Making humor together: phenomenology and interracial humor

Michael D. Barber

This paper explains humor through phenomenological concepts and methods. The three major theories of humor: Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity depend on the thwarting of intentional expectations. Since one experiences an incongruity between what is intended and what is actually experienced, the incongruity theory affords the best explanation, but intentionality remains fundamental for all theories. Theorists of humor rightly insist that the enjoyment of humorous incongruity completes the definition of humor, but such enjoyment also depends on a special epoché, usually elicited by the cues of an interlocutor who invites the listener to leap together into the humorous finite province of meaning. In this province, actions and statements, hurtful in everyday life, such as a pie thrown at someone who ducks as the pie hits another, produce laughter. This comic epoché resembles the phenomenological epoché in its distancing from everyday life, and, like the phenomenological epoché, it opens everyday experience to reflection. Although one often experiences and enjoys humor alone, humor is thoroughly intersubjective and more frequently occurs when two persons participate in the humorous epoché together. The opportunities for making humor together are enhanced to the extent the partners differ in their expectations and responses to situations. Those differences, including bodily differences, often result from the complex intersubjective networks, including culture. As in the case of a seemingly solitary activity like reflection, which one learns from others and exercises on one's own autonomously, one internalizes others' styles of humor and discovers such internalization through reflection on one's «because motives».

On the basis of these features – intentionality, epoché, and intersubjectivity, the paper concludes by briefly examining an example of interracial humor. Despite the racist character of much interracial humor, the example shows that interracial humor can produce a respectful bonding between representatives of different races who make humor together.

Introduction

This essay will outline of a conception of humor that will draw on phenomenological concepts and methods. I will show that all three of the major theories of humor: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruity Theory can be explained by intentionality that explodes, or, as Kant opined, expectations are suddenly transformed into nothing (Kant 1790: 200; Morreall 1987: 48) . Whereas perception for Husserl proceeds, for the most part, with a continuous fulfillment of intentions, humor depends essentially

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on intentional expectations that are thwarted. Insofar as one experiences an incongruity between what is intended and what is actually experienced, the incongruity theory affords the best explanation of humor, though intentionality is fundamental for all the theories. Nevertheless, we frequently experience intentional aiming that is thwarted, but humor does not necessarily result, as for example, when I believe that my wallet is on my writing table in the other room but discover that it is not or when we travel to meet a friend at the train station and they do not appear. While other theorists rightly insist that the incongruity must be enjoyed and that this enjoyment constitutes an additional element that completes the definition of humor, I will argue that such enjoyment is also generated within a special kind of *epoché* that is usually elicited by the tips and cues of the humorous interlocutor who invites the listener to leap together into the humorous finite province of meaning. This comic *epoché* distances one from the everyday life experience that, as lived, might have an entirely different tone. Thus, actions and statements that would be hurtful in everyday life, such as a pie thrown at someone who ducks with the result that the pie hits someone else, produce laughter in the realm of humor. The comic *epoché* resembles the phenomenological *epoché* in its distancing from everyday life, and, like the phenomenological *epoché*, this comic distancing opens up to reflection the everyday lived experience that by its lived intensity hinders such reflection.

Although one often experiences and enjoys humor alone, humor is a thoroughly intersubjective activity, since more frequently it occurs when two persons participate in the humorous *epoché* together, as when children leap together into the sphere of make-believe play. The opportunities for making humor together are enhanced to the extent the partners differ in their expectations and responses to situations. Further those differences, including bodily differences—the stuff of humor—often result from the complex intersubjective networks that constitute the cultures from which we emerge. As in the case of a seemingly solitary activity like reflection, which one learns from others and goes on to exercise on one's own autonomously, one is able to internalize others' styles of humor discoverable through a reflection on what Schutz calls one's «because motives» (Schutz 1962: 69-72; Schutz 1967: 91-96, Schutz 2004: 202-209).

On the basis of these constituents of humor, namely, intentionality, *epoché*, and intersubjectivity, I will briefly examine as an example interracial humor. I will suggest that interracial humor, which has often been racist in character, actually affords the possibility of a respectful bonding between representatives of different races as they make humor together.

1. Intentionality and the Three Theories of Humor

According to the Incongruity Theory, our normal intentional mental patterns and expectations are upset, or, as Schopenhauer points out, there is a discrepancy between concepts and the way the things that instance those concepts appear (Schopenhauer 1988:70, Morreall 2009:10-11). The pie thrown at one person who ducks with the result that the pie hits an unintended person or the winding down of the jack-in-the-box music when suddenly the lid bursts open and a comical clown pops out are paradigmatic examples of humor, the thwarting of intentional expectations experienced as incongruous. Of course, as opposed to situations of upset intentions which are not humorous (as in tragedy, when Oedipus pursues the murderer of his father only to find out it is himself), in humor, the incongruity evokes laughter and/or a sentiment of bemusement and delight. For a fuller explanation of what is involved in humor, more phenomenological analysis is needed because several intentional syntheses take place insofar as there is a «quarrel» between an intention and the intuition that fails to fulfill it. For this quarrel to appear, both the act of intending and experience of an intuition that fails to fulfill that intending must be synthetically held together in consciousness (Husserl, 1984b: 575-576; Husserl 2001: 211-212). Of course, such syntheses of conscious activity occur rapidly with such a little lapse in time that it takes subsequent, careful reflection to elucidate the several different consciousness experiences that have taken place.

It is necessary to demonstrate the idea that the other theories of humor are based on the thwarting of intentionality, experienced as incongruity. Hobbes expresses the quintessence of the Superiority Theory of humor, when he states, «I may therefore conclude, that the 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 others, or with our own formerly» (Hobbes 1649: 104). Historically, the ancients, Plato and Aristotle, also thought that the superiority theory accurately accounted for all humor, which, for them, involved an element of scorn (Morreall 1987:3, 1). Of course, one can conceive of many possibilities of humor in which no scorn for others or sense of our own eminency is involved, but rather simply incongruity, for example, humorous misunderstandings or puns. For instance, when a colleague named Voiss retired and left his Department, another colleague punned, «The Department has lost its Voiss», leading one to think that it was not allowed in some way to express itself («lost its voice»), when it had only lost a colleague named «Voiss». Similarly, Alfred Schutz's secretary, intending to refer to his classic *sinnhafte* (meaningful) *Aufbau der sozialen Welt* spoke of it as the *sühnhafte* (atoning) *Aufbau* of the social world (Schutz, 1943). Though this

misstatement might have led one to anticipate that Schutz would correct the error or even possibly be offended at it, Schutz, upsetting such expectations and producing humor, directed his humor at his own *opus magnum* by affirming that she may have spoken more truly than she thought. In such cases, it is the incongruity that underpins the humor, with Schutz defying expectations that he might have responded angrily to a misunderstanding of the title of his work, mocking his own work instead, and converting what appeared to be a mistake into a possible insightful comment. No scornful comparison with someone else is involved, unless one wants to stretch Schutz's own self-effacing comment as involving some kind of scorn against himself. But this of course, would be to subvert the «Superiority Theory» which seems based in scorn adopted toward others and to broaden the meaning of «scorn» to include any dismantling expectations that something was of positive worth. In fact, though, the source of the humor in Schutz's self-effacing response lies in its unexpectedness, its incongruity with reference to the kind of response one would have expected.

Not only are there many examples of humor that the Superiority Theory does not seem to explain, but also incongruity seems to underlie precisely the examples of humor to which the superiority theorists appeal in justifying their theoretical stance, as the previous cases suggest. Hence, when Hobbes speaks of the «sudden glory» arising from «some sudden conception» of eminency in ourselves by comparison with another's infirmity, he is suggesting that we are focused on a world in which we are all pretty much equal or the same or in which the other is «greater» than me, until something «sudden,» something upsetting, interrupts our usual ways of approaching others, thrusting into our attentional focus our «eminency» by comparison with that other. John Morreall provides the example of someone who had been hating for a while a next door neighbor, who flaunted his wealth, and then that neighbor, in a new $500 suit, falls accidentally into a swimming pool (Morreall 1987:136). Indeed that the wealth-flaunting individual with his brand new suit should fall into a swimming pool is humorous because of the incongruity of what one would expect. But this incongruity forms a base on which a higher layer of meaning, the sudden sense of eminency of the one who hates his neighbor, builds. That this wealthy individual who continually flaunted himself and treated others as if they were inferior, should fall into a swimming pool reverses all the expectations of one thought to be inferior, who suddenly finds himself thrust into eminency over the wealthy neighbor, floundering in the pool, with his new suit destroyed. Hobbes's repeated mention of «suddenness» highlights the incongruity between what was in place and the intentional expectancies that things would continue this way and the reversal and undoing of what was in place through the disappointment of those expectancies.

The Relief Theory originally was based on a physiological model according to which laughter involves the relief of pent up nervous energy, like a sigh of relief. For example, the energy used to repress feelings of hostility or sexual desire, is suddenly released when a joke expressing hostility toward another group or a sexual joke overrides our inner censor, and this released energy is expressed in laughter (Morreall 2009:15-18). Along this line, Freud argued that it is not the energy of the repressed feelings that is released, but the energy used to repress them. Freud develops other versions of this source of humor in which the energy I would exert (e.g. to understand a clown's erratic movements) is not even allowed to be spent (when I compare the clown's action with my own and see that the clown's movements are unnecessary), and then that unspent energy is then released in laughter. Or there are distressing situations in which we become ready to express affect as part of our distress, at least until the situation is defused, as when an explosion throws someone into the sky only to have her land in a hay cart, uninjured, to our relief. The energy that would have been spent in concern over the person thrown by the explosion is released in laughter (Morreall 2009:18-19).

These examples exemplifying the Relief Theory seem to rely on a kind of mechanistic psychology that envisions sums of bound energy being freed to seep out elsewhere, and, of course, the strength of phenomenological analysis is that it escapes mechanistic and physiological reductionism, and discloses the foundation of conscious intentionality, which can be correlated with physiological accompaniments that do not, however, explain it. One can see the intentionality at play when someone's expectation that hostility or sexual feelings are to be repressed is exploded when someone tells a joke hostile to another group or a sexual joke. Or when one draws a comparison between the clown's movements and one's own, the incongruity is highlighted and the out-of-the-ordinary gyrations of the clown, incongruous with what normal movements would lead one to expect, appear ridiculous and evoke laughter. Similarly, when someone is blown up high in the sky, one expects a severe injury to result, but the pleasant experience of seeing the blown-up person landing in a hay cart—an outcome incongruous with what one would have expected—incites laughter. Freud, in effect, offers a causal account of the physiological origins of laughter insofar as pent-up energy denied one outlet flows into another channel like an unruly and mindless river might—and all of this taking place beneath the threshold of consciousness. This account, though, presupposes the intentional experience of the incongruous in which humor is experienced, and on the basis of this conscious experience, Freud builds a mechanistic causal account of laughter to supplement the intentional experience of humor. For phenomenology, of course, intentionality provides the fundament which scientific explanation presuppose.

In fact, the Relief Theory further depends on a kind of bodily intentionality akin to that which pervades the writings of Merleau-Ponty. One can illustrate bodily intentionality by considering an example offered by Herbert Spencer to support the Relief Theory. Spencer suggests a theatrical scene in which a hero and heroine, after a long misunderstanding, are on the point of reconciliation, only to have a tame kid deer walk toward the lovers across the stage and sniff at them. Spencer, having presented the intentional experience, adds the mechanistic account:

> A large mass of emotion had been produced; or, to speak in physiological language, a large portion of the nervous system was in a state of tension. There was also great expectation with respect to the further evolution of the scene—a quantity of vague, nascent thought and emotion, into which the existing quantity of thought and emotion was about to pass. Had there been no interruption, the body of new ideas and feeling next excited, would have sufficed to absorb the whole of the liberated nervous energy. But now, this large amount of nervous energy, instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of new thoughts and emotion which were nascent, is suddenly checked in its flow. . . The excess must therefore discharge itself in some other direction; and in the way already explained, there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter (Spencer 1946: 305; Morreall 1987:106-107).

Even in this mechanized, physiological account, Spencer cannot avoid referencing intentionality, as theater viewers expect the personal reconciliation that the deer's appearance upsets. Of course, we are not merely minds, and so our bodies, accompanying our conscious experiences, experience a directed tension, aimed at an experience expected (the reconciliation of estranged lovers). Only it is the intentionality of a body, tensed and aimed as it anticipates the reconciliation of lovers, which relaxes at the appearance of the tame deer that dissolves one's expectations. Conscious intentionality lies at the root of the examples offered by the Relief Theory, and it is possible to explain the bodily component of such conscious intentionality through the kind of bodily intending that Merleau-Ponty described so well, instead of through mechanistic, causal explanation.

2. The Epoché of Humor: Clues for a Leap, Distance, Reflection

As has been mentioned repeatedly above, more is involved in humor, however, than merely the exploding of intentionality. For example, the intentionality of

an action is thwarted when one is driving to a concert and another car blindsides one's own, injuring one of the passengers. Or a friend might describe the chagrin she felt when a colleague introduced her to the main speaker at an intellectual conference, and, as she was chatting with that keynote speaker, suddenly and for no apparent cause, the speaker may have commenced berating her, in total contrast to the collegiality the situation might have called for. Or in a theatrical performance of the tragedy of Macbeth, one can observe Macbeth scheming and acting to achieve predominance, only to find all his purposes thwarted in the end by the armies that rise to oppose him. In all these situations, intentional expectations, especially the aims of action, have been thwarted, and yet there seems to be nothing humorous involved in any of them.

What must occur for there to be humor, in addition to thwarted intentionality, is that one finds the upset intentionality enjoyable, amusing, or evoking laughter, as opposed to the sadness, awe, or pity that one might feel in the tragic disappointment of expectations. The emotions of humor, though, are inseparable from an overarching attitude or mindset, which, when adopted, leads one to expect to feel these emotions, and, when the intentionally is thwarted, one feels them. Following Alfred Schutz's essay «On Multiple Realities,» we can think of entrance into the humorous attitude, what Schutz would call a «finite province of meaning,» as involving a «shock» by which we break from the reality of everyday life, as when one leaps into the province of theatrical reality when the curtain opens in a play, takes up the theoretical attitude upon entering one's laboratory, or enters literary reality by opening a novel one is reading. Schutz suggests that one enters the province of a joke when «relaxing into laughter, if, in listening to joke, we are for a short time ready to accept the fictitious world of the jest as a reality in relation to which the world of our daily life takes on the character foolishness» (Schutz 1962: 231).

This «shock» or «leap» into another province of meaning, by which one takes up the humorous attitude, is also called a kind of *epoché*, resembling the phenomenological *epoché* by which one is no longer absorbed in everyday reality but turns toward it reflectively, no longer taking things for granted as existing, but focusing instead on how they appear and are experienced and the correlative experiencing acts to which such things are given.

Humor, too, involves a kind of distancing from everyday life, and the friend who was berated by the keynote speaker, perhaps, after some time has elapsed and she therefore has a certain distance from the event, can look back upon it as comical. Although the passage of time seems to make possible the distance from everyday life that enables the friend to find her being berated as comical, more often than not, we achieve the humorous distance from everyday life characteristic of the humorous *epoché* in a social relationship. Often one

or one's partner invites the other through signaling to leap together into the province of humor. Perhaps, this signaling occurs in the formulaic announcement of a joke, «Did you hear the one about the priest, the rabbi, and the minister ?». Or it could be that a mere mischievous smile on an interlocutor's face lets the partner know that what is about to be said is to be taken in humor. Or it could be that one is so used to a friend's sense of humor that without much signaling at all, any comment of the friend can catapult both parties into the realm or humor. Sometimes it is the case that only after a statement is made, perhaps because of its outlandishness, one realizes that it was intended humorously and that one has been, in fact, conveyed into the realm of humor, or at least was intended to be so conveyed.

The distance from everyday life that the *epoché* of humor introduces becomes clear in that the intentional actions and statements made within this province are no longer seen as they would be in everyday life. Seen within the humorous attitude, statements that would be insulting or rude in everyday life, for instance, suddenly become comical, they take on a humorous significance. It is as though they undergo a kind of trans-valuation—grasped in an entirely different light.

For instance, an African-American friend of mine, whom I have come to appreciate as regularly plunging both of us together into the humorous province of meaning with little prior signaling, was walking through a store with me and greeted three white women, none of whom returned a response. After the third non-response, he turned to me and asked «What is wrong with you people»? Of course, to find myself suddenly grouped by my friend as among those who were unresponsive to him possibly for racial reasons, simply because I was white like those women, evoked laughter. However, in everyday life, to classify someone as prejudiced against blacks simply because one's skin color is white would be perceived as itself a prejudicial, aggressive, and insulting classification. But, in this incident, I simply took the classification as humorous. My familiarity with my friend's sense of humor is such that in his presence I am always prepared for the possibility that his comments are intended humorously; in his presence I am perpetually ready to be initiated into the humorous realm with him. His comment not only invited me to leap with him into the finite province of humor, but within that province, the significance his statements would have had in everyday life, suddenly became trans-signified. They became part of a playful game in which expectations are disappointed and incongruities emphasized. In this case my expectation that my black friend of many years would not take me to be a racist was exploded, and the incongruity of his associating a long-time friend, for whom his race had made no difference, with those who may have been indifferent or even fearful of him because of his race, fueled the humor. By detaching this

statement from the aggressive and insulting significance it would have had in the context of everyday life, the humorous attitude establishes a context in which the classification of me as prejudiced could have been laughed at.

The humorous expression requires underlying layers of intentionality upon which it, in a sense, supervenes. The very construction of a sentence involves a lower layer of intentional purposive activity, ordering syllables, inflections, and word-order for the purpose, or the «in-order-to motive» in Schutz's language, of asking a meaningful question («What's wrong with you people?»). Furthermore, though the sentence my friend uttered has the structure of a question, it actually does not function as a question since no answer was expected in this case (I would not have been expected to reply «nothing.»). Instead, this rhetorical question serves the purpose of chiding me and my race, belying, in a sense, its grammatical form as a question. This chiding of white people, me and the women who ignored him, of course, presupposes as part of its underlying intentional activity the «you people,» which effectively groups me with the women who did not respond to him. This grouping of me as among the putative prejudiced ones just because I was white, would have in everyday life normally been perceived by me as an insulting attack. But when the humorous *epoché* is enacted, a new purpose supervenes upon these underyling intentional linguistic processes, which now serve the goal of thwarting my expectations that I not be classified among these women but of doing so within a context intended to evoke laughter. These layers of intentionality are consistent with Husserl's view that an expression subsumes within it a series of subacts (Hussel 1984a:416-419; Husserl 2001: 113-115) and with Schutz's view that an overarching in-order-to motive furnishes the ultimate meaning for all the sub-acts leading to its realization (Schutz 1962:23-24). The idea of layers of intentionality could also explain how the thwarting of expectations at the base of humor (e.g. the man with the expensive suit falling into the pool), can also satisfy a purpose of taking oneself to be superior to another, as the superiority theory suggested. This phenomenological appreciation for the layering of intentional acts even converges with speech-act theory that distinguishes the mere locutionary formation of a sentence («I pronounce you man and wife»), the illocutionary level by which the pronouncing of the locutionary statement actually effects a state of affairs (effecting a marriage), and the possibility that the previous levels might serve a per-locutionary purpose (e.g., I pronounce this couple married because I want them to live together so that they find out how difficult the personality of each is, with the final hope that they will soon divorce) (Austin 1965: 101-103).

But my friend's comment, which placed us both in the humorous attitude, also converted the unresponsiveness he had experienced in everyday life into that comic setting, and diminished the sting he may have felt in being ig-

nored. At the same time, the unresponsiveness of the women, once detached from the hurt he might have experienced in the world of everyday life, would have been more easily discussible. After his transferring the experience of not being responded to into the realm of humor, I could have imagined us going on to discuss further questions. Were those women who were not responsive maybe unaware that he had said something? Had they heard him? Were they fearful? Were they prejudiced? Was my friend too sensitive or accurately aware of how he had been treated? Was this unresponsiveness typical of the way blacks are treated, but something which a white person like myself might not be conscious of and all too disposed to dismiss by attributing to my friend an oversensitivity on racial mattes? Of course, my friend need not have embarked upon such a discussion or answered such questions. His humorous comment transferred the experience of being unresponded to out of the context of everyday life, in which it was no doubt experienced by my friend as hurtful, into the humorous sphere. At that point, I felt I could have pursued with him all the questions I raised above, but we did not have to discuss them. However, if we had discussed them, we would no longer be in the humorous province of meaning, but perhaps in a reflective, semi-theoretical context.

Humor, though, is a kind of first step in ushering incidents or situations that are explosive or difficult to discuss, such as racial prejudice, into a more reflective context or even a theoretical province of meaning. As such, humor's distance from everyday life experience makes it an ally of reflection. At the same time and in contrast to what is involved in the theoretical sphere, humor is able to bring experiences to awareness without having to raise the further questions of whether one's perceptions were accurate (in this case, whether these women were really prejudiced or whether my friend's grasp of his being prejudiced against was accurate). My friend's turning on me and asking what's wrong with you people was humorous whether the women were really prejudiced or not, whether or not I should have been lumped with them as prejudiced against black men. The truth or validity of those claims became irrelevant in the humorous sphere. Humor resembles the theoretical *epoché* or the phenomenological *epoché* in detaching from the pragmatic world of everyday life, and yet it differs in not having to get to the bottom of whether the beliefs involved in one's experiences are valid or not.

3. The Intersubjectivity of Humor: Derivation and Intercultural Humor

Having seen that humor involves disrupting expectations within the context of the humorous province of meaning, we can consider another key feature of humor: its intersubjective dimensions. In fact, detecting humor can seem to be

a very solitary activity; one simply sees a situation of thwarted intentionality as comical, as we suggested might be the case with the friend who years later looks back on her berating at the hand of the keynote speaker as comical.

However, as we have seen, often others signal us to invite us to adopt the *epoché* of humor with them. The invitation, as we have seen, can be issued through a specific announcement, a facial expression, or simply making a surprising statement that transfers us to the humorous sphere. Because we live in our intentional, culturally reinforced expectations, usually without reflecting on them, someone who does not share our expectations or responses to situations is well-equipped to frustrate humorously our expectations. For example, my friend, who did not share my anticipation that I be regarded as someone who was not prejudiced against him, was freer to include me among those who did not respond to him and so to upset my expectation and to evoke humor.

When others thwart our lived-in, unreflected-on expectations, they make those expectations visible to us. But there are other ways, non-humorous ways, in which others intervene in our lives to make us reflectively aware of the ways we intend the world. Beginning in childhood, for instance, it is often a parent or teacher, whose comments make it possible that children become aware that they are engaging in certain behaviors (toward the world or others) or anticipating an outcome, of which they had been unaware. In addition, as we mature, others continue to assist us in becoming reflective about what we take for granted—and Plato himself recognized how knowledge is dialogically acquired is the fruit of Socratic midwifery. Though reflection is originally learned in an intersubjective context, a remarkable thing happens when one eventually internalizes the reflective processes learned from others and autonomously exercises self-reflection, uncovering what one has taken for granted. Such reflectivity attains a thoroughness and culmination in the phenomenological reduction. Similarly, it is possible to internalize another's sense of humor, to become to a degree cognizant of one's own expectations as the other might see them and to imagine them as being exploded by someone outfitted with another set of expectations or responding in a different way to the same situation as we do, without the other being present. In sum, the intersubjective intervention of another, whether in humor or reflection, helps one acquire the distance from one's lived-in aimings-at and makes them accessible to reflection. In addition, just as one internalizes what may have been originally an externally induced process of reflection and becomes self-reflective, so also one is able to internalizes another's sense of humor in a way that heightens one capacity for becoming aware of the intendings of the world that another might have highlighted. As a consequence, one can begin to see how the seemingly highly individual processes of self-reflection and the seeing of the comical are socially learned.

Although we deploy humor creatively, discovering the comical as unique situations seem to call for, within the repertoire of our ability to detect the humorous we can find various general styles of humor, and, by reflection on these styles, we are able to associate them with the styles of others from whom we may have learned and internalized them. It is usually not the case that one consciously decides «I am going to imitate x's sense of humor» but rather through regular association with another and repeated experience of their use of humor, one acquires by passive assimilation another's way of seeing the humorous, of focusing on expectations or the thwarting of them, and of strategies for inviting another to enter the humorous sphere or for pointing out the humorous.

The discovery of how one's sense of humor is acquired can happen after one has employed a particular style of humor, and then one undertakes what Alfred Schutz calls a «because motive analysis». Such an analysis begins with a past event, a decision made or a course of action completed or, in our case, the appreciation of a humorous situation, and then looks for those circumstances, events, or persons in the past before that action now completed, in «the pluperfect tense,» which could be interpreted as influencing or determining the actor to undertake that action now past (in our case to have exercised that style of humor) (Schutz 1962: 69-72; Schutz 1967: 91-96; Schutz 2004: 202-209). Of course, with the passage of time and depending on the interests prevailing when one undertakes a because-motive analysis, one might discover different events or persons to have played a more important role in influencing an action than one might have thought earlier.[1] The entire process involves reflective interpretation that associates just completed actions with events or circumstances in the more distant past.

For example, a former professor's style of humor involved asking seemingly harmless questions in a quasi-sincere, dead-pan manner, but these questions were intended to deflate pretensions and elicit laughter. In developing the introduction to my master's thesis in theological studies, I had rather pretentiously and self-consciously expressed at length gratitude to «One» (God) who had been with me in all my trials. In the oral examination on the thesis, this professor, as if simply asking a question of fact, inquired whether this «One» referred to Professor Doyle, from whom I had taken many of my courses because I considered him superior to other professors, including this professor asking the question. When I find myself at times asking what seem like sincere

[1] 1 In "Life-Forms and Meaning Structures," the early Schutz recounts how different aspects of a past event emerge into prominence depending on the temporal perspective and prevailing relevances at that time from which we undertake the act of remembering, and one can extrapolate from this account how one acts selectively and interpretively in selecting the events that are because motives of an action that occurred after them (Schutz 2013: 68-72).

questions, stated in a dead-pan manner, that are actually intended to deflate others' pretensions in a humorous manner, I recognize the influence of the style of that professor's humor on my own. His particular style of humor, in addition, has made me more alert to pretensions in myself and others, thereby bringing to light anticipations (e.g. of one's self- importance) that one would rather not acknowledge.

My African-American friend's sense of humor, which plays across the racial divide, as the previous example illustrates, has also attuned me to the comical aspects of interracial relationships. For example, recently, when my friend, his children, and I were at a restaurant, the maître d' pointed to an empty booth to which I proceeded immediately, and when my friend and his children caught up with me and arrived at the booth, a waitress offered to find me a seat elsewhere, since for her it seemed inconceivable that a white man and a black family would be in the same party. Although the waitress apologized for her mistake, I found the situation comical (as did my friend, though neither of us laughed out loud) and of a piece with the kind of humor that will surface when the expectations of people of different races intersect and contradict each other. My capacity to detect humor in such situations is something I believe I have a keener eye for because associating with my friend has attuned me to the comedy in such situations.

A common theme in my friend's humor is that of something or someone little or powerless assuming their rightful place with others. This theme is not foreign to African-American culture, which, in my experience, often de-emphasizes competition between its members and practices a solidarity that appreciates the contribution of its less powerful members, such as children or the elderly. This theme appears prominently in the song «This little light of mine, I'm going to make it shine», which has often been thought of as a Negro Spiritual and which was prominently used in the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. One can detect the influence of this cultural background, as a because motive, in the following expression of my friend's sense of humor. In 1993, when there was severe flooding in the Midwest United States and caskets, dislodged from cemeteries, were seen floating down a river, my friend, who recalled that I had accidentally cut off the tip of my finger years before, joked about the tip of my finger floating downstream in its own little casket. Now, on occasion I find myself detecting humor in situations in which those less powerful unexpectedly assume their rightful place with others, playing their part, however small it may be, in a common enterprise. When I notice such situations as humorous—but with a humor that involves feelings of affection and admiration for those assuming their rightful place (as the fingertip in the casket example suggests)—I attribute the because motives of my ability to perceive this type of humor to this style of humor

in my friend's repertoire. Of course, I am also speculating on the because motives of this style in his repertoire, which I see as emerging from African-American culture to which he belongs.[2]

Because motive analyses like these unearth linkages to a past often forgotten, and they suggest that most, if not all, of our present conscious activities could be traced, if we were omniscient, to previous experiences and social influences that we no longer remember. To be sure, these influences are exercised on actions in which our own creativity is involved; we do not repeat by rote what we absorb from our associations with others, hence I have used the expression a «style of humor». A «style» is like a typification in Schutz's view, something that is learned from the past and usually socially transmitted but which is generalizable, undetermined, and open to novel application in the present (Schutz 1964: 281-288). However individual our ability to find humor may be, it no doubt emerges from a past and from others, however impossible it may be for us to reconstruct its origins.

Our awareness of individual persons or situations from which we have learned the styles of humor we practice belongs to our stream of personal history, only a little of which present associations prompt us to recover and most of which is forgotten. But as the example of my friend's deployment of humor about my finger-tip in its own little casket suggests, the style of humor we exhibit also has its origins in the massive and complex intersubjective network of culture. Culture affects us beneath the threshold of recognition; and one way of discovering the subconscious influence of culture is to simply notice how it marks our bodies, thereby furnishing material for humor. For instance, my African-American friend once remarked upon how I, and most white people he has observed, press the remote control to lock or open a car. We *aim* the remote at the car, whereas he and other black people he knows are more casual, simply pressing the remote buttons in their pockets. In addition, my friend imitates my exact pronunciation of English—and an imitation involves a kind of humorous explosion of expectation insofar as one does expect one's mannerisms or manner of pronouncing words to be embodied in another person. My friend jokes that I pronounce even the silent vowels and consonants in words. But the deliberateness or casualness with which one presses a remote button or the degree of linguistic precision which one deploys in colloquial settings indicate ways in which our cultures, our class, our families, and our

[2] 2 Of course one must be cautious of broad generalizations, such as "African-American culture", but when one finds patterns of behavior that are similar to or associated with patterns found in a culture broadly defined, one can venture a because-motive explanation, without of course denying that the expression "African-American culture" encompasses a broad diversity of sub-cultures.

histories have left their mark on bodily actions which we carry out automatically, with little or no reflection. As Schutz observes, even the way we walk is shaped by the socio-cultural contexts from which we emerge (Schutz 1973: 110). Perhaps, the power of outside socio-cultural and historical formation on us is reflected most clearly in our bodily actions, our pointing, our speaking, and our walking, which we assimilate passively merely by repeated exposure to others who share our cultural heritage. We often do not recognize the distinctiveness of these bodily patterns until we meet someone for whom they are strange, for whom they can be comical because so unlike their own, and for whom they can be the target of humor that they share with us. When we leap with another into the finite province of humor, patterns that culture has already shaped beneath the threshold of consciousness, become the stuff of humor, disconcerting our taken for granted suppositions that our way of bodily engaging the world is the same as everyone else's.

In summary, humor is intersubjective in character because often another person subverts our expectations and often does so by inviting us to execute a particular *epoché*, that is, to leap with him or her, into the humorous province of meaning, like children leaping together into the realm of make-believe. In that province, the significances that words and actions have in everyday life undergo a transformation of meaning, a kind of trans-signification. The clash and exploding of anticipations are all the more likely to the extent that interlocutors differ from each other—and the different identities that are the stuff of humor are constituted, of course, along many different gradients, such as gender, race, culture, nationality, and class—to name a few. I have suggested further that styles of humor one finds in one's repertoire, what one finds funny, what one notices, what one is attuned to see as comical, how one practices one's humor, how one cues and invites another to undertake the humorous *epoché* (e.g., dead-pan, serious questions; a mischievous smile; an abrupt, confrontational comment for which one is not prepared) are intersubjectively derived. They are learned from others, as a because motive analysis, which associates just completed intentional activity with past experiences of others' intentional activity, reveals. Finally even the differences in physical behaviors that we live out of and that impress upon us expectations easily contradicted by those formed in other cultures, reveal that the entire field on which humor plays, including our bodiliness, is socially shaped.

4.Ethics, Trust, and Interracial Humor

In my friend's disillusionment with the white women whom he took to ignore him, which he transformed into a comic moment; in the bodily differences be-

tween us that he pokes fun at; and in the affectionate appreciation of the powerless assuming their place alongside others, the differences between European-American and African-American experience and the encompassing cultures may come to the fore. The broader American culture, as everyone knows, has developed widely shared interpretations of racial features, for example, typifying black men as dangerous and to be feared, and, consequently in response to such typifications, black men, like my friend, are prone to interpret white unresponsiveness to greetings as a symptom of such culturally formed fear. Such cultural significances, in the background of the humor we share, also form the cultural context for the non-humorous events that exploded in Ferguson in 2014, when a white policeman shot an unarmed black man whom he perceived to be threatening his life. The typifications that the broader American culture, particularly European-American culture, has developed and upheld over centuries has played a role in developing institutions that have isolated and segregated African-American culture and that have produced massive and tragically destructive social and economic consequences for African-Americans. Within this long history of asymmetrical and oppressive relations, of course, racist humor has been pervasive, in which blacks have been cruelly presented as thwarting, often by falling short of, white expectations of how «civilized,» «intelligent», or «normal» people ought to act. Similarly, men have presented women, straights have presented gays, or members of majorities have presented minorities as falling short of their own expectations and as therefore deserving of ridicule. Hence, given the history of asymmetries across race, sex, gender, class or social groups, humor is always risky and always in danger of prolonging and deepening the society-wide asymmetries that contextualize any dyadic encounter between representatives of these groups. Given this context, in this section, relying on the account of humor I have developed in the previous three sections, I would like to explore the possibility for an alternative, an example of a kind of interracial humor that might bridge and even to a degree heal the racial divide, without contributing further to it.

One can imaginatively depict racist humor as involving a group (of racists) huddling together to build a type of someone from the despised race, much like the type an everyday actor would construct of a Contemporary, Predecessor, or Successor or a social scientist of his subject. Racist humor, though, often involves portraying this type as failing to fulfill the racists' expectations of how human beings ought to act, with the results that the type appears «stupid» or «ridiculous» and thereby evokes laughter among the racists who have leapt together into the humorous province of meaning. Of course, the victims of this humor (if they were even present as most often they would not be) would not leap with them into the realm of humor since they would be only the object of ridicule, laughed at, rather than participating in making

humor together with them. In fact, the racist group resembles the home group of the Schutz's stranger, which develops a picture of the foreign group which «has not been formed with the aim of provoking a response or reaction from the members of the foreign group» (Schutz 1964: 98). Likewise the racist group constructs its type of the victim group without any intention of sharing that type with them or eliciting their participation in this humor. In Schutz's vocabulary, the racists enjoy a we-relationship with each other and construct a type of their victim, which, unlike the type one forms of Contemporaries, Successors, or Predecessors through which one relates to others, resembles more the type of the social scientist, constructed without any intention of relating to the other through it (though racist types, unlike those of the social scientist, lack any scientific objectivity about their subject matter).

However, in the case of my African-American friend, we leap into the province of humor together, and maintain within that province a direct social relationship, a «we-relationship», in which we share space and time. In this immediate relationship with the other, Schutz comments that «My ideas of him undergo continuous revision as the concrete experience unfolds»(Schutz 1967:169, Schutz 2004: 321), and I become aware immediately of the correctness or incorrectness of my understanding of the other person (Schutz 1967: 171, Schutz 2004: 323-324). In the immediacy of the face-to-face relationship with my friend, in which typifications and their expectations are continually revised, he usually takes the initiative in upsetting *my* typifications, such as the self-typification that I am a non-racist friend of his (unlike the women who ignored him in the store) or that my pronunciation or (remote) pointing behaviors are normal and universal (though they are not). In a sense, he assists me in even becoming aware that I am (culturally) «white» and that our worlds are different. In the case of all humor, expectations are exploded, but in the case of racist humor, the victim explodes expectations by falling short of them, whereas in the humor in my relationship with my African-American friend, he explodes my expectations by showing them to be false or too narrow.

But one might argue that my friend's humor is, nevertheless, racist, insofar as he grouped me with the unresponsive white women and attributed to me their «wrongness» (being unresponsive because of fear of black men?) seemingly simply because my skin color was the same as theirs. In his defense, one might argue that, since his grouping of me among the women occurs in the province of humor, he puts in brackets the factual truth of the suppositions on which that humor is based, namely that the white women did not respond to him because they were afraid of black men or that I share their wrongness. But, of course, the white racists could claim the same thing, namely that since their statements are uttered within the province of humor, one cannot conclude conclude to the truth of any racist presuppositions underlying their

jokes. Indeed, one hears the authors of racist or sexist jokes often offering such a defense, «It was only a joke». To excuse their racist jokes as implying nothing factual about the races seems hypocritical insofar as their entire belief system seems predicated on the belief that cognitive or moral inferiority can be attributed to the bearers of the morphological features characteristic of the races mocked.

The racist then by not including the victim in the humor he creates and by other beliefs he or she espouses seems to be engaging in the degradation of another on the basis of the other's morphological features. But one might object, what if the racist were to tell racists jokes *in the presence* of someone from the race ridiculed, and what if that person were to find them comical but not offensive? Would such jokes cease to be racist just because they were uttered in the presence of someone from the race mocked? Schutz, in his essay, «Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World», points out that discrimination (racial or otherwise) not only involves the imposition of a typification by an outsider, in this case the humorous portrayal of another as inferior by a racist, but also «an appropriate evaluation of this imposition from the subjective viewpoint of the afflicted individual» (Schutz 1964:261). The key word here is «appropriate» because there seems to be something inappropriate, something needing explanation, if an African-American were to be in the presence of a racist joking about African-Americans and were to experience those jokes only as comical and not offensive. One might think that the victim of the joke had been so oppressed for so long and so cruelly that she may have lost all sense of own dignity. Or perhaps the racist is coercing the victim in some way not to object (e.g., he will be fired from his job unless he laughs along). One could, of course, make the moral case that to reduce an individual's moral or spiritual qualities to being nothing more than the product of physiological features is objectively wrong and to accept such a reduction is never morally appropriate.

But what about my friend's accusation, «What is wrong with you people»? It seems to group me among potential racists simply because of the color of my skin. It is necessary for me to show why from my subjective viewpoint this imposition of a typification should not be appropriately evaluated as an instance of racial discrimination. The discussion of humor has up to now taken place in what might broadly be called a semantic context: there are a set of expectations (which could be articulated as propositions) that an individual has (e.g. that I not be treated as a member of group racially prejudiced against my friend) and they can be conjoined with a statement that contradicts or undermines those expectations («What is wrong with *you* people?»). In this semantic setting, to produce humor, one has to be creative to be humorous, not to be bound by accepted expectations and to be able to break free of them, to

leap out of the province of everyday life, to make statements that mean something entirely different from what they would mean in everyday life, and to surprise an interlocutor's train of thinking by going in a direction never anticipated. My friend is a master at such humor, which involves undertaking, as we have seen, an in-order-to motive that orders all its sub-acts to a particular purpose. In order, though, explain why from my subjective point of view his humor is not racist, I need to address how the humor he deploys also achieves *interpersonal* in-order-to purposes *within our relationship*—and here one must address the pragmatic (as opposed to semantic) dimensions of his humor (Morris 1946: 217-220). In a sense, what follows will show how my friend's humor, which achieves the goal of producing comedy, serves further interpersonal goals, one that produces endearment and overcomes the racial divide while still preserving our difference from each other.

His «What is wrong with you people?» precisely expresses a viewpoint that a black person frustrated with what could appear to be prejudicial unresponsiveness might feel, namely that *all* whites are fearful of black men, including me. Nevertheless, he also typifies me as someone in whose presence this point of view, which the humorous setting can render hypothetical in character (he never states factually that all whites are afraid of black men), can be expressed, however offensive such a statement might be to a generalized, decontextualized white audience. He is also expecting to find acceptance for who he is despite venturing this possible accusation, and he anticipates that our friendship will not be disrupted by it. In a sense, he is allowing me to enter into his point of view, sharing it with me, giving me a kind of access and intimacy to himself that he most likely would not make available to other whites. Similarly, I typify him as typifying me this way. He, at one and the same time, seems (the humorous context makes this ambivalent) both to be separating himself on the semantic plane from me with his «you people» and yet sharing himself with me on the pragmatic plane, both giving expression to the idea that there may be a racial distance between us and yet crossing the divide. Furthermore, since he intends to evoke humor, the supposition that I am afraid of black men (to which his spoken word gives expression) must contrast with my expectation that I am not. But this expectation appears to be not only my own, but also his, insofar as he is associating with me in the store, leaping into the realm of humor with me, and actually venting with me feelings and hypotheses that reveal a kind of trusting, intimate relationship between us.

This pattern of using humor within a pragmatic, interpersonal context, in a way that reaches out to include me is one that he repeats often. For one thing his reaching out toward me, while upholding our differences, is consistent with his greeting the women who ignored him; he is an individual who seeks in many ways through kindness to cross racial boundaries.

But let me provide another example of his way of including while maintaining differences. Once, at a basketball game in which there was only one white person on the court, with all the other players and referees being black, the white person felt that the referee had made an unfair call against him. My friend, detecting the white person's dissatisfaction with the call, said to him, «Look, you are the only white person here, you can't expect to receive a fair call». Of course, this sentence was incongruous and evoked laughter because one might have expected that he as black person would take the side of the black referees and dismiss the white person's claim of unfairness, but he did not. When his comment suddenly launched the white person and him into the sphere of humor, one would have to be wary that he believed to be truthful anything he said. One should not conclude that he factually believed that black referees would be so determined by their racial background that they could not make an objective call. But the humor, again on a semantic level, seemed to posit a chasm between the races, as if people are so determined by their racial backgrounds that any hope of objectivity or fairness to the other race becomes impossible. On the other hand, he as black was empathizing with the white player, suggesting perhaps that the call was unfair. In addition, he sympathized with the suspicions that might arise for any minority person who is the «only one» of his kind in group dominated by a majority, namely that unfair decisions are made that always support the majority. At the same time, however, he perhaps gives the white player a glimpse of what it often must feel like for blacks when they are treated unfairly in predominantly white society, whether in searches for jobs or before legal tribunals. The humor, which on the semantic level suggests an unbridgeable gap between blacks and whites, on the pragmatic level serves the further goal of bridging that gap through empathy and through suggesting to the white person that he in this moment is sharing with black people their experience of being unfairly discriminated against. In the same breath that my friend suggests an uncrossable breach, he welcomes the white player into the black world.

Similarly, at one point in which I had been frustrated with my friend's insistence on the differences between us, I said to him, «Surely it is not impossible for white and black people to get along together?». He responded, «Yes, we can, after all I've learned to like your sorry ass». Here again the humor upsets expectations, with me asking a question, perhaps with the intent of bringing us into some kind of unity, and he, in his own sentence supporting that intention («Yes, we can…»), only to have that expectation shattered by the second half of the sentence, «after all I've learned to like your sorry ass». The later part of the sentence stresses differences, that it was not easy to like me since I am a «sorry ass». Of course, the humorous context makes it dubious if he re-

ally thinks that I am hard to like or if I am a sorry ass. At the same time, the very expression translates us together into the humorous province of meaning and also seems to affirm, however cryptically, that he does like my sorry ass. Here again the humor in the semantic dimension asserts at distance between us that is also overarched in the pragmatic level by friendship.

One thing to be observed about the humor in our relationship is that he usually takes the initiative to challenge my expectations, and it is rare, if ever, that I undermine his expectations or expose expectations that he is unaware of. Perhaps this is because I simply am not as quick as he is, but also it could be because I am reluctant to enjoy humor that might appear to be enjoyed at his expense, perhaps because of the cruel history of interracial humor in American culture.

Perhaps the asymmetry I feel about not enjoying humor at his expense reflects the deeper notion of ethical asymmetry that Emmanuel Levinas has described: the asymmetric summons to my responsibility for the other that any other person makes to us. Such an asymmetric, ethical summons only appeals to us but never compels us to act—and the history of American racists humor abundantly proves that the ethical summons of the other is easily disregarded (Levinas 1980: 5-7, 173). It may be that, because of such a summons from another person, we are willing to follow the lead of any other, to trust any other, who invites us to leap with them into the province of humor with them, but even within that province, the ethical claims of others, beyond the one who has invited us to leap, continue to constrain us. Having trusted someone to lead us into the realm of humor, we find ourselves recoiling at jokes that belittle others in sexist, racist, and homophobic ways, and in such examples of humor we feel impelled to withdraw abruptly from the province of humor into which we entrusted the other to lead us. Sometimes people attempt to tell jokes about the deceased (e.g. the Kennedy or Lincoln assassinations), and one finds oneself overtaken with a sickening feeling that such a joke is not funny, and one again retreats from the sphere of humor into which the joker was leading us. If, as Scheler observes, the value differences among people depends on what objects can have an effect on their possible comportment, or on what objects could even tempt them, we could say that the morality quality of a person with reference to others is dependent on what they would be willing to laugh at (Scheler 1954: 178).

The asymmetry, which Levinas speaks of and which may underlie my reluctance to venture to explode the expectations of my friend the way he does with me, could paradoxically lead to the reciprocity, which Levinas also values, as, for example, is evident when he praises the «egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up…)» (Levinas 1974: 203). When discussing with my friend my reluctance to mock his mannerisms or

highlight the narrowness of his expectations, as he does with me, he suggested that I should be able to joke with him as he does with me. Perhaps, my unwillingness to exercise symmetric humor with him betrays a lack of trust, a fear that he will be offended and our friendship end. If that is the case, then his invitation that I be more reciprocal with him would paradoxically lead to the result that my feeling asymmetrical responsible to him—and hence responding to his invitation—could lead to greater reciprocity in our making humor together.

However, a kind of symmetry is already to be found in our relationship based upon a mutual asymmetrical responsibility that each of us exercises in relationship to each other. While I, for fear of succumbing to the long history of racist humor, asymmetrically receive passively his interventions without taking initiatives as he does, from his side he has been asymmetrically responsible for me, striving to prevent me from assimilating him in my world, ever reminding me that the black experience is not my own, all the while working to maintain our relationship, to honor me by giving me access to his world and offering me intimacy. My friend is an artist in his humor, and he shows the healing power that interracial humor can have, despite the delicacy it demands because of the wounds it has inflicted and can so easily inflict on those who are different from us.

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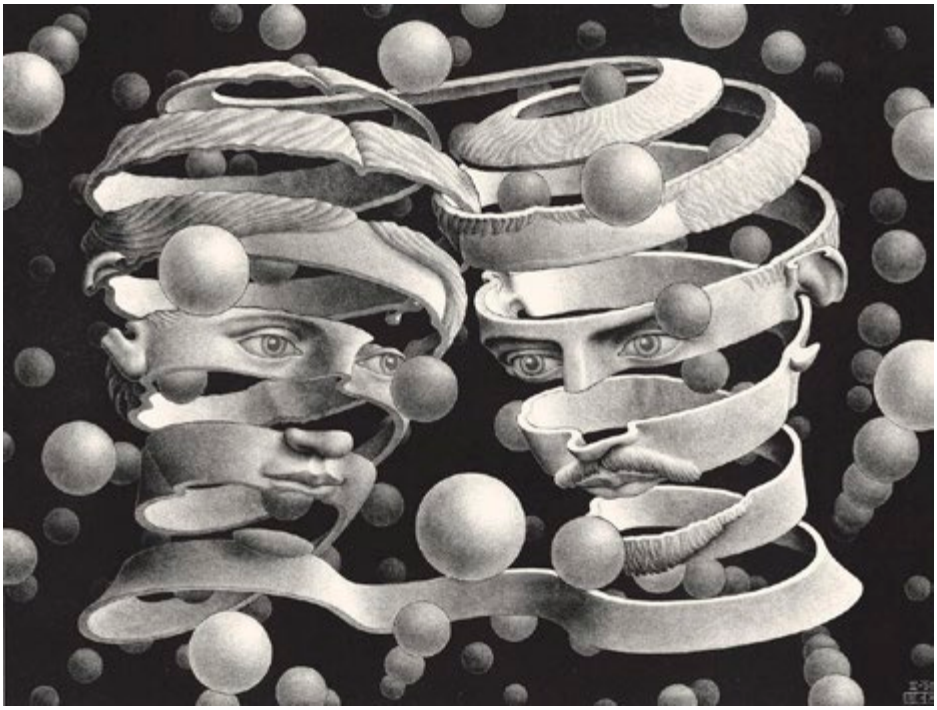

Maurits Cornelis Escher, *Bond of union* (1957)