

## It's Funny, the Truth Is . . .

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When we say and many frequently say 'It's funny, the truth is...' in prefix of *what* they want to say, it seems to suggest that the truth isn't funny. And it isn't. It isn't true? Well, that can't be the whole truth. Nonetheless the contrast between humor and truth set up pointedly before us by this expression is not expendable. Truth and fun do contrast in interesting ways, in fact in many many ways (only too few of which I can get to here). At least it was Earl Shaftesbury's contention: fun is capable of sorting out what is true from what is not true, - not in the lab of course, but mostly in common talk where people say things they know nothing about as if it were true. But, you will object, people don't do that much.

I think he's right they do, quite often. There's plenty of guessing assuming presuming hypothesizing planning hoping ordering around in the world - in one word, theories - all leaving equally ample opportunity for humor to sort the loose from the straight talk. Straight talk is Okay. Quite reasonably, nothing out of the ordinary, we ask of others and (sometimes) ourselves that we can say what it is we talk about. And we usually can. If you can't, you'll be told to shut up. This something we talk about is of course not just something we say and what we say it is, consequently, cannot be said to be in reality in precisely the same way as it itself is. In short, talk is about something: somethings aren't about anything.

Mostly when we don't know what we talk about, but don't stop - and I don't know what it takes to stop us - we start theorizing. When you start what you say with 'theoretically speaking' you disregard how you know things are and talk about them as if you knew what you don't know about them; if your start is 'practically speaking' you disregard how you know things are not. That juncture is where what you say can go wrong one way - and where theories surely often do go wrong.

Talk is generally discarded after its purpose is served, it's disposable you might say; theories - though some seem to loathe to let go of some of them - are discarded too, as soon, and not soon enough, as the facts of the matter are in Reality can easily knock-out theories - then they cease being theories, they become follies of the past. First discarded are of course false theories - very few would dispute that; it happens to the worst theories first (we hope), eventually to them all. Unless you set your heart and head on pure theoretical truth, they are no longer worth your salt, aren't really anything that can sustain talk about anything at all, and we're left in reality.

Theories are about, too. They are not about things as much as they are about what someone thinks he doesn't know (if he did know, he'd have no reason to ignore his ignorance). Who, anyways, would accept a theory about something in places where he can say what's the case?

You see there is then a gap between talk and theory, much as there is between talks and things. Thinking and particularly philosophical thinking, I think philosophically, is the activity of probing into the noman's land between things and talk, tresspassing, you may well call it, on reality - for the sake of getting talk closer to real things.<sup>1</sup> This is where insight and discovery is to be had; so I say Avant! toward the rugged grounds where talk has some traction.

Some advocate that philosophy should make new theories - and I agree there's absolutely nothing philosophy mustn't do. But it mainly is headed for truth, or in other accurate words, it is aimed at getting rid of theories. Theories and theoretical truths are mere surrogates. Not the theoretical but the real of matters must be sought in order to know that which really is true. And, as I said, there's plenty of good use for humor in that search.

Even the good uses have complexities, - none, however, that upsets the simple corporate dialectics between truth and fun. 'To tell the truth' can be rewarding; if you can't tell the truth (from the rest) chances are that you're a pretty peculiar fellow - the funny one around your woods. The truth, only the truth, isn't (always) funny.<sup>2</sup> Nothing but the truth is seldom great fun.

The whole truth must be pretty delightful; it would be crisp and great to have. It's seldom given, though. We may meanwhile also take it, the basic contrast, in a much more direct way, i.e. that is funny which is not true; there's something ridiculous, laughable, or amusing about being in the wrong. And the silliness of righteousness gently underscores that. So, we can find out what is false by applying a fair dose of ridicule, - if it works, we're right; if it doesn't, we've got it too. Perhaps you can have truth without having some truth, too.

Expectedly, the obverse expression, 'That's not funny, it's the (plain, painful, discouraging) truth', leans toward the same point. When you become the subject of ridicule undeservedly, as we say, it is offensive, not because it doesn't amuse, but because unjustly so. The hint is right, justice enters the good laugh.<sup>3</sup> When it's no fun because true, your "it" will stand up; lay it before your scoffers and they'll, perhaps (not) a bit embarrassed, realize how rude they were - but you see here their rudeness depends on what you can muster by way of facts; the more rare or outrageous your story is the less you can expect they'll ever realize their mischief (e.g. cases in point are the typical sportsfishermen's stories: Should you pull out the snapshot of your 80 pound salmon, their grins disappear and legend you become instantly; but only incontrovertible fact shall accomplish that for you). To get into the clear, to strip grins off faces, only reality is needed. The modesty imposed on you, quite voluntarily, by the risk of becoming legendary phony is as high a proof as you're likely to get from eating any rumpudding that reason and laughs do corporate. Exercise of good sense and bright wit solicits no ridicule and holds off potential victimization.

Even if not nearly exhausted I wish not to get stuck with intricacies of the expression "It's funny, the truth is..."; enough of a clue is provided of more matters of the truth-telling smile.

I suppose you know the old little story about joke's provenance, the story of stories, the true one; so, I'll tell it again: McErnest enjoys jokes a lot, enjoys hearing them, enjoys telling them. Nothing escapes his keen observation, so he notes what he hears and tells, but never told one he hadn't heard. Knowing first hand from his own case suggests itself to McErnest that so do everybody else; obviously this is the way jokes get around; checking with a few of his nitwit friends squarely confirms his theory. Sharp of mind as he is, it delivers the problem: where on earth do they come from? But that's it, it comes to McErnest, the sweet (theoretical) solution is that it must

be extraterrestrials who "plant" jokes among us earthlings; why would they do a thing like that? Surely not to entertain us, nay, it must be in order to test us out to see if we're ready for intelligent contact. That's it, as long as we have a laugh at the funny, at any thing at all, we're too barbaric for serious business with higher intelligence.<sup>4</sup> (McErnest blushes, more than slightly embarrassed, over his prior joyous embracement of plain fun).

Again, the happy corporate contrast brings out the truth in point. And its point is that the purpose of joking could hardly be worse misunderstood, misrepresented, or disfigured, (that's where whatever fun it contains spring). Nothing could be more wrong, could it? The fact is that only a barbarian cannot enjoy a fine joke appropriately; he'll miss the clue, he'll insist on taking it all dead seriously, believe it, act on it, etc., witness the practical joke works best on disciplined, principled, dull, or square people; they practically invite them).

The most telling corroboration of the contrast just brought out between intelligence and barbarism in virtue of humor is that it is shrillingly absurd to claim a right to be ridiculous. One can and many do claim a right to a good many things, e.g. a right to free action, to absence of pain, or to certain degrees of health and welfare; but one cannot sensibly claim a right to be ridiculous - that is as nonsensical as to claim a right to be stupid, to be ignorant, or to be ugly.

Most people tend to overlook the close corporation of fun and reality, - they blindly see fun as freewheeling, as detached from daily and social life. Often some-wise guys - say it's childish. They are wrong. There's nothing childish about it, except that it's adultish to dismiss it so. Shaftesbury got it right meanwhile if I'm right that his main insight is: that which can be shown only in a certain light is questionable.<sup>5</sup> [So much for Contextualisms.] Truths bear all lights, and one of the Principal lights (or natural means) by which things are to be viewed in order to advance recognition is ridicule or that manner of proof by which we discern whatever is liable to just raillery in any subject. (44) For wit is its own remedy. Without wit and humor reason can hardly have its proof or be distinguished. (52)

Perhaps the term 'proof' is entirely misleading here (given our rigorously singular preference for proofs), the point however is that if truth had in any way been surmountable (22) also fun can do it; the fault is we carry the laugh but half-way. (56) Never retreat, even if the wrong bites, for he who laughs and is himself ridiculous, bears, a double share of ridicule; (57) but a mannerly wit can hurt no cause or interest for which I am in the least concerned; (65)

so, one should never decline wit, but willingly commit one's cause to this test, and try it against the sharpness of any ridicule which might be offered. (23)

In the second place it is equally true that we cannot possibly make a jest of honesty; to laugh both ways is nonsensical, (86) and I should think myself very ridiculous to be angry with anyone for thinking me dishonest if I could give no cogent account of my honesty nor show how I differed from a knave. (69) Genuine fun and laughter disallow replication; should you from time to time succeed in deceiving a few, *you'll* know. In other words, the gravest gentlemen and, for that matter, women, even in the gravest subjects and in their gravest arguments, we should have no scruple to ask: Is it not ridiculous? (44) which is to say that it always remains an *open question* whether the things we say in all seriousness (itself conducive to misbelief) will collapse in the face of reason's ridicule. Fun will have the better of falsehood. No amount of serious reasons for a view or statement eclipses the question: Is it not ridiculous?

We can very well imagine, Shaftesbury continues, that men may be frightened out of their wits (e.g. by threat, ideology, gloom and gravity, etc.), but we have no apprehension they should be laughed out of them. (65) Some truths are so evident in themselves, that it would be easier to imagine half mankind to have run mad, and joined in one and the same species of folly, than to admit anything as truth which should be advanced against common sense. (97)

The peculiar power of ridicule is further fixed by its close affiliation with thinking (at its best). Shaftesbury willingly allows that to pass for philosophy which by any real effects is proved capable to refine our spirits, improve our understandings, or mend our manners. By contrast, if philosophical speculation goes besides the mark and reaches nothing we can truly call our interest or concern, it must be somewhat worse than mere ignorance or idiotism. The most ingenious way of becoming foolish is by a system. And the surest method to prevent good sense is to set up something in its place. The closer anything is to wisdom, if it be not plainly the thing itself, the more directly it becomes its opposite. (189) Even logic is beat.

It is not wrong to bring philosophy into the picture. Philosophy, most agree, is a kind, perhaps the foremost kind of thinking, the use of reason, which cannot be distinguished without wit and humor. Neither of which, i.e. neither a mannerly wit nor philosophical speculations politely managed, surely can ever render mankind more unsociable or uncivilized. (65) And both aim at truth. No

doubt about it. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, (III), Wittgenstein remarked "Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep? (And that is what the depth of Philosophy is)," a remark I think we cash in on here.

I'm not out to make sense of this sort of "proof" (to which Shaftesbury alludes). Sense you make of something which hasn't any, and fun you make of something pretending to have sense - hence the abortive scream is reward for explication of jokes. (So often making sense of a philosophical argument is making fun of it - that gives you the truth of the matter). Explanations, excuses, and explications cannot salvage nor adorn intelligence if it stands up to being made fun of. It is worth keeping (for a while at least) if fun is shot at it and is repelled (try they as best they can).

Hans Christian Andersen, my fellow country man, is ascribed the proverbial statement that he who takes the serious only seriously and the humorous only humorously has understood everything only very poorly. I do not know whether he knew Aristotle, but he surely must have been on to the Aristotelian insight Shaftesbury supportingly puts this way: Humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor. For a subject which would not bear raillery is suspicious; and a jest which would not bear serious examination is certainly false wit. In argument and conversation one should meet serious pleading with humor, and humor with serious pleading. (52n) So I'm tempted to supplement Shaftesbury's argument a bit, capturing perhaps the spirit of Aristotle's and Wittgenstein's sensibility, not to mention my own - which it after all all is, - to supply a yet clearer grasp of how and why humor conveys insight, has cognitive power.

Permit me to bring in one of my favorite analogies, *viz.* between the smashing aptness of metaphors and jokes alike. The joke, as well as the metaphor, easily overcomes the cognitive malpractice of the winded narrative and the twisted tale, (which are immediate waste: again, if you have to explicate your joke, the joke is shy of insight). Jokes are short, sharp, and shining. The metaphor delivers insight in a way similar to the way we know from the good joke: sudden and with no concealment. Its punch-line is an eye-opener, with a swift swirl. Suppose you consider a one-liner, that has been used and misused by countless producers of anything at all: "If you have enjoyed this (performance, etc.) half as much as we have (enjoyed ourselves making it), we have enjoyed it twice as much as you have," and you see that one virtue, a cognitive one at that, of the joke is that it sets you up such that you cannot not grasp the insight offered and receiving insight in this way is fun (which is

why the rare (?) occasions when you miss the point are so offending to your intelligence), and fun it certainly is if you compare it to the sweat and tears of the traditional classroom manner of conveyance. The shared humor of it gives away that you got the point. The humorous joke (much as the metaphor creates a meaning) conceives, carries, conveys insight, and cripples misunderstanding (lack of sense of humor does indeed handicap its victims). Even the ones that aren't about anything, at least if they are any good, contain that conceptual clasp.

Let me close with a few examples I think have got it, starting on the lead from Wittgenstein, - the conceptual jokes, which demonstrate that, even if what is punned is not reality, truth is carried. Suppose someone says "All men would be cowards if they dared", and you see this is equivalent to saying "It is true that all men would be cowards if they dared." More clearly you can't want any true insight. It can be fun for its own sake, as we say not quite accurately, because it almost never is for its own sake but for the shared end of reasoning together, making minds meet.<sup>6</sup> The verbal plays, the funny ones, the sarcastic ones, the ironic ones, the satirical ones, the satirical ones, etc., but particularly the well tempered ones all demonstrate a grasp of concepts (most likely as firm or firmer a grasp as it takes to hold on to a paradox); it takes a sharp intellect, a generous imagination, and a zest for life, comparable only to the creative scientists, artists and philosophers. Quite plainly the word-play trades on the same conceptual copulation, e.g., "its astonishing how our view of age changes with age," or even briefer "the waterproof teabag."<sup>7</sup> Fortunately we can gradually bring the unbeatable conceptual content much closer to reality: How is this for a waste of time: First we teach children to talk - later we try in vain to teach them to shut up. Learned men of all nations and hat sizes compete to create and deploy such insights at the right time. Lord Russell is said to have said some such thing as that "our magnificent democracies are still inclined to think, that an unintelligent man is more honest than a clever man, and our politicians cash in the benefit of this prejudice by acting as if they were even more unintelligent than they are by birth," (little wonder the political caricature is a strong grown genre).

But let me not join the distributors and petty retailers of wit, which must raise to and on the proper occasion, - leave McErnest to his puzzle, - so, I'm not saying that humor can't do many many other things (obviously it amuses, entertains, relieves, etc.). But I'm going to firmly insist, with Shaftesbury, that whatever else it does, genuine humor thrives in close encounter with honesty and truth, while gravity predates on pretense and falsity. So it is funny

that the truth about truth is that fun can bring it out. I now fade out with a motto an insightful writer chose :

This poor old world works hard and gets no richer; thinks hard and gets no wiser; worries much and gets no happier. It casts off old errors to take on new ones; laughs at ancient superstitions and shivers over modern ones. It is best but a Garden of Folly, whose chattering joke gardeners move a moment among the flowers, waiting for the sunset.

(And with a side-glance to the McErnests among us, he credits this wisdom thus : Confucious, or Tutankhamen-I forget which).

### Notes and References

1. "Anpassung von Begriffen an Qualitäten", *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 1 83.
2. And crude people, so the suggestion of this of course is, are dead sure that the/some others do *deserve* it. Innocence is in fact ridiculously hard to come by if you ask around unreflected people.
3. There's something exhilaratingly healthy about humor (if I'm right it thrives on its opposition to absurdity) which parallels, conceptually speaking, the fact that freedom gets its meaning from the possible restraints it might be subjected to (see "Freedom of Information", forth-coming); humor grasps its sense, and sense it has, (you don't have to make it), from absurdity's washings off.
4. A neat about this story is its outright admission that it takes invention to produce a joke; thereby
5. in the characteristic fashion of the funny shows forth an incomplete concept of intelligence.
5. I endorse the following notes on truth; however, they are virtually quotations of Shaftesbury, at least of the relatively features I bend to my ends; not bent enough to misrepresent his views which are found in *Characteristics*, ed. J.M. Robertson, Indianapolis 1964, to pages of which the in text scattered numbers refer.
6. Cf. 'Exploratory Conversation' section in "Real Art and Constructed Reality", *Restant* 8, no 2 (1980) : 235-249.
7. Which, notice, differ greatly from the learned's habit of quoting, where fun is as rare as in architecture, ("Quotation and Common Sense", *Worldmakings' Ways*, Gent 1982).

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