latent emotional reactions underlie the experience of humor.

To see it this way however, as we see through the work of Freud and Zillmann, is to disown the impulses that gave rise in one's consciousness to those incongruous observations, which shape magnify the response of the laugher. What we laugh at says a lot about our understanding of the world and our feelings about those in it. No one, as far as we know has unfettered and aperspectival access to Plato's world of pure and perfect forms, and as much as one would like to hover above the world, viewing the purely analytic/conceptual world devoid of bias, one's assumptions and understandings still frame one's

⁶¹. Expectation Violation Theory is a modern social theory, based on the concepts of incongruity and surprise.

thoughts.

An example of this is Arthur Schopenhauer's observations on humor. He offered an incongruity theory of humor which included the idea that humor arises when a concept fails to account for an object of thought.⁶² The times when there is a mismatch between the general and particular is when incongruity presents itself. He, like Aristotle, emphasized surprise as having the effect of magnifying the humorous laughter. Humor is dependent on one's development and the world in which she lives. Schopenhauer makes this painfully clear in his writings about humor. One of his examples of the humorously incongruous, an example he considered ludicrous to all, was that of a freed American slave grieving the loss of his child, who choose the epitaph "Lovely, early broken lily," to express his feelings about his dead infant.⁶³

How humorous, Schopenhauer thought, to compare two things so very incongruous: a dark-skinned, dead child and a beautiful, white-petaled flower. His example, and the expectation that others would universally see its inherent hilariousness is revealing of the way he saw the world, and as a result extended his social understanding. It is no coincidence that the object of amusement is a low status, low education slave. Schopenhauer knows what a metaphor is, and could, one imagines, clearly see why one might want to compare two things they viewed as precious, delicate, beautiful, and finite. It is not like the former slave compared his deceased child to something to which no parallels could be drawn. Rather, Schopenhauer ostensibly laughs because he cannot believe that the low-born man could seriously compare his child to something like a lily. Here is one example of what seems to the joker like objectively funny conceptual incongruity, to others represents particular, and often malicious views about the world.

Schopenhauer's laughter is not merely a matter of pure cognitive play. It has a target, and reveals beliefs and showing up against a historical background of intelligibility, and demonstrating what and

⁶². IEP-Humor

⁶³. Schopenhauer 95

whom he values. This happens, for all of us, largely without our conscious reflection. That is precisely the insight that relief theorists offer to explain why what we find humorous is not merely the witty turn of phrase, but the more aggressive impulses and subtexts beneath the surface. So, while cognitive play is the main focus of the theories of incongruity it is important to remember the social and emotional causes which frame, drive and shape them. With that said, the cognitive element is an essential component to humor's functioning. Without cognitive content and realizations the emotional and physiological reactions can hardly be called humor. Whether or not the reasons are always consciously understood, there are reasons for our reactions. The impulses that direct our actions and our laughter have cognitive causes, even if those causes are not readily apparent or acknowledged.

These causes are embedded in our socio-historical unfolding as well as our biological impulses. Incongruity theorists are clearly right that the emotional shift in humor involves some psychical, cognitive shift. This is necessary to fully understand humor. Some sort of mental connection must be made for the reaction to be humor, even if it is not clear to us at the time what it is. Laughing at nothing and for *no reason* is not humor, it is laughter. Even anti-humor and absurdity are about the unexpected subversion of expectation.⁶⁴

Incongruity reveals that humor often hinges of some sort of surprising conceptual shift and has a great deal to do with the development of cognitive play, critical thinking and sussing out incongruous relationships. Because of this, humor has a direct role in determining the rules of sense-making and the correction of erroneous assumptions. Incongruity-based humor trains the participants to get better at making connections through comparison and teaches the epistemic rules of the social game. It serves this function in concert with the superiority, which helps to form and reinforce the social rules of status and expectation, and relief which vents the emotional pressure accrued through these constraints.

⁶⁴. Anti-humor jokes work through the subversion of a typical joke format, where the set-up is given but the punchline is replaced with something absurd or anti-climactic so that that becomes what is funny: a meta-joke about jokes and expectation, playing often on the shock or confusion of the listener. An example of an anti-humor joke:

Q: *Why did the boy drop his ice cream?* A: *Because he was hit by a bus.*

Rather than being mutually exclusive, these theories and functions overlap and interrelate.

Like humor grounded in superiority, incongruity's role in humor plays important social and psychological roles. Also, since it is rarely mere abstract conceptual play involves various degrees of superiority or relief, it is not so clean or ethically innocent as is presumed by the jokers. The teasers often overestimate the mutuality of the fun being had, calling it teasing and minimizing the reaction of the teased by: a. calling it teasing rather than something more harsh b. saying that it is merely an observation of something objectively funny c. claiming that it is just a joke and that they cannot take a joke, or d. that the target deserves it for their own good or for society's betterment. It is likely a combination of all of these in many instances. As noted by relief theorists, those who engage in what they view to be innocuous, victimless humor are still often telling or laughing at jokes with targets, whether they know it or not. It is not all bad however, as they all, even some of the ostensibly negative elements, contribute to society's progressive expansion and functioning.

Humor's Role as Play toward Individual and Social Development

You can tell how smart people are by what they laugh at.

-Tina Fey (Oprah 2009)

The three theories already mentioned describe aspects and functions of humor that each have their advantages and dangers. Superiority helps with bonding, the exposure of folly, and the creation of solidarity and in-groups, though coming at the expense and humiliation of the excluded target, and the potential for fascist regression. Relief allows for the agent to deal with negativity and misfortune in a way that feels positive, though sometimes with negative and unintentional consequences which are hidden from those involved. Incongruity helps to make sense of the violations of social and conceptual rules, while the same interpretive lens of allows for most things to be cast as wholly absurd, and therefore potentially dismissing valid criticism, closing off rational or ethical discourse. These

functions are so seamlessly integrated, as open-ended processes of relation and realization, into the way that people think and feel that the reasons behind them go largely unnoticed.

So far a number of negative aspects of humor have been examined, and this is because they are generally ignored when humor is discussed. The positive effects are certainly great; even when bearing in mind that they are often mixed in with the negative ones. Some positives worth mentioning are the fact that humor promotes divergent or creative thinking in two ways: 1. by blocking negative emotions like fear, sadness, and anger, which stifle creative thinking, and 2. by way of promoting an appreciation of cognitive shifts, and metaphorical play, since humorous frames of mind are predicated on looking for new ways to see and understand the world through new combinations of ideas and rewarded with mirth and amusement.⁶⁵ These benefits likely developed along with society and language as we became what is known today as human. It is postulated that the evolutionary roots of humor are tied to the elicitation of Duchenne, or genuine and mirthful, laughter which originated in ape play and developed over the last 2 million years into various social functions.⁶⁶

As previously mentioned, Provine's work takes laughter to be an evolutionary adaptation of sounds made during animal play. A number of evolutionary theorists have likewise attempted to explain humor's roots in a similar fashion. These explanations do not compete with the social theories previously mentioned, but rather inform them by helping to explain how humor came to be what it is, and what socio-evolutionary functions it might serve. The functions of humor which various evolutionary theorists have posited are largely congruent with the view of humor as a form of play or game. These include the development of imagination and tentative identity-taking, the non-violent/creative resolution of conflicts, the reinforcement of social power relations, the enforcement of social mores, and the encouragement of solidarity and group cohesion. These are all consistent with the theories mentioned so far. Let us briefly examine a few more in greater detail. One of the evolutionary

⁶⁵. Morreall (2011)

⁶⁶. Gervais and Wilson (2005)

advantageous features that humor is said to have is the role of sexual selection, the indication of social interest and the monitoring of relationships.⁶⁷

Daniel Dennett and colleagues have a theory of humor, similar to that of Alastair Clarke, which attempts to give a comprehensive account of humor origin and function. Humor, in their estimation is essentially a reward mechanism for the debugging of one's mental maps of the world, which allows the agent to develop more fully her understanding of her surroundings and ideas in order to be better equipped for evolutionary success. Comedy, the intentional creation of humor is, by this view, the exploitation of such mechanisms, in the same way that confectioners use our evolutionary predisposition toward sweet things—a holdover from when calories were scarce and sweet meant calorie rich—to the end of making people enjoy and buy sweet and colorful desserts. He also gives the example of the response toward infantile features—large eyes, small mouth, etc...—that cue certain instincts within us such as affection and protectiveness, which have been used by cartoonists since before Walt Disney's ancestors walked fully upright.⁶⁸

Dennett and company make a very good argument which stands as one of the best suggestions for an explanation of humor's roots and roles, as well as an invitation to further empirical study of the topic. Their investigation, which provides insight into what functions humor serves and how it may have developed over time is largely commensurable with the findings of this thesis.

The Evolution of Humor and the Agents Who Speak It

These ideas of humor's evolutionary roots are certainly helpful to understand the roles that it plays today in social development, as long as they offer a dynamic understanding of how it is used in actual human life without attempting to reduce the role or function of humor to singular causes and purposes, such as survival; or a functional account taken to be the essential nature of humor. Such reduction,

⁶⁷. Li, Griskevicius, et, al. (2009)

⁶⁸. Dennett Bucharest Conference on Humor

common to many mechanistic and biologicistic theories, effectively ignores the agentic internal workings of the individual interpretive process, made possible through language and self-conscious reflection.

The failure to include the agentic aspect by limiting humor to mere biological reactions and prehistoric speculation about its causes is to partially overlook the capacity of things to develop. This sort of reductionism misunderstands the evolutionary process, since evolution is a dynamic development, where previously used elements are combined and repurposed constantly. The eyes of organisms are in most cases specially modified skin cells that evolved from even more simple cells, which are themselves combinations of various elements.

The eye performs a great number of functions, but more than this, sight has a great number of facets (color, depth, texture, tone, brightness) and is used in a number of ways. What eyes are made of and how sight evolved are only part of the story. It would be a mistake to simply say that the real, or most important function/purpose of sight is to avoid obstacles. A similar error is committed by Natural Law theorists like Thomas Aquinas, who only see one purpose to things, not realizing the complexity of the world with its parallel and competing goods, each adapting to the fit and change the new context.

Humor and laughter both have multiple roles intertwining and overlapping. The roles of humor are manifold: bonding, releasing anger, distancing, criticism, acceptance, influencing others, calming oneself, establishing superiority, self-deprecation, disrupting conversation, keeping it going, creating common ground, and scorching it. For this reason is important to realize that there will likely never be a fully comprehensive theory of humor that takes all of these functions into account and organizes them neatly.

We will likely never have a completely prioritized and objective set of criteria by which to categorize and judge humor/comedy, and we will almost certainly never have a the formula for “the holy grail” of humor: the necessary and sufficient conditions of making/finding something funny. This is for a

number of reasons, including the fact that jokes don't travel well, since they are largely context dependent and they wear out over time as people hear them and as attitudes toward their content evolves. A person cannot tell all of the same old jokes, with the same old ideas and prejudices because people have heard them and they do not think the same way anymore. The themes persist and recur but must take on the new levels of contextual and conceptual sophistication.

What is appropriate to joke about and how we may do so changes with time and place. As old jokes and topics die out others replace them. We will never run out of jokes as they can always go “Meta.. Meta, Meta...” as Dennett points out, and old jokes and concepts have been recycled since the beginning human history. However, many jokes cannot be retold in cultures that are radically different from one another in ways that are clearly, and not so clearly related to the joke themselves. The distance between these cultures can be spatial or temporal. We are as removed from certain jokes about farming in modern Russia as we are about jokes about revolutionary war garb. Humor, like the people in whose heads it lives, evolves to fit new social and epistemic contexts.

The same thing must be said about the dynamic role of the self as an open-ended, process of reflection and interpretation, which defies reduction into mere brain state correlates and evolutionary imperatives. While the work of Dennett and Hurley is certainly helpful for understanding humor's evolutionary roots and social roles, Dennett has argued vociferously that consciousness is nothing more than an illusion. In line with other scientific determinists, Dennett makes the argument that consciousness is a merely a “magic trick” performed by biology.⁶⁹

What would accepting such a view mean? Would we would have to decide to change our view of consciousness and interaction, the theories that govern our investigation of human consciousness and how to proceed? Perhaps not and we are biologically or mechanically determined in such a way that we can't help but do what we do, and be what we are, thinking and relating in terms of agentive action but

⁶⁹. Dennett *Consciousness Explained* (1992)

being mere biological puppets or philosophical zombies.

By this thinking it would be futile to try to do any different than we already will be doing and even words such as “try” are ironically inadequate. In the same way that philosopher J.L. Mackie argues for a moral *Error Theory* which says that moral statements are hollow and neither true nor false, Dennett could be said to be an error theorist in terms of conscious agency. I shall not spend a great deal of time on this, but merely to say that it seems to be an untenable assertion, undercut by a sort of performative contradiction. So, to Dennett's view of consciousness as an epiphenomenal occurrence, rendering us all essentially zombies, John Searle's response will have to suffice for the time being:

*To put it as clearly as I can: in his book, *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett denies the existence of consciousness. He continues to use the word, but he means something different by it. For him, it refers only to third-person phenomena, not to the first-person conscious feelings and experiences we all have. For Dennett there is no difference between us humans and complex zombies who lack any inner feelings, because we are all just complex zombies. ...I regard his view as self-refuting because it denies the existence of the data which a theory of consciousness is supposed to explain...Here is the paradox of this exchange: I am a conscious reviewer consciously answering the objections of an author who gives every indication of being consciously and puzzlingly angry. I do this for a readership that I assume is conscious. How then can I take seriously his claim that consciousness does not⁷⁰ really exist?"*

As Searle notes, there is certainly a problem in remaining an error theorist in terms of consciousness in the face of the evidence of other conscious minds, while presumably having the experience of a conscious decision-making agent like the rest of us. Of course positing a completely free will also poses a number of serious issues as well.

⁷⁰. The New York Review of Books ‘The Mystery of Consciousness’: An Exchange Daniel C. Dennett, reply by John R. Searle 12/21/1995

Human experience is undeniably in large part shaped and formed social conditioning, pre-existing material conditions, and biological predilections. For this reason we cannot call conscious agency in any way fully free or unfettered. Humans are not, as the caricature goes, fully autonomous self-caused beings pulling ourselves out of the muck by our own hair.⁷¹ A person completely independent of their context, out of which they grow in reaction to and in accordance with, is a nonsensical idea. Against either extreme, I defend the idea that we are created, pulled into being, out of a relation to the whole is an important one indeed, and it will form the basis for our understanding of agency and ethics in the following chapter.

There are certainly issues of being pulled into a preformed world which shows up in advance, shaping our experiences and reactions which are important to keep in mind. It is probably the case that individuals react perhaps as often, if not more, than we act, and our view of the world and ourselves is not totally reliable. Our minds not only fail to make sense of our worlds in a strictly rational sense, but as a matter of course trick us with regard to what we see, remember, believe and value. For example, studies consistently demonstrate the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Test subjects don't know why they picked one choice over another will make up ad hoc explanations when questioned, and are even easily tricked into thinking they chose something that they did not, and supplying ad hoc reasons for why they chose the thing they actually did not choose. Also, there is the fact that obesity and suicide are highly influenced by social factors to the point of being called "contagious," and as well as the misattribution theory of humor previously mentioned also all point to the fact that our worldviews are somewhat unreliable, and agency is a multiplicity cobbled together through moment to moment interpretation based on what we see and feel.

It is clear then that presence of conditioning and bias in the structuring and expression of human

⁷¹. As per Nietzsche's reference to Baron Munchhausen as a ridiculous example of a *causa sui*.

consciousness undoubtedly plays an important role in how the social world functions. This does not however negate the phenomenological evidence of the almost universal human experience of consciousness, nor the fact that the society and language are structured around the interaction of conscious subjects. It is not fully reliable to be sure, but nothing is. Is it reliable enough to speak of reasonably stable agents with recourse to identity and responsibility? I argue that it is, and that this account of agentive development is central to social conflict and necessary toward resolving it.

The pragmatic view of self-conscious agency that I will outline does not rely on supernatural souls or the metaphysical idea of completely free will. It rather understands conscious agency as an emergent possibility structured and made possible by language and experience: specifically the linguistically-mediated perspective-taking articulated in the work of G.H. Mead, and taken up by modern philosophers of mind.

Keeping in mind the social and historical constitution of agents, and the biological constraints on their cognition, it is essential to take into account the interaction of the external, shared factors which define the conditions of existence and experience generally with the internal worlds of specific conscious actors. We are the product of our social circumstances, of our opportunities, of the selves that we form in reflective equilibrium with one another. That said, humans, at least at points seem to be capable of conscious reflection, identity-taking through the open-ended interpretive process.

The classical humor theories that we have discussed up to now all indicate this in some way: superiority's presupposition of social responsibility, individual bonding and the discarding of old ideas of oneself; relief's expression of latent emotional states resulting in a catharsis which allows for growth or at least continuation; or incongruity's reliance on individual cognitive realizations which debug mental maps and allow for social change through the recognition of absurdity and error. Those as well as the modern theories mentioned all point to the evolutionary advantage of humor, and the idea of humor as an extension of animal play.

To further understand how agents develop and how humor affects this development, it is important to view the theories that we have just discussed, not as essential elements, competing for descriptive primacy, but rather functions that it may and often does perform, each to various extents involved in the private development and social worlds of the agents who use them. Humor, functioning to enable and structure play is commensurable with the views of Mead and Honneth regarding the socialization and development of the self. Mead's explanation of the role of play and games in human development is not only compatible, but complimentary to this account.

To that end let us flesh out the issue of agency's development in relation to language and recognition with the goal in mind of more fully understanding the effects of recognition and humor on societal and individual development.

II. Language, Agency and Recognition

The discussion of agentic development and basic sense-making will begin with an example which highlights the importance of language in communication and the creation of interior worlds. After that I will expound further upon the concept of agency generally. Through Mead's work with the concepts of the *I*, the *me*, and the *generalized other*, I will show how selves are developed, maintained and renewed through language and social processes allowing individuals to become self-conscious participants within a world. This will explain as well the ethical debt entailed in such a relation and why development of agents through mutual recognition is a positive goal.

Following this I will utilize Honneth's three spheres of recognition, as outlined in *The Struggle for Recognition*, as a model to offer the basic conditions for agentic actualization through the recognition of others. Through this I will draw out the implications of the potential effects of the denial of respect, manifested in many instances through ridicule. This will set the stage for the later explication of humor's role in affecting and analyzing interpersonal processes. First, however, we must establish the

importance of language in the formation of individual and social worlds. To do so, we turn to the example of a man named Ildefonso whose story is described in the book *A Man without Words*.

The Importance of Words

Imagine for a moment living in a world without the means for basic expression, conversation, or communication. How incomprehensibly lonely would such a world be? In the book, *A Man without Words*, author Susan Schaller recounts the example of a 29 year old, deaf, mute, man, named Ildefonso.⁷² He was ostracized by the rest of his class, and unable to relate to them. Schaller, an assistant teacher in the class for the deaf, took it on as a project to figure out why he was uncommunicative. She eventually discovered that Ildefonso had never been taught, what most of us take for granted: that there were such things as words. He did not know that there were discrete units of symbolic interaction which could stand in for the objects and situations to which they referred. Susan took it on as a task to teach him words, so that he would not be isolated in a world where he could barely function, “poor-in-world,” to borrow a phrase from Heidegger, lacking any real conceptual or symbolic foundation. She sat with him each day and would attempt to show him written words and hand signs, but each time she would sign, he would simply mimic her, not realizing that she was attempting to convey informational content.

Her attempts continued for months, but one day, when he got up from the other side of the table, instead of attempting to have him continue the lesson in the same way, she tried something different:

I taught an invisible student. I stopped talking to him and I stopped having eye contact, and I was trying to explain to this invisible student that this creature, a cat—so I'd me miming a cat and petting a cat—and then I'd sign the sign for cat.⁷³

⁷². Schaller's book “A Man without Words,” published in 1991, with a foreword by Oliver Sachs, details this story. It challenged the Critical Period Hypothesis, that humans cannot learn language after a certain age.

⁷³. Radiolab *Words* Transcript 2010

She would then go to the empty chair and pretend to get it through her gestures and facial expressions. She did this day after day, and Ildefonso would watch her, looking bored a great deal of the time. Until one day something clicked in his understanding and it suddenly struck him that there were words that stood in for particular things. With this sudden revelation he began to weep uncontrollably, with happiness and an overwhelming sense that he now understood what he had been missing: language. She feared that he would not return to class, but the next day he began to compile a list of words, which grew each week, which he would show her, excited to demonstrate his expanding inner world. His emotional content now had the power of conceptual placeholders, which could be developed, combined, and analyzed; leading to a greater capacity to understand and communicate. Without the conceptual hooks of identity, temporality, prescriptivity, etc., it is not only impossible to communicate ideas of self/other, past/present/future, having complex thoughts at all is seemingly impossible.

As it turned out Ildefonso was not the only such person. He lived with other deaf mutes who also lacked the knowledge that spoken and written languages existed, and consequently were excluded from the benefits of their use. In order to communicate they would engage in long chains of gestures, acting out complete scenarios in order to convey even the simplest thought. While this is language and communication in a rudimentary sense, it is certainly about as basic as symbolic exchange can get; each scene acted out in its totality, with no short-hand to refer to events, persons, or concepts. Eventually, after being habituated into the new world of linguistic understanding, Ildefonso was unable or unwilling to stay with his housemates any longer. Frustrated by their inability to communicate, in any efficient, socially significant or complex way, he left. When interviewed about his experiences he did not like to talk about the period before he acquired the knowledge of words, referring to it as the “dark times.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴. Radiolab *Words* 2010

It is unclear if he can remember any of it clearly; but it is likely that he cannot, since at the time he lacked any coherent way to categorize and catalog the sense data to which he was exposed. A life without language is one essentially unrecognizable as human. Language is often taken for granted as something mundane, pre-formed, and merely useful for transaction and expression. It is clear however that words are foundational to the emergence and perpetuation of minds, selves and societies. When that man spoke his first primordial “I shall...” that was moment of world-shattering/world-building importance. Through the act of role-taking play Ildefonso was able see what he was missing and begin to play the structured game of language, developing a definite center of agentive action as he proceeded along. As, Hellen Keller, the first famous example of such a transformation from undeveloped isolation to participatory personhood remarked:

Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious, yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect. I was carried along to objects and acts by a certain blind natural impetus. I had a mind which caused me to feel anger, satisfaction, desire. These two facts led those about me to suppose that I willed and thought. I can remember all this, not because I knew that it was so, but because I have tactual memory. It enables me to remember that I never contracted my forehead in the act of thinking. I never viewed anything beforehand or chose it. I also recall tactually the fact that never in a start of the body or a heart-beat did I feel that I loved or cared for anything. My inner life, then, was a blank without past, present, or future, without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith.⁷⁵

⁷⁵. Helen Keller (1908) 117

Such is the power of words and interaction with others that without themselves cannot exist.⁷⁶ Agents form and continue develop as individuals through the internalizing concepts through language, interacting with others and incorporating their perspectives into their own. To understand how such develops occurs we turn to the work of Mead and Honneth on agency and recognition.

Agency as Socially Situated Self

Let us further examine what is meant by the term “agency.” “Agency,” as it will be used, refers to an individual's capacity to self-consciously act within a social whole. The term does not in itself denote or imply moral directionality in and of itself, but a self-reflexive individual subject who may decide to act in various ways. This ability to reflect and voluntarily act with an understanding of the causes and potential effects of one's own actions is itself the basic precondition for morality generally. It is a fundamental tenet any modern society that it does not make sense to hold a person responsible for something over which they had no choice. Blameworthiness and prescriptivity dissolve in the absence of volition. It would be absurd to punish or reward an individual for something over which they had no control.

The self is the basic unit of interaction and responsibility, even in collectivist cultures where blame and credit are distributed within one's familial and social groups. It therefore follows that the embedded subject should to play a primary role in discussions of society's development. It is assumed in this thesis that a society should work for the inclusion and promotion of individuals toward their own developmental growth and inclusion; not simply because selves that do not actualize their potential is a waste of communal resources, or merely that actualized individuals can more effectively contribute to

⁷⁶. There are some who question the story that Schaller tells: that Ildefonso's Kaspar Hauser story is not accurately told or doesn't fully challenge the Critical Period Hypothesis. This, if true, does not contradict the foundational nature of language in the development of consciousness. Thinking a world without words is as far as we can tell a performative contradiction, and the worlds of animals for this reason are comparatively impoverished. For more on this read Kevin Aho's “Logos and the Poverty of Animals: Rethinking Heidegger's Humanism” 2006

the whole, but as well that a basic demand of justice is that individuals should have the potential for actualization and respect. This will not however be an atomistic account of egos coming together to form a social whole, but rather how selves grow out of the social whole, shaping and it through their own development.⁷⁷ For a clearer understanding of how such development occurs we turn to George Herbert Mead, and his insights on agency's development through recognition and play.

Mead, Myself, and I

Mead's pragmatic view of self-conscious development, as outlined in *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), will provide the basis for understanding agentic constitution as where a being becomes self-conscious by being drawn into a relation with oneself as a socially responsible object through taking on the perspectives of others. Let us begin with the question of the emergence of agency in individuals, and what self-conscious reflection has to do with it. When people speak to one another, they generally do so like they are dealing with rational beings who are in control of their own abilities to think and act in the world. Asking one another to do this or that thing presupposes the ability to choose to do it. Whether one says "I will," "she wants," or "he refuses," treating one another like agents, responsible for our actions is inherent in the language that we use.⁷⁸

Making decisions requires the ability to conceptualize choices, compare their potential effects and select based on particular criteria. In general we do not suppose that animals possess the same ability to decide in this way since they, to varying degrees, lack this capacity for conceptual analysis and futuritive projection.⁷⁹ This capacity requires the ability to be self-conscious: conscious of oneself and how one relates to the world, through taking the perspectives of other agents, real or hypothetical, and

⁷⁷. Other theories emphasize the role of idealized conditions for discourse, capabilities required for flourishing, linguistic structures, etc... but without recourse to a thick notion of self an essential component is missing, even if that self is a pluralistic account as is supported in Mead.

⁷⁸. Even if one is a determinist regarding the issue of free will, or an error theorist regarding morality, the language she uses is still directed at, and referring to, responsible, autonomous individuals directing their actions and intentions toward this or that activity.

⁷⁹. Aho (2006)

to see oneself as an *Other* to these agents. More specifically one must be able to a. make change in the world, b. understand one's effects on it, and c. have the capacity to differentiate one's causal powers.⁸⁰

This clearly does not simply happen from birth. Babies do not come out weighing the merits of different choices and deciding what they will do in the future. Developing into an agent which consciously acts and thinks in terms of selves and others is an extended process of increasing sophistication through linguistically-mediated perspective-taking.

It begins when the infant is confronted with its limitations and compelled by its own needs and desires to understand and overcome them. Through the initial exchange of gestures which take on increasing significance one is habituated into the world of symbolic interaction, setting the stage for self-

conscious reflection. Integral to this process is self-objectification, but how does such a thing occur?

In *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead says: “How can an individual get outside himself? This is the essential psychological problem of selfhood or of self-consciousness; and its solution is to be found by referring to the process of social conduct or activity in which the given person or individual is implicated.”⁸¹ He continues by saying that:

The apparatus of reason would not be complete unless it swept itself into its own analysis of the field of experience; or unless the individual brought himself into the same experiential field as that of the other individual selves in relation to whom he acts in any given social situation.

*Reason cannot become impersonal unless it takes an objective, non-affective attitude toward itself; otherwise we have just consciousness, not self-consciousness. And it is necessary to rational conduct that the individual should take an impersonal attitude toward himself, that he should become an object to himself.*⁸²

This self-objectification is fundamentally important to the ability of the individual to act, rather than

⁸⁰. Kögler (2012) 48

⁸¹. Mead 138

⁸². Mead 138

merely react, to stimuli. If the agent is unable to take such an attitude toward herself, the *self* as a social object subjected to the expectations of others, she cannot take into account the role that she plays in interactions or make judgments about her own potential choices. Cognitive reflection upon one's choices, and encountering the self-as-social-object allows the agent to reflect upon how she perceives herself, through an internalization of the perspectives of others.

As previously stated this process could clearly not happen without the implicit and explicit use of symbols.⁸³ Without the symbols which form concepts there would be no way to consider the perspectives of others or think the potential outcomes of different choices. Absent these symbols, provided by society, there would be no way to exchange meaning with others or process it for ourselves. There would be no internal worlds absent these conceptual hooks on which experiences are hung and sorted, and we would be left with an impoverished subjectivity, as seen through the example of Sharron and Ildefonso. The example also provides clues to how one attains the conceptual frameworks necessary to have sophisticated thoughts, feelings, goals and most fundamentally, a self that has them. This development occurs, usually in early childhood, through the formation of a 'me.' It is because of the importance of language in the formation of selves and ideas in the creation and exchange of symbolic meaning and perspectives that in this paper I focus almost exclusively on his ideas of the linguistic, and omit largely the explanation of pre-conceptual perception which leads up to and parallels its attainment. It after language is acquired that selves enter the picture.

“Are you talking to me?”

All human babies start from the point of knowing nothing, entering the world as close to *tabula rasa* as much as any creature of which we are aware. They do not possess any of the skills, understandings, or self-consciousness that they will later acquire. Babies are conscious insofar as they experience the

world around them, but the data that they encounter is not sorted into the useful categories that allow for competent navigation of the world. The acquisition of such capacities, the self-reflexive awareness of ones place within social-context, and the ability to view oneself and others as centers of agentive action occurs when this organism is confronted with a world outside of herself. As Mead explains:

*The physiological mechanism of the human individual's central nervous system makes it possible for him to take the attitudes of other individuals, and the attitudes of the organized social group of which he and they are members, toward himself, in terms of his integrated social relations to them and to the group as a whole; so that the general social process of experience and behavior is presented to him in his own experience, and so that he is able to govern and direct his conduct consciously and critically, with reference to his relations both to the social group as a whole and to its other individual members in terms of this social process.*⁸⁴

It is through this process that one is able to become “not only self-conscious but self-critical.”⁸⁵ The result of which is that self-criticism governs the actions and beliefs of the individual based on their social frame of reference. Self-critical thoughts which direct behavior originate in society and would not occur in its absence, hence, as Mead correctly asserts: “social control, so far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and associated with that individuality.”⁸⁶ This interaction forms the basis for the formation of a “me,” the internalization of the generalized other’s standards, which structure and constrain the activity of the open-ended, agentive “I.”

Mead references Freud's conception of the psychological “censor,” as correlating to the *me*, and stating that Freud's illustration represents a partial recognition of this process, but focuses too narrowly on

⁸⁴. Mead 255

⁸⁵. Mead 255

⁸⁶. Mead 255

“sexual experience and conduct,”⁸⁷ when in reality the “me” governs “all other aspects of social experience, behavior, and relations—a fact which follows naturally and inevitably from our social theory of the self.”⁸⁸ From the discussions of ridicule, superiority, and the conceptual play of incongruity/wit, it should be clear what role humor might play in the apparatus of self-criticism. That self-critical reflection, functionally essential to the development of the agent, emerges as one’s consciousness becomes an object to oneself. This begins with the Hegelian insight that as one’s awareness grows one discovers that one is not the self-same as surrounding world.

Confronted with the limitation of its own powers to manipulate the world, the child is forced to communicate. This leads toward the development of an *epistemic* self-relation, which, as Mead says, “represents a necessary, though insufficient condition, on the basis of which the identity of the practical ego can constitute itself.”⁸⁹ Out of this process, a *practical* self-relation to the world is formed. This basic involvement in the world, is soon coupled with the elementary forms of moral judgment through exchanges with interaction partners: “Thus the child can think about his conduct as good or bad only as he reacts to his own acts in the remembered words of his own parents.”⁹⁰ Hearing her own words, the child is able to perceive herself as producing a gesture, and ultimately reflecting similar gestures of others. This mirroring holds the seeds of seeing oneself as an active participant in the social world. Through this process the developing agent begins to see herself as an Other, subject to the normative demands of her social environment. Accordingly, the *me* becomes more fully fleshed out in this process. This *me* “to which the subject turns, from the second person perspective, can no longer represent a neutral instance of cognitively overcoming a problem, but must rather embody a moral instance of intersubjective conflict-resolution.”⁹¹ Social reaction, now extended to include normative

⁸⁷. I know, Freud reducing explanations of motivation and mechanism to sexuality... Shocking.

⁸⁸. Mead 255

⁸⁹. Honneth 76

⁹⁰. Mead (1913) 378

⁹¹. Honneth 77

action-contexts, the *me* shifts from merely a “cognitive into a practical self-image of one's own person.”⁹² Through taking the point of view of one's interaction partner, over and against oneself, one applies the partner's moral values to its practical relation to itself. As the number of interaction partners and normative evaluations increase, so too does the scope of one's *me*.

In so doing one forms a practical understanding of the expectations of one's society, of the *generalized other*, which contains the ideas and expectations that one's society is taken to hold. In response to this generalized other agents take on certain beliefs about themselves in relation to these standards and beliefs. This narrative self, the *me*, is formed in agreement with, and opposition to, the constellations of belief and understanding around which the society organizes itself. This interaction, defined by words and concepts, forms the precondition for selves to emerge. The practical concept of oneself, formed through linguistically-mediated perspective taking, is the *me* to which Mead refers:

*Such a 'me' is not then an early formation, which is then projected and ejected into the bodies of other people to give them the breadth of human life. It is rather an importation from the field of social objects into an amorphous, unorganized field of what we call inner experience. Through the organization of this object, the self, this material is itself organized and brought under the control of the individual in the form of so-called consciousness.*⁹³

One's self/selves exists in reflective equilibrium with the observations of the others, real or projected, who show up as significant in the overlapping socio-linguistic worlds which they inhabit.⁹⁴

Simply stated, the 'me' is the narrative foundation that one forms of oneself built through second-person perspective and which provides all potentials of conscious activity due to the integration of moral

⁹². Honneth 77

⁹³. Mead (1964) 130

⁹⁴. Honneth notes that it is telling that Mead refers to multiple 'me's, indicating multiple environments for the self, with corresponding standards and modes of comportment. This agrees with the assumption that social play/games are fundamental to being in the world.

norms into the relationship with individual and general interaction partners. Selves are not preformed entities which merely require concepts and language for their full expression to others, selves are formed in relation to the social context, constructed from the building blocks of language and concepts provided by society, and shaped by the internalization of/reaction to the ideas that one's particular social-context allows. The *me* structures and limits the possibilities of action of the *I*, constraining it from transgressing against the internalized standards of the *generalized other*, shaping its internal narrative by defining what the agent does and does not do.

This process often seems seamless and is engaged in without conscious reflection is broken up in moments where one is confronted by some sort of problem that halts one's unreflexive movement, drawing one's presuppositions into question. This process is essential for the process of conscious reflection and activity. Let us further examine the relationship between the *me* and the *I* and how the internal dialogue forms the possibility of self-awareness and agency.

Talking to My Self

As mentioned, Mead contrasts the *me*, the accumulated, internalized understanding of the *generalized other*, with the *I*, the impulses of the individual, restrained by the structuring and censoring influence of the *me*. The *me* is the object, holding the collected knowledge of the interaction with others, to which the processing, acting, *I* responds. The *I*, however, is the unpredictable agency of the individual reacting to, and potentially transcending the constraining influence of the *me* by taking up these impulses and moving them to a more open space, since the *I* is not objectifiable like the *me*. This bifurcated notion of the self constitutes the possibility of a communication with oneself.

As Mead points out it is through this process of internal dialogue “where he not only hears himself but responds to himself, talks and replies to himself as truly as the other person replies to him, that we have

behavior in which he individuals become objects to themselves.”⁹⁵ The development of this inner monologue allows for the reflection upon one's view of herself, others and the world; and allows for the possibility of holding beliefs, reflecting upon them and potentially making changes to them. This self requires maintenance and renewal through interaction with others whether real or imagined.⁹⁶ One requires the other's gaze to establish and renew her existence as an agent.

To this point Mead uses the example of an individual, who having developed such a self, is put into solitary confinement. Such a person would be “able to think and to converse with himself just as he had communicated with others.”⁹⁷ However, without some contact through which the inmate’s self might be recognized and renewed, one’s agency will come loose from its social tethering, and loose context perspective. Here is what one prisoner who spent years in solitary confinement said about it:

“It’s pretty fucking impossible to keep your sense of proportion in there,” says Sam McBride, a now-paroled convicted murderer who himself was in solitary confinement for five months.

“Humans, even bad ones, are social beings. Take that away and what do you have?”⁹⁸

Even if the experience of extreme isolation and rejection involved in solitary confinement is foreign to many readers, the point is fairly obvious. The process to which Mead refers, with the subject “responding to one's self as another responds to it, taking part in one's own conversation with others, being aware of what one is saying and using that awareness of what one is saying to determine what one is going to say thereafter,” is a familiar process to all who might be reading this.⁹⁹ As the reader, you may be at this moment, asking yourself, “is that true...?” and responding, “I guess it is.”

⁹⁵. Mead 139

⁹⁶. Mead's ideas of how self-consciousness develops out of the social world owe a great debt to Hegel's “Struggle for Recognition.” As Sartre correctly observes, humans are beings confronted with the problem of our own existence and defined in large part by the gaze of the other, whose existence is sustained through social relations.

⁹⁷. Mead 140

⁹⁸. Robinson, E. “Thomas Silverstein, the Most Violent Prisoner ... in America”

⁹⁹. Mead 140

The dialogical process of shifting subjects, replies and gestures in response to those of another person becomes internalized; and once the agent has been sufficiently habituated into this practice through interaction they carry on such a dialogue with themselves. Self-conscious thought is this process of internal dialogue. This process of the individual responding to himself is necessary to the existence of individual agency, to the process of communication with others, and to ethical responsibility. The *I*, while potentially always present, however, only emerges, in a self-reflective sense, in response to a problem, puzzle, or obstacle. It is only when something is a problem in need of solution that there is a reason to turn inward in reflection and self-conscious dialogue. Mead says as much here:

*For individual subjects, a world of psychological experiences can only emerge at the moment in which they encounter such difficulties in carrying out a preconceived plan of action that their interpretation of the situation, which had been heretofore been objectively reliable, is robbed of its validity and comes to be separated from the rest of reality as a merely subjective notion.*¹⁰⁰

Mead's conception of role-taking and games is central to this moment of impasse is handled. Mead shows that the development of the agent is facilitated in childhood by play and games. This is a two-tiered process of role-taking, and of games. In the role-taking stage which where interpersonal norms are established “the child communicates with himself or herself by imitating the behaviour of a concrete partner to interaction, in order to react in a complementary manner in his or her own action.”¹⁰¹ Through this “the concrete pattern of conduct of a significant other that has to be integrated into the child's own action as controlling normative expectations.”¹⁰²

As cognitive complexity and self-confidence build he is able to participate in the competitive 'game' or participation and achievement which requires “the maturing child to represent the action-expectations

¹⁰⁰. Honneth 72

¹⁰¹. Honneth 77

¹⁰². Honneth 77

of all of his or her playmates, in order to be able to perceive his or her own role within the functionally organized action-context.”¹⁰³ In this process one takes on the expectations and standards of not only a significant other, but a generalized one, internalizing “the socially generalized patterns of conduct of a whole group.”

In this way children develop their sense of selfhood, by tentatively taking on the roles of others, not just trying particular identities on, but relating to themselves from the position of this outside other, expanding the understanding of oneself as a potential character, an objective *partner to interaction* to be taken on as well as a role. The *game* stage requires the child to take on a role of fellow participant within the “action-context,” and with certain acceptable and preferred actions defined by the game's rules and the expectations of the participants. These “attitudes of those involved in the same process” form the potential modes of comportment for the child as participant in the game, which functions as a microcosm for society. Within the *role-taking play* this participant adjusts to “the concrete pattern of conduct of a significant other that has to be integrated into the child's own action as controlling normative expectations,” Whereas with the game stage “it is the socially generalized patterns of conduct of a whole group.”¹⁰⁴

These practices form very important launching points for agency within the developing child. I contend, however, that they do not stop in childhood. They continue as elements of individual and social development throughout one's life: the role-playing activity as one adjusts to and internalizes the perspectives of particular, significant others, and game activity with the habituation into a broader contexts with multiple roles and action partners. Humor, as a form of play, is essential to their smooth continuation. It represents an attitude and general framework for the game of subjective interaction and tentative perspective-taking. The anesthetizing and pleasurable elements of humor help encourage the

¹⁰³. Honneth 77

¹⁰⁴. Honneth 77

agent, and along with rewards for superiority and cognitive realizations function to encourage the expansion of social and technical competencies. Or at least they do when coupled with the requisite recognition ideally present such opportunities. Humor seeks an audience, and play seeks a partner. To further understand the role of the other in the formation of agentive deliberation and individual actualization we turn to the work of Axel Honneth.

Honneth and the Struggle for Recognition

Axel Honneth's work on agency builds on that of Hegel and Mead to explicate the role that recognition plays in the development of agency. Mead's view that self-consciousness is a (performative and narrative) construction resulting from and maintained by interactions with agents (hypothetical as well as real), is expanded in Honneth's work with different modes of respect and recognition responsible for the conditions that structure and constitute the possibilities of the development of a self as a psycho-social entity.

The theoretical resources found in Mead's social psychology made it possible to give Hegel's theory of a 'struggle for recognition' a 'materialist' reformulation. What re-emerged in Mead, in the altered form of an empirical hypothesis, was not only the general premise of the early Hegel — that practical identity-formation presupposes intersubjective recognition — but also post-metaphysical, naturalistic equivalents for the conceptual distinctions among various stages of recognition and even the wide-reaching assertion of a struggle mediating between these stages. Thus, by drawing on Mead's social psychology, it becomes possible to take the idea that the young Hegel outlined in his Jena writings with such brilliant rudimentariness and make it the guiding thread of a social theory with normative content. The intention of this is to

explain processes of social change by referring to the normative demands that are, structurally speaking, internal to the relationship of mutual recognition."¹⁰⁵

Honneth argues that since agency is constructed and maintained through the process of the internalization of the perspectives of others, recognition is a fundamental need for individuals to become full and healthy selves. The recognition of others is a universal human need and wherever that need is denied conflict occurs.¹⁰⁶ Social conflict, rather than being simply a struggle of completely autonomous individuals fighting for survival or goods, is fundamentally predicated on the struggle for recognition. At their core agents are socially embedded individuals seeking recognition from one another, and becoming injured or stunted in cases of its denial. Recognition allows for the possibility becoming selves in the first place and offers the impetus and material for its continued development. Recognition's importance in the process agentic development cannot be understated. Where conflict exists, there is a felt lack of recognition of the other agents involved, and such conflict springs from such disrespect.

Recognition's Role in Developing Autonomous, Actualized Selves

Honneth's work *The Struggle for Recognition* will be used as a basic framework for examining the role of respect/recognition, and the denial thereof, in the development of an agent within a social context. Honneth demonstrates that for an individual to develop to be a full agentic participant within the social whole, it requires certain measures of recognition. Honneth breaks these types of recognition into three categories: love, law, and esteem.

For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem... that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an

¹⁰⁵. Honneth 78

¹⁰⁶ If you doubt the power of recognition to affect the emotions and thoughts of an individual. Perform a small thought experiment: Imagine yourself waving to another person, genuinely politely waving, to any person, and they don't wave back. What immediate shifts in thought and emotion do you feel with this lack of basic recognition? And that's just a wave.

*autonomous and an individual being and to identify with his or her goals and desires.*¹⁰⁷

Love refers to the intimate and deep affection bestowed before the advent of the individual's personal responsibility/agency. It might be called “unconditional,” in some respects and forms the potential for self-respect. It demonstrates to the fledgling agent that her existence is, in the barest sense possible, valid and important.

The unconditional love and recognition of the mother shows the child that she exists as an individual with an existence that is independent and worth recognizing. This relationship allows for the differentiation of the child's self from that of the surrounding world to which it relates, and shows the child that she is a being in relation to other beings in the world. As she grows less physically and emotionally dependent upon the parent, she is able to spend more time alone.

The mother who was previously an ever-present force in her field of experience, immediately arriving to interpret and tend to each need the moment she would cry out in response to it, becomes further and further differentiated.¹⁰⁸ The child is confronted by the collapse of its previously uncontested, prereflexive omnipotence and in response lashes out at the mother, who must herself undergo a differentiation, and understand that the reactions and needs of the child are not her own.

This process sets the stage for the child to begin to understand itself as an individual habituated into a social context of reciprocity and responsibility. Without the development of a relation to oneself through significant others being free, or being human, as we understand it makes no real sense. The child is reinforced in its independence from the base of love, allowing for the seeds of autonomous self-confident participation to grow. Once one has the self-confidence and understanding required to participate with others in a broader sense, the sphere of recognition relating to society, law, comes into view. Here Honneth speaks to this conception in Hegel:

¹⁰⁷. Honneth 79

¹⁰⁸. This is not necessarily a literal mother.

*Hegel characterises this mutuality, which cannot be coerced but be freely given and received, as being at home in the other. Such a relation with another is the condition for the phenomenological experience of freedom and right. Consequently, our interactions with others are not a limitation on freedom, but rather the ‘enhancement and concrete actualization of freedom.’*¹⁰⁹

Individual identity, rights and responsibilities exist within a shared framework of mutual recognition. *Law* refers to the recognition that one receives (and bestows) as a participant under within the shared framework of a socio-political context. As a member of society one has the rights and responsibilities (Hegel) of being a participant in the shaping and maintaining of a social order. The bearer of rights and responsibilities under the law is at the same time the respecter and granter of rights herself. Much as money and property are the direct and continuing result of social agreement held in the minds of its participants, so too are rights and social roles, and society only persists insofar as its participants agree to honor and value these social roles and rights.¹¹⁰ Honneth speaks to this conception in Mead's work:

*With the appropriation of the social norms regulating the cooperative nexus of community, maturing individuals not only realize what obligations they have vis-a-vis members of society: they also become aware of the rights that are accorded to them in such a way that they can legitimately count on certain demands of theirs respected. Rights are, as it were, the individuals claims about which I can be sure that the generalized other would meet them. Insofar as this is the case, such rights can be said to be socially granted only to the extent to which a subject can conceive itself as a fully accepted member of its community. For this reason, rights play an especially significant role in the formative process of the practical ego.*¹¹¹

So while love sets the basis for role-taking, rights within the law set the stage for the game of society.

¹⁰⁹. Williams, (1997) 59

¹¹⁰. Titles and property mean nothing if society fails to honor and agree to them. If the people of your country decide that you do not in fact own your car, absent the intercession of an interventionist deity, you have no rightful claim to it.

¹¹¹. Honneth 79

The game is however, not merely about being able to show up and be counted, or avoiding the penalties set out by the legal framework. It is about accomplishment and particular recognition.

Over and above the basic participation of a citizen in the reciprocity of roles, rights, and responsibilities, there is the possibility of achievement, where one is recognized for doing something exemplary and valuable. *Esteem* is the term Honneth uses to describe this level interpersonal of recognition, which is more conditional and particular than either love or law. It is the type of recognition given for the achievement of particular goals. One is recognized, for not being merely able to participate in the game, but to win or change it. It is a circumstance where you have not only been let onto the basketball court, and given a jersey, you have also made a half-court shot, or a slam dunk. The consequences, however, for when the individual is denied basic dignity, participation, or esteem, can be great. The potential of recognition to positively develop an agent is mirrored in the negative by circumstances of its denial, due to individual and systemic disrespect.

The Long Shadow Cast through Recognition's Denial

*"Inherent in our everyday use of language is a sense that human integrity owes its existence, at a deep level, to the patterns of approval and recognition..."*¹¹²

Just as positive recognition has been shown to be an essential part of agentive development, its absence or purposive deprivation, are consequently detrimental to such development. This is seen in the ways people describe when others treat them wrongly. The felt fundamental denial of respect is shown in words such as "insult" and "humiliation."¹¹³ This represents a trespass or injury against that person, not just in that it "harms subjects" or "restricts their freedom to act," but that it injures them regarding the positive understanding that they have about themselves, an understanding which is acquired and

¹¹². Honneth 131

¹¹³. Compare with *sarcasm* ("to tear flesh") and the modern school yard terms "burn," "cut-down," "slam," and one I had not heard before "slice."

renewed through interaction with others. Since a large part of one's self identity is acquired through this interaction. This disrespect, a denial of recognition by others, has the power to call in to question the nature and value of one's self-identity.

*What the term "disrespect" refers to is the specific vulnerability of humans resulting from the internal interdependence of individualization and recognition, which both Hegel and Mead helped to illuminate.*¹¹⁴

This is certainly a problem since we are all potentially vulnerable to this collapse, since our identities must be established and renewed through the exchange of perspectives and respect. Without the recognition of others individuation in a mature sense cannot occur. One's conscious participation and understanding of the world is based on the process of perspectival coordination with others, so when one is subjected to a great degree of disrespect the relationship to that world and that self, one's fundamental reality, is called into question. As Mead puts it:

*Because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being – his or her "me," as Mead put it – is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of a person as a whole to the point of collapse.*¹¹⁵

The problems with conflating different types of disrespect can cause trouble with regard to theory and practice. Honneth argues for the need to be clear about the differences between types of disrespect because the use of a single term *disrespect* risks blurring the difference and influence of each. The identification of gradations of *recognition* point to the differences in types of *disrespect* to which they

¹¹⁴. Honneth 131

¹¹⁵. Honneth 133

correlate. Subjective in nature, they are organized in terms of the effects of the disrespect; by the degrees to which one's practical relation-to-self is disrupted by the denial of recognition.

This distinction between gradations of disrespect is useful in understanding the ways that these forms of disrespect shape identity. This Honneth argues essential to answering the question which Mead and Hegel could not answer: how the experience of disrespect is anchored in the affective life of human subjects in such a way that it can provide motivation for social resistance and conflict, and for social recognition. These modes of disrespect roughly reflect a denial of the spheres of recognition: Love, Law, and Esteem.

Denial of Individual Physical Respect

The list begins with the most immediate and direct form of disrespect, that of the *physical*, namely, a forcible deprivation of one's ability or opportunity to freely dispose of one's own body. Examples of this are torture and rape. Such an injury is not felt just in terms of physical pain but the pain combined with the feeling of extreme helplessness at the hands of another. I would add that in fact, strictly speaking, physical pain is not necessary for such a violation of to occur. The pain associated with the violation of one's integrity and autonomy is the primary issue.¹¹⁶

The result of such a violation is that one's fundamental reality is called into question, and as a result lasting damage is done to one's basic confidence, learned through love, in one's autonomy and coordination of one's body. This is manifested in terms of a sense of social shame, resulting in lack of trust in oneself and one's world, affecting all relations to self and others.

*Thus, this kind of disrespect deprives one of is the taken-for-granted respect for the autonomous control of one's own body, which itself could only be acquired at all through experiencing emotional support as part of the socialization process.”*¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶. A person may be apprehended painlessly, for example, thrown in solitary confinement, but cared for nutritionally and medically. Or one may be given pleasure against their will. Both demonstrate that conditions for physical disrespect are not limited to physical pain, but the pain of being forcibly deprived of the dignity related to control over one's own body.

¹¹⁷ Honneth 133

Such an injury has the effect of having one's physical and emotional qualities of behavior broken up from outside, destroying trust in oneself, the most basic practical relation-to-self. This type, argues Honneth, unlike other conceptions of disrespect, is not contextually and historically determined: rape and torture always result in this type of fundamental breakdown of trust in one's social world and collapse of self-confidence.

There are, of course, historical, social and individual aspects which can either mitigate or aggravate the situation, and as such each act will differ in its degree of emotional and psychological injury. Also, while Honneth argues that the two other categories of disrespect are more fully embedded in process of historical change, it seems clear that there are historical/cultural aspects to the injuries relating to the directly physical. They occur against a historical backdrop which affects how such attacks are treated, how often they happen, how offenders and victims are dealt with, and the tools that victims have to deal with it.

The intersubjective aspect of such disrespect should not be underestimated, as it is an important component, ethically and phenomenologically. The way that the act affects the injured party is contingent upon the relations between, and reactions of, the sentient subjects involved: the attacker, the victim, and the community. The symmetry presumed by their shared humanity matters a great deal. The fact that the attacker and the victim are both supposedly rational agents is a very important factor. The attacker, being another agent, having the capability to decide between choices, and one presumes, basic empathy, who selects one which inflicts injury and disrespect on another person is a powerful and difficult reality to come to terms with. One is confronted with the fact that person did this, and did so *willingly* to another *person*.

If one were attacked and maimed by an animal or a machine, it would almost without question be a trauma, but would clearly not have the same psychological effect as being injured by a member of one's own species, community, or family. The experience of realizing that another agent, ostensibly like

yourself, has decided to hurt you; decided that your anguish was incidental, or possibly worse, integral to their goals, is fundamentally different than other types of injury. Trying to make sense of such a thing is difficult to begin with, but in cultures where torture, rape and physical violence are allowed to occur, even condoned, the effects are even greater. In these cultures, where the onus of proof and the weight of blame is placed on the already vulnerable victim, or often victimized group, this leads to isolation and/or the internalization of one's own rightful exploitation or disrespect.

Attempts to make sense of one's place in a culture that sees certain individuals as being fundamentally lesser, and unworthy of equal protection and consideration, result in emotional and cognitive turmoil.

When one's idea of oneself comes into direct opposition to those of the generalized other that see one as an object to be rightfully mistreated and dismissed as insignificant, the insult compounds the injury and allows very little in the way of recourse. In many instances lasting effects persist in the way that

one relates to themselves and the world. The experience conditions the individual to respond

physiologically and psychologically to her own fundamental feelings and interactions differently.

The effects of such injuries on the body and mind are often great. In this way and a great deal of damage is done to one's basic confidence, learned through love, in one's autonomy and coordination of one's body. A sense of social shame and embarrassment shapes and limits the prereflexive and conscious attitudes the individual holds about the world and their use and ability to act within it resulting from lack of trust in self and world. As a result of these effects all relations to self and others, one feels objectified and compromised, and humiliated/at odds with oneself for allowing the such corruption or affectedness to occur. Physical and emotional qualities of behavior are broken up from outside, destroying trust in one's self, the most basic practical relation-to-self.

In cultures where such transgressions are not punished or taken seriously the impact and prevalence of such injuries is often minimized through victim-blaming and trivializing the actions or effects through humor, compounding the effects of such an injury greatly. "Eve-teasing" is the name for harassing

women in many parts of India, justified because they are out without escort, and therefore are promiscuous, “bad girls,” and unworthy of basic protections from assault. The fact that one’s abuse is seen as being a source of great fun for others sends a very clear message about who and what such a society values. Immodesty is often stated as the reason for justification of such attacks, with the victims blamed and ridiculed for their perceived lack of virtue, which is in many cases merely a synonym for attempting to assert control over one’s own body and choices. Victims are objectified in the first place and denied recourse or solace after the fact. In terms of sexual assault in the US, and many other places, “What was she wearing?” is often one of the first question asked, followed by jokes about her lack of virtue and the idea that she, or he, wanted or deserved it.¹¹⁸

In a similar way torture, indefinite detention, and other forms of brutality inflicted by authorities is justified through the denial of the humanity of the person on whom it is inflicted. The marginalization of the injured subject creates its own self-justifying narrative and a feedback loop of the justification of the denial of empathy or equity. After Abu Ghraib and the release of numerous documents outlining enhanced interrogations and torture procedures used against detainees, there was each time a month or so of jokes about the treatment of these prisoners on popular news and talk shows. So-called enemies and criminals are treated as sub-human monsters and subjected to systemic mistreatment, with each rebellious act, the justification for greater dehumanization and punitive measures is found, resulting in the further alienation and disenfranchisement of the victim and those who identify with him or her. Those people that society defines as enemies are the ones most fundamentally susceptible to the worst types of disrespect of mutilation, torture, and rape. This stems from the fact that they are seen as most fundamentally other, least human, and most deserving of the sub-human treatment they receive. If love builds confidence, self-respect and trust in the world, violations like rape and torture, have as a primary effect the depletion of an individual's integrity, confidence and trust. One’s confidence, sense of

¹¹⁸. Or alternatively a male victim's lack of masculinity if he is the victim of such assault. See issue of rampant sexual assault against men and women in the military and jokes about prison rape in popular culture, even in children's cartoons.

autonomy, relation to self and trust in one's social world are severely disrupted, if not in large part permanently injured. At times this destruction of identity through the control of one's bodily autonomy and self-definition is a means to an end. Oftentimes it is an end in and of itself.

If society does not provide some means of redress, the individual is cut off from respect and comes to understand that is the role accorded her by society if she is to continue within it. The truth of the aggressor is internalized about one's own identity: "I am the thing they say that I am," or "I am a worthless slut," or "I am a deviant."¹¹⁹ As a result of this denial of the most basic forms of respect one's identity, which is co-created through respect and the internalization of the perspectives of others, is damaged, leaving a person who cannot see themselves as a confident, self-respecting individual, capable of accomplishment, and worthy of love.

This type of disrespect results in injury to a person's basic psychological foundation, and Honneth refers to this as *psychological death*. It is the denigration of individuals, treating them as less than human, and violating their most basic humanity. Honneth contends that this type, unlike other conceptions of disrespect, is not contextually and historically determined: rape and torture always result in this type of fundamental breakdown of trust in one's social world and collapse of self-confidence. I would disagree with Honneth's assessment that such injuries are universal and independent of context. This will be addressed later, but for now let us move on to the denial of recognition in terms of the sphere of the legal.

Denial of Respect under Law

The second kind of disrespect under this framework is the denial of self-respect or dignity by way of the deprivation of participation and protection under the law. This amounts to the structural or individual exclusion of individuals from the possession of certain rights within a particular society,

¹¹⁹. That's not to say that this is a permanent situation, or true in each and every case to the same degree. In fact I argue in the third chapter that it is fundamentally personal, and embedded in a subjective historical context that prevents such an experience and its effects from being truly immediate and universal, contrary to what Honneth argues.

such as being unable to drink from the same water fountain as others, or to vote, and it effectively denies the dignity of membership into the community of rights and responsibilities. This type of disrespect, is as mentioned, historically contingent since the denial of respect regarding the law is, of course contingent on the types of rules and rights a society has laid out.

The result of such a denial is that an individual compares her lack of rights to those of other groups and feel a lack of respect. She realizes that she is seen as not a full-member of a society with the moral responsibilities and reciprocal rights that go along with them, and as a result assumes that she is unworthy of being granted such respect. As such, this is not simply the restriction from active participation and protection, but also the loss of one's ability to see one's self as a subject worthy of self-respect, and the ability to relate to others on an equal footing. Accordingly, she cannot view herself as able to form respected moral judgments, or see self as worthy of equal consideration under the law. Humor is often used to ridicule the notion of the extension of such considerations to others. Satirical pamphlets comparing voting rights for women to voting rights for animals might be something now seen as relegated to the past in the US, but the comparison of gay marriage to bestiality is most certainly still alive and well.

This sort of thing reminds individuals that they are not seen as equal participants under the law. The result of this is that since she is not a "full-fledged member of the community," with "claims that a person can legitimately expected to have socially met." Through this systematic denial it is implied that "she is not being accorded the same degree of moral responsibility as other members of society."¹²⁰ The subject, having their socially valid rights-claim be denied "signifies a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgments."¹²¹ The danger in this is twofold: 1. the potential for unreasonably harming the individual's deprivation of one's cognitive regard "for the status of moral responsibility that had to be so painstakingly acquired in the interactive

¹²⁰. Honneth 132

¹²¹. Honneth 133

processes of socialization,¹²² and 2. as a result, in isolating an agent and depriving her of rights, the corresponding responsibilities to the whole of also evaporate. The ex-felon, unable to vote, now knows himself to be apart from society, rather than a part of it, and as a result has no vested interest in its perpetuation. This leaves the agent with resentment, alienation, and the motivation for revenge against a whole which has ostensibly rejected her. That would seem to be a bad thing if the goal of society is effective education, integration, cooperation, and frankly, self-preservation. This brings us to the third category of disrespect put forward by Honneth: the denial of self-esteem.

Denial of Self-Esteem

The third type of disrespect is what Honneth refers to as the “denigration of individual or collective ways of life.”¹²³ This type of disrespect entails calling into question one’s honor or dignity by insulting or degrading them based on their assumed lack of ability, thereby limiting one’s idea of self by depriving them of the opportunity to attribute social value to their abilities or beliefs. The results of this type of disrespect are that one is unable to view what they do or how they live in a positive way, and the inability to have self-respect in the way that others can whose attributes are prized. Honneth says:

For those engaged in them, the result of the evaluative degradation of certain patterns of self-realization is that they cannot relate to their mode of life as something of positive significance within their community.”¹²⁴

If one is conditioned to believe that she is unable to achieve praiseworthy accomplishments in the same areas as others, if there are no positive potentials open to that person or the idea of that person achieving such a thing is a joke, there will be no expectation of achievement or esteem on the part of that person. In the past, for example, female scientists faced an uphill battle, were seen as having the mental capacity to flourish and achieve within the discipline. In fact the President of Harvard,

¹²². Honneth 133

¹²³. Honneth 133

¹²⁴. Honneth 133

Lawrence Summers, made a speech in 2005 where he said that women lacked the same aptitude for science as men. Women were prevented from running in races longer than 800 meters until the early seventies because it was believed that their physical constitution prevented it. Out of the last 43 US Presidents, none have been women, and it is still seen by many as a joke or unreasonable expectation that there should be one, though there are dozens of countries who have had female presidents and prime ministers.

Men running for president have generally had the privilege of not having to even entertain questions about how they plan to balance the needs of their children and spouses with those of public office, or deal with criticisms of how they look in a pantsuit. They do not encounter the same near-constant attacks on their appearance: that they are ugly, or lesbians, or are trying to be men. And they don't have to deal with the clichéd quips about how their periods make them too irrational and unstable to be in control of the country's nuclear weapons arsenal. Similar jibes were secretly, and not-so-secretly, leveled at Barack Obama by dint of his race.

This form of disrespect is of course embedded within one's socio-historical context, as are the potentials for its rectification. As with any problem, they must first be seen or felt to be made objective to the mind. That is where humor comes into play in a social sense. It is not only a means of disciplining and marginalizing transgressors who buck the established order, but it is also the way that those denigrated and disrespected recognize such injuries, and as a method of rebellion against said order. The pain of ridicule brings the disrespect into the conscious understanding of the person who feels it directly or witnesses it indirectly, feeling it through the empathetic internalization of the perspective of the other. In response to this treatment satire can form a critical tool against forms of injustice.

Pain from Injury as Instrumental in Social Change

From Honneth's insights we can observe that the dangers associated with these various forms of

disrespect are quite real since they have the capacity to attack the very foundation of one's conception of oneself. He explains that the three types, bodily metaphors are attached to them in common language. For physical abuse, such as rape and torture, one is confronted with the threat of “psychological death,” unable to find self-confidence as an individual in the world worthy of love and basic dignity. In a world where slavery and human trafficking exist, sexual assault is ubiquitous, and torture apologists are paid consultants of our governments and news stations, this threat remains real. I argue that the same holds true for intense emotional abuse, especially by parents and intimate partners. In terms of legal exclusion, one is confronted with the potential of “social death,” where one's voicelessness is a foregone conclusion, and she is denied the same protections and responsibilities as the other moral actors in society, essentially a social ghost. These people are not “seen” in the same way as others and legal protections are often unenforced. Many are denied participation due to their race, gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic class. One example of this is the obvious discrepancy in the way that minorities are treated by the police and judicial system. Another example is how certain cities, such as Jacksonville, have nothing in the way as yet in terms of protection from housing and job discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The third category, of disrespect, cultural denigration, leaves one with the “scars” and “injuries” of culturally sanctioned, or at least ignored, abuse. These effects are real and lasting as Honneth says:

*The experience of being socially denigrated or humiliated endangers the identity of human beings just as infection with disease endangers their physical life.*¹²⁵

What is unique about Honneth's insight is his view that the pain provided by these injuries, however terrible, can actually provide the potential for seeing them as problematic and then rectifying them, by a diagnosis—the presentation of symptoms and suffering makes the individual aware of the “illness”—and the prescription through understanding the social requirements for “psychological health” which

¹²⁵. Honneth 133

can be determined addressed when the injuries are seen. Honneth expressed the view that in the work of Mead and Hegel there is a lack of the movement from disrespect to demands for redress.

The missing element, Honneth argues, is the psychological link from suffering the injustice of disrespect to action. By informing the *patient* of their illness and the causes, the negative emotions resulting from disrespect provide the awareness of their denial of recognition. Just as with abuse recovery programs, the first step is the realization that there is a problem.

Since these injuries cannot show up as neutral, they uniquely open the possibility, through cognitive dissonance, of a new motivation for political resistance. This is not a definite result, since it only is possible if social redress shows up as a possibility through action and solidarity, however it provides the moment of opportunity for such a realization to occur. The frustration of one's plans and expectations shows up as negative feelings such as anger and indignation. Positive feelings like joy or pride show up in relation to the fulfillment of expectation with regard to action. Individuals must feel capable affecting change and deserving of respect in order for this to enter into their consciousness. Without this component, disrespect will not show up as problematic for them since they will be unaware of the lack, though still unactualized and likely unhappy. Shame and rage are responses to denial of respect people feel that they deserve, and without the understanding that things might be different, feelings of unrequited desert have no grounding.

Building on Honneth's Distinctions

Honneth's observations and distinctions regarding disrespect are very insightful and helpful toward understanding how the process of agentic development might be harmed, and how social injustice provides the seeds of its own redress. I would disagree with his assessment of the physical level as being independent of contextual and historical mediation, and with his complete separation of types of harm. All three types of harm are both context dependent and inextricably linked together. They are

each context dependent, yet intertwined.

What I mean by this is that even the physical level is not immediate and universal, but is both conceptually mediated, and tied to the other forms of disrespect in a deep sense. Historical, social and cultural context shapes what individuals see as a violation, as well as the degree and duration of the effects. An aristocratic woman of England in the Elizabethan Era stripped of her six layers of clothing in the town square and forced into stocks that bared her feet for all to see would be an indignity and torture from which she may never recover. The “Rape of the Lock” was written to lampoon something very similar. The power of society to write roles and expectations onto one's *me* is that great. This is due to the fact that selves are conceptually mediated and socially embedded in a historical context.

As we have seen, the process of agentive development as a function of linguistically-mediated perspective-taking means that one's standards for self-confidence, self-respect, and accomplishment are all contingent on the internalization of societal standards and the perspectives of the other agents one encounters. For the Elizabethan aristocrat, conditioned to value modesty and certain body parts in such a way, the rotten tomatoes, finger pointing and snickering would constitute a debasement and violation of her identity and self-control would be immense and devastating.

On the other hand, in places where persons were not bound by the same views of sex, shame, and the essentialization of bodies as others might view an actual sexual assault as something negative, but not much more haunting or difficult to overcome than a mugging. For the societies that we are familiar with however it is a very big deal, and certainly should be treated as such. Such acts and their interpretations are dependent on the context and perceptions of the actors involved, but there is little doubt that grievous harm often results from these transgressions, and should be treated in an appropriate manner.

The other element that Honneth's distinctions seem to miss is that is that they are directly connected and contingent upon one another in ways he seem to not fully address. The acts or respect and

disrespect, as well as the systems of their exercise, do not so neatly break into categories, but rather form a framework of overlapping reinforcement and effect. This is important to acknowledge, in order to fully address the problems that they pose. For example, the fact that an individual can be raped, tortured, or captured and held indefinitely, a denial of basic respect, is as such linked to a legal framework that either:

(a) does not protect the individual because she is a member of a certain group

(African/Americans in the pre- civil war south, Jews in Nazi Germany), or

(b) does protect the individual *pro forma legalis*, but in social fact the individual members of these groups are still subjected to differential treatment due to their cultural, gender, or class membership, i.e. due to the general social denigration of certain groups prevailing in this social or cultural context.

So the social denigration and its destructive effects with regard to self-confidence are true whether or not there is a law against such mistreatment or general guidelines against treating others poorly. For example, there are laws on the books in the US against rape and torture, and that the practice is generally frowned upon in the daylight. That does not mean much when enforcement of those laws is a demonstrably low priority, when rape and torture victims are blamed for the crimes perpetrated against them, and jokes are made at their expense. Similarly problematic is the ostracism experienced in other countries by the victims of rape, and even worse, honor killings, since they are marred socially by the act; showing them that their value lies in their physical body, different from others who are not of their gender. So here, in both cases, it becomes clear that what is needed is that agents need to object to the culturally entrenched forms of perception and oppression by reflexively thematizing and rejecting those forms of social differentiation and exclusion.

The message that this sends is clear, as we see that disrespect is not limited to one sphere, but rather messily bleeding between them, reinforcing the process of institutionalized victimization. When the threat of rape is generalized to a whole group of people based on their race, gender, religion, or ethnicity, what Honneth would describe as only a particular and physical violation is functionally generalized and made into a denigration of a whole group. The same can be said of lynching and other forms of terrorism. Likewise, when legal protections are either denied to certain groups as a whole, as with redlining in the 1930s, or its modern equivalent in invisible housing quotas enforced against minorities by landlords, this sends a clear signal to those affected: not just that they are not the same under the law, but also the idea that because of their belonging to a certain group, they are not considered by society to be worthwhile of investment or capable of accomplishment.

These modes of disrespect are in some ways distinct, but are functionally intertwined in significant ways overlooked by Honneth (at least in his initial work). We thus have to remind ourselves that the agent, or the groups of agents, are defined through their interactions with others in the most thoroughgoing sense and the socially contingent, symbolically-mediated concepts of self-hood and sense-making thus constitute the socially real grounds that define and allow for what constitutes transgressions against their personhood. The only way to fully make sense of the issues here, the harms inflicted, and the means to rectify them is through an understanding of society as consisting of agents who orient their lives and derive their identity through the process of linguistically-mediated perspective-taking. It is on these theoretical grounds that we can see how reflexive rejection of enculturated patterns of oppression can become possible—and how humor and comedy can be a helpful tool in this process.

Humor allows for the acknowledgment of these issues and offers possibilities for recourse through satire and solidarity. It has the potential to increase the social awareness of inequality, absurdity and ignorance, thus allowing us to make changes within ourselves and society generally. The study of

humor gives us the capacity to see the effects of our own entertainment and speech that might otherwise go unnoticed and see the targets and effects of our humor, allowing us to look inward to manifest change.

When we are able to think more critically and ethically, seeing problems we could not before and determine who is being purposively or incidentally disrespected then and only then is it possible to make the requisite changes so that there is a greater degree of individual and social development occurs. In the next chapter we will deal with the ethical considerations of satire and ridicule (punching up and punching down), act vs. agent centered views of prejudicial speech (how to improve dialogue through avoiding the urge to define agents as essentially racist/sexist), in-groups and out-groups and who can say what.

III. The Interpersonal Power of Humor

Humor as Play and its Role in Agentive Development and Interaction

Humans are all implicated in the game of society, continually adapting ourselves to the ever-shifting rules, roles, and interaction partners we encounter. To reiterate what has been previously stated: role-taking and game play are integral to the process of the development of selves and of society generally. Humor facilitates this process. As we have already established, in *role-taking*, the agentive develops through interaction with a specific action partner allowing for one to see themselves through another's perspective, taking on the partner's role and looking at oneself through an, albeit rudimentary, third-person perspective. This is the seed of self-objectification and the beginning of one's understanding that there are relationships to mediate and expectations to fulfill. Over and above this level of interpersonal competency comes the more generalized interaction of the *game*, where one participates with multiple partners within a matrix of expectation, with less flexible rules which are maintained by multiple

partners. The distinction, as stated previously, between *role-taking play*, where the participant adjusts to “the concrete pattern of conduct of a significant other that has to be integrated into the child's own action as controlling normative expectations,” and the game stage, where it is “the socially generalized patterns of conduct of a whole group” are similar, but distinct.¹²⁶

It is my contention that some form of both role-taking and game playing continues past the point of childhood development and the fledgling attempts to sort out the world and place within it. Role-taking, I argue, clearly continues in some way as individuals engage in relationship management. Through a form of hypothetical mental projection, individuals examine themselves from the perspectives and roles of specific other people as they grow older in order to navigate the world. This role-taking helps people determine the expectations of *significant others* in a way geared toward the management of specific relationships, shaping normative expectations, in a way more fundamental and intimate than that pertaining to the relationship with the *generalized other* in the game. This mental projection is a fundamental component of empathy. One might not pretend to be her own mother and play house, but rather one mentally takes her perspective and thinks through what it is like being in her position, having the background that she has, and having to talk to her daughter about x or y. In a way that mirrors yet transcends the experience of the child who does self-talk through role-taking. In this form of mental exercise the daughter empathetically projects from the mother's perspective. The adult correlate allows the child to understand and feel the mother's frustration, joy, or disappointment, rather than just reacting positively or negatively to the fact of her response.

Less controversial than the idea that *role-taking play* continues through life, at least to some degree, is the fact that the game aspect of early development continues as the agent develops and continues throughout adulthood. This is a necessity for the projection into new situations with new partners, goals and rules where one learns the rules of the organization or practice and the expectation of the other

¹²⁶. Honneth 77

participants such that she can confidently navigate her environment in order to ideally reach a point of actualized participation and accomplishment.

Humor helps with the development of the individual's conception of both her world and herself by encouraging tentative game playing which rewards cognitive connection, superiority, error correction, the expenditure of emotional energies, and tentative identity-taking. Comic interaction encourages the agent to take on various other roles and voices, and to interrogate beliefs and articulate her own. The enjoyment of comedy and the attempt to create it perpetuates the role-taking play and the game-work which initiated the process of self-conscious participation in one's youth. The rules of the game are illustrated and reinforced in large part through superiority creating in-groups and out-groups. Through relief emotions are vented and difficult topics broached, even if we are not fully aware that is what is happening. Incongruity humor makes the game of life a puzzle to be decoded, with cognitive realizations through comparisons and absurdity rewarding one's figuring out the game, and allowing for it to change through humorous revelations. Ridicule, which includes aspects of each corrects through embarrassment cognitive errors and social missteps, offers expression that is at once rebellious and disciplinary, and through the denial of respect allows for the possibility of both injury and self-conscious growth. I will now explain how ridicule has the power to start and perpetuate both processes, supposing that it does not overwhelm the subject through the denial of recognition and social resources.

Ridicule, Language, and the Self

As we explore the issue of ridicule, and humor generally, relating to the self, it is important to make some finer distinctions between the approach of Honneth and Mead to the idea of agentive development as it relates to language. Since the experiences of world, self and other are fundamentally conceptual, and arising out of, and perpetuated through, the practice of symbolically-structured perspective-taking, those symbols must be maintained for the possibility of not only social communication but for selves to appear to oneself in any meaningful way. Mead develops, in a much fuller sense than Honneth, the theories of symbolic interactionism, and specifically the central role that

language plays in the development of self-conscious agency emerges from, yet transcends the intersubjective relations between subjects.

Honneth's focus on the role of intersubjective recognition in the creation of a shared social identity is certainly important, however his analysis lacks the emphasis that Mead places on the linguistic elements that make such a thing possible in the first place from a transactional standpoint. Also, the omission of the linguistic component ignores the central sphere of internal dialogue which Mead defines as essential to self-conscious agency, which is integral to the very exercise of self-consciousness in the first place. It is the linguistically enabled self-objectification that makes self-consciousness possible, by enabling communication with the others with whom one interacts, as well as the translation of gestures from temporary impressions into lasting conceptual frameworks which can then be internalized and acted upon in as a practical self.

This practical relation of selves to the broader context requires the linguistic and social rules that enable conceptual manipulation, and structure our experience of empathetic perspective-taking, narrative self-conception, and futuritive projection. Persons are habituated into these shared structures of meaning through reinforcement and punishment, recognition and disrespect; but to have a *me* which is reflected upon requires the structuring influence of language.

To build upon what was stated in the first two chapters, that laughter exists in other species, but not humor in the way that we know it since they, to varying degrees lack the language necessary for the internal worlds which enable the complex conceptual manipulation required for selfhood and humor. Alienation and mistreatment may happen in nature, but ridicule, and humor generally, require the rich environment of a mind with internal categories in order to make the required connections and realizations of incongruity inherent in what we humans refer to as humor. Agentive development and humor go hand-in-hand, and not merely since the various modes of humor are indicative of the

individual's cognitive and social development. Humor is itself a means by which such development is about to occur.

Humor is normally given little thought as a part in terms of agentive development, other than perhaps an indicator of psychological and cognitive development. It is however a tool for effecting such growth and an integral component in this process of the development of understanding and self-identification. Conversely it also points to the fact that conscious agency is an essential element in how our minds and societies function. Ridicule is seen by many as an exclusively negative phenomenon, wherein one is alienated from the whole and turned into an object of abuse for common amusement. This disrespect, however, has a place in building solidarity within groups, correcting potentially harmful transgressions and dangerous illusions, and most fundamentally, and perhaps most surprisingly, has a primary role in the development of the self-reflexive agent.

Ridicule is integral to social responsibility because, as Billig argues, it is a means of socialization and the preservation of the social order, disciplining agents into maintaining and internalizing the rules of society.¹²⁷ It performs a dual function of punishing transgressions, while itself being a transgression against the constraints of repression. Studies show that ridicule is quite effective at effecting change and reinforcing actions and beliefs in third-person witnesses to its exercise. (Janes 2010)¹²⁸

Billig's observation about the dual nature of ridicule as both disciplinary and rebellious (Billig 2001, 2005) holds true. He argues the point further by saying that since all cultures make certain demands on their members there is a universal need to repress the temptation to disrupt this order, and a corresponding pleasure derived from bucking the constraints of that repression. Concluding he argues:

From this it follows that the possibility of pleasure at seeing order disrupted or the powerful discomfited should also be universal. Consequently, the very conditions of social life produce the necessity for empathy and compliance, as well as creating the pleasures of ridicule and

¹²⁷. Billig (2001)

¹²⁸. Janes (2010) "Is It You or Is It Me? Contrasting Effects of Ridicule Targeting Other People Versus the Self"

disruption. If one wants to say that this ambivalence reflects human nature, then this is because human nature is, and must be, a social nature. ¹²⁹

Ridicule, rather than being merely cruelty for its own sake, serves at least in some cases the valuable function of maintaining social order, venting frustrations and toxic emotions, and pointing out error. The duality which Billig describes allows for the two functions of rebellion and discipline to occur simultaneously: essentially cruelty or targeted humor (Socrates' "pain of the soul") in the role of the reinforcement of repression, hierarchy, and this or that established order. It is a form of revenge on transgressors, both sanctioned and prohibited at the same time, a rough game where the established participants are encouraged to play dirty. The very nature of ridicule and practical jokes points to the role that recognition plays in the formation of selves, the renewal of the agent's normative framework, and the narrative constitution of the self. The fact that the agent is able to be so deeply affected by the ridicule and practical jokes of other agents indicates the degree to which we are not disconnected, preformed, atomistic selves, but rather open-ended interpreting selves contingent on the process of linguistically-mediated perspective-taking.

It also helps to affirm the nature of our reality as generally dialogical: selves emerge through the need to speak to others to express needs, and continue to develop as we take on and internalize the perspectives of others, growing in sophistication as the number of action partners and contexts grow; requiring recognition to flourish. It is precisely because of this intersubjective constitution that ridicule has the power to devastate in the way that it does. Ridicule is a means of demonstrating to the other (and the audience) the distance between what she thinks she is and how others think of her through the mirthful denial of respect and recognition.

In not recognizing the person as what they purport themselves to be, and finding it laughable that the person would hold such a self-conception, the mocker is exerting the social power of their opinion over

¹²⁹. Billig (2001) 74

the other person, letting her know that she is denied the agreement that she is what/who she claims herself to be, or know what she claims to know. This denial of the recognition of the other poses an problem to the seamless construction of one's self-conception. By doing so, either consciously or not, the mocker draws into question the being of the other, in terms of their existential, ethical or social status. The mocked agent's idea of herself is drawn into question, contrasted against the opinions of those who disagree, thus making an aspect of their identity, or the whole thing, show up to herself as a problem. One may not have questioned herself before this moment, but she sure will afterward; at least until she a. rectifies the perceived lack b. decides that the mockers are wrong or their opinion does not matter c. exacts some form of revenge.¹³⁰

An example of this mechanism at work is that found in pranks and practical jokes, which is a form of comedy which comes at the expense of an unwitting target, sharing mirth in their unknowing reactions and not being them, and often with the goal to teach them the rules of status or interaction. They contain elements of both disciplinary and rebellious humor: the disciplinary being found in the shared superiority of those who are in on the joke, asserting dominance over the unwitting dupe and teaching them a lesson; and rebellious through the release of anti-social aggression which would is supposedly not permitted in polite, orderly society. Pranks break the rules of social decorum, transgressing against individuals by tricking them, something that is considered aggressively cruel and normally verboten, while at the same time it is used socially condition, and teach those who are naïvely unaware of the local rules and group power dynamics. It is potentially wielded as a weapon of humiliation against the powerful or the powerless, and how it is used will determine in what way it can be said to be ethical. First, let us examine an example of such a prank to see how it relates to agentive interaction: the so-called "No Soap, Radio" prank.

No Soap, Radio: A Demonstration of Ridicule's Mechanism through a Classic Prank

¹³⁰. Similar to Cognitive dissonance responses:

a. Change behavior or cognition b. Justify behavior or cognition by changing the conflicting cognition c. Justify behavior or cognition by adding new cognitions d. Ignore or deny any information that conflicts with existing beliefs.

A demonstration of humor's combination of rebellious and disciplinary elements can be seen common pranks and practical jokes like the “no-soap, radio” prank. It is an old prank, still employed today and is used to derive mirthful laughter from the unwitting attempt of an individual to keep up or fit in; forced to say they get a joke, even if there is no joke to get. The target of the prank is held outside of seriousness and solidarity by the other participants. The joke goes like this: The prank requires at least two conspirators and a victim. One conspirator offers to tell a joke, usually telling the victim that it will be particularly to her liking. The punchline of the joke does not follow in any way from the setup that would make sense, so is intentionally unfunny, and nonsensical; usually, "No soap, radio." The conspirators, after the punch is delivered, laugh extraordinarily hard, as if the joke was hilarious, leaving the victim in the position of having to either pretend that the joke is funny (false understanding) or to show their confusion (negative understanding), for which the victim is mocked. Sometimes the victim will feign understanding after being ridiculed for their non-comprehension, and thereby express false understanding for something which is obvious to the mockers and audience as incomprehensible, thereby inviting more ridicule.¹³¹

Of the two reactions the false understanding is the one preferred. It illustrates the influence of peer pressure upon individuals, causing the rube to pretend to understand and feign enjoyment in something he finds incomprehensible. They are compelled by the need to conform to the expectations of others, even in the face of their own confusion and doubt.¹³² Normally the target is eventually let in on the prank. If the victim does not take this revelation in good humor he will be seen as deserving of further ridicule, since he cannot "take a joke," and is not strong or flexible enough in his self-understanding to take such an attack in stride.

¹³¹. Practical jokes, like tickling, hijack and exploit evolved mechanisms in order to gain advantage through trickery. Pranks and other forms of humor put the target in a double-bind that disallows the response of indignation or anger since it was “all in fun.”

¹³². Similar in some ways to Stanley Milgrim's Stanford prison experiment, as much more can be condoned in groups when one takes on one's assigned role, whether because of a “joke,” or a “job.”

The show Punk'd on MTV is a good example of similar pranks being played on celebrities. It is a no-win situation for the celebrity who is being pranked. If the celebrity does not react enough, it is unsatisfying for the pranksters/audience, and is therefore poor entertainment. If, on the other hand they over-react, the takeaway is the perception of them as a jerk who cannot take a joke. Zack Braff from Scrubs, the TV show, came off looking humorless and prone to overreaction after he chased and pummeled young teenagers he caught spray painting his Porche. When it was revealed to be a prank he played along as well as he could, but it was clear that he had been “punk'd.” He was judged fairly harshly for his reaction, though it is hard to believe that many of us would have reacted differently in the face of such a perceived attack.

That is however, how pranks are structured: the victim, or butt of the joke is held outside of solidarity by the others while the prank is going on. Their embarrassment, however, continues as they are reminded of their gullibility, and the fact that they were singled out as the recipient of the teasing. The example of Justin Timberlake gets brought up as one of the most famous episodes of Punk'd. The MTV description is as follows: “The singer was told that he owed \$900,000 in back taxes, and faux US agents — led by the funnyman’s trusting (sic) sidekick Dax Shepard — seized the crooner’s house and confiscated his valuables.” When Timberlake was told that they repossessed his dogs he sat down and cried. Then the host came out and told him that it was all a joke. People familiar with the show still commonly reference this episode. It is unlikely that Timberlake has forgotten it. Whether or not he was deserving of such treatment in order to “take him down a peg” is I guess debatable. Since he is a celebrity it is more readily considered “punching up,” going after the perpetrators, the powerful, or the privileged rather than victims, powerless, and less privileged.

Either way he will likely not suffer any long term ill effects, but it will likely change how he responds in the future in such circumstances. He is less likely to be fooled again, but probably more likely to do it to others in an attempt to see himself as a victor rather than a victim, since one is confronted in the

moment of ridicule, and in the succeeding reminders of it, that he is the type of person who is vulnerable to such an attack. Each remembrance carries with it the knowledge that one's vulnerability was exploited for the amusement of others.

This event sets up the pattern of hazing the next victim in line, so that one's own emotional vulnerability; where being left previously to hang skinless in the wind is overcome in the future through the concealment of vulnerability, and the reenactment of the ridicule ritual. In this reenactment a new person is put in the one-down position, and the former victim is now “in” on the joke as a co-conspirator. In so doing the former dupes are now able to perform a sort of Jungian projection and demonstrate their control, sophistication and belonging by preying on the new rube. It is in this way the former rubes overcome their old selves, laughing with superiority at the past version of themselves who fell for it, who were then not part of the in-group.¹³³

The former victim can take on a new self-conception, in dialectical opposition to their old self, discarding (ignoring) his old negative attributes through casting his shadow onto another person to destroy it. He is able to disown a piece of himself that he would jettison and externalize through demonstrating the otherness of the vulnerable, trusting, unwitting, uninitiated individual, and triumphing over that person through a socially sanctioned play-attack. In the process he in some sense becomes a different self through the affirming the distance between his past and present selves, even if only minutes have passed. This is in part accomplished through the denial of solidarity to an individual or group in the same situation that he was in previously.¹³⁴ When related to group dynamics ridicule can make the team potentially stronger in the co-commission of the playful crime at the temporary expense of the hazed, whose identity is broken down, and reformed as someone who went through such

¹³³. In much the same way that war propaganda and religion takes the attributes of members seen as negative that they are unwilling or psychologically unable to incorporate and projects them onto another group to vilify/react in opposition to, forming the binary to remain right/good/pure.

¹³⁴. This happens quite often on the individual and group level. For an unfunny example, see the Pilgrims escape persecution to ironically persecute in North America, or Israel engaging in the recently uncovered forced sterilization of Ethiopian Jews.

an ordeal like the rest, and who is willing and able to do the same to the uninitiated later. This breaking and reforming identity through embarrassment, or at least its threat, is fundamental to the habituation of individuals into new frames of understanding—new games—and the self-conscious participation of agents within them. It is for this reason that I say that ridicule is a fundamental aspect in how society functions and how agents are formed. It is, in a sense, the bit of sand in the oyster of the human mind which provides the irritation, and therefore the impetus to develop the pearl of self-conscious agency.

The Pearl of Self-Conscious Responsibility and Identification

It should now be clear now that ridicule is a type of humor which is fundamental to the way the rules of the competitive game of social life are demonstrated and reinforced; the expectations of the generalized other become social practice with the penalty of transgression being the feeling of painful feeling of social exposure, called embarrassment, and the accompanying potential loss of status. This is self-evident even in the way that embarrassment is defined: “*em-bar-rass-ment. a feeling of self-consciousness, shame, or awkwardness.*”¹³⁵ And since embarrassment is an emotion fundamentally predicated on self-conscious exposure, I contend that it not only serves as a means of social correction, as Billig suggests, but it is as well a fundamental means of developing self-conscious, reflexive agency: calling out in individuals when they are confronted by ridicule personally, and evoking it in others, at least potentially, when it is witnessed being inflicted upon another person.

When one is in the position of being embarrassed through ridicule her own being confronts her as a problem and she takes the perspective of the third-person other, that of either the ridiculer or audience. This facilitates the process of self-objectification in order to understand the reasons she has been singled out in an attempt to reconcile the opinions expressed through the ridicule of others with those of their own self-conception. This situation has the potential of kick-starting the process of self-conscious agency through the realization that one is a social object, a self that interacts with other

¹³⁵. Merriam Webster entry on “Embarrassment”

selves within a social whole. Ridicule has the potential to, at least to the point where it calls out such a response in the other of conscious reflection, and does not shut down their cognitive processing through the idea that one is *essentially* a certain way, without the recourse to address the shortcomings or to judge them as not faults at all. For this reason it is important to remember that selves are open-ended and growing things which can and do perpetually change.

As was stated in the previous chapter, the individual must have a certain amount of self-respect and agency built up through the recognition of others for the ridicule to not result in the short-circuiting of agentive reflection and growth. If the emotional and cognitive resources required to address the ridicule are lacking, then the result is instead simple negative reactions such as anger, endless rumination and the resignation to an idea of an essentialized self, deserving of scorn. In other words, if one is overwhelmed by the embarrassment and judgment due to the lack of sufficient internal and external perspectival resources then ridicule serves to stifle development and agentive action rather encouraging the concept of a self as an open-ended conscious process of interpretation with the ability to change external conditions and internal reactions.

Just as Honneth's work demonstrates that the pain of this denial is the catalyst for the demand of recognition I argue that the embarrassment and disrespect inflicted through ridicule is a fundamental aspect of the basic development of self-consciousness and identity. Feeling the pang of the denial of respect, and seeing the same happen to others, serves as an impetus to change and makes the self an object present in the mind in a way that one would not have conscious or emotional access to otherwise. This potential for the positive use of ridicule however exists between the two extremes of deficiency and excess, however. On the one extreme the individual encounters no adversity to the point where nothing is questioned, their being and role is never confronted as a problem and therefore lacks the cause for reflecting on one's self, powers, and place. On the other end of the spectrum the agent is confronted with an excess of embarrassment and ridicule, to the point where their own being becomes a

problem without a solution, and what powers they do have remain unexamined, undeveloped, and unexercised. This is what the threat of excess embarrassment holds: to be trivialized and convinced that one is not worthy of respect in the form of care/attention, participation or praise. In such a case one has her status threatened as a person whose opinion is regarded positively; and in extreme cases, being scene as sub-human, an object not worthy of esteem, respect, or love.

Ridicule and similar forms of tendentious humor are commonly the mechanisms by which individuals are denied recognition, so it is important to take that seriously, but humor also has the ability to help in those same processes, enabling a self-conscious interpretive reflection and response to the initial criticism. Humor, as opposed to the unreflexive responses of anger or sadness, or resignation and rumination, allows for a more agile form of problem-solving, creativity, and emotional resilience.

The comedic allows for an engagement with criticism by promoting creative and intentional responses to criticism in order to answer it appropriate to the way that it is delivered, while at the same time allowing for the emotional distancing through humorous hypotheticals, the attitude of mastery, and the anesthetic function of laughter. One may touch what would otherwise be too hot, through humorous analysis; meaning that an individual if enabled to engage with topics that would otherwise seem too large, too painful, or too difficult to encounter otherwise. In so doing they derive enjoyment from the witty joke-work, the cathartic release of negative emotions (relief), the pleasure of solving a problem (incongruity/debugging), and the feeling of eminency over either the problem, one's foe, or oneself previously (superiority). We will now look at the potential of humor to change minds by dealing with topics that would go unaddressed, first generally, and then through the example of Chris Rock.

The Role of Humor in Social and Political Change

“If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you.”

Oscar Wilde

While I have shown Humor has the unique ability to challenge the ideas held by societies and

individuals in a way that can avoid making people feel engaged but not directly confronted. Those challenges issued in comedy have the possibility of surprising the listener, of slipping past their defenses and touching them in ways that other modes of communication cannot. The ambiguity at work in comedy allows for tentative-identity taking, trying on ideas, and relating to one another with emotion resonance. That is not to say that these goals are easily accomplished or that comedy, even when done well, is universally effective in achieving the intended change in society or within agents. The ambiguity inherent in the experimental and hyperbolic nature of comedic presentation, inviting uncertainty about what part of the joke is to be taken in jest, means the potential for failure and misunderstanding in such forms of expression is very real.

The large degree of conceptual freedom which different styles of comedy enjoy means that it is highly interpretive, and the potential for misinterpretation is surely a concern. This ambiguity can definitely work in the comic agent's favor, leading to the forgiveness of offense where other more serious forms of discourse might not have the same degree of latitude; but the danger of one's recipient feeling either alienated when they aren't in on the joke or mocked when she is not being taken seriously. It is potentially a very effective rhetorical and critical tool, and since it has no preset directionality or target it can be used toward cruel or kind ends; politically or personally; to attack the weak or the powerful; to hurt or to heal; to engage or escape. It can be a cudgel, an instrument for beating an opponent into submission, ridiculing him into uncertainty and fear. The comedic act can as well act as a Trojan horse, accepted and taken past one's defenses before its contents are fully realized. It is up to those who direct its power what the contents the horse actually are.

1: Knock, knock.

2: Who's there?

1: Just a statue of a horse.

2: Just a statue of a horse who?

I: Seriously, let us in. ¹³⁶

Using joke-work to persuade others, reveal ideas and subvert the established order is likely as old as language itself. The better kinds of comedy to allow for the scrutiny of beliefs that normally go unquestioned and the engagement of individuals and groups normally cut off from the social discourse. The comedic, like few other things, can separate one from the affiliated objects and beliefs that constitute what William James referred to as “the larger me,” giving a person the critical distance to hold their beliefs up to question and allowing for change both within the society and its most basic unit: the individual. Humor has the capacity to be both light enough to avoid the negative feelings that accompany serious and heated discussion, while at the same time serious enough to engage difficult topics. It allows for individuals to discuss ideas that would normally be too painful, distasteful or tedious to address directly. It can hold the attention of the participants or audiences, who may not normally feel disengaged or discouraged, and succeed where other forms of discursive engagement fail. This is true of the satirical work of those like Jonathan Swift, whose political commentary was disguised as engaging works of fiction such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*. Admittedly the disguise for *A Modest Proposal* was much thinner than that of *Gulliver's Travels'* fanciful story; as the “modest proposal” was the ironic suggestion of the poor Irish selling their children as food to control the population and get some money to the poor. Both books affected change by raising general awareness of the issues they addressed and of embarrassing their selected targets.

John Stewart and Stephen Colbert are paradigmatic examples of such engagement in modern culture, encouraging engagement in groups that might otherwise not feel like the political world speaks to them. As a result the viewership of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are among the most politically informed groups surveyed.¹³⁷ Whether that always translates into direct action is another issue, especially since the relief function of humor might allow for a venting of those negative energies that

¹³⁶. Curtis Retherford “Ancient Greek Jokes”

¹³⁷. Pew Research “Public Knowledge...”

allows for the purgation of energies that might otherwise be put toward change. However, informed understanding of events is an essential step, because uninformed action might do more harm than good. Informed and critical understanding is a fundamental first step and satirical shows promote critical thinking and analysis. This is because they require a critical eye to determine what is a joke and what is not, and they promote the process of creative comparison inherent in comedy. As a case study for humor as social criticism I will briefly discuss Chris Rock's "Black People vs. Niggas" bit, from his 1996 *Bring the Pain* show, printed below in its entirety.

Chris Rock's "Black People vs. Niggas" Bit as Example

There's a lot of racism going on. Who's more racist, black people or white people? It's black people! You know why? Because we hate black people too! Everything white people don't like about black people, black people really don't like about black people, and there's two sides, there's black people and there's niggas. The niggas have got to go. You can't have shit when you around niggas, you can't have shit. You can't have no big screen TV! You can have it, but you better move it in at 3 in the morning. Paint it white, hope niggas think it's a bassinet. Can't have shit in your house! Why?! Because niggas will break into your house. Niggas that live next door to you break into your house, come over the next day and go, "I heard you got robbed." Nigga, you know you robbed me. You didn't see shit 'cause you was doing shit! You can't go see a movie, you know why? 'Cause niggas is shooting at the screen, "This movie's so good I gotta bust a cap in here!" You know the worst thing about niggas? Niggas always want credit for some shit they supposed to do. A nigga will brag about some shit a normal man just does. A nigga will say some shit like, "I take care of my kids." You're supposed to, you dumb motherfucker! What kind of ignorant shit is that? "I ain't never been to jail!" What do you want, a cookie?! You're not supposed to go to jail, you low-expectation-having motherfucker! You know the worst thing about niggas, the WORST thing about niggas? Niggas love to not know. Nothing makes a nigga happier than not knowing the answer to your question. 'Hey man, what's the capital of Zaire?' 'Shoot, I don't know that shit! I'm just keeping it real, just keeping it real.' Yeah, you're keeping it real, real dumb. Niggas hate knowledge. Shit, if you're afraid a niggas will break into your house, and you wanna save your money, you know what you do? You put the money in a book. Cause niggas don't read. Books are like kryptonite to a nigger.

'Here's a book.' 'NOOOOOOOOOO! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! Not a book!''

Chris Rock *Bring the Pain* 1996

In this bit Rock's ridicule might seem to some to be shock humor played for cheap laughs. In reality it is a very acute piece of social criticism, and norm policing, using all three lenses of humor theory.

Rock, like Socrates, points out for humorous effect the ignorance of a group about their own shortcomings regarding what they think of themselves and what they regard as virtues and competencies. The joke on them is that their standards are too low for what constitutes credit-worthy action: staying out of jail, taking care of one's own children. He lampoons the ignorance and arrogance of bragging about basic satisfaction of the first two spheres of recognition and thinking that these are accomplishments worthy of special praise.

His harshest criticism is directed at what he sees as the wrongheaded practice of taking pride in ignorance itself, thereby making a virtue from a vice of deficiency. By calling out the idea of their “love to not know,” he is holding up to ridicule the practice of self-selected group which he sees as running counter to social progress and their own well-being, but he's serious about the need to change it. The recognition of that truth on the part of the audience is what elicits the deep laughter reserved for work that transcends abstract humor like puns.

His joke-work in this bit is not as much about clever or tricky wordplay as it is the in the delivery of truths in surprising ways, and painting absurd pictures with his words. Examples of this are the idea of being able to have nice things but having to move them in under cover of night, painting a TV to look like a crib to fool criminals, or books being literally treated like kryptonite. The joke-work matters, but insofar as it allows the audience to confess agreement and share emotions and opinions that might be difficult to share or articulate otherwise, which is what makes it resonant and not merely clever.

Rock is using obviously tendentious humor toward the goal of expressing frustration at a situation, relieving the latent tensions in the audience. The audience is bribed into agreement through Rock's use

of well-crafted jokes. He keeps them laughing in order to deliver a message which would be otherwise quite heavy, which relates to concerns of violence, theft, ignorance, and negligence; subjects that in themselves are not funny. In airing these shared frustrations in an open way he allows the audience to experience solidarity and relief from the repressive constraints of not being able to say those observations and words out loud. Since Rock is largely seen as a member of the group for whom he speaks, his message was not met with the same resistance as an outsider criticizing the community. Rock makes no bones about his comedy being tendentious. It clearly has a target, and functions in the way it does largely because his audience expects him to give the cathartic release of their repressed energies; with the pointedness of his frustration allowing for the expenditure of their own unaddressed emotions and opinions. He is airing frustrations that he knows that the audience shares and uses comedy to openly address them. Rock sets up the dichotomy between “black people” and “niggas” in order to shape the discourse around the issues mentioned and hopefully through the threat of humorous embarrassment delegitimize certain modes of being.

Rock makes it his point to ridicule “niggas” so that living proudly as that stereotype, which embraces ignorance and vicious behavior as virtues, is no longer a laudable goal. In setting up the choice in the way that he does, he allows those who might consider themselves to be in the latter camp to decide to more fully embrace the former, of which they are already ostensibly members. He does not ask them to give up their identity to become something that they are not already. They are not told to accept some supposedly essential nature as criminals or fools, but to rather disown the self-given labels and attributes that paint them as such, realizing that selves are malleable, and open-ended.

Barack Obama, referenced the bit during his 2008 presidential campaign in a speech on Father's Day saying: "Chris Rock had a routine. He said some—too many of our men, they're proud, they brag about doing things they're supposed to do. They say 'Well, I—I'm not in jail.' Well, you're not supposed to be in jail!" Humor, like Rock's bit, increases the engagement of agents with the world and knowledge of

their place within it in a way that feels like mere entertainment, but is rather a form of education and a point of reference that makes social criticism more palatable because of its playfulness. When thought of in this way such humor increases the ability of agents to contextualize and criticize their own actions in terms of a broader context and future goal. This is in keeping with Mead's ideas of play (roles/games) and Kögler's arguments regarding the social debt of agents to one another, due to the intersubjective nature of the constitution of their agency.

Rock's act has the potential of functioning to in some way continue the role-taking aspect of play where one interacts with a significant other and looks at one's own behavior through that lens; and as well of outlining the game-playing aspects of social interaction.* People who see comedians and enjoy them are very often so deeply affected by what they enjoy that it keeps recurring in their head like a song. They will then repeat the joke to themselves silently, and aloud to others in order to reproduce the experience and to try to be funny, to call out the same response in others and share the insights that to them made the joke so powerful.¹³⁸

In Rock's performance and the audience's response, we see the various functions of humor at work in a practical setting. Through incongruity Rock is able to demonstrate what he views as an absurd situation, playfully ridiculing those who he sees as ignorant of their own shortcomings, and harming the community as a result. The audience feel superiority to the targeted group against whom he is directing his diatribe, feeling justified because they share with one another the experience of being both better than those they are comparing themselves to with regard to status and capabilities, and ethically superior to them so they feel righteous and good about themselves, and justified in teaching them an object lesson through mockery.

This is largely fueled by frustration that the audience members feel, but are unable to fully express because attacking others, especially those within the community, who have less education or status

¹³⁸. This ubiquity of repetition, to both share and try to be funny oneself is the phenomenon that helps spread an idea, but also what helps wear a reference out quickly. See Austin Powers, Borat, or your last favorite song.

might be seen as vicious. So for those uncomfortable with overt superiority Rock provides relief, through enjoyment of boldly breaking taboos. This cathartic function lets the audience blow off some of the energies of repressed frustration; not merely from the shared problems that the targeted element represents, but a wide range of other frustrations as well, which are then vented. This is an example of the practical overlap of the various functions of humor within a social setting which allows for the manifestation of conversation and change based on “non-serious” discourse.

In this internalization and repetition, one hears Rock's voice as critic, and also takes that role on themselves, which in turn shapes the conception one holds of how things are and are supposed to be. In other words the enjoyment and agreement experienced in response to Rock's act, as well as subsequent repetition shapes one's *me*. And insofar as it is shared with other people their conception of the *generalized other* shifts as well according to the impact on them, how often it is repeated and how pervasive the beliefs become. Even though Rock ceased to perform the bit after his 1996 special it is still readily referenced and the distinctions and examples made within it are still used by people all over. Because of these repeated references and the internalization of the distinction into various individuals' understanding of the constraints of the generalized other it stands as a ready point of criticism and commentary 20 years later.

Missing the Mark: Why despite Having Similar Ingredients Cosby's "Pound Cake Speech" Fell Flat
 Bill Cosby, delivered some very similar remarks to the NAACP in 2004 to a different crowd, and received, especially as his speech spread through the various news outlets, a much more mixed reception. While both speeches/bits were later arguable “misused” by people with agendas of embarrassing the black community, by pointing to them and saying “See! Even THEY say so!” Chris Rock's bit was much better received. Why? For a number of reasons, but mostly for punching down, and for not being particularly funny while doing so. Rock, far more than Cosby is seen as a member of the community and someone who is concerned with issues that vex them. He is seen as someone who

speaks to and for the younger black audience in a way that Cosby does not. Rock built a career on being edgy, and speaking truth to power, calling out racism and saying things that press buttons. Bill Cosby is famous for having a clean act and creating shows like the Cosby Show, where he plays an affluent, sweater-wearing doctor, and father of five.¹³⁹ ¹⁴⁰ While The Cosby Show did include some issues relating to so-called black issues it was intended to break into mainstream markets and present an uncontroversial representation of upper-middle class black family (As opposed to representations in shows like The Jeffersons, for example).

So, Cosby, as an older man who built a career on clean-cut, upper-middle class, success telling “knuckleheads” that they were to blame for all of their own problems was seen as punching down from an outside position of privilege; as opposed to Rock's imminent critique of social problems from within the community. Rock's bit, by its reception appeared to most an edgy, funny piece of social commentary. Cosby's was taken as taking the side of the establishment against a group which no longer seemed to want to claim him as one of their own.

In retrospect, now that Cosby has been brought down publicly by allegations of sexual assault and by his own admission in court depositions that he used Quaaludes to drug women it is seen as doubly hypocritical by those who see Cosby as grandstanding on moral issues. His shaming of a hypothetical pound cake thief, when his alleged transgressions far exceeded the severity of petty theft, would be hilarious for its patent absurdity were it not so vile and disturbing. Commentary from those within the community was initially unforgiving for Cosby's lack of perspective relating to black issues and the broader context. Here Ta-Nehisi Coates comments:

¹³⁹. Bill Cosby is now famous as well for being accused of drugging and sexually assaulting numerous women, and is now generally an object of scorn and ridicule.

¹⁴⁰. Rock was incidentally, early in his career, booted unceremoniously from the Cosby studio, for doing stand-up critical of some of Cosby's characters on Fat Albert being racist. Apparently neither this fact, nor the ejection affected his admiration for Cosby. The rape allegations however likely have.

If Cosby's call-outs simply ended at that — a personal and communal creed — there'd be little to oppose, but Cosby often pits the rhetoric of personal responsibility against the legitimate claims of American citizens for their rights. He chides activists for pushing to reform the criminal-justice system, despite solid evidence that the criminal-justice system needs reform. His historical amnesia — his assertion that many of the problems that pervade black America are of a recent vintage — is simply wrong, as is his contention that today's young African Americans are somehow weaker, that they've dropped the ball.

Excerpted from a 2008 The Atlantic article By Ta-Nehisi Coates¹⁴¹

And after it had sunk in a few years later that Cosby had likely committed the crimes he was alleged to have perpetrated against others, the idea of him punching down with his sardonic moralizing was cemented. Here Rebecca Traister comments on this occurrence:

A man who was running around the country yelling at women for how they were conducting their sex lives, a man who held his own marriage up as a model of functional commitment, had in fact been repeatedly unfaithful. To have gone further — to have really dealt with the possibility that this extremely rich man lambasting poor people for everything from stealing pound cake to wearing low-slung pants to how they named their children — might have drugged and raped more than a dozen women would have made our heads pop off.

Excerpted from a 2014 New Republic article by Rebecca Traister¹⁴²

Given the new information, his castigation of others for irresponsibility and immorality are particularly absurd and indicative of someone who is clearly punching down on those who a. don't possess the same level of privilege that he does, and b. in comparison, have transgressed against others to a lesser degree than Cosby himself. It was, ironically enough, Cosby's heavy-handed moralizing that led a

¹⁴¹. Coates "This Is How We Lost to the White Man"

¹⁴². Traister "Why America Took So Long to Wake Up to the Truth About Bill Cosby"

judge to unseal the 2005 deposition in which he admits to obtaining drugs to get sex from women. The judge cites Cosby's persona as a 'public moralist' as a reason for the release and states that Cosby's public denials of any wrongdoing have "diminished his entitlement to a claim of privacy." Ouch. Cosby's personal issues aside, however, one main question raised here is who can say what about various issues and people. An excellent example in comedy that points to this is when in episode two of the first season of *The Office*, when Steve Carell's character Michael Scott, performs a censored version of Rock's bit, dressed as "Ghetto Mike," and does not realize that he is the reason that the entire office must undergo racial sensitivity training.

The episode humorously deals with the question of what happens when an individual doesn't understand when he is saying something that might be seen as racist, even if another person saying the same thing verbatim was not considered to be. To address this question and to think through the implications of our intersubjective debt to one another as it relates to recognition and humor I will introduce the distinction made by Michael Phillips in his essay "Racist Acts and Racist Humor."

Act vs. Agent-Centered Views of Prejudicial Humor

In his paper, Phillips examines and compares two ways of categorizing and dealing with prejudicial humor. The first is the agent-centered model and the second is the act-centered model; with the former focused on the speaker or laugher, and the latter on the question of the humor's effects. Phillips argues that the agent-centered model is problematic for a number of reasons, and that the act-centered model is more adequate to describe what makes a joke racist, and therefore unethical: the act itself.

Phillips continues by making the clarification that racist humor is "put-down humor," and that we often find put-downs, funny even when they are about us. This being the case, he asks "So, what makes them unfunny or wrong?" His answer that is that, while it is likely a bad thing to hold racist beliefs, what is most morally problematic is the negative effects that those beliefs have on others when they result in

racist acts. Moreover, many people have what might be considered racist beliefs, but few see themselves as *racists*, and therefore feel that they are immune to the criticism of doing harm when telling such jokes.

In attempt to sort this out Phillips mentions a popular theory, or common defense: a joke is not racist if not told by a racist person. This is the “Agent-Centered Account” and this view relates racist humor to racist people and racist people to racist beliefs. Accordingly, racist beliefs are beliefs about an ethnic group used to justify racist acts, racist feelings and feelings that typically give rise to such acts. Racist jokes and epithets are the means to carry such racism out. The issue with the agent-centered view is that it ignores that exclusion or offense might happen for reasons other than intentional harm, or racist ignorance, while the act might still be racist. He instead offers the “Act-Centered” view to attempt to sort this problem. Phillips argues that the conception of racist humor must begin with an understanding of the Basic Racist Act (BRA); and he defines that as follows:

*A basic racist act is one where either 1. the actor performs the action in order to harm them because of their membership in a certain ethnic group or 2. regardless of the actor's intentions, the act can be expected to mistreat the target. In cases where ethnic humor meets either criteria, it is prima facie wrong.*¹⁴³

An example of this is that even if you have nothing against Jews, using the word “kike” is a racist act. While Phillips acknowledges that the intentions and beliefs of an individual matter, what should be considered is the effects on other individuals and groups. In this way we can condemn acts which harm others regardless of motivation. Phillips anticipates objection that too many actions end up looking racist, such as crossing the street to avoid large black man. Phillips contends that that still there is a prima facie duty to resist racism and such an act is still racist. Racist humor, in Phillips' estimation follows the pattern of “1. being a Basic Racist Act 2. being reasonably expected to promote atmosphere

¹⁴³. Timmons 197

where BRAs are more likely or 3. is intended to promote such an atmosphere.”¹⁴⁴

So taking that into account, it makes sense that Chris Rock decided to remove the act from his bit

"By the way, I've never done that joke again, ever, and I probably never will. 'Cos some people that

were racist thought they had license to say 'nigger.' So, I'm done with that routine."¹⁴⁵ Chris Rock is

ostensibly not racist against black people, so the agent-centered view would make little sense in order

to make sense of why he removed the bit from his act, in fact his removal of it demonstrates that

opposite.¹⁴⁶ The act-centered view on the other hand helps a great deal in understanding why he made

the change. He determined that the utterance of the act led to confusion which contributed to, for him,

an unacceptable likelihood of harm to others. Rock's decision to omit the bit because it gave certain

people the impression that they could use the word in a way that might harm others indicates

considerations consistent with an act-centered view of prejudice.¹⁴⁷

I argue that Phillips makes important distinctions that are helpful toward the end of understanding what

makes certain jokes and utterances wrong in a way that focusing merely on agents misses. I would say,

however, though, that a concern for both acts and the intentions of needs to be factored into the

thinking. The difficulty comes when defining someone *as* "a racist." Such a definition limits their

identity and closes off the dialogue, as at that point there is little room for discussion. If I were to say to

someone that a joke that they had said was racist, they could apologize or discuss it with me, but once I

have decided that they are *a racist* there is little more to say. They will get defensive and call me a

name and dialogue will stagnate, since there is only either denial or complete surrender as options left.

Rather, the act-centered view is more conducive to dialogue and self-conscious development, honoring

¹⁴⁴. Phillips 79

¹⁴⁵. "Rock: Bring On Oscar 'Safety Net' :Ed Bradley Talks To Oscar Host About N----- Word, Minstrelsy"

¹⁴⁶. Though he did describe some people as being "racist." Phillips does not deny some people are in fact racist, or racists.

¹⁴⁷. Rock says in a New York Times interview, in response to its use in his act, and in relation to other similar words, that "The thing with "nigger" is just that white people are ticked-off because there's something they can't do. That's all it is. "I'm white, I can do anything in the world. But I can't say that word." It's the only thing in the whole world that the average white man cannot use at his discretion." New York Times Magazine October 5, 1997

the interaction partner as not essentialized to a label, and able to change the beliefs that might make one be called *a racist*. Many if not most people have prejudicial beliefs, but that is not the sum total of their personhood, and the act-centered view accommodates that fact by focusing on the effects of one's acts, rather than defining individuals by those acts.

This allows for individual development and dialogue in ways that the agent-centered view does not. It also fits more coherently with the aforementioned intersubjective debt that we have to one another, due to the fact that our perspectives and recognition largely define the conditions of the self-identification of others. Since that is the case, it is important to not prematurely define those who accidentally, or even purposively, engage in a racist act, as being essentially racist. Now that act and agent-centered views have been examined, let us briefly expound a bit more on the ethical (and aesthetic) issue of punching down.

General Guidelines: Punching Down and the Application of the Act-Centered View

Due to the fact that identity is intersubjectively constituted through the internalization of the perspectives of others and contingent on recognition of those others, we must take that responsibility seriously, as the ridicule we dole out could cause serious offense or do real damage to the identity of others.¹⁴⁸ Since we provide the perspectives that others use to define themselves it is generally an ethical rule of comedy to not “punch down” with our humor. To unfairly attack the vulnerable with humor would be both an exercise in cruelty and violation of the good-natured, “positive” role that we assume humor to have.

People rarely wish to see themselves as bullies, for the obvious reasons of wanting to avoid guilt, as well as the idea that bullies are generally seen as motivated by insecurity and an inability to fight in their own weight class. Bullying is precisely, however, what one is doing by taking cheap shots at those

¹⁴⁸. That is not to say that cruel or risqué comedy should be avoided, but rather that its effects should be held in mind, with a spirit of empathetic engagement, rather than the cold distance that can sometimes accompany such acts.

vulnerable individuals who lack social power or commonly valued attributes. Of course the way that comedy is often used can be construed as cruel to certain groups: unkind to individuals, rough with concepts, and playing up one's folly for the enjoyment of others. Overall, however, this seems to be a good rule in terms of the intention with which humor should be wielded. The avoidance of intentional and unintentional harm against particularly vulnerable individuals, who are unable to defend themselves, or who already experience their fair share of hardship, seems like a reasonable prescription. However in actual application that can be an exceedingly difficult to call to make consistently who should say what and what behavior deserves criticism.

There are certainly people who will claim offense and discrimination when none was intended. And there are those who, on the other hand, say things which are likely to cause offense, and when criticized for offending, are quick to claim it as their right to do so without being judged for it. This is of course itself a contradictory stance. Liz Labacz, addresses the latter group, with no small amount of sarcasm, in her piece "Punching Up and the 'Rules' of Comedy," saying:

*Am I the only one who finds it simultaneously hilarious and infuriating that the frothing, nearly hysterical reaction to being told their joke has offended someone is for comics to call their detractors overly sensitive and thin-skinned? Why is it that when a prominent feminist receives a rape threat or a female celebrity's body is critiqued in great detail, the response is so often "that is the price you pay for being in public," but the response to having a joke called offensive is to strike up the Bro version of "Do You Hear the People Sing?"*¹⁴⁹

Those who offend are correct that it is their right to say whatever they wish, and it is generally agreed in the US that this should remain the case. However the freedom to say what one wants is not the same as being free from repercussions or judgments after those words are uttered. It is highly likely that most

¹⁴⁹. Labacz "Punching Up And The 'Rules' Of Comedy"

of us belong to both camps, at one time or another, both claiming offense when it might be better to put the comments into context, and of offending others either on accident or on purpose. The acknowledgement of reciprocity and intention is an important part of being in a society with other people. Bearing in mind the idea that other people are people who want to see themselves as well-intentioned individuals with identities and actions of which that they can be proud can go a long way. This is why the act-centered view is useful, as is the avoidance of punching down in general. Dealing with hurtful or offensive acts, and what makes them hurtful, rather than attacking the identities of the agents who uttered them is an important aspect of dialogic interaction and agentic development. While it is probably the case that we are slightly more thin-skinned than we once were, and maybe more than we arguably should be, since comedians are now afraid to perform on college campuses due to the loose allegations of racism and sexism, the consideration that is afforded those who were previously demonized and ignored is certainly a good thing. What is required is some sort of balance. One should determine if offense was intended, and if not, how to best address the issue in a way that gives due consideration to the humanity of both parties involved. An example of how to deal with racist jokes that I have always found particularly interesting and potent is to ask the joke-teller to explain the joke. If the teller does not feel awkward in explaining what he finds funny about the embodiment of the stereotypical attributes of those ridiculed in the joke, he likely will when you say, “oh, I see...” and smile politely. The power of non-laughter in the places where laughter is expected is quite powerful, especially since the joke-teller is exposing himself in the telling of the joke, with the expectation that the hearer will play along in agreement and recognition.

The utterers of jokes and those who laugh at statements and situations must realize that these moments have the power to form connections, as well as break them, and as such, there is an implicit responsibility of the agents to not punch down. This might seem like an overthinking of humor, and a distinctly unfunny instance at that at that, but that is the unfortunate thing about powerful objects of

amusement. Cars, jet-skis, and alcohol can all provide a great deal of fun and escapism, but taken too lightly can cause great misery as well. Knowing the dangers allows for the fun to continue, rather than being the source of unfortunate surprises. Knowing the factors involved in humor ideally gives the opportunity to make something that provides more joy than pain. This is one of the main reasons that “don’t punch down” is a rule at all.

As with Bill Cosby, we saw that punching down often involves one being seen as outside, and above a group, taking shots that are considered unfair. So, with that in mind, one of the factors involved is the relation of the agent to the individual or group at which she is poking fun. If one is a member of a group, or claims some form of solidarity with them, this is a mitigating factor; and the likelihood of being seen as punching down is much less.

That is not to say that the person gets *carte blanche* to make fun of everyone with whom he might be said to identify with in one way or another, but it certainly gives more leeway.¹⁵⁰ Lesbians making jokes about the other lesbians, lesbian dating, or the lesbian community generally is more acceptable than men doing the same thing. This is for a good reason, the likelihood of them being seen as punching down, and marginalizing those affected as a whole is much less, since in effect they are seen as engaging in self-deprecating humor, or at least taking jabs on equal footing.

Poking fun from within a group to highlight social issues and concerns through humorous observations is, and should be, more acceptable because it is less likely to be vicious and stifling; and either way it is somewhat more allowable because the comic in that moment is speaking to an issue that likely affects them, that they have insight on as a member of that group, and are in some ways engaging in a form of humor about themselves and their community.

That rule, of course has its limitations as well. People are potentially prejudiced against the groups to which they belong: there are a number of women who go out of their way to talk about how much they

¹⁵⁰. Rock: “Every ethnic group divides itself, criticizes itself. I know gay guys who say “fag.” What I said got more attention because it was black people, and we tend to get more attention when we do things.” NYT Magazine 10/5/97

hate women, with apparently little or no irony intended. From the agent-centered view they could be called misogynists and judged accordingly, though they would likely claim that they don't hate women as such, but rather what the women that they attack represent as a degradation of womanhood. This again highlights the issue with the agent-centered view, where the dodge always exists, of "well, I'm not a racist/sexist/homophobe."

From the act-centered view these same people could be criticized for saying things which might harm women. It is especially insidious because they *are* women, lending veracity to their claims, leading others to say "see, she said it *and* she is a woman!" This is why particular news stations and radio shows will find women and ethnic minorities to espouse vitriolic rhetoric against those same groups in order to delegitimize their concerns. The act-centered view might be better suited to deal with issues of prejudice and harm, though concerns of act-centered prejudice are more likely more pernicious, however, since the effects are hard to discern in advance.

Rock's arguably well-intentioned and sophisticated internal critique could be easily used to legitimize the negative opinions of a group whose intentions are not nearly as positive or sophisticated. This is demonstrated in Chris Rock's decision to take the bit out of his act when he realized what the broader effects were: allowing the racists and Michael Scotts of the world to use his words to intentionally or unintentionally harm the community of which he is a part.

The act-centered view is also somewhat problematic due to the subjective nature of discerning what constitutes a greater good. For example, the evidence that Rock was presented with that convinced him that it was better to not do the bit and legitimize people saying a racial slur, who might have said it anyway, outweighs the good that it does to keep doing the bit, is a judgment call on a sliding scale of competing goods. However, most ethical considerations are, especially quasi-utilitarian concerns like the relative effects of certain acts. That said, however, the act-centered view is quite valuable as a means of attempting to promote goods and mitigate harms, as it relates to prejudice and agentive

development, especially since it implicitly acknowledges the open-ended process of identity, rather than reducing one's identity to a certain type: i.e. "a racist." It as well provides greater insight into how one might avoid the aforementioned ethical transgression of punching down. If these issues can be kept in mind, comedy can be a productive means of engaging with others in a way that, if not always kind or safe, still facilitates discussion, development, and hopefully still, laughter. With the question of how humor's effects might be understood with regard to its effects on others, let us examine more closely its potential functions within the context of agentive and societal development.

Practical Application: Humor's Functions and the Agent

Up to this point we have seen the various theories of humor; an account of linguistically mediated reflexive agency, and its development through the recognition of others. The interrelation between these elements was given grounds for further explanation through the reconstructions of particular examples of humor and comedy, as well as the introduction of conceptual tools, such as the act vs. agent centered account, and the distinction between "punching down" and "punching up."

So, now that the various theories of humor and the theoretical frameworks of agency have been explained on their own, what then can be said explicitly about their relation to one another and to agency? Well, as was stated at the outset, none of the theories give a full account of the essence of humor. Rather, they describe different aspects of humor and its functions within the individual and the social whole.¹⁵¹ These functional aspects are, rather than mutually exclusive and complete, parallel explanations which, taken together, explain many of the ways that humor is used in society. What then can we say in the form of a recap about these various functions and what it means for agency? Let us start, once again, with *superiority*.

¹⁵¹. Within the individual there is, as Freud points out, already the criteria for what will make oneself laugh. It is also individual since jokes very often originate, and often remain within the private internal dialogue of the agent.

Superiority: Establishing Selves and Structure through Social Policing

Through superiority humor the social standards of status and “proper” conduct are illustrated through the painful lessons of ridicule.¹⁵² One’s “me” is shaped as one is shown what to laugh at laugh with, forming many of the positive and negative structures which constrain the impulses of the “I.” For example, a teen boy may feel the urge to wear “feminine,” flowing, silky clothes, but if one is shown that such options are not available to the agent without serious repercussions; through ridicule and denied recognition (laughing at trans persons, or hippies that want to wear silk skirts, holding them up as archetypal weirdos or buffoons); the “me” is thusly conditioned to eliminate the option, or at least to stamp it down and sublimate it. This begins with the first stages of role-play with immediate action partners; one is laughed at or laughed with, and is shown the appropriate moments and causes for laughter. Learning when to laugh, and when not to, is an integral component of the agent’s development into a socially-involved and capable self. This process continues throughout the life of the agent, as she reacts in agreement or opposition with what others say.

The superiority function of humor is in operation when individuals experience amusement or mirth through the experience of the inferiority of some thing or person other than themselves currently in comparison to them or their affiliated objects. Through laughter one triumphs over something that she views as lesser and ostensibly bad. When applied to others publicly it serves the role of social control, with the mockers deriving amusement from the recognition that another is lesser or worse in one way or another. This gives the feeling of self-mastery or at least a respite from the critical gaze of the Other. The weight of society’s compulsion to be better at least temporarily lifted, while the focus is shifted to the failings of another to measure up to this or that set of standards. Hostility directed outward is negative energy that is not bound up in anxiety or angst.¹⁵³

¹⁵². Ridicule has aspects of relief and incongruity built into its expression, but since it is a direct expression of a thing’s unknowing inferiority, it seems best to categorize it mainly under *superiority*.

¹⁵³. The aspects of social control and the emboldening effects of recognition’s denial on those doing the ridiculing are much more crucial in my account than in that of Honneth, who focuses much more on the positive effects of recognition in

Racist or homophobic jokes allow for the solidarity of the in-group members patting themselves on the back for not being black or gay. In this moment of solidarity the members of the in-group congratulate one another on being better than those they mock, while at the same time reinforcing the social order through shared agreement. This both reifies their own social power, while simultaneously lowering the bar for their own standards of conduct.¹⁵⁴ The social control that they exert forms a part of their “me” (what they are allowed to say, think, and be) as well as the “me”s of others in that society as well. It functions as a means of social policing. This can obviously have very negative effects when this denial of respect is directed at particularly vulnerable groups.

Understanding the role that superiority-based humor plays in social life is important for both humor and agentive development. On a practical level superiority in particular helps us to understand our particularity, either demonstrated or directly felt. It applies the coercive threat of ostracism and scorn to the individual in order to instruct (and construct) selves that know their place and role within the whole. Through this process one becomes acutely aware of her individuality as it relates to the pain of being singled out. This does not, of course, necessarily entail an accompanying confidence in that individual autonomy.

The singling out that occurs might, or might not, lead to an understanding of the performativity and flexibility of identity as it relates to, for example, flowy clothes. This often does not occur, and what is required, as we saw in the last chapter, is the experience that leads the agent to see or demand it as an option, and the requisite support through recognition that makes it a viable route. What humor can do is offer the possibility of tentative identity taking, since it is predicated on characters, absurdities, and

agentive development; and on the motivating effects of recognition’s denial on those on the receiving end of the ridicule. These are all important points, and it is clear the understanding that one derives regarding social relations is much richer, and more sophisticated if they are all taken into consideration.

¹⁵⁴ If one focuses on, for example their own racial supremacy or sexual orientation, as a core tenet of their own identity, they can fail to meet any number of other standards and feel superior to the demonized and marginalized other. “I might be an angry, ignorant, racist, but at least I’m not... black, gay, a woman, a Sikh, etc.” As mentioned previously, superiority humor is often used to cast one’s own Jungian shadow onto another in order to at least temporarily destroy it.

hypotheticals. Comedy, even when seen as poking fun, can offer the possibility of dialogue around a topic and a more comfortable setting in which to entertain certain ideas and identities.

Depending on how it is used, superiority humor has a great effect on the way that the agent develops and relates to the Others with which it finds itself involved. The dialectical movement between the perceived standards of the generalized whole and the drives of the individual often involves superiority humor: finding the inferior or incongruous elements and laughing at their expense; and doing what one can to avoid being humiliated in kind. Sometimes this is used to claim membership to the clearly more powerful group—bullying to fit in, perhaps—and sometimes it is used to dissolve such bonds and claim unilateral superiority over and against it; such as is the case with purposive loners and splinter groups. As the often quoted, and more often mocked bumper sticker phrase goes: “You laugh at me because I’m different, I laugh at you because you’re all the same.” By its very existence, the superiority function of humor indicates the importance of recognition in the formation of self-conscious agents, as well as presenting potential avenues for change.

Relief: Venting the Friction Between Self/Other

From the analysis of relief we see that it illustrates that agents have emotional content that is expressed in ways that defy the model of a straightforwardly rational agent who has access to all of her reasons for acting, thinking, and feeling. The vent of humor provides an outlet for the various feelings built up in an individual through the forces of social interaction. The result of these covert discharges is the implicit or explicit denial of respect for other persons. The denial of respect to others happens, often without the conscious intention to do so, and often as a response to felt denials from others.¹⁵⁵

Experiments, such as those done by Zillmann and Cantor tell us that agents do not always have access to their own reasons for acting and reacting. This is an insight made explicit through analysis of the

¹⁵⁵. A good visual example is that of the baboon tribe studied by zoologist Robert Sapolsky, where smacks are given down the pecking order as a matter of reflex when some bad thing happens to one of the large males. Buddhists refer to this unreflexive involvement in a chain of misery as the “cycle of suffering.”

relief function of humor.

Many of our motivations are secret, even from ourselves, and even the most self-aware agents are themselves a process of constant open-ended interpretation, constituted to a certain extent by reactions that are beyond their own control, and outside of their conscious understanding. Agents have the ability to reflect upon themselves as responsible social objects, but are often somewhat unaware of how they are responding to others and what the pertinent stimuli are. The “I” responds, the “me” haphazardly constrains, and aggression or lust slip by in the way that they can, through jokes, and although we convince ourselves that is not what we meant, that they were “merely” jokes, that is not quite true. Those cathartic escapes of the I, where we knowingly or unknowingly cast off the stifling blanket of the me and rebel against society's constraints, generally, and the Other, specifically who represents something we want, or hate, or who just happens to be there. It is in this way that the relief function of humor divulges the herky-jerky nature of the “me”/”I” dialectic, which is always in the process of becoming, never able to get outside of itself fully to see where it came from or know precisely why it wants to go where it does.

From the birth of the self-objectifying “I” that learns to play the game of symbolic interaction onward we never have full access to the reasons for our emotions or beliefs. Our “me” and “I” are always adapting on the fly through the game of social interaction and material reality, trying to internalize enough to attain the tools to know what we want and how then to get it. It is usually only in those moments where the agent is confronted with a problem that the “I” turns inward to examine itself as an object in potential need of change. This, as was previously stated, may be kick started by ridicule or other denials of respect; but only when not fully overwhelmed by the weight of the denial. The relief function allows for the individual to release some of the energy created between the constraining “me” (which as we know is an internalization of the demands of the generalized other) and the willing “I,” pressing against this constraint. This psychological defense mechanism points to the agent bound up in

a continual process of navigation and interpretation.

From the instant that process of development begins agents are always bound up in becoming, frustrated by the things we cannot say, do, or control; the itches we can't scratch. Relief is what we get when those verboten itches are scratched in a roundabout way, through the sly catharsis of humor. Through humor the repressed I enjoys the rebellion against the established order that prevents it from doing what it wants, even if it is a very minor and fleeting victory. It would likely be best if every single person felt no frustrated urges which required venting, but Freud seems to be right, some repression is necessary for the perpetuation of society. So, if listening to stand up comedy helps you not strangle your boss, or to force yourself to wear clothes to the store, it seems like that might be best. If not, one may find oneself as the next topic of another person's stand up act, trying to make sense of the incongruous sight of a person wearing nothing but a ball cap, deciding which melon to purchase.

Incongruity: Learning and Rewriting the Rules of the Worlds We Inhabit

Incongruity is the sense-making game that we play for making comparisons and finding either disparities where none were thought to exist, or similarities between ostensibly different things. The mirth or amusement that we experience is the reward we get for answering those questions cognitively: for debugging, for playing the game correctly. We receive a pleasant feeling for figuring out rules and correcting our mental maps. It provides moments of comic relief and cognitive play which shape what we think of the world and how we go about thinking. Rather than enjoying our own superior status over and against others (or the removal of the pain of the failure to rise to the "me"s/GO's standards) or revenging ourselves upon others and those standards in a cathartic way, incongruity makes a game of figuring out how the world functions. This may occur interpersonally or in the process of internal dialogue.

As mentioned previously, none of the functions of humor described above constitute its essence, but rather overlap and interrelate, so incongruity may, and often does, involve a bit of both of the others.

For example, the superiority one feels over others, or oneself previously, for determining the answer or for getting the laugh; or alternately the urge to do so may be driven by repressed energies, or directed at someone or something against which the one harbors hostile or lustful feelings. Such is the intertwining and overlapping nature of humor's functions. Still, the incongruity aspect remains an important part of the construction of a better internal picture of the world, allowing one to reframing one's conception of oneself and others within the worlds she exists. Seeing how incongruity functions in this role lends a great deal of insight as well into how agents come into being through the process of interpreting the world and cementing the ideas that become the maps we use and the beliefs that define us.

It should be clear at this point that humor not only can help cultivate agency but its existence and various functions demonstrate its facets. Humor would not be able to function as it does if individuals did not experience interpersonal involvement, conceptual interpretation, and personal responsibility as they do. Self-conceptions obviously form in concert with one another through shared symbols, concepts, and the communication of recognition. People may form bad ideas, self-conceptions, or misinterpret what other people are attempting to communicate, but this only happens because of the reciprocal relation between selves and Others.

Jokes can only be surprising, due to the fact that we are discrete agents with partial access to the information that others have. Humor can bond individuals together because of their separate selves and frames of reference, constructed from the common materials of language and shared information. The personal nature of humor and the shared function of comedy point to the peculiarities of shared experience that form the basis for sense-making and self-conscious social involvement. The power of embarrassment, and consequentially ridicule, is predicated on the fact that we form our worlds and ultimately our *selves* from the opinions and ideas of others. We only have knowledge, or even selves because of this deep level of interdependence. This gives more than enough justification to a *prima facie* ethical debt to other agents to promote their actualization. Humor can certainly hinder this, but it

can also be an essential aspect of personal and social development.

As previously stated, there are three factors which define self-conscious agency: the ability to make change in the world, to understand one's own effects in it, and the capacity to differentiate one's causal powers. Humor clearly provides opportunities for all three. One may effect change through humorous observation and illustrate the powers of individuals and the effects of their actions. Incongruity helps to map the conceptual topography and affect change through conceptual comparison. Superiority is a means of demonstrating the borders between agents and the extent of their powers or limitations. It draws distinctions between agents and sparks self-conscious reflection and, through ridicule, demonstrates one's own powers for some and the limits of those powers for others, reminding those involved of their agentive particularity. When taken together, the functions of humor provide the agent with a unique set of training and tools. Through this the agent may attain mental agility, learn rules and roles, and ultimately through creative and critical thinking to transcend the current boundaries, pointing out errors in the system. Coupled with the mechanisms of ridicule/satire, one may burn away the entrenched ideas that stand in the way of progressive movement or agentive actualization.

The way that humor works is itself indicative of the way that agency forms and interacts in society. Embarrassment and superiority, conscious and unconscious expressions of frustration over and against societal forces of repressions that forms one's "me," and the cognitive debugging of group and ultimately individual mental maps. These point to the real interaction of co-created individuals, shaped by common factors, common words, and one another's gaze. What it says that superiority and relief play such large roles in our lives, I am not certain, but I argue that an overdependence on censorship and trigger warnings is not the best route to take. While some might feel that humor based on hostility, superiority and frustration should be eliminated, I think that not only is this an untenable goal, but one that is counterproductive to progress. The clearing function that humor plays, like a fire that makes way for new growth in a forest, is a role that should not be undervalued or excessively stifled.

Conclusion

The issues that have been discussed up to this point—the inherent potentials and pitfalls of humor, and the challenges of developing actualized agents—stand a chance of being solved, or at least improved upon greatly, if we take seriously the idea of humor as a tentative, explorative, experimental space for discourse. The dangers that we run into, are the aforementioned issues of accidental and intentional disrespect, and the reaction that has in some ways grown out of it: the modern allergy against any possible offense of the allegedly marginalized, weak, protection-needy Other, posed by those who want to sanitize speech in order to avoid harming individuals.

There needs to be a level of sensitivity and awareness of the effects of one's words, however in trying to save people's self-identities we encounter the very serious problem of throwing the baby out with the bath water, and severely limiting the speech of others. This has the effect of truncating their identities, and their capacity to speak, relate, and tentatively occupy spaces that they might not otherwise. This arbitrary limitation stifles development by hampering discourse that, while sometimes painful, is potentially important to the development of individuals and groups.

The result of such a stifled environment of expression, where everyone is simultaneously afraid of engagement and overly entitled to shut down any speech which might be the least bit challenging or offensive to anyone, is an infantilized society which thinks that offense is the self-same as harm. The negative effects of humor are very real, but they are not always intuitively straightforward. Some speech that offends some or even most is very productive toward the end of improving society, destroying illusions, and encouraging critical thought.

The key to this is treating both humor, and identity itself as a tentative process embedded in an experimental space of discourse that allows for experimentation without 'degrading' the Other. It has been demonstrated that identity is an open-ended process of interpretation, through self-talk, and the

continued game of internalizing the perspectives and expectations of others. We now see how important this theoretical backdrop to our analysis really is.

Humor is, significantly, a way to tentatively express the ideas that shape identity, and provide the possibility for development in the game of human interaction. This is seen in the cognitive debugging of incongruity play and ridicule, through the change in one realizing superiority over oneself previously (Hobbes), and the venting that occurs through relief, allowing for new modes of interaction once the latent content is cathartically vented. The important aspect of all of this is the idea that humor and identity, to be helpful require the space of tentative discourse and should be treated as such. Comedy is meant to be taken, at least somewhat, lightly.

Humor should be allowed to exist, and to be treated as the tentative process that it is, and not be overly constrained due to fear of its deleterious effects. That said, the settings for humor are different from one another and should be treated as such. The consent of participants, as well as the setting must of course be taken into account. A pluralistic approach is required if we are not to treat mosques, comedy clubs, and kindergartens the same way. With these things kept in mind, humor, can not only be an integral part of human interaction, it can be a force for positive change and development for both agents and society. Humor is an essential element in communication between agents, and for individual cognitive and psychological development. Humor acts as a necessary means of expression of hierarchical relation and social norm enforcement. It allows for the release of pent up hostility and frustration which are the result of living in a society under the constraints of repression. And it provides a way for interaction and conceptual sorting to be rewarded in a way that feels like a sort of game. Not only is humor itself rooted in conceptual exchange and understanding, it reveals the extent to which all interaction is predicated on the exchange of significant symbols and the internalization of the perspectives and expectations of other agents.

Language, as we have seen is essential to the creation, development, and continued existence of agents in general. If there was no such thing as language, there would be no thoughts, no narratives, not futuritive projections, no selves. With no nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, the creation and communication of thoughts would not be possible. As shown through the examples of Hellen Keller and Ildefonso, a world without words is an impoverished one indeed; one that lacks any rich interiority, or the possibility for self-conscious dialogue.

It is through language and the contingent perspectives of others that we are able to create Selves. The importance of language here cannot be overemphasized in terms of the basic communication of meaning, and ultimately as the basis for self-conscious agency, through symbolically-mediated perspective-taking, and internal dialogic reflection. Without other agents there would be no need for communication, and therefore no language to begin with, and without others there would be no way, or need, to see ourselves from other perspectives. This fact means that we are indebted to the Other for the very existence of our self-conscious agency.

Through Mead's work we see that it is through the role-taking and game of interaction that we acquire conscious agency. Through role-taking agents adapt to the social expectations of significant others, and through the broadening the scope of interaction to include more and more action partners the agent enters the game of society; internalizing the rules, roles, and expectations of the *generalized other*. This internalization of perspectives becomes the *me* of the individual: the narrative self, and censor, which frames and constrains the experiential, open-ended, agentive *I*. The dialogic process between these two elements, especially in moments where a break in the seamless habitual progression of daily life occurs, is what constitutes the basis for self-conscious agentive reflection. It is through this process that the agent realizes that she is a self, with the ability to choose within a context, to make changes within that context, and to know the limits of her own powers.

From the work of Honneth, who expands on the groundwork laid by Hegel and Mead, we see the role that the recognition of other agents plays in the growth and development of agents. Without basic love, one cannot feel as if their own life is valid, so then basic self-confidence is almost impossible. Without respect under the law, the agent does not see herself as a bearer and granter of rights, worthy of equal protection and participation within a society; and therefore she cannot possess the self-respect that others claim for themselves. Without the ability to see oneself as capable of accomplishing something valuable to the broader whole, an agent is unable to see herself as worthy of special recognition, and therefore lacks the potential to have self-esteem.

These modes of recognition are intertwined in such a way that they mutually support and affect one another. The disrespect shown to a certain group through jokes made about the injuries, sleights and the denial of rights are not distinct and disparate elements, but rather fundamentally interconnected parts of a whole which define the possibilities of the agentic development of citizens within a society. Humor serves as a primary means of communication of both recognition and its denial. As Honneth demonstrates, the injuries caused through this denial, and the associated struggle for recognition, are not only the reason for social turmoil, but the means by which those affected can take notice of it and seek some sort of recourse; just as Hegel noted that each new movement of history contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction and ultimate synthesis into something new.

Humor is particularly suited to this, in that it not only provides the irritation of self-conscious awareness required for agentic development, it as well, provides the possibility for analysis and criticism. It does so by serving as a mode of subjective distancing from oneself and context, through hypothetical, non-serious statements and thoughts; as well as a means of tentative identity-taking. This allows for the individual to project into the role-taking and game functions of life without fully committing to one or another strict set of beliefs while protected by the anesthetizing effects of humorous laughter; and allowing for the satirical commentary of those who are both affected by the

situation but distanced from it by the play of wit. The agent, in the engagement with the Other, is rewarded for successful play by the approval of interaction partners, and the internal mechanisms that incentivize problem-solving, superiority, and cathartic release. Identity, through the process of humorous play is shown to be performative, multiple, and a form of open-ended interpretation. Humor, due to the effects of recognition, embarrassment, and the intersubjective nature of the Self in general is potentially very powerful tool in tentative identity-taking, social policing and the expression of ideas and emotions. As such it requires an understanding of this power to be used effectively and responsibly. Chris Rock's use and subsequent removal of his "Black people and Niggas" bit is an apt example of this. With this volatility and potential impact on the agentive development of others in mind it is important to use a few guidelines as it relates to the use of humor relating to its use. This means that one should generally take an act-centered view relating to humor when looking at the potentially offense that one might both cause, and that one might experience. This guideline gives others the benefit of the doubt allows for the possibility of expanded, rather than hampered, dialogue. One should also avoid punching down, taking into consideration one's relationship to the butt of the joke. With this consideration comes the common-sense understanding that the context of the joke and joke-teller matter as much as their content. No one wants to be seen as a bully, well... mostly no one, and the rule about punching down helps with this. The setting and audience should also be taken into account. The plural spheres of public space matter and the setting that one occupies can make a great deal of difference in how humor is received. The jokes that one "should" tell in a school, compared to those told in a bar, differ significantly and in non-arbitrary ways. That said, it is important to allow for the free expression of unpopular ideas, and for humor to be given its proper place.

Now that the frog of humor is examined and stitched back up hopefully we can still make it hop.

Knowing the structures of humor and of agentive development allow us to see how the parts move together, but it requires us to provide the direction and the spark of life. Knowing what we now do

there is no reason we can't use humor to help agents play the game of life better and develop individually and socially.

Through this exploration of humor and agency it should be obvious that a close study of humor demonstrates both the agentic nature of social interaction and the importance of recognition in the formation of social selves. This social self that human beings develop through the processes of interaction and the acquisition of language forms the very basis of human emotion and cognition. Humor, in its various functions provides the basis for the development of agents into actualized participants within the broader social matrix. It gives tools for interaction, introspection and analysis. It demonstrates clearly the mechanisms for self-conscious development, as well as the roles that recognition and its denial have in the developmental process. It is simultaneously a toolkit for engagement and a means of escape. Done correctly, comedy peels away various presuppositions that are the foundations for individual identity. Comedy acts as a sort of enzyme clearing away the ossified structures of unexamined belief, and ill-fitting social reactions. It then allows for innovative reconstruction of narratives that transcend and include the past, in ways that evolve and fit the present context. If it is not taken, in some sense, seriously on both a practical and a theoretical level, this amounts to a missed opportunity to understand how individuals and societies evolve; and to perhaps shape and encourage that development. Humor is an enormous element of human development and interrelation, and we ignore it at our own peril. If we refuse to understand humor the joke will be on us.

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