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An Absurd Theory of Humor

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1 May 2020
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I. Introduction

If a painter chose to join a human head to a horse’s neck, and to spread feathers of many colors over limbs brought together from everywhere, so that what was at the top a beautiful woman ended below as an ugly black fish, would you, my friend, allowed to such a picture, be able to hold back your laughter?

—Horace

Among the human pleasures, perhaps the most satisfying, infectious, offensive, derisive, and downright fun is laughing. And one of the most prominent sorts of occasion for laughter is the case of humor, and although there are, of course, many other reasons for laughter, this paper will focus specifically on the humorous. There have been no few attempts to do a conceptual analysis of humor, and my aim is much the same because I find every other attempt to do this falling short (even if just barely) of a satisfying conceptual analysis of humor. To generate a satisfying analysis of humor we must look at the humorous in relation to things that aren’t humorous—specifically, art, and must also look at the most popular theories of humor, and why they are insufficient compared to the theory that I put forth here, that theory being that at the root at all that is humorous, there is an underlying element of *Absurdity* that—while not making something humorous on its own—is present in all cases of humor. In other words, I take Absurdity to be a necessary condition for humor. It is of course necessary to explain what exactly I mean by “Absurdity,” and I will
indeed pay what I owe soon, but first I owe some clarification on what I mean by humor and a brief account of the existing theories.

This is not a general theory of laughter, for as I said before, there are many things that make us laugh other than humor, such as tickling, pleasant surprises, triumphs, nervousness, and general fun-having. This paper focuses on humorous things, such as jokes, some bits, scenes, and so on. Of course, there are some thinkers, John Morreall for instance, that see humor and laughter as being essential to one another, yet distinguishable from each other. I by no means doubt that there is an intimate relationship between humor and laughter, but as there can be laughter without humor, there can be humor without laughter. Morreall argues that if something does not incline someone to laugh, then it is not humorous to them. Laughter is essential to Morreall’s theory of humor as play because it is a signal of amusement, but I believe that is all it is—a signal, which is not a necessary element of the humorous.¹ I will go more into Morreall’s play theory in the next section, but for now, I plainly state that I believe that humor and laughter can be conceptually separated, and ought to be.

Most likely the closest thing to humor in the world is beauty. When we talk intellectually about beauty we use examples in the world such as nature, art, and even people. We do the same thing with humor, taking examples from comedies, spontaneous humor in groups of people, and even from nature as well. When I talk about “humor” I mean something that is pleasantly amusing to us,

which usually inclines us to laugh (but not necessarily). Of course, there are many different kinds of humor; there is slapstick humor, dark humor, satire, and so on, and while some categories seem vastly different — The Three Stooges might seem to have little in common with South Park, Monty Python differs from jokes about 9/11, and Airplane! is a totally different comedy than The Daily Show — but I believe, that the common thread between them is Absurdity.

II. Three Theories of Humor (Plus One)

As with all others who wish to put forth a new theory of humor, I will begin by covering the most widely accepted theories in place—those being the “superiority theory”, the “incongruity theory,” and the “relief theory.”

The superiority theory has its roots in Plato and Aristotle, but Thomas Hobbes formulated the strongest version of superiority theory, writing that, “sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of the person who experiences the humor’s own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”\(^2\) In general, what we find humorous is what makes us feel like we are better than

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those around us. For example, when we see someone trip and fall, we may laugh, and think to ourselves (or say out loud if we are so inclined), “Ha. Big dummy. Stupid little dumb dumb. Me? I’m smart, I’d never do that. Dummy.” A classic example in support of superiority theory in popular media might be Homer Simpson from *The Simpsons*, a character that is shown as a blithering idiot. For Hobbes, we find humor in Homer Simpson because we regard ourselves as being better and smarter than he is, and when he does something outrageously stupid, we laugh harder and more merrily since the superiority is more evident. An example from the season 5 episode 8: Homer is blindly pawing underneath the couch trying to find a peanut he dropped, after a few unwanted items he pulls out a twenty-dollar bill and says, “Aw, twenty dollars! I wanted a peanut.” The voice in his head replies, “twenty dollars can buy many peanuts,” to which body Homer says, “explain how,” mind Homer says, “money can be exchanged for goods and services,” and Homer jumps up excited with a signature “woohoo!” According to Hobbes, we find this humorous because we see ourselves to be obviously superior to Homer, who doesn’t understand how simple trade works or the value of money in relation to peanuts.

It is important, though, to note, as Aristotle does, that if the “deformity” in the object is too “painful or destructive” for the object in question, it is not pleasant, and we often do not find it humorous. For example, people often will not laugh at others with severe mental disabilities such as down syndrome.
Aristotle says, “the comic mask, for example, is unseemly and distorted but does not cause pain.”

The superiority theory seems to account for many cases of humor and why we laugh—children are often prone to this type of humor and make fun of and tease each other as sources of humor, such as name-calling, and such jokes where one child says to another, “bigstupididiotsayswhat,” and the other asks, “what?” To which, the first laughs and says, “You fool. You absolute buffoon. You have fallen for my classic ruse” (or conveys that thought in some other words). The theory would also explain why most people hate being laughed at, or being made the butt of jokes, for when we are made the butt of the joke and laughed at, we are made to feel as though we are inferior, or at the very least, that those laughing feel as though they are superior to ourselves. We often make the distinction between, “laughing with, and laughing at.” The theory also affords an explanation for why we might find humor in things that are not intended to be humorous. For example, we might laugh at some political opponent’s claim, or some other argument we might find to be nonsense, such as the outrageous claim that vaccines cause autism, despite no empirical evidence, and despite even, empirical evidence that supports the opposition. This, I believe, is the basis of satire, which I will cover later.

But, there are, of course, situations that we find humorous that do not stem from this sudden glory that Hobbes has bestowed upon us. Take, for

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3 Aristotle. Poetics, ch. 5, 1449a.
example, the movie *Airplane!* A running gag throughout the film is that the characters in the movie take things extremely literally. When the main character goes to the desk to buy a ticket, the attendant asks him “smoking or non-smoking,” and he replies, “smoking.” The attendant gives him a ticket that’s on fire and smoking profusely. To take another example: we often find it funny when animals, such as dogs, behave like people. If we see a dog in the passenger seat of a car with its paws up on the dashboard, and at first mistakenly believe the dog is the ones driving the car, we may find this humorous. But for superiority theory this should be unfunny since a dog driving would be closer to being a human, and thus our perceived superiority would be lessened.

We may now turn to a different theory of humor, one that accounts for more instances of things we find humorous, and hence, is the most widely-supported contemporary theory: the “incongruity” theory. The tricky trouble of terms comes into play when we discuss this theory; the views of many philosophers will fit under the broad term of “incongruity,” but, of course, different philosophers formulate their theories somewhat differently. Indeed, my theory of Absurdity in humor might be classified by some as a form of the incongruity theory (a branding I will reject). Let’s consider the positions of some of the earlier philosophers that fall under this category: Francis Hutcheson, Immanuel Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer.
Hutcheson starts off his theory of humor by dismantling Hobbes’s theory of superiority, offering an explanation that was the beginnings of what we call today the incongruity theory of humor. Hutcheson does not use the word incongruity, but claims that the source of humor is the mixing of ideas that are contrary to each other, for example, something that is noble mixed with something deformed. The humor in such things is the comparison between these conflicting ideas. He writes:

That then which seems generally the cause of laughter [humor] is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest is founded upon it.\(^4\)

An example of the incongruity Hutcheson is talking about may be the movie series *Austin Powers*, where Michael Myers plays an international secret agent. The movie parodies tropes of spy movies such as James Bond and mixes the seriousness of being a secret agent saving the world with silliness. In one scene, for example, the main villain, Dr. Evil, is in prison with hardened criminals and breaking into a musical number from *Annie*.

For Kant, humor is part of his category of “free play,” relating it to games of chance, or music. He notes that humor and laughter are necessarily pleasant

experiences, but not beautiful like art. For Kant, humor must be at first an “illusion” that tricks us—and makes us expect one thing only for us to be surprised by the actual outcome. He writes:

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.* This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment.

Kant, it seems, has in mind instances such as the example from *Airplane!* where we would not expect the “smoking” ticket to be literally smoking. The source of humor is the unexpected outcome that follows from a situation, making the sequence of actions incongruous. We see that Kant also uses the word “absurd” in this quotation, but what he means by absurd is different from what I mean, and I will cover my distinction in section 3.

For Schopenhauer, “the ludicrous”—what I take to be humor— is a case of paradox between conceptions of an idea and the particular reality of that same idea. He writes,

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been

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6 Kant, 47.
7 Schopenhauer seems to be against using the term “humor” as an umbrella term for all things that are “funny,” since he seems to think of humor as more of an art form. However, it is apparent that we use humor in the same way he uses “the ludicrous” today.
thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. ... All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous.\footnote{Schopenhauer, Arthur, \textit{The World as Will and Idea}, translated by R.B. Haldane and John Kemp, 6\textsuperscript{th} Edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1907-1909), in \textit{The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor} ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press 1987), 52.}

So the source of humor is having a conception and a particular that conflict with each other. He gives the example of a group of soldiers guarding a prisoner. They allow him out of his cell to play cards with them and end up having arguments with him and throwing him out of jail when they discover he’s cheating. The conception here is “cheaters are to be thrown out,” but the particular conflicts with this conception since the cheater was a prisoner and not to be thrown out—indeed should be the very opposite of thrown out.\footnote{Ibid., 58.}

While even today theorists who fall under the category of incongruity may think of it in somewhat different ways, the idea stays relatively the same—put simply: what is humorous is our expectations about a situation—whether it be in the real world or in a fictional world or story—being conflicted by what is the actuality of that situation. This is often the cause of the defiance of our inductive reasoning about situations or about the world; if we were to see a man playing checkers with a chicken, that defies our reasoning about the world—chickens don’t have the mental capacity to play checkers—and we might find it funny. When we see the chicken triple jump the man’s pieces to win the game
we might once again be defied in our reasoning—chickens aren’t smarter than humans.

This theory encompasses many instances of humor, which is perhaps why it is still the leading theory of humor today—even the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines humor as “that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous: a funny or amusing quality”—but no theory is without its troubles.

The main problem I have for the incongruity theory is the fact that often we still find something humorous despite having perceived them previously, or even repeatedly. For example, I’ve seen Airplane! countless times, and, while my reaction may not be the same as the first time I saw it, I still find many of the scenes and jokes humorous. We may even fully expect the oncoming punchline of a joke, even if we haven’t heard it before, and still find the joke humorous. Perhaps there is even a build-up to what is going to happen, and we find amusement and humor when it finally does happen. If the incongruity theory is true then how can this be the case, when there is no conflict between our reason or understanding and the reality of the situation, or when we see something coming that there is no conflict between the things that are happening.

The third main theory I’ll describe briefly is the “relief” theory of humor. I was tempted to not even cover it since I’m under the impression that it may not even be a theory of humor, but rather a theory of laughter. The theory is often
connected to Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, formulated more simply by
the former and elaborated on by the latter. The basis of this theory is that we
often build up nervous energy in our body and that we laugh as a way to release
excess energy. Often, theorists use the analogy of a pressure valve releasing
steam.

Spencer notes that there are many ways our muscles react to emotions
and releasing of energy; for example, when we are angry we will breathe heavily,
clench our fists, perhaps we will take larger steps. He holds that laughter
functions much of the same way, that the muscle movements of laughter are a
release nervous energy. Spencer’s account has aspects of the incongruity theory
as well; indeed, he has potential answer to a problem concerning incongruity
theory—i.e. why some incongruities make us laugh while others do not. He says
that there needs to be a “descending incongruity” in order to make us laugh—
meaning things must go from good to bad, big to small, and so on.10 In our
example of the chicken playing checkers, imagine if instead of the chicken
winning with the triple jump, there is a long and thoughtful game that unfolds
between the two and the man ends up winning. We might find this less funny,
or not funny at all, because there is no descending incongruity—the man is not
perceived to be bested by a chicken. Instead of finding it funny, we might find it
amazing that a chicken was able to learn checkers, a feeling Spencer refers to as

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“wonder.” Instead of the man descending in intelligence, the chicken is ascending in intelligence.

Freud shares many of the same thoughts but believes that there is a kind of transferring of humor between two or more people. For example, he writes of the buildup of someone’s joke:

He sees this other person in a situation which leads him to anticipate the victim will show signs of some affect; he will get angry, complain, manifest pain, fear, horror, possibly even despair. The person who is watching or listening is prepared to follow his lead, and to call up the same emotions. But his anticipations are deceived; the other man does not display any affect—he makes a joke. It is from the saving of expenditure in feeling that the hearer derives the humorous satisfaction.\(^1\)

It seems that both Freud and Spencer have some of the same ideas as the incongruity theorists, but they have emphases concerning the physiology of finding something humorous—however, as I said before, this does not really seem like a theory of what makes humor humorous, but rather a theory of laughter.

I realize the title of this section is three theories of humor, but I believe I’d be amiss if I did not cover at least one other theory that is put forth by John Morreall (who anthology I’ve gotten many of my sources from); —his theory incorporates elements of both the incongruity and relief theory and is known as “play” theory. Morreall argues that amusement occurs when we undergo a

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11 Ibid., 108.
“cognitive shift,” that is pleasing to us in some way. Once we undergo this shift we are in a “play mode” and are disengaged from “practical and conceptual concerns.” We enjoy this shift rather than being afraid or shocked.  

Morreall believes this cognitive shift goes back to early humans, as a way to release potential negative energy in tense situations. He gives the example of a tribe of early humans gathered by a fire when all of a sudden what appears to be a great horned beast begins to approach them. They all become tense and frightened, only to find out that it was another one of their tribe returning from a hunt and carrying a large animal on their back. They all laugh, because they undergo a cognitive shift from tense and frightened to amused and disengaged. Morreall finds that there is a deep connection between laughter and humor (of course, this is clear), and says that laughter is a signal that one has entered this “play mode.”

One argument I would like to put forth against this play mode, is I believe that in many cases humor can be outside of the realm of “play.” For example, take this interaction from the 2008 Democratic Presidential Debate between the moderator Brian Williams and nominee Mike Gravel:

Williams: You said, “it doesn’t matter whether you are elected president or not.” So then why are you here tonight?

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14 Ibid., 44.
Brian, you’re right I did make that statement, but that’s before I had the chance to stand with them a couple—three times. It’s like going into the Senate; you know the first time you get there, you’re all excited, “my God, how did I ever get here?” Then about six months later you say, “how the hell did the rest of them get here?” And I have to tell you, after standing up here with them, some of these people frighten me! They frighten me!

When Gravel said this it provoked laughter from the audience (including even some of the other nominees on stage), but I do not believe that Gravel was in some kind of play mode or was disengaged from practical concerns when he said this, even though he certainly meant to be humorous. There are also the cases of late night-talk show hosts such as Jon Oliver or Trevor Noah who make jokes about political matters; this may be closer to a play mode, but many of these jokes are more so commentary on political discourse and events in a humorous way rather than simply playful. While it seems like they are playing with the news and politics, really what they are doing is bringing attention to certain issues and their opinions on it. In an episode of Jon Oliver’s show *Last Week Tonight* on HBO, he covers televangelists preaching “seed gospel,” that is, the belief that donating money to a church organization will return greater wealth in the future. He mocks them and makes jokes about the belief and the way they preach, but in doing so, he is trying to show that what they are saying
is wrong and harmful. While he is being humorous, his attacks on televangelists are serious and not merely “playing.”

It is, of course, worth saying that while sometimes these theories may seem exclusive from one another, there are often various similarities and overlaps among them, such as Spencer’s relief theory having elements of incongruity. It is not uncommon for commentators to hold that there are parts of each theory that are true. I am under this category of people, but I believe that there is something deeper that each of these theories have missed—that being, what I call, Absurdity. In general, I take my theory to be some kind of synthesis of the superiority theory, incongruity theory, and parts of the relief theory.

III. That’s Absurd!

It’s high time that I allow myself to explain what I mean by “Absurdity.” For some, this term means simply an incongruity or contradiction. It’s true that many absurd things are incongruous or contradictory, but merely being incongruous or contradictory does not make something humorous. To say so would mean that the proposition of “P and ~P” would be funny on its face, or that some tragic incongruity—for example, a global pandemic such as COVID-19—would give you a chuckle. There must be something in these incongruities and contradictions that make them funny—that feature is what I’m calling Absurdity.
Absurdity, as I am using it, is more than incongruity and contradiction—Absurdity is heavily reliant on the way the world works, or how we perceive how the world works, and what we take to be “right.” This can be a form of incongruity, but there are other things that we find funny that are not incongruous, such as when children mock each other, or when we satirize a political position. And often, there are things that are incongruous that aren’t humorous.

We can see that Kant uses the term when talking about his theory, saying that in humor there must be something “absurd,” but his idea of absurdity still seems to be based on incongruity, where mine is not. However, he says that when things are absurd “the understanding can find no satisfaction,” and this can be helpful.15

In his book Jokes, Ted Cohen writes that many jokes incorporate and absurdity, and that “a human response to absurdity is laughter.”16 I find this not only the case in many jokes, but in all jokes, and not only in jokes, but in all forms of comedy and all instances of humor. Cohen doesn’t make clear what he definitely means by “absurdity,” but I will try now to make clear what I mean by Absurdity, with a capital A.

In my view, Absurdity is a case of not-rightness. Often when my dad hears or sees something he finds funny, he’ll say, “that’s not right!” while laughing. A series of commercials for wireless phone company Mint Mobile plays on the phrase: in one where there is a fake commercial for “chunky milk,” and the mother of a family serves spoiled, chunky milk to her children, who drink and chew the milk. The person watching the commercial within the commercial says, “that’s not right.” When I use this term of not-rightness, I mean for it to account for things that are logically Absurd—contradictions, logical impossibilities,—all the while not excluding other cases we might take to be “not-right” or Absurd based on breaking of social norms, rejection of beliefs about the world, and even conflicts with personal preferences. We would call something that is logically impossible not-right, just as we might call someone breaking etiquette as not-right. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of categories of Absurd things, but I find these to be paradigmatic cases of Absurdity in the world and in comedy.

Kant claims that judgments of taste are not logical, but aesthetic judgments since when we make judgments of taste and ask if something is beautiful, we “refer the representation to the Subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure.” He continues,

The judgement of taste, therefore, in not a cognitive judgement, and so not logical, but is aesthetic — which means that it is one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective. Every reference of representations is capable of being objective, even that of sensations (in
which case it signifies the real in an empirical representation). The one exception to this is the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.\(^{17}\)

I believe that judgments of Absurdity, as I’m using the term, can be judged both logically or aesthetically. When we judge a contradiction as Absurd, we are making a cognitive, logical judgment that “P and ~P” is not-right and cannot be correct—in other words, “P and ~P” is Absurd. An example of this in the real world is saying one thing and then saying the opposite. In a question and answer session with Keanu Reeves, he was asked the question: “does pineapple go on pizza?” He says, “I don’t like pineapple on pizza... but sometimes I do.”

But there are some things that are not necessarily logically false or contradictory that we might refer to as not-right or Absurd. Take the example of the chunky milk commercial; we might think to ourselves that it is not-right for people to enjoy chunky, spoiled milk, just as the commercial suggests, but it is not a cognitive judgment we are making when we think that drinking spoiled milk is Absurd. There is no contradiction or logical impossibility implied by enjoying a nice, cold glass of spoiled milk—maybe there are some people that actually do enjoy chunky milk.\(^{18}\) But for many, there is certainly some displeasure when seeing someone drink chunky milk (admittedly, even the sight of spoiled milk is enough to make me gag).


\(^{18}\) We might call these people something along the lines of “psychopaths.”
It would seem then, in this case, Absurdity can be separated into two main categories—instances that are logically Absurd and instances that are aesthetically Absurd. Since logical judgments of Absurdity are made cognitively—as opposed to aesthetic judgments of Absurdity which are based on pleasure or displeasure of the subject—we can see that there are some things that are objectively Absurd, meaning they would be Absurd independent of subjective feelings of pleasure or displeasure. This would include things like contradictions and logical impossibilities. The contradiction of “P and ~P” is logically not-right and so Absurd in itself. When someone contradicts themselves outright we often find whatever they are saying to be not-right, and this not-rightness can sometimes be humorous, such as Keanu Reeves saying that he doesn’t like pineapple on pizza, except that he does.

Things that are aesthetically Absurd on the other hand cannot be judged to be objective Absurdities since they rely on the feelings of the subject. For example, as I said, there is nothing logically not-right about the enjoyment of chunky milk. Things that are aesthetically Absurd then rely on our social norms, personal beliefs, and our personal preferences. Should something go against what we believe to be social norms we’ll often think that something about that instance is not-right. Take for example the restaurant chain Dick’s Last Resort—the restaurant’s staff is intentionally rude to customers—insulting and pulling pranks on them—which goes against the social norm of restaurant staff being as hospitable as possible. In a sense then, their treatment of
customers is Absurd, but this is exactly why customers will still go to the restaurant, because they find the Absurdity of the staff’s behavior humorous.

But there are often things that will seem Absurd to one person while not to another. This could happen in the case of social norms changing with time. For example, wearing drag was often used in comedy sketches or bits in the past because for most of the audience there was something not-right about a person of one gender dressing like someone from the other gender. In the 1980s sitcom Bosom Buddies (a show that’s better off forgotten), the characters played by Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari dress in drag in order to live in an apartment complex that’s reserved for women only. But today, we have television shows such as RuPaul’s Drag Race that are not meant to be comedic because for many, wearing drag isn’t a case of not-rightness. For a person who doesn’t think that wearing drag is Absurd, they would not find tropes using drag as humorous since it is not Absurd, unless there is any other added Absurdity. Judgments of Absurdity that are aesthetic then are subjective and have to deal with the in place social norms of a culture, and with personal beliefs.

Often when we see some form of Absurdity, we’re acknowledging some form of not-rightness in the situation. But Absurdity need not be humorous—for example, we might call some political position Absurd, and condemn it as not-right, since it is against what we believe. A staunch Libertarian might say that regulations on trade are not-right based on her beliefs and would think them Absurd, but wouldn’t find them humorous. Likewise, if a politician were to flatly
contradict themselves while giving a speech, this might not be humorous even though they committed a contradiction. We might find ourselves frustrated at the Absurdity. As I said before, Absurdity is a necessary condition for humor, but not a sufficient condition. In the next section, I will cover a range of examples of Absurdity in humor and suggest why something might not be humorous while only being Absurd.

IV. Humor from Absurdity

In the last section, I used the following examples as categories of Absurdity: contradictions, logical impossibilities, breaking of social norms, rejection of beliefs about the world, and conflicts with personal preferences. Again, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list of categories—I’m sure there are ways other than these in which something can be Absurd, but I believe that these are among the most common. To start off this section, I will try to use examples from each of these in order to show the Absurdity in humor.

I already mentioned one example of a contradiction that is Absurd and can be humorous, that being the video of Keanu Reeves saying he doesn’t like pineapple on pizza and immediately saying he does like pineapple on pizza. Another example is from the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*: in a scene where he is talking to the camera about how he faked being sick he’s talking about a test he was supposed to take in school:
Ferris: I do have a test today. That wasn't bullshit. It's on European socialism. I mean, really, what's the point? I'm not European. I don't plan on being European. So who cares if they're socialists? They could be fascist-anarchists. It still doesn't change the fact that I don't own a car.

Here there is a contradiction in the phrase “fascist-anarchist,” these are two things that are logically against each other, the one being for a totalitarian government (we could call that P) and the other being against any government at all (~P). When we find this bit funny, it’s because we realize the Absurdity of the contradiction between fascist and anarchist.

It is worth noting that Søren Kierkegaard believed that all humor—or as he calls it, “the comic”—is based in contradiction saying “the comical is present in every stage of life (only that the relative positions are different), for wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present.” But he uses contradiction in a much looser sense than the logical contradiction I’m using here, as we can see from some of his examples. One such being the instance of a man who dresses oddly every day, but once in a while dresses “elegantly;” in this case “we laugh at this, because we remember

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the other.”  This is not a logical contradiction and wouldn’t belong in the category I would call logical Absurdities, but would instead be an aesthetic Absurdity.

The case of logical impossibility is harder to demonstrate. Let’s imagine a third-grade class, and the teacher asks the answer to five times five, and one student eagerly raises their hand and says “thirty!” Some of the other students snicker because that’s obviously not the correct answer. The Absurdity here lies in the fact that in no possible world would five times five equal thirty, and the other students find it funny because the student who answered gave an answer that was Absurd.

Another possible example could be the existence of two of the exact same person. In an episode of *Family Matters*, the character Urkel creates a cloning machine and accidentally clones himself, making an exact copy. It would seem at least close to logical impossibility for there to be any more than one single individual, and so we might find the creation of a second exact copy of one single person Absurd. The television show *Rick and Morty* also plays with this idea, where there are multiple realities with exact copies of each character in the show, and often in the show, if something goes wrong in their reality they will simply jump to a different reality, dispatch (kill) the copies of themselves in that reality, and take their places. While this might not be logically impossible, it certainly plays with the idea of impossibility, and we might find this humorous.

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20 Ibid., 87.
because of the Absurdity of there being exact copies of ourselves that we can
switch with and live as if nothing had ever happened.

More common cases of Absurdity that we find humorous are those that
are aesthetic judgments of Absurdity. These are things, as I’ve said, that go
against norms, or what we take to be norms of our world. The example of
breaking social norms I gave before was the example of wearing drag, where
many in the past thought it to be Absurd to dress like someone of the other
gender. In comedy bits that use wearing drag as humorous, we think it
humorous because we do find it Absurd.

Morreall draws attention to Paul Grice’s maxims of conversation, such as
“do not say what you believe to be false,” “avoid ambiguity,” “be relevant,” “be
brief.” These are preconditions that people take each other to be following in
conversation. When in conversation we assume that the person or people we are
conversing with are following these rules and this allows us and our
conversationalists to be able to say one thing and have it be correctly
understood. To use an example from William Lycan’s Philosophy of Language: A
Contemporary Introduction, if I tell someone “there’s the door” they will reason
through these rules (be relevant) that I want them to leave.21

It’s often the case that when people break these rules, whether intentionally or
unintentionally, there is some humor produced. One example Morreall uses is
from George Carlin’s stand-up, in which he muses on the idea of legalizing

21 Lycan, William G, Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction, (New York,
murder once a month for each citizen. Obviously, Carlin doesn’t believe this is true or a good idea, and (most) people watching his comedy routine don’t believe he believes it, but he is breaking the social norm of following these rules of conversation by saying something he doesn’t actually believe which is Absurd.

In the case of the rejection of beliefs about the world, we can take the example I used earlier of Last Week Tonight’s host Jon Oliver mocking televangelists. For some, or perhaps most, there is something morally not-right about church pastors asking their viewers to send money to their church as a “seed,” but then use that money to buy private jets. If we do find it not-right, we find it to be morally Absurd, and when someone attacks it in an exaggerated way we might find it humorous ourselves. This example can show how my theory accounts for those cases covered by the superiority theory. One of the things Hobbes says about laughter, again, is that, “men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consists in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another…” In my case, we find that the people being mocked and attacked are acting in an Absurd manner because they go against our beliefs.

It’s no coincidence that when we hear an argument we find Absurd we say that it’s laughable. If we say to a political spokesperson, “the facts say that what you’re arguing is plain wrong,” and the spokesperson replies with, “well, we use alternative facts,” we might find this Absurd since it might go against our beliefs to think there are “alternative facts” about anything.

22 Morreall, 2-3.
This is the foundation of satire; seeing an Absurd argument and exaggerating that Absurdity to extreme circumstances. For example, in the *South Park* episode “Stunning and Brave,” the character PC Principal (a personification of so-called “politically correct” culture) gives one of the students two weeks of detention for writing a paper called “I Don’t Think Caitlyn Jenner is a Hero.” This is a satire on politically correct (PC) culture, and “cancel” culture, taken to extreme measures. Most people wouldn’t believe that writing a paper that might be seen as politically incorrect warrants discipline and so they see it Absurd when it happens in the show. Often in satire, we’re meant to see an exaggeration of what the creator thinks to be Absurd in everyday life, such as an idea or even a person.

It is not just Absurdity in ideas or people that we might find humorous, but seeing something that goes against our personal preferences or our taste. Often, people will watch movies that are notorious for being bad, simply so they can laugh at them, saying that they are “so bad, it’s funny.” Movies such as *Trolls 2* and *The Room* have turned into cult classics that have followings simply because they fit this mold of being movies that are fun to watch because they are so bad. When we find these movies and other “so bad, it’s funny” things humorous, it’s at least partly because we find them to be Absurd.

We can see Absurdity in offensive or so-called “edgy” humor as well. In the 2019 movie *Joker*, there is a good example of this (spoiler alert). While on a
late-night talk show, the main character, Arthur (Joker) is asked to tell a joke and performs a knock-knock joke:

**Joker: Knock Knock**

**Murray: Who’s there?**

**Joker: It’s the police, ma’am. Your son’s been hit by a drunk driver, he’s dead.**

(Audience groans)

**Dr. Friedman: No, no, you cannot joke about that.**

**Murray: Yeah, that’s not funny, that’s not the kind of humor we do on this show.**

While the audience in the movie reacted poorly to this joke, we can imagine why it might be funny to some people. Firstly, there is an incongruity in the buildup to the “punchline,” but also there is a common belief held by some that there is something not-right about joking about tragedies, and sometimes this not-rightness will be found humorous. We can even look at examples of jokes about 9/11, about the holocaust, or as I alluded to earlier, about COVID-19. There are people that find these types of jokes funny, and the main reason is because they push some kind of boundary on what can be joked about—they’re “edgy.” This relates to Spencer’s and Freud’s account of the relief theory. When we joke about sex and violence we find them humorous and laugh because we’re
expelling some nervous energy that was built up by the tension of those ideas. The same can go for offensive jokes—we feel some pent up nervousness about such tragic events that when someone jokes not-rightly, or Absurdly about them, we find them humorous. I find examples like this to be unaccounted for in the incongruity theory and in the superiority theory of humor. Consider joking shortly after a tragic tsunami:

A local bar owner was asked how their business was doing over the last week. She replied, “It’s been very quiet but some of the regulars are starting to drift back.”

There is no obvious incongruity or superiority in jokes like this. The Absurdity lies in the not-rightness of joking about such things—there is “shock value” in jokes like these.

There is another type of Absurdity that I will count as an aesthetic Absurdity, and that is things that nonsensible or incoherent. An example of this is a stand-up performance by Andy Kaufman, where he begins speaking in a different language, perhaps even a language that he made up. He begins performing in this language that nobody in the audience understands as if it’s any other stand-up routine, presumably telling funny anecdotes and even interacting with the audience. The audience cannot comprehend what Kaufman is exactly doing or saying. Looking back at Cohen, he writes:

Many successful jokes incorporate an absurdity, and therein lies the lesson that a human response to absurdity is laughter. It is not just jokes, but indeed it is also the world itself and its various inhabitants that are sometimes absurd to human contemplation. When we laugh at a
true absurdity, we simultaneously confess that we cannot make sense of it and that we accept it. Thus this laughter is an expression of our humanity, our finite capacity, our ability to live with what we cannot understand or subdue.\textsuperscript{24}

The audience cannot make sense of Kaufman’s bit, which is what he wanted to happen, and they find it humorous because they accept that it is Absurd. This is also the case in regards to “surrealist” memes on the Internet. Take, for instance, this image:

![Image](image-url)

We can understand the words, but that might be most of what we can make sense of in this image. But I and many others will still find it funny since we are

\textsuperscript{24} Cohen, 41.
recognizing the Absurdity of it and accepting that we cannot make any sense of it.

While this range of examples differ considerably, I believe they all have some common underlying feature, that being Absurdity, whether that being a logical Absurdity such as a contradiction or an aesthetic Absurdity such as the breaking of social norms. However, while Absurdity is apparent in every case of what we find humorous, it is often not the only factor that makes us find something humorous. When we hear an Absurd argument from someone we disagree with, rather than being amused, we may get frustrated. When we do or say something Absurd that draws a laugh from others we may feel embarrassed. We often feel this way because, even if we do or say something Absurd, we are often too attached to ourselves and our feelings to be amused by it. We hate to think, or even refuse to think, that we ourselves could be absurd in any way.

This is why Henri Bergson argues that humor (what he calls “the comic”) requires a “momentary anesthesia of the heart,” and that there is an “absence of feeling” when we find something humorous. He writes that even dramas and tragedies will turn into comedies if we are disinterested enough.25 For instance, when we do say or do something absurd unintentionally that draws a laugh from others, we are upset in the moment, but after some time has passed (whether it be hours or years), sometimes we look back and find the humor in it. We have distanced ourselves from our emotions in that moment enough to be able to see

our own past behavior as Absurd and thus find it humorous. There are however some comedians that distance themselves in the moment and perform self-deprecating comedy, which is acknowledging themselves being Absurd, such as the routines of Jim Gaffigan or Louis C.K.

This can be connected to Kant’s aesthetics; he says that the only appropriate way to judge fine art is with a disinterested attitude, that “every one must allow that a judgment on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste.” For Kant, in “all the formative arts,” what is essential is the “design.” He argues that for something to be a pure judgment of taste it can only be concerned with the form of the object in question, and cannot be tainted by any “charm or emotion.”

If we were to see a play a significant other is in, we should not judge the play from the point of view of loving our significant other. If we want to make a pure judgment of taste because it will make our positive judgment partial. If we view the play disinterestedly, we might find it dreadful rather than brilliant (and perhaps keep that a secret from our significant other).

However, in contrast to Bergson’s account, sometimes emotion or interest can amplify humor. In an important soccer game between Chelsea and Liverpool, Liverpool’s legendary captain Steven Gerrard fumbled with the ball at his feet and slipped trying to recover it, letting Demba Ba go one on one against

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27 Ibid., 139-140.
the goalkeeper and score—a moment that many people say essentially took Liverpool out of the title race in the premier league. As a Liverpool fan, this is hard to watch, and a shock of pain still goes through me when I watch the clip.

But for a Chelsea fan or a Manchester City fan (City won the league by two points that season), the pratfall might be humorous since it was a rival team’s player that slipped and decided the game. To take another example, if you are watching a late-night television show such as The Daily Show, and agree with the politics of the host, you might find the jokes made at the expense of the other side funnier than if you were neutral on the issue at hand, and if you have the opposite political stances of the host, you may find the jokes not funny at all.

However, if you are on the other side politically it is possible to view the jokes from a disinterested standpoint and find humor in them, since at the base, they are satirical and exaggerate the Absurdity of the issue. The same happens in so-called “roasts” of celebrities, where comedians and other celebrities make jokes at each other’s expense, centered around jokes made about a single person. This person doesn’t get upset (or at least doesn’t seem to get upset) when all the others pile on with apparently hateful banter, because they are exaggerating the Absurdity of the person’s life and reputation.

Even though Absurdity can be objective (logical) or subjective (aesthetic), humor will always be subjective; even if something is judged to be objectively

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28 Liverpool lost the game 0-2, with this goal happening at the end of the first half. Still, the event of giving away an easy goal may have changed momentum throughout the second half.
Absurd, Absurdity is not a sufficient condition for humor and there may be other things that need to be fulfilled, such as potentially a lack of emotion as Bergson suggests. While Absurdity can be judged either logically or aesthetically, humor can only be experienced aesthetically since it is solely dependent on the pleasure of the subject perceiving an instance of humor. Here again, the philosophy of humor intersects with the philosophy of art—or, more closely,—the philosophy of beauty, since humor is not art—comedy is art, and humor is to comedy what beauty is to fine art.  

Even though humor may be a subjective thing, we often talk as if humor is an objective, and often there is widespread agreement about what or who is funny. For example, if one searches online for “top 10 comedians of all time,” most (if not actually all) results will include either Richard Pryor or George Carlin at the #1 spot, and the other will be #2, and likely there will be names such as Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, Lenny Bruce also in the top 10.  

Not only this, but if we were to ask someone who they think the greatest comedian of all time is, and they say Carlos Mencia, we might grimace, since that seems almost certainly wrong. But if humor is subjective then how can it seem almost certainly wrong?

29 Or used to be, anyways.

Kant tries to wrestle with this question in his third critique with regard to judgments of taste. Kant claims that when we judge something to be beautiful we are saying that every person should find it beautiful as well. He writes,

It would, on the contrary, be ridiculous if any one who plumed himself on his taste were to think of justifying himself by saying: This object (the building we see, the dress that person has on, the concert we hear, the poem submitted to our criticism) is beautiful for me. For if it merely pleases him, he must not call it beautiful. ... when he puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself, but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Thus he says the thing is beautiful... He blames them if they judge differently, and denies them taste, which he still requires of them as something they ought to have; and to this extent it is not open to men to say: Every one has his own taste. This would be equivalent to saying that there is no such thing at all as taste...

Humor works in much of the same way. When we crack a joke to a friend and they don’t laugh or find it funny, we accuse them of not having a sense of humor or think that some defect in themselves leads them to miss the joke. If they were able to acknowledge the Absurdity behind the joke, or gain some emotional distance from the subject matter, or understand whatever references we were making or the terms we were using, then they would react the same way that we do. Kant argues that making a judgment of taste “must involve a claim to validity for all men.” Since we take it to have validity to all people, it creates the possibility of a “subjective universality” If we look on some object without any interest then we will “look on the object as one containing a ground

31 Kant, 135.
of delight for all men.”32 Since when we look on without interest we figure that if every other person looked on without interest they would see it as delightful as we do.

With humor, there seems to be more agreement among people who share an appreciation of certain kinds of humor, or who share “senses” of humor. For example, not everyone enjoys “British” humor, but for those that do, there is common agreement that Monty Python is among the greatest acts in that genre. There seems to be a subjective universality within genres or 'senses' more than with humor generally—although, there is of course some agreement as I said before with the example of the top comedians. The subjective universality of humor in general seems to be weaker than those within certain genres or senses of humor.

V. Some Challenges Approach

I’d now like to consider some of the counterexamples that are potential problems for my theory just as I considered the counterexamples of other theories. Perhaps I won’t be able to cover every potential counterexample in this section, but I’ve picked out some that I believe pose the biggest problems for my theory.

The first that was brought to my attention was the case of impressions. Impressions seem to be a common form of comedy, such as Alec Baldwin

32 Ibid., 134.
impersonating Donald Trump or Tina Fey impersonating Sarah Palin on
*Saturday Night Live*. One thing about impersonations is that it seems to be the
case that the better the impersonator is the funnier we find it. The closer
Baldwin comes to copying Trump’s speech patterns, body gestures, and
mannerisms the more humorous we find it. This poses a problem for my appeal
to the not-rightness of Absurdity—the righter Baldwin is in impersonating
Trump the funnier it is. The same could be said of caricatures; when a
caricature of someone bears more resemblance to the person being caricatured,
the funnier it will be.

Where does the Absurdity come from in these cases? Kierkegaard uses
caricatures as an example of his theory saying a caricature is comical,

Because of the contradiction between likeness and unlikeness; the
caricature must resemble a human being, an actual, particular person; if
it resembles no one at all, it is not comical, but is a straightforward essay
in the sphere of the unmeaning fantastic.

When someone does an impersonation or draws a caricature of someone there is
usually an exaggeration of some kind, such as in a caricature if the person being
caricatured has large ears the artist will exaggerate the ears to make the
drawing humorous. This exaggeration will bear some resemblance to the person,
but it adds an element of not-rightness. If someone were to make a drawing of
someone without caricaturizing them or exaggerating some feature, we would

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33 There are some cases where the impersonations are not good on purpose, such as
Andy Kaufman doing impressions in his foreign man character on *SNL*. These are
obviously easier to deal with because the not-rightness of the impressions is Absurd,
such as when we find a bad movie funny.

34 Kierkegaard, 88.
not find it humorous, but would rather be impressed at their artistic ability (not that we wouldn’t be impressed by their ability were it a caricature).

The same is the case in impersonations; Baldwin might be spot on with Trump’s mannerisms and voice, but he will use the impersonation in order to parody Trump—saying outlandish things that Trump (probably) wouldn’t say. For example, in a cold open where Baldwin played Trump about declaring a national emergency for the construction on the wall:

**Baldwin (as Trump):** So, I’m basically taking military money, so I can has wall. So I’m going to sign these papers for emergency, and then I’ll immediately be sued. And the ruling will not go in my favor. And then it’ll end up in the Supreme Court, and then I’ll call my buddy Kavanaugh and I’ll say it’s time to repay the Donnie, and he’ll say “new phone who this?” ...

This goes on for a bit longer, but I figure you get the picture. Baldwin may be right in his impersonation of Trump, but what he is saying as Trump is not-right, and thus Absurd. However, if we impersonate someone without exaggerating or making it Absurd, then there will be no humor in it. Such is the case with tribute bands; a Beatles tribute band will attempt to be as close the Beatles as possible, down to what suits they wore at what shows, but they do not exaggerate any features of John, Paul, George, or Ringo to make them Absurd.
Another type of instance I’d like to go over is bodily functions such as farting or belching. There are cases of these functions that don’t pose a problem for my theory, such as doing them in an inopportune time—as the phrase goes “that’ll go over like a fart in church.” Cases such are Absurd because they are seen as not-right to us given the situations we find ourselves in. If someone farts during an important business meeting people may find it humorous because it was not-right in relation to the situation and social norms. What I think poses a more difficult problem are cases where there is nothing not-right about the situation, such as the scene from *Blazing Saddles* where around a campfire cowboys eat plates of beans and start farting profusely in succession. If there’s any appropriate time to fart, this is probably it, so what makes it Absurd?

In Simon Critchley’s *On Humor*, he suggests that humor comes from the gap between *being* a body and *having* a body. We can distance ourselves from our bodies, such as if we grow our hair long we might say that we have long hair, or that we have a pimple, but all the while we *are* our bodies at the same time. Critchley distinguishes the two as the physical (having) and the meta-physical (being). He writes, “what makes us laugh, I would wager, is the return of the physical into the metaphysical.”35

I’m not sure if Critchley means for this to be a general theory of humor, and if he does I don’t necessarily agree with it, but I think that it might prove helpful in this case. He uses examples he calls “scatological” humor, and says

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that the gap between the physical and meta-physical is explored between “our souls and arseholes.” He writes that “we should consider the lowly fart, for if the body is what returns in humour then surely the fart is both the auditory and olfactory announcement of the body’s imminent return.”

This gap is what I take to be not-right in cases such as farting. When we find our bodies humorous because of the presumed gap that Critchley argues for, we find that there is something not-right about our physical bodies from our metaphysical point of view. There is obviously nothing logically impossible about farting, but aesthetically, when we distance ourselves from our bodies and are (sometimes explosively) reminded that we are our bodies, we find some kind of not-rightness in the physical part of ourselves. We were distancing ourselves from our bodies, and are rudely awakened when we or someone else is reminded that we can only distance ourselves so much.

At first glance, wordplay and puns seemed like they would pose a problem for my theory, but after a little thought, the Absurdity is clear. Consider the joke:

**Why can you not starve in the desert? Because of the sand which is there.**

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36 Ibid., 47.
In cases like this, the Absurdity comes from a kind of false equivalence between two words or phrases that sound the same, and while in cases of impressions and caricatures people attempt to exaggerated the Absurdity, in cases of wordplay the Absurdity is attempted to be hidden, but it is often so obvious that it can’t be. In the above joke, there’s a not-rightness in equating “the sand which” with “the sandwiches.” There is an attempt to hide this not-rightness which is the set up to the punchline—if there are sandwiches in the desert, then the answer to the question in the set up would make sense, but of course “the sand which” is just supposed to sound like sandwiches. Sometimes when hearing word play we have to have a second to think about them, because of the attempt to cover up the Absurdity. Consider the joke:

**A seal walks into a club.**

When I first was told this joke, it took me at least a minute to understand it, and that made it funnier to me, because I saw not only the Absurdity of the false equivalence of club (bar) and club (weapon), but the Absurdity of trying to hide that former Absurdity.

I believe that these are perhaps the strongest counterexamples to my theory, but I don’t refute that there may be more. However, hopefully with the same kind of reasoning above the reader can determine how any other counterexamples they think of can be solved.
Professional Humor — AKA Comedy

It's worthwhile in this penultimate section to take a look at what professional humorists have said about humor and how it works—we can only learn so much from philosophers who, in all honesty, may, judging from their works, have had as much capacity for humor as a fish does. In my comedy improvisation group in college, we took *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* as our “Bible.” For those unfamiliar with it, the Upright Citizens Brigade is an improvisational theatre group which has developed some now-famous actors and comedians such as Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, and Matt Walsh. The manual, written mostly by Besser, Walsh, and Ian Roberts, tries to lay out the foundations of improvisational comedy: essentially, how to be funny.

The main reason I bring improvisational comedy into the picture is that Morreall argues that *spontaneous humor* builds intimacy and community more than mere joke telling. He states that it is easy to rely on repeatable jokes in academic texts since they relate to a wider audience, but most of our aesthetic experiences with humor are based on real-life experiences of spontaneous humor. He argues that the person who creates spontaneous humor—what he calls the “wit”—has an unlimited well of humor they can create while the mere “joke teller” is limited only to the jokes they can remember. He likens the difference to music; we give applause to musicians performing a piece written by
someone else, greater applause to a musician performing an original work, and even greater applause to a musician improvising music on the spot.\footnote{Morreall, 84-85.}

Improvisational comedy fits into the category of creating humor on the spot, but it still brings in a level of preparedness and skill, as does improvising music. Morreall argues that while the joke-teller only performs, the wit creates humor \textit{and} performs, as is the case in improvisational comedy (which I will now refer to as “improv” for ease).\footnote{Ibid., 84.} I will use the explanations and guides to creating humor and performing from United Citizens Brigade to further provide further support my Absurdity theory of humor.

In improv, every scene is structured around a “base reality”: the world that the improvisers will create. This creating of the base reality need not be funny, because it is simply the build-up to finding “the Game” of the scene, the part of the scene that is funny. As the UC guide puts it, “it is a consistent pattern of behavior that breaks from the expected patterns of our everyday lives.”\footnote{Besser, Matt, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh. \textit{The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual}. New York, NY, (Comedy Council of Nicea, LLC), 2013, 64.} In other words, the Game is the part of the scene that is Absurd. For example, a scene’s base reality may be two intergalactic delivery boys who jump from planet to planet delivering pizzas. This isn’t necessarily Absurd since the only incongruity within the scene is the fact that the delivery boys are in outer space, but we are familiar with the concepts of pizza deliveries. But when we
add something Absurd to the scene, such as one of the delivery boys refusing to deliver to planets with names ending in “y,” we have a Game.

One of the strategies UCB offers for making a scene funnier is to make the absurd believable. This is another way I believe the Game differs from mere incongruity. UCB recommends justifying absurd behaviors in scenes in realistic ways, i.e. in ways that would be normal in real life. An example they give is a scene where there is an elephant in someone’s apartment and they need to justify why there is an elephant to her roommate. Justifying it by saying that the zoo she worked for closed down and she needed to house the elephant somewhere is a more realistic and logical explanation than if she had said that a magical genie appeared and gifted her the elephant.40

The first explanation is an example of Absurdity, because it is a case of not-right behavior, whether in the form of incongruity, or superiority theory (how could you be so stupid to do something like that?), while the second explanation, while incongruous with our world, doesn’t put the incongruity in relation to our world and establishes another world where genies are real. It is not Absurd. This would explain why the first explanation would be seen to be funnier than the second.

Often, being trained in one of these improv groups will lead improvisers to become professional comedy actors and writers, as was Amy Poehler from UCB, Tina Fey from Second City, Jordan Peele from Second City, Nick Kroll from

40 Ibid., 130.
UCB, and many more. Often actors and writers who were trained first in improvisational comedy are regarded as the top performers in comedy because they are able to create a potentially infinite amount of humor from the “Game”: this creation of humor that comes from highlighting an Absurdity in a base reality. In relation to comedy in everyday life, this base reality is simply the reality that we perceive and have committed beliefs about, and so when we highlight an absurdity, whatever that Absurdity may be, there is a chance for humor.

VI. Conclusion

I’ve tried to clear up some of the mystifying features of humor and will give a brief overview of my view in this last section; the view that Absurdity is a necessary condition of humor—with every instance of humor, there is Absurdity. This absurdity can differ between being an Absurdity based on logical judgment, or an absurdity based on aesthetic judgment. Those that are based on logical judgments can be termed objective Absurdities, while those based on aesthetic judgments are subjective Absurdities. While Absurdities can be either objective or subjective, humor is always subjective, because Absurdity is not a sufficient condition for humor. While two people may both find something Absurd, they may have different reactions to it; perhaps one finds it funny while the other
finds it frustrating or disgusting. I’ve tried to use examples from comedy to show how my theory works in the real world and not just on paper.

There are many mysteries that remain, however—the theory still gives only a necessary and not sufficient conditions. There are other factors in place, such as the lack of emotion, or, in other different cases, even adding of emotion, and I’m sure there are plenty of other things that help make things humorous. While these other factors are important, Absurdity is the feature that runs through all instances of humor.

This, admittedly, is a kind of conglomeration of the other theories of humor, although it does share the most in common with the so-called incongruity theory. I think the theories are distinct, but if the reader prefers, they may regard it as a refinement of incongruity as well.

In any case, things that are funny are an important part of our lives as humans, and it is important to know how humor works at the very least in order to see how humor can be beneficial for the human spirit and communities.