

I. Am I Funny?

I have always been a bit of a ham. I have never loved being the absolute center of attention¹; instead, I prefer to be center-adjacent, a supporting character acting as the comic relief. Relatively early on, I carved out my niche and from then on in our mandated yearly plays I played exclusively curmudgeonly, angry old men². It was a series of characters that fit nicely with my personality, even if the optics weren't as cohesive. If I put on a beard and yelled at people in a silly way, I could get laughs³. As I've grown older, my sense of humor has become slightly less theatrical and significantly more biting. I hesitate to think of myself as funny⁴, firstly because I do not like to be this directly arrogant and prefer to exhibit self importance in more subtle ways, and secondly because I don't really know what it means to be funny.

In "Towards a Philosophy of Humor,"⁵ Israel Knox posits "for whatever else humor may be, it is surely a species of liberation, a lifting of horizons and a prelude to the peace and freedom which are vouchsafed by an unclouded sight and an unerring insight."⁶ I had never thought of this classification before, an association between humor and liberation, but when I read it, I realized its truth. Humor has been my choice tool for liberation, whether it be from the figurative cage of being a second grade girl or the deep rabbit holes of depression or anxiety. As long as I can make myself laugh, I feel like I have power and control over my situation - making others laugh is just a plus and a nice boost to my ego.

II. Why are so many funny people depressed?: A Philosophical Investigation

*"The secret source of humor itself is not joy, but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven."
- Mark Twain*

When I had my first introduction to Shakespeare⁷, I was told that you could tell one of his plays was a tragedy if someone died at the end and a comedy if someone got married. They could intermingle to some extent, but at the end of the day, any piece of work could be categorized. Though comedy and tragedy are opposites in theory, in practice they are perpetually linked. Sometimes, a piece of comedy can pack a far greater emotional punch than a tragedy, sending you laughing on your way to despair. Sometimes, comedy comes from a sadder, more messed up place than its more earnest counterpart. This is not a new phenomenon - in fact, with some simple analysis of the philosophy of humor, it's hard not to see that tragedy is built into comedy's existential DNA.⁸

¹ That was more of my sister's thing.

² One of the oft-ignored perks of single sex elementary school.

³ Quite frankly, this is a great tactic and is recommended for anyone looking for laughs.

⁴ Or most anything else that is concrete and has implications that can be denied by others.

⁵ An extremely non-humorous article about humor.

⁶ Knox, Israel. "Towards a Philosophy of Humor." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 48, no. 18, 30 Aug. 1951, pp. 541-48. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2020793.

Accessed 6 Nov. 2019.

⁷ A delightfully pretentious way to begin, isn't it? (The author would like to acknowledge The Brearley School for instilling in author the assumed value of memorizing Shakespearean monologues and wearing a navy blue tunic at a young age.

⁸ Gosh darn philosophers - always there to make you overthink things!

There are three most popular theories of humor: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruity Theory. All of them are rooted in anxiety, depression, and overall unproductive human behaviour. Please refer to the following paragraphs for further explanation.

1. The Superiority Theory was the first widely regarded theory and was based on writings by Hobbes and Descartes about trends throughout the Bible and Plato's writings.⁹ In essence it posits that "our laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves,¹⁰" meaning that we laugh because we find the inferiority of someone else entertaining even if that person is ourselves in the past¹¹. In this theory, humor is based on disdain for others and self-hatred. This theory speaks to the phenomenon of putting others down to make oneself feel better, something that is all too prominent in human behaviour
2. The Relief Theory is based on the idea of laughter being the release of pent up nervous energy. It originated from an essay by Lord Shaftesbury where he outlines some questionable facts about the nervous system and animal spirits. The theory was then gradually revised over the next two centuries with the evolution of biology¹². In this theory, laughter occurs when one is so anxious that they cannot function without letting out some of the repressed energy. This theory is now pretty much obsolete and rarely, if ever, regarded as correct, mostly because of the iffy science about the nervous system that came along with it. However, I do think that the aspect of mental relief is significant.
3. The Incongruity Theory is what is now regarded as the most truthful explanation of humor in philosophy and psychology, with some of its top billed endorsers being Beattie, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kirkegaard. Simply put, "the Incongruity Theory says that [humor] is the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations.¹³" In this theory, humor is the deviation from the normality of thought, which I find accurately applies to both depressive and anxious thoughts as well. If "normal" thoughts are thought of as those of a non-mental illness ridden brain, then depressed and anxious thoughts and behaviours follow a path of deviation similar to that humorous thoughts.

III. Coping with comedy

Earlier this year, I wrote a poem that included the line "*I stare my darkest, most depressing thoughts in the eye/ And I laugh.*" While this line does lean slightly into early 2000s

⁹ These two just voice their opinions on everything don't they?

¹⁰ Morreal, John. "Humor." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 ed., Stanford, 21 Dec. 2016, plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=humor.

¹¹ Sounds a lot like the debatably healthy practice self-deprecation!

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

emo music territory, it got a great reaction when I read out loud for my class. Despite its mild levels of cheese, I will stand by it for humor is a fantastic coping mechanism. On my figurative list of coping skills, humor ranks among the top five, if not number one¹⁴.

Humor also ranks pretty high on my list of defense mechanisms. I tend to always be ready with witty¹⁵ commentary, oftentimes one that comes as an effort to assert myself as in control, observant, and confident. These comments can also come off as retorts or protections. If I feel vulnerable in a moment, I will say something that will diffuse any sort of targeted remark or, more commonly, any anxiety or insecurity I feel. In “Involuntary coping mechanisms: a psychodynamic perspective,” George Vaillant mentions a phenomenon called the Defensive Functioning Scale. The scale essentially is a list of defense mechanisms categorized into four levels. Level one is described as *psychotic defenses*, level two as *immature defenses*, level three as *intermediate (neurotic) defenses*, and level four as *mature defenses*.¹⁶ Humor is classified as a level four *mature defense*. In describing level four, Vaillant writes “these defenses usually maximize gratification and allow relatively more conscious awareness of feelings, ideas, and their consequences.”¹⁷ What he is clearly saying here is that I am extremely mature and in touch with my feelings and their consequences.¹⁸

In reality, this categorization brings to mind what I often pose to myself: “Isabel¹⁹, is it really healthy to use humour to cope with anxiety, depression, general stress, fear etc.?” While I don’t know the answer to this, I find it easier to be funny than to live in my head. Sometimes, I know it isn’t healthy when I say something I really shouldn’t in the moment or go a little bit too deep with my jabs. This is not aided by my impulse control issues stemming from ADHD and my tendency to be quite blunt because that is how I would like for others to be²⁰.

To be fair, humor only goes so far. There are drawbacks in terms of using comedy to get through life. Especially in the stand-up world, it can be easy to think that making comedy about your mental illness is a substitute for actual treatment. Others think that having untreated mental illness is essential for their comedy to be successful. Obviously these mindsets are unhealthy. In “The Uneasy Relationship Between Mental Illness and Comedy” Jamie Lutz describes how it can be easy for comedy to romanticize mental illness and that what makes effective humor regarding these topics is distance. It’s funny to talk about your past experiences, but it’s painful and ultimately unproductive to make jokes when you are currently struggling and cannot separate yourself at all from your material²¹. Personally, while I use humor as coping and defense mechanism all the time, I also take antidepressants that chemically keep me from having unhealthy thoughts and behaviours,²² and would not be able to use humor if I did not have a stable base.

¹⁴ This would be much to the therapist I had at age thirteen’s chagrin. She preferred meditation.

¹⁵ Or snarky, depending on who you are speaking to.

¹⁶ Vaillant, George E. "Involuntary coping mechanisms: a psychodynamic perspective." *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience* vol. 13,3 (2011): 366-70.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ If only that were true!

¹⁹ The full name denotes seriousness.

²⁰ I don’t think the Golden Rule is supposed to be employed in this scenario.

²¹ Lutz, Jamie. "The Uneasy Relationship between Mental Illness and Comedy." *Vulture*, New York Magazine, 14 Dec. 2012, www.vulture.com/2012/12/the-uneasy-relationship-between-mental-illness-and-comedy.html.

²² I would like to clarify that this paper is not sponsored by big pharma.

IV. Emotional numbness and the laughs that come with it

“Does that scare you?” my English teacher asked me when after trying to cry for five days for an experiment and failing, I determined that I was very bad at crying. I had never thought of that before. I did some research and found out that a possible side effect of taking antidepressants and stimulants was a reduced ability to experience emotions. In other words, I become emotionally numb.²³ Well, that is an exaggeration; I still experience emotions deeply, and am able to cry, I just have lessened external reactions to feelings and have a much higher threshold for crying.

This phenomenon is a relatively new development. When I was first struggling with concrete depression and anxiety, I was in 6th grade and very dramatic.²⁴ I became more and more dramatic as I crescendoed into seventh grade, then hit my peak of heightened emotionality, got some perspective and started my return to an ounce of awareness. Towards the end of eighth grade, I got diagnosed with ADHD and started taking medication for that, which made my life a lot less exhausting.

By the beginning of ninth grade I was on the same dosage of medication as I am currently²⁵. I went to a new school and began to see my hardened outer shell, protecting me from being vulnerable. My quips became sharper, they cut more people, they showed people that I was smart, witty, and confident in who I was²⁶. As the shell got thicker, I got funnier, but also more distant. The distinction between sincerity and sarcasm became fuzzier. I moved away from a “typical teen” mindset where everything seems like the biggest deal ever and became more in tune with a “well nothing happening right now *really* matters in the long run” view. I’m happy, just a bit removed.

V. Laughing with the Grim Reaper

Q: Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?

A: Because he was dead.

-My father’s once proclaimed “favorite joke”

“Black humor's message is that there is no message, so audience members had best steal a laugh before they are too dead to do even that²⁷,” writes Wes Gehring in *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire*. If one is discussing sadness and comedy, it’s hard not to mention dark comedy²⁸. I think that on some level everybody’s biggest fear is death - even if they claim that’s

²³ Not to be confused with the lyrics “I have become comfortably numb” from the Pink Floyd song *Comfortably Numb*.

²⁴ To be fair to myself, middle school is a dramatic time even without mental illness.

²⁵ This is an estimate. Not based on medical records.

²⁶ Which is a silly thing to assert because anyone who has been in a freshman in high school knows that nobody actually feels confident and secure in their identity.

²⁷ Gehring, Wes D. *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 1996. *Questia Online Library*, www.questiaschool.com/library/3556172/american-dark-comedy-beyond-satire.

²⁸ Black comedy or gallows humor if you prefer.

not the case. It's one of the things we have the least amount of control over and is the ultimate equalizer. As the saying should go: "If you can't beat death, joke about it."²⁹ We may be scared of it, but somehow joking about it makes us feel better. This applies to sadness too. If we can't control our negative emotions then we should at least milk them for comedic value.

It's pretty inconsequential in my case, but the idea of acceptance of sadness through comedy is also visible on a historic scale. People usually associate us Jews with a couple of things: Israel, noses, matzoh ball soup, comedy, and the Holocaust. Strangely enough, those last two are pretty closely related. In *American Dark Comedy*, the author writes of a passage in a psychiatric text on survival by Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writing, "...on a more macabre note, he also mentions instances, such as entering a shower room that might be a gas chamber, where black comedy was an automatic reflex: "most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. We know that we had nothing to lose except our so ridiculously naked lives . . . we all tried very hard to make fun. Even before the actual liquidation potential, victims were referring to dark humor as Jewish novocain"³⁰ In this case, comedy is not only a coping mechanism but a means for survival. Similarly, in a 1978 article about psychologist writes, quoting psychologist Samuel Janus, "Jewish humor is born of depression and alienation from the general culture. For Jewish comedians...comedy is a defense mechanism to ward off the aggression and hostility of others."³¹

Admittedly, I do recognize the paradox at hand: something is funny but it is funny because it is depressing and thus you are laughing while also having to think about depression. It doesn't work for everybody, but it does alleviate the pain associated with possibly traumatic events and turns into physically therapeutic reaction. "At its most fundamental, black humor is a genre of comic irreverence that flippantly attacks what are normally society's most sacredly serious subjects -- especially death. In fact, death is both the ultimate black comedy joke and its most pervasive,"³² writes Gehring, further articulating the connection. Normally, we are told that there is nothing funny about death, so of course that means everything about it can be hilarious.

Recently, dark humor has risen again as our world quite literally is engulfed in flames. There is just so much meaninglessness to find comical meaning in. On the other hand, if our surroundings feel like a sick joke themselves, it can be argued that there is no humor to be made anymore, for there is no longer a distinction between truth and the absurd. Today, it is nearly impossible to exist without hearing about some sort of tragedy or horror each day, which just puts more emphasis on the necessity of humor as a manner of survival. It's easy to let these things weigh on you - and weigh on you so deeply that your ability to function is significantly decreased- but it's much more fun to deflect them through humor, and who doesn't want to have a little fun in the grey monotony of our day to day lives?

²⁹ Please propagate this saying.

³⁰ Gehring, Page 8.

³¹ Sifferlin, Alexandra. "The Psychology of the Sad Clown." *Time Magazine*, 13 Aug. 2014, time.com/3104938/depression-comedy-connection/.

³² Gehring, Page 1.

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