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THE EDUCATIVE POTENTIAL OF HUMOR

BY

JUSTIN GRANT YORK

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Nicholas C. Burbules, Chair
Associate Professor Chris Higgins
Professor Cris Mayo
Professor Barbara Stengel, Vanderbilt University

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the educative potential of humor through the lens of the concept of incongruity. Drawing on two definitions of humor grounded in the Incongruity Theory of humor, I argue humor is educative in both instrumental and existential ways. Drawing on literature in philosophy, especially philosophy of humor and philosophy of education, as well as humor studies more generally, my argument is in two parts. The first part argues that humor can be understood instrumentally through the ways it supports educational endeavors such as learning the course content, creating a more open and relaxed learning environment, and developing moral dispositions such as patience or open-mindedness. The second part of my argument develops my idea of the humorist worldview. It looks to fill in a gap among those worldviews or interpretive frameworks already available for coping with incongruity of an existential sort, namely the absurdity of the human condition. The humorist worldview, by acknowledging the insights of the tragic sense of life, the ironic stance, and *Homo risibilis*, moves beyond these three worldviews by basing our experience of incongruity in the mundane and using that as space to explore more existential experiences of incongruity and absurdity through the lens of humor. This leads to my conclusion that humor and the humorist worldview is educative on several fronts. Humor is useful as a tool in educational settings in multiple ways, from helping students relax to supporting the development of cognitive and moral skills. Furthermore, humor and the humorist worldview are self-educative in that they reveal to us ourselves, creating a space for an honest appraisal of who we are, thus allowing us to adjust course toward a fuller

understanding of our own flourishing. Finally, for teachers adopting a humorist worldview, there are several implications for one's teaching practice.

Considerations ranging from questions of indoctrination, what types and to what extent one should allow humor in the classroom, and what the ethical implications are in both teaching with an humorist worldview, as well as seeking to impart the same in one's students would need to be further researched.

To Mom and Dad

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And to those thinking of writing a dissertation on humor, I say, run, run the other way as fast as you can.

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INTRODUCTION

Humor is a something we encounter daily and something people seek out frequently. It is a common social interaction, so much so that when we meet people who don't seem to engage with it regularly, we think them strange, calling them humorless, perhaps prodding them a bit to see if we can uncover the sense of humor we know to be there. Philosophers have taken up other seemingly mundane interactions extensively. Topics such as friendship, love, death, and sex are understood to be worthy of in-depth exploration, so why not humor as extensively? One reason might be how regularly we encounter and engage in humor. When people think of humor, they often think in terms of entertainment. Sit coms, stand-up specials, memes, forwarded jokes, and funny stories at a dinner party are momentary bits of enjoyment that bridge more serious moments and interactions. That is, humor in the context of entertainment is experienced as something that produces momentary pleasure and that interrupts the more serious endeavors of our lives. We engage with it briefly and then return to our regularly scheduled activities. Nevertheless, is distraction the only thing humor has to offer?

Another way to think about this question is to consider what the purposes of humor might be. As mentioned, certainly we can experience it as a momentary respite from daily activities, in addition to something pleasurable. However, if we separate humor away from the context of entertainment (and the laughter it induces as well), what other reasons might there be in enjoying and creating humor? Perhaps it enhances some good or set of goods we find worthwhile. For instance, the shared enjoyment of humor can increase the bonds of friendship. Or, in tense conversations, a quick joke can break that tension, allowing for more a more productive dialogue. While these types of things are interesting,

does humor have something more to offer? I argue it does, that humor has much to reveal to us. That is, humor is educative. It teaches us about the self and our experiences of the world around us. When we engage with humor, whether by enjoying or creating it, we are interpreting the inconsistencies of our experiences in such a way that the outcome usually brings to the fore just how or why our understanding conflicts with how we experience something. Once brought to our attention, we often feel amused, usually to the point of laughter, at just such a tension. However, why are such revelations important and what do they have to teach us? In what ways, that is, is humor educative?

In the following quote, E.B. White captures the somewhat paradoxical nature of studying humor: “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.”¹ However, White seems to be off the mark here. Just like a student in biology class who takes a bit too much enjoyment in dissecting animals, those interested in analyzing and understanding humor might seem a bit strange. Nonetheless, if the increase in scholarship on humor over the last decade is any indication, there are more people looking to dissect humor than ever before. Furthermore, if personal experience is anything to go by, analyzing humor hasn’t done anything to decrease its enjoyment, much like people still enjoy hearing the same joke or watching their favorite skit on *Saturday Night Live*. If this is the case, then what have we learned from such dissections? More specifically, how does understanding what humor has to reveal help us to understand ourselves more fully, that is, how does it educate us? One place to look for answers to how humor is educative is the field of educational studies.

¹ As quoted in: John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), ix.

Within the field of educational studies, humor has been explored along several lines. One of the more common is how and in what ways humor contributes to learning in the classroom. For instance, does humor increase students' motivation to learn the material? Some research finds that it does because students who find a class enjoyable are more motivated to complete assignments and participate in discussions.² Some research points to the fact that humor increases student satisfaction with a course because it helps make the classroom a more welcoming place and bridges the emotional distance between teacher and student.³ While the research is inconclusive on whether humor increases learning directly, some studies do show that humor has a positive effect on learning course concepts.⁴ While these findings and correlations are interesting, they don't get at what humor can reveal, what deeper meaning humor might hold for us once we move beyond what humor can do. It is clear that much research on humor's educational impact stems from viewing humor instrumentally, sidestepping defining humor, and instead concentrating on how it supports or contributes to something else. In order to explore humor's educative potential more fully, I turn to discussions of humor within philosophy and, specifically, philosophy of education.

In introducing the 2014 special issue on humor in the journal *Educational Philosophy and Theory (EPAT)*, the editors note, "In recent years, philosophers of education have turned more concertedly to thinking about the meaning, value and various functions of humor in educational and other social contexts, as well as more generally as a capacity

² Peter M. Jonas, *Laughing and Learning: An Alternative to Shut Up and Listen* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2010).

³ Joan Gorham and Diane M. Christophel, "The Relationship of Teachers' Use of Humor in the Classroom to Immediacy and Student Learning," *Communication Education* 39, no. 1 (1990).

⁴ Avner Ziv, "Teaching and Learning with Humor: Experiment and Replication," *Journal of Experimental Education* 57, no. 1 (1988).

that can enhance human flourishing.”⁵ While this might be the case, there is still a relative dearth of scholarship in the field of philosophy of education exploring the educational value of humor, and this dissertation helps to continue the exploration of humor and education that has recently picked up speed.

Other fields have studied how humor benefits the learning environment or whether humor increases student learning or how humor communicates ideas.⁶ In cultural studies, there is a wealth of research on humor in various cultures and historical periods,⁷ and in philosophy, there is a long tradition of exploring laughter and humor beginning with Plato and Aristotle, seeking to both explain why we laugh and what humor is. Nevertheless, there is no agreed on comprehensive definition of humor, though there is a consensus that whatever humor turns out to be, it involves some type of incongruity. Even if nascent, what does philosophy of education have to offer through its examination of humor, one of the most prevalent types of human interaction?

Two philosophers of education have addressed humor in depth. One is Cris Mayo. Her first (and one of the earliest articles on humor and education in the field) is her 2008 essay “Being in on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor.” She argues that humor’s ability to amuse and critique can help to “intervene in the usual resistances and earnestness in teacher and student contributions to social justice classrooms,” which can move “social justice education from its occasional lurch into unproductive, if earnest,

⁵ Mordechai Gordon and Cris Mayo, "Special Issue on Humor, Laughter, and Philosophy of Education: Introduction," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 115.

⁶ John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (2000).

⁷ James E. Caron, "Comic *Belles Lettres* and a Literary History of the American Comic Tradition," *Studies in American Humor* 29 (2014).

oversimplifications.”⁸ Her other article is the 2014 essay “Humorous Relations: Attentiveness, Pleasure and Risk,” which argues that there are certain structures within humor, specifically jokes, that demand a certain attentiveness or listening. Combined with curiosity and an openness to being startled, “humor can help to illuminate complicities and invite more robust interactions with difference, creating pleasurable encounters to work through difficult social divisions.”⁹ The other philosopher of education to write over humor is Mordechai Gordon. Gordon pens an essay in 2010 on engaging with types of humor that allow us to laugh at ourselves and how being able to do so can affect educational encounters.¹⁰ In 2012, Gordon argues in “Humor, Laughter, and Educational Philosophy” that there are interesting similarities between humor and philosophy, and, that through studying humor, philosophers of education can develop a greater tolerance for ambiguity, as well as using humor to communicate “painful and inconvenient truths to the larger educational community and the general public.”¹¹ That same year, Gordon publishes an article on the similarities and differences between aesthetic experience and humor, extending the conversation begun by John Morreall and others as to whether humor is a type of aesthetic experience. Gordon’s work on humor to date culminates in *Humor, Laughter and Human Flourishing*, a collection of the essays previously mentioned, as well as

⁸ Cris Mayo, "Being In on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor," in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 244.

⁹ ———, "Humorous Relations: Attentiveness, Pleasure and Risk," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 175.

¹⁰ Mordechai Gordon, "Learning to Laugh at Ourselves: Humor, Self-Transcendence, and the Cultivation of Moral Virtues," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 6 (2010).

¹¹ ———, "Humor, Laughter, and Educational Philosophy," *ENCOUNTER: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 25, no. 2 (2012): 9.

one additional one, which neatly encapsulates what Gordon has sought to argue throughout his work on humor, which is that humor contributes robustly to leading the good life.¹²

Something that this brief summary excludes is the work done on laughter in philosophy of education. While I will discuss laughter as it relates to my various ideas on humor throughout the dissertation, my focus is on humor and its educative potential and so I will not explore laughter in any depth. One reason I give short shrift to laughter is that much of it has nothing to do with humor, as Robert Provine notes in his research.¹³

Laughter is, according to what Provine argues, a physical reaction to some stimuli, many times outside of our conscious control, and often used as a type of social lubricant and not as an indicator of whether something was either funny or humorous. However, there is interesting work on laughter and education I will mention. Joris Vlieghe, Maarten Simons, and Jan Masschelein examine laughter from a phenomenological perspective in two essays, arguing there is a democratic moment of corporeality in communal laughter that is potentially educational.¹⁴ In Barbara Houston's response to Vlieghe et al's *Yearbook* essay, while agreeing that Vlieghe et al may be onto something, she argues laughter can be miseducative as well, and notes (as do I in my critique of their essay) that they do not take enough account of the aggressive nature of the type of laughter they examine.¹⁵ In the *EPAT* special issue on humor, there are several essays discussing laughter and education. The

¹² ———, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing: A Philosophical Exploration of the Laughing Animal* (New York: Springer, 2014). In the special issue in *EPAT* mentioned earlier, Gordon also has an essay on humor, intimacy, and friendship, which is included in a slightly altered form in his book.

¹³ Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

¹⁴ Joris Vlieghe, Maarten Simons, and Jan Masschelein, "The Democracy of the Flesh: Laughter as Educational and Public Event," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009); ———, "The Educational Meaning of Communal Laughter: On the Experience of Corporeal Democracy," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 6 (2010).

¹⁵ Barbara Houston, "Taking Laughter Seriously," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009). J. G. York, "Democratizing Laughter," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012).

essay by Vlieghe continues the line of argument just mentioned; that communal laughter in formal schooling is educationally significant.¹⁶ “After the Laughter” by Barbara Stengel asks not what motivates laughter, but what happens when the laughter stops, whether that laughter is in response to something uncomfortable or something comic. Drawing on John Dewey, Stengel argues, “Laughter marks a breakdown of experience *and* that same laughter creates space for reflective listening and thinking, for diffusion of difficult affect.”¹⁷ All of these essays (as well as others not mentioned) make interesting philosophical and educational arguments about laughter, however, as my concern is with humor’s educative potential, my concern with laughter is secondary.

If this is the case, then, what understandings has the current scholarship on humor and education within the field of philosophy of education offered? I will discuss this in more depth in later chapters, but one understanding that both Mayo and Gordon agree on is that the use of humor can help in discussions that challenge and discomfit, distancing students from immediate reactions of defensiveness or denial. As Gordon states, “Humor is a very effective way to convey the truth because it permits frankness to be less threatening than a more confrontational style of discourse.”¹⁸ Put differently, Mayo argues, “Humor may help, through its pleasurable response of laughter and amusement, to encourage us to negotiate difficult concepts and situations, reminding us of the pleasures of difference and unsettling ideas.”¹⁹ Another point of agreement is what I call humor’s perspective-giving capacity. That is, in interpreting our ideas and experiences humorously, we gain a new

¹⁶ Joris Vlieghe, “Laughter as Immanent Life-Affirmation: Reconsidering the Educational Value of Laughter Through a Bakhtinian Lens,” *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁷ Barbara S. Stengel, “After the Laughter,” *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 200.

¹⁸ Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*, 11-12.

¹⁹ Mayo, “Humorous Relations,” 180.

perspective on the subject of the humor and our understanding of that subject. While this theme isn't specific to philosophers of education or even philosophers in general, what is pertinent is identifying this capacity as a type of learning. Mayo succinctly argues this point, stating, "Humor is an invitation to think differently, from another perspective, while at the same time inhabiting one's own perspective; in other words, humor encourages one to learn."²⁰

These two examples of how humor is educative motivate the central question of my dissertation: how or in what ways is humor educative or educational (I used these terms interchangeably)? I answer this, in part, by extending the conversation begun by Morreall, Gordon and Mayo, among others, and by bringing together the insights offered concerning humor within philosophy of education and philosophy more generally. As mentioned previously, there is not much scholarship about humor within philosophy of education, and this dissertation helps to close this gap in scholarship. In order to ground my exploration of humor and education, I use the following broad definitions of education offered by Gordon, and Morreall. For Gordon, the term education, broadly speaking, refers to "any interaction among human beings in which intellectual learning, emotional development, or moral and spiritual edification takes place."²¹ Morreall, one of the few philosophers to make humor central to their scholarship and on whom Gordon draws significantly, writes, "Education is supposed to be preparation for life. It should foster the intellectual and personal attributes needed to be successful, well-rounded human beings."²² Jean Lyotard, in his essay "The

²⁰ ———, "Being In on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor," 245.

²¹ Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*, 67.

²² John Morreall, "Humor, Philosophy and Education," *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 120.

Postmodern Condition” describes knowledge in the following quote. However, as a definition of education it works just as well:

[Education], then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc. Understood in this way, [education] is what makes someone capable of forming “good” denotative utterances, but also “good” evaluative utterances...It is not a competence relative to a particular class of statements (for example, cognitive ones) to the exclusion of all others. On the contrary, it makes “good” performances in relation to a variety of objects of discourse possible: objects to be known, decided on, evaluated, transformed...²³

What these definitions have in common is that education goes beyond learning facts or even knowing how those facts interrelate. Education concerns how to live and how to do so well. It involves various types of learning and development (emotional, cognitive, moral, spiritual), wisdom, aesthetic experience, and practical skill. Education changes the person; it is transformative. I argue is that humor can contribute to all of these facets of education.

Concerning my understanding of humor, I utilize Morreall’s and Richard Richards’ definitions. Gordon does not offer his own definition of humor, at least not explicitly. Instead, he claims to draw insights from traditional humor theories in order to embrace an eclectic understanding of humor and to avoid “the reductionism that has often resulted from trying to create a comprehensive theory of humor.”²⁴ While agreeing that seeking to develop a comprehensive theory of humor has failed so far, I employ a working definition to further ground my discussion of humor’s educative potential, one based in the Incongruity Theory. It seems to be the case that most humor involves some form of incongruity, that is, some form of tension between expectation and experience. It could be

²³ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.

²⁴ Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*, 1.

the case that this is a cultural artifact, where the type of humor currently enjoyed and displayed on television, in comedy clubs, playhouses, and so on, just happens to mostly concern incongruity. If this is so, then leaning on an Incongruity understanding of humor makes the most sense in our present moment. Furthermore, it seems that humor based in incongruity offers the most promise in yielding educational benefits, as it reveals tensions between our beliefs about the world, our understanding of ourselves and the types of people we both think we are and want to be, and how the world actually is. This is mostly due to the nature of humorous incongruity, in that it involves a stepping outside of one's immediate experiences and reinterpreting such in a humorous light. This stepping outside is a moment of reflection and is the space where education can take place. I will go into more detail in chapter 1 as to why Incongruity understandings of humor are the most relevant to this dissertation.

The following, therefore, is how Morreall describes the basic humor pattern, and what I draw on throughout the dissertation: 1) We experience a *cognitive shift*. 2) We are in a *play mode*. 3) We *enjoy* the shift. 4) That enjoyment is expressed through *laughter*.²⁵

Richards has a very similar understanding of humor, explaining it as the “playful appreciation of incongruities.”²⁶ They both recognize that humor involves incongruity, that when engaged with humor, we are in a play mode, and we enjoy the interpretation of those incongruities. They both agree that our experience of humor is a type of aesthetic experience (as does Gordon), though Morreall places more emphasis on laughter than does Richards.

²⁵ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 50.

²⁶ Richard C. Richards, *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor* (Healing Time Books, 2013), 30.

In order to make this case, I draw together multiple avenues of research and scholarship on humor, as I argue humor is both instrument and subject of study, that it both aids in learning other subjects and has something to teach us itself. While many have researched the instrumental benefits of humor, and a few have written about humor's existential learning capacity, none have explicitly brought together both strands of research to demonstrate how humor contributes to education variously. That is, humor is helpful as an instrument to promote learning, as a worldview to combat the feeling of helplessness that the absurdity of our existence can engender, and as a way to understand ourselves more fully, what we believe, and the contradictions that can arise within our web of beliefs.

As mentioned, one avenue of research on humor falls squarely in the instrumentalist camp. The way we usually think of humor is in relation to entertainment, specifically comedy. Sit coms, stand-up specials, late night talk shows, *The Onion*, *Buzzfeed*, the constant churning of Internet memes, etc., are all examples of what people most likely consider examples of humor. That is, humor is understood as a type of entertainment, as a distraction from the seriousness of everyday life that hopefully makes us laugh for a little while and lets us feel better about our lives. It is something we make use of. However, humor can be understood instrumentally in other ways as well. The body of research concerned with how humor can be used to achieve educational ends seeks, in part, to demonstrate the ways humor contributes to learning something else. When Mayo and Gordon argue that humor can make uncomfortable or difficult discussions, especially those concerned with issues of inequality, less difficult for students and thus more productive, humor serves a supporting role in challenging students to examine their own

understandings.²⁷ When Gordon claims that humor builds up tolerance for ambiguity, and thus is useful to philosophers of education who find ambiguity intolerable, humor is a mechanism for making things a bit easier for some in this regard.²⁸ Moreover, when discussing how humor does contribute to human flourishing, Gordon notes that humor strengthens the bonds of friendship, and that having close friends is an element of human flourishing, he is taking an instrumentalist view of humor.²⁹

The other avenue or research is humor as self-education. The basis of this is developing a humorist worldview. What motivates this worldview is accepting that reason is unable to capture adequately the world of lived experience. That is, our experience of the world contains both the explicable and inexplicable, at least to us, and therefore we need resources in order to help us make sense of the tensions that arise between our expectations of a reasonable world and the failure of our reason to explain our experiences, as well as resources to accept the same. John Marmysz, in his article "Humor, Sublimity and Incongruity," states, "Humor responds to the world's overwhelming realities, not by giving in, but by forcefully and creatively imposing a sort of pleasurable interpretation upon those realities."³⁰ Humor, understood in Richards' sense as the playful appreciation of incongruities, is an interpretive act. What makes this act pleasurable is that by interpreting the tension between expectation and experience humorously, we often find ourselves amused by our interpretation. What this allows for is not being overwhelmed, in part, by the absurdity of our existence. Through cultivating a humorist worldview, we are better

²⁷ Mayo, "Being In on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor." Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*.

²⁸ ———, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*.

²⁹ ———, "Friendship, Intimacy and Humor," *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014).

³⁰ John Marmysz, "Humor, Sublimity and Incongruity," *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* 2, no. 3 (2001): 13.

able to cope with what comes our way, better able to handle the ambiguity we encounter daily, become more open-minded, and are liberated from an unexamined life. Or, at least this is what I will argue a humorist worldview will help us accomplish.

This humorous coping impacts other types of self-education. The first is that of moral education. Morreall and Gordon argue that humor can impart or impact such virtues as open-mindedness, patience, graciousness, and humility. The necessity to be emotionally distant from practical concerns helps us to engage in a bit of self-transcendence, which is why humor helps develop these specific virtues. Another type of self-education is that of aesthetic experience. Several thinkers have argued, including Morreall, Gordon, and Richards, that humor is a kind of aesthetic experience. This is the case in the sense that through experiencing and interpreting life's travails in a humorous fashion, we choose to experience life ironically instead of tragically or apathetically. Furthermore, humor is type of aesthetic experience in that humor is "a kind of appreciation in which we perceive or contemplate something for the satisfaction of the experience itself, not in order to achieve something else."³¹ Often we engage in humor, either as a consumer of humor, for instance at an improv show, or as a producer of humor, telling our friends about the antics of our toddler, for the pure satisfaction the humor gives. Lastly, humor is revelatory through its perspective-giving capacity. Humor helps to reveal to us attitudes, beliefs, or ideas present in our culture that one may or may not hold firmly, and also allows for an engagement with such things in order to either understand them more fully or change them (hopefully for the better). However, what is interesting about this capacity is its self-transcendence. That is, in order to interpret our experiences in a humorous way, we need to be able to step back

³¹ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 70.

from those experiences and play with them, reimagine both how we understand them and how we feel about them, to explain to others and ourselves why these perceived incongruities are amusing instead of terrifying. As Peter Berger argues, “The sense of humor is not simply an expression of subjective feelings (akin to, say, the statement that one is depressed), but rather is an act of perception pertaining to the reality of the world outside one’s own consciousness.”³² This stepping outside or transcending of the self allows one to grow, to change, to become better educated about who one is.

³² Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 208.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 begins by briefly discussing the traditional theories of humor (Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity) and making the case that the traditional theories are better understood as theories of laughter, in the sense that the theories examine what motivates laughter as opposed to defining humor. I then discuss the humor theories of John Morreall and Richard Richards as they ground my understanding of humor throughout the dissertation. The final section of this chapter outlines my understanding of education as defined by Mordechai Gordon and John Morreall, with the purpose of grounding humor's educative potential.

In chapter 2, I discuss the instrumental uses of humor. This involves a discussion in three parts. In the first part, I sketch the difference between the concepts of instrumental and intrinsic goods, as well as noting a middle category, what I call quasi-intrinsic goods. The next section discusses using humor in narrowly instrumental ways, as well as using humor in generally instrumental ways. In the last section, I discuss the limitations of understanding and engaging with humor in primarily instrumental ways.

Chapter 3 outlines three worldviews that take as central the absurdity of our existence: The tragic sense of life, the ironic stance, and *Homo risibilis*. This chapter fleshes out our experience of incongruity, as well as what I think of as existential incongruity, the absurdity of our condition. The chapter begins with an extended discussion of incongruity. This, in turn leads into a discussion of absurdity, specifically Thomas Nagel's conception of absurdity. The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to outlining the three worldviews, as well as discussing their insights and limitations.

Chapter 4 offers my approach to coping with incongruity through what I call the humorist worldview. It begins briefly outlining why I am offering a new worldview of framework for interpreting our encounters with incongruity. I then move on to discuss the four aspects of the humorist worldview: the everyday experience of incongruity, the perspective-giving capacity of humor, reinterpretation of incongruity, and playfulness. Next, I discuss how the humorist worldview can be understood as a type of education of the self, using Hans-Georg Gadamer's essay of self-education as a launching point. I argue that whatever the humorist worldview has to teach, the most important lesson is what it has to teach us about ourselves. Furthermore, adopting a humorist worldview helps us live more honestly, helps us to flourish by coming to accept that our understanding of the world is often in conflict with our experience of it due to a lack of honesty about our beliefs and ourselves. Lastly, I outline the relative strengths and limitations of my own worldview, both relative to the other worldviews and inherent to the worldview itself.

Chapter 5 outlines three areas of further research that addresses the question of what would it mean to teach with and to the humorist worldview. The first area I outline is whether one can teach others to be funnier. The second area addressed is a discussion of whether one has a moral obligation to teach with and to the humorist worldview in the hopes of developing the same in one's students. The last area of further research is that of what it might look like to teach with and to the humorist worldview. While these three areas are only briefly outlined, the hope is to motivate others to explore these areas in more detail.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Chapter 1 begins by discussing the traditional theories of humor: Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity. While many extended treatments of humor go into detail about each theory, I do so only briefly for both the Superiority and Relief theories. In the case of the Superiority Theory, as it is primarily a theory of laughter and as I am interested in humor separate from laughter, this theory isn't helpful in exploring humor's educative potential. For the Relief Theory, as it's described in much of the literature, it too is mostly a theory of laughter, though there are important differences in the versions offered by different theorists. For instance, Freud's overall theory is arguably a mix of Incongruity and Relief theories, with certain aspects more concerned with explanations of laughter than humor. Nonetheless, I choose to focus my energies in exploring the Incongruity Theory of humor and its educative potential. It seems to be the case that there is a consensus that whatever theory one chooses to embrace, humor involves incongruity in some form. Moreover, popular forms of entertainment have made incongruity types of humor central to our cultural experience of it, at least in much of the western world. This being the case, and being more interested in how we experience humor as opposed to defining exactly what it is, I discuss two thinkers within the Incongruity Theory category that seem to do just that, describe our experience of humor.

These two thinkers, John Morreall and Richard Richards, ground my discussion of humor throughout the dissertation. Both of their theories give prominence to the distancing capacity of humor, to the playfulness involved in engaging with humor, and both argue incongruity is central to our experience of humor. While both Morreall and Richards

claim humor is a type of aesthetic experience, Richards places more emphasis on this claim. In the last section of this chapter, I offer two complimentary definitions of education specifically drawn from authors writing on humor and philosophy of education. The first is Mordechai Gordon and the other is Morreall. Their descriptions arguably cover, generally speaking, what education is meant to accomplish, both practically and existentially. Not only does education impart a host of skills for navigating our day-to-day lives, but it further plays an important role in creating the type of person we strive to become and defining what the good life means. These understandings of humor and education set the stage for my discussion in chapter 2 concerning humor's instrumental value and in chapter 4 on developing a humorist worldview.

Traditional Theories of Humor

Historically, there are three traditional theories or categories of humor. The oldest is the Superiority Theory and Plato and Thomas Hobbes are often associated with this theory.³³ The theory gets its name from the emotional motivation of laughter, namely that we feel superior in some way to the butt of the joke. The butt can be another person, group of people, or institution. It can even be a past version of ourselves. What I argue is that this isn't really a theory of humor as much as a theory of derisive laughter, where sometimes we laugh at certain types of humor because we feel superior to the butt of the joke. Put differently, the Superiority Theory is a theory about what motivates certain laughter and what motivates the use of humor in certain instances, either that we feel superior in some way to the butt of the laughter or wish to express our feelings of superiority through humor.

³³ For examples of their discussions on laughter, see Plato, "Philebus," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957).

Moreover, it is unclear what humor is under this theory, other than that thing or set of things we laugh at motivated by the particular feeling of superiority. While, admittedly, this brief sketch of the Superiority Theory and its problems does not suffice in solidifying the case against calling this a humor theory, it does speak to why I think its educative potential in relation to humor is wanting. Namely, discussions of using others to make oneself feel better seem straightforward in their philosophical and educational implications. Whatever the case, I leave it to others to investigate fully this theory of humor and its relation to what it can teach us.

Another of the traditional theories of humor is the Relief Theory. Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud are the most prominent thinkers associated with this theory.³⁴ The Relief Theory or Release Theory argues that the reason we laugh when experiencing humor is due to a release of “psychic energy,” energy usually used to suppress taboo thoughts and feelings. The theory receives its name from the outdated hydraulic theory of mind. However, it does have something interesting to say about engaging with certain types of humor, those Freud calls tendentious, that is, humor of an aggressive or sexual nature. Indeed, some humorous laughter does seem to be cathartic and we do indeed laugh in response to both the humor of the joke and because it relieves a certain tension, especially if that tension was caused by a violation of our moral code. Nevertheless, this does not tell us much about humor itself, other than it was perhaps crafted to elicit just such a reaction, or created in response to some need to violate a taboo. This is not to deny the philosophically and educationally interesting things about Freud’s overall theory of humor,

³⁴ Herbert Spencer, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1911); Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960).

which my brief description doesn't do justice to. Nonetheless, the Relief Theory as usually described is tied too closely to laughter for my purposes here, and so I focus my efforts on the last of the traditional theories, the Incongruity Theory.

Incongruity Theory

The two thinkers most associated with the traditional version of the Incongruity Theory are Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant states,

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body and the reflex effect of this upon the mind.³⁵

The incongruity between an expectation of an outcome and it being transformed into nothing is why Kant's theory is placed in this category. However, Kant never uses the term incongruity. That distinction goes to one of Kant's contemporaries, James Beattie, who claims that laughter "seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage."³⁶ Additionally, Beattie argues that the object of laughter is the apparent combination in thought of "two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances."³⁷ However, Kant is still credited with offering one of the first versions of the Incongruity Theory, where incongruity is the central feature explaining laughter and humor.

³⁵ Quoted in John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). 11.

³⁶ James Beattie, "An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," in *Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: 1779), 318. Quoted in *ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

In contrast to Kant's theory of humor, Schopenhauer offered a version of the Incongruity Theory that resembles the more current understandings of incongruity.³⁸ Arguing against Kant's idea that an expectation dissolving into nothingness is always humorous, Schopenhauer notes that such dissolution could be unpleasant at times. For example, imagine looking in your bag for your wallet to pay for the coffee you just ordered and are unable to find it. Your expectation of finding your wallet dissolves into nothingness, but the result isn't humorous. Instead, Schopenhauer argues, humor happens when our perception of an object corrects our conception (or, better yet, our preconception) of that same object. Schopenhauer gives several humorous examples demonstrating his theory. One is of a group of prison guards who invite their prisoner to play cards with them, but on discovering him cheating, throw him out into the night. He also notes as an example of the incongruity he thinks central to humor the line from the scene in *Romeo and Juliet* after Mercutio is stabbed and Romeo says he will look in on him the next day. To this Mercutio replies, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a *grave* man."³⁹ Furthermore, in his descriptions of the ludicrous he includes such things as how society subsumes the taboo under euphemism ("to signify a brothel we were perhaps to describe it as 'a modest abode of peaceful pleasures'")⁴⁰ or the use we make of sarcasm ("during heavy rain we say: 'It is pleasant weather today'").⁴¹

However, as Alexander Bain argued, the perception of incongruity by itself is not enough. He lists several examples of incongruity, including "snow in May", "parental

³⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, vol. II (Indian Hills, Colo.: Falcon Press, 1958).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

cruelty”, and “an instrument out of tune,” which we readily perceive, but which doesn’t generally end in amusement.⁴² Additionally, there are types of incongruity that we enjoy, but which we do not usually consider humorous. The arts are full of examples that illustrate Bain’s point, such as the play *Oedipus Rex*. When Oedipus unknowingly makes a self-incriminating vow of revenge on the murderer of King Laius, the audience revels in the incongruity of which Oedipus is unaware, knowing that Oedipus is that self-same murderer.⁴³ While, at least for the audience, this incongruity is enjoyable, we would be hard-pressed to label it humorous.

Certain modern theories of incongruity seek to overcome the limitation of only counting incongruity as the basis for humor, as Bain notes above, and add other descriptions or conditions in order to flesh out our experience of humor. For instance, some theories claim that in order to overcome the objection that the perception of incongruity is insufficient for humor, what is needed is a further condition of resolution.⁴⁴ Other theories broaden or redefine what incongruity means in order to account for this objection, thereby avoiding it all together.⁴⁵ For all of these theories, the goal is to determine what humor *is*, *the* essence or nature of humor in order to both fully describe and understand it. However, what is important for my dissertation is that there is

⁴² Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans and Green, 1875). 257. Quoted in Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, Jr., *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).

⁴³ John Cage’s composition “4’33” would be another example. Morreall notes both examples in Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 13.

⁴⁴ Jerry M. Suls, “A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons,” in *The Psychology of Humor*, ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (New York: Academic Press, 1972).

⁴⁵ Salvatore Attardo, “The General Theory of Verbal Humor, Twenty Years After,” *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 24, no. 2 (2011); Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985).

agreement that whatever theory of humor one adheres to, incongruity is a necessary condition of humor.

Incongruity and the Humor Experience

Not being concerned with what *the* explanation of humor is and wanting to focus on how the Incongruity Theory of humor and the experience of incongruity are potentially educational, one issue to discuss is what is meant by the term “incongruity.” Generally speaking and in regards to how we experience it, incongruity is the discrepancy or tension between how we think the world is and how it turns out to be when those two things don’t match up. That is, the tension between expectation and experience. However, in discussing types of humorous incongruities, I utilize Marie Collins Swabey’s categorization of incongruity, while agreeing with John Lippitt that her final category is really an extension of the third.⁴⁶ I do so because Swabey’s categorization nicely captures the types of incongruities we encounter in humor without also making the claim that these are the only types of incongruity encountered, whether humorous or otherwise. Furthermore, I treat Swabey’s categories as being more Venn diagrams than having strict borders, in that, there is overlap among the categories. In certain instances, it is difficult to determine which experience of incongruity belongs in any one category. It could certainly be the case that my experience might belong to both, or parts of an experience of incongruity is best described by one and another part by a different category. That is all to say, while these categories aren’t sacrosanct and the examples used throughout the dissertation might not fit neatly into the categories described below, Swabey’s descriptions are useful.

⁴⁶ John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 9-11.

Swabey's first category is equivocation or ambiguity, which includes humor such as *double entendres*, jokes that depend on the tension between literal meanings and figures of speech, and comedies using mistaken identity as its plot device. Think of the old joke about a man complaining to his doctor that he can't get any sleep because he dreams one night of a teepee and the next of a wigwam for the past several weeks. The doctor responds that he needs to relax, that he's two tents (too tense). Or the wide use made of the straight man or dumb-dumb who interprets everything literally the comedian states sarcastically or jokingly. In Swabey's second category, she includes *non sequiturs* or fallacies of irrelevance. The comedian Steven Wright is one of the best examples of this with such lines as "I couldn't fix your brakes, so I made your horn louder." Swabey's third category is arguably the most common type of incongruity used in humor and consists of humor resulting from "disparities in subject matter, modes of operation, and conventions of two different worlds."⁴⁷ Here such things as sitcoms whose plot device depends on a clash of cultures (current examples of this are *Fresh of the Boat* or *Black-ish*), plays such as *My Fair Lady*, or movies that mix genres such as *Sean of the Dead* or *Army of Darkness* (in these cases comedy and horror).

Swabey's final category, which she considers a weaker form of incongruity, consists of "strikingly contrasting qualities at the farthest extremes from the scale from one another."⁴⁸ She would include in this category finding humorous things such as the fact that Great Danes and Chihuahuas are species of dogs or a circus act that includes a bear riding a bicycle in a tutu. Swabey may be arguing that a difference in degree becomes a difference in

⁴⁷ Marie Collins Swabey, *Comic laughter: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 120-21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

kind if the contrast happens at the extreme ends of a spectrum. Otherwise, as Lippitt points out, it is hard to see how this type of humor is not included under her third category. A ferocious animal dressed in something gentle like a tutu and doing something so unnatural to it but mundane to us seems to be both a disparity in mode of operation and a clash of convention of two different worlds. That is, ferociousness as the bear's mode of operation in the world is in conflict with the tutu's indication of grace and gentle art, whereas the bear riding a bike is a convention from the human world and not from the animal world. Something this category brings to light that is important later on in this dissertation is the interpretive nature of our experience of incongruity. What I take from Swabey's description of our encounter with this type of incongruity is an example of how we as meaning-making things interpret extremes of scale as incongruous, as opposed to the incongruity resting in the objects of the experience themselves. This is important in understanding both the subjective nature of our experience of humor and why there is disagreement over whether something counts as incongruous in the first place. Nevertheless, what Swabey does do successfully is outline the common types of incongruity we experience in most humor situations rather nicely and her categories are therefore useful as a heuristic in discussing the types of humorous incongruities that contribute to humor's educative potential from incongruity in general.

We now have a general understanding of what is meant by incongruity— the tension between expectation and experience — and a general description of the types of incongruity encountered when we engage in humorous experiences. Moreover, since it is the case that incongruity is arguably a necessary condition for humor and there is no single agreed on definition of humor, I argue it is more fruitful in understanding humor's

educative potential to move away from defining humor and to move toward descriptions of the experience of humor, specifically the experience of humorous incongruity. This is an important difference, in that by moving away from seeking to define what humor is exactly and moving toward explaining how we experience humor, we avoid, as Gordon notes, the reductionism so common with pinning humor to only one theory.⁴⁹ Furthermore, whatever educational potential the other traditional humor categories might hold, the insights offered here are compatible with those. Nonetheless, incongruity types of humor are, arguably, the most common types of humor we encounter. I argue that this is due, in large part, to the use of such humor in entertainment. For instance, two popular comedians working today, Amy Schumer and Louis C.K., have built careers (both as stand-up comedians and actors) on noting and mocking the incongruities they perceive. In the case of Amy Schumer, she often turns her gaze outwards, whereas Louis C.K. tends toward the self-deprecating, verging on the self-degrading. The same holds true for sitcoms, movies, and online humor sites. Moreover, incongruity infects our everyday life, sometimes in a mundane way, such as losing your keys and finding them in the first place you looked, but also in more serious ways, where the term absurdity is better suited to describe the existential nature of certain kinds of incongruity.

While I discuss this in more detail in chapter 3, I will briefly outline the distinction between conceptions of absurdity here. Thomas Nagel, in his article "The Absurd" distinguishes between two conceptions of absurdity.⁵⁰ The first conception is our experience of the absurd in ways mentioned above, such as losing one's keys only to find

⁴⁹ That isn't to say there aren't still people claiming to have found *the* theory of humor. The two theories in fn 45 are examples of this, as is Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes*.

⁵⁰ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971).

them in the first place one looked or when someone makes an impolite noise during a formal address. I call this type of absurdity mundane absurdity. The other way in which we experience absurdity is at the philosophical level (which I call existential absurdity, but for Nagel is better thought of as metaphysical or ontological). Nagel claims, "This condition is supplied...by the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."⁵¹ In regards to the first condition, that of taking our lives seriously, this implies that we both rank-order our pursuits, as well as allocate time and energy to the pursuits we deem most worthwhile. This holds true even if we aren't, in general, serious people or if we are slothful to a fault, we still pursue those ends we deem most worthwhile with a greater amount of interest and energy than those we deem less worthwhile. This rank-ordering involves the ability to reflect on our desires and goals, to question what is worth the risk and effort and what isn't, and even if we do so only pragmatically, we still leave open to question the worthiness both of how we pursue such ends and the ends themselves. As Nagel claims,

In fact, we can step back and question the validity of the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question.⁵²

This, then, is the conflict that leads to absurdity. Put differently, though we understand that all of our reasons and even the system within which we place these reasons are contingent, we still pursue those ends regularly and with enthusiasm, and thus are living absurdly. That is, our lives are absurd at the existential level. To be clear, for Nagel, this level of

⁵¹ Ibid., 718.

⁵² Ibid., 720.

absurdity is more than just existential; it is metaphysical. It is part of what defines human existence. Nonetheless, Nagel doesn't think this is a cause for despair, as some might conclude. Instead, he claims that "absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics...it is possible only because we possess a certain kind of insight — the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought."⁵³ Toward this end, he argues we should approach such a condition with irony. While he offers no suggestions as to what this might entail, as he mentions this in literally the last sentence of the essay, I argue that instead of living ironically as a way to cope with life's absurdity, we can do so humorously. I pick this argument back up in chapter 4 and now move onto discussing the theories of humor I employ throughout the dissertation.

Morreall's Basic Humor Process

John Morreall's explanation of our experience of humor gels with my move away from discovering *the* theory of humor and toward examining how we experience humorous incongruities. In what follows, I outline his theory, what Morreall calls the basic humor process, and discuss some of its limitations, while arguing that as a theory of humor experience, as opposed to a theory of humor, it captures well our experience of humor based in incongruity. To be clear, Morreall offers the following as his definition of humor; one he thinks accurately describes both our experience and what humor actually is. However, as argued previously, reducing humor to one overarching theory has proven unsuccessful and it runs the risk of excluding much of the richness in how we experience humor and how we express humor. For that reason, I accept Morreall's description as one

⁵³ Ibid., 726-27.

describing experience and reject that it is *the* explanation of humor. Here is how he outlines his theory:

- (1) We experience a *cognitive shift* — a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts.
- (2) We are in a *play mode* rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns.
- (3) Instead of responding to the cognitive shift with shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or other negative emotions, we *enjoy* it.
- (4) Our pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in *laughter*, which signals to others that they can relax and play too.⁵⁴

The first part of his explanation seems to outline what happens when we experience incongruity generally. For example, the set up for jokes and funny stories often have a twist such that our expectations of how things are proceeding within the joke or story are violated, and we make a conceptual shift in order to make sense of that twist. This is where the incongruity of the piece of humor arises. However, the same seems to hold true in experiencing a word puzzle or in solving a difficult math equation. In order to resolve the incongruity, we have to make a cognitive shift. Nonetheless, what Morreall's concept of the cognitive shift describes is the way in which we experience the internal play or flow of humor, as well as accounting for a broad spectrum of shifts, from vulgar to sophisticated, from children's jokes to *New Yorker* cartoons. However, as noted earlier, the perception of incongruity by itself isn't sufficient to produce a humorous reaction, we also need to enjoy that shift.

Part of what allows for this enjoyment is the play mode we enter into when engaging in humor. In this mode, we are distanced from certain emotions and practical concerns. This is important, in that when we are engaged with practical concerns directly, it is difficult to step back and see the humor in those situations. Matthew Hurley, Daniel

⁵⁴ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 50.

Dennett, and Reginald Adams describe something similar in outlining their humor theory.⁵⁵ They argue we need to be distant enough from emotions with strong negative valences so that they neither interfere with entering in the play mode nor dissolve the enjoyment experienced. (As a side note, Lippitt sees a connection here to Nagel's idea of our ability to step back and question the validity of all justifications.⁵⁶)

However, this strikes some as problematic. Deborah Brown, in critiquing Morreall's theory of humor for the affective distancing he claims necessary to the humor experience, does so in part because it seems to ignore the research in areas such as neuroscience on the importance of affect to cognition.⁵⁷ Her concern is that Morreall and his ilk deny that affect plays any central part in the experience of humor, and, she argues, since affect directs reason, and as the recognition and resolution of incongruity so central to humor is a cognitive activity, then what is it, she asks, that directs this activity? For Brown it is the emotion of wonder. Interestingly, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams claim something similar, arguing that emotions direct reason, calling them epistemic emotions, with mirth being the emotion motivating humorous cognition.⁵⁸

While both agreeing with Brown that affect plays a central role in motivating reason and admitting that Morreall doesn't do enough to account for this, I argue Morreall does have a response to her critique. Morreall isn't claiming is that this distancing capacity of humor is a distance from all affect, as enjoyment is an affective state, nor is he denying that cognition in general is directed by the passions. The emotions one needs distance from are

⁵⁵ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes*, 121.

⁵⁶ John Lippitt, "Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, no. 1 (1992): 46.

⁵⁷ Deborah Brown, "What Part of 'Know' don't You Understand?," *Monist* 88, no. 1 (2005).

⁵⁸ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes*, 13.

just those that would interfere with the necessary emotional and practical detachment needed for humorously experiencing the incongruity of the moment. Furthermore, it's unclear that Morreall would exclude such emotions as wonder from the set he thinks compatible with humor. For one, wonder and play go hand in hand, so, if we are in a play mode when experiencing humor, then it makes sense that wonder could direct us to discover a way to resolve the incongruity we perceive, and one avenue we could take is that of humor. Moreover, Morreall argues amusement is the state we are in when engaging with humor, though he argues in *Comic Relief* and elsewhere that amusement is not an emotion.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, there is some contention as to whether this is the case, with some arguing amusement contra Morreall is in fact an affective state.⁶⁰ Whatever the case concerning the affective status of amusement, Morreall does not see it as problematic for his theory if one adheres to this line of argumentation. Here too one could argue that amusement being a mental state could also involve affect, such as wonder, joy excitement, a sense of well-being, and so on without claiming that there is a particular emotion called amusement. Nevertheless, the state of amusement seems to include both a distancing effect, as well as a level of enjoyableness, and this is how it ties to Morreall's theory of humor. Therefore, while Morreall never explicitly responds to Brown's critique, there is reason to interpret Morreall as at least being sympathetic to Brown's point.

Moreover, there is a connection between enjoying something and playfulness. We enter easily into a play mode in such situations where we know enjoyable things are supposed to happen, such as in comedy clubs or at a movie theater. Additionally, most

⁵⁹ John Morreall, "Humor and Emotion," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York, 1987).

⁶⁰ Robert Sharpe, "Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is an Emotion," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York, 1987).

jokes have verbal cues that tell us “what’s about to happen is meant to be taken humorously.” That is, as Morreall notes, there is a fictionalization of the events being told and this lets us know they aren’t to be interpreted seriously. Even when humor is unexpected (e.g., Freudian slips or someone making a funny noise at an unexpected time), the cognitive shift itself can put us into a play mode instantly such that we enjoy that shift and thus find or experience the humor of the situation.

Morreall claims there are three aspects to the enjoyment of or pleasure in humor. The first is that it is social, the second that it is exhilarating, and the third that it is liberating. Much of how we experience humor is in the company of others, whether physical or digital. We tell each others jokes, we watch funny movies together, we attend comedy events with large groups of people, and we usually demonstrate our enjoyment by laughing along with others. It is certainly the case that you can find something humorous when alone, such as when you are driving to a doctor’s appointment that is in the opposite direction you take to work, but because you’re distracted, leave as if you’re going to work and only catch yourself going the wrong way once you’re headed down the road. You then laugh at your mistake, at the incongruity between habit and intent, and turn around and head back the way you came. However, we mostly experience humor with others, and it can be difficult to find humor in situations when you’re alone, though, on recounting them to a friend, the humor in the situation can seem obvious.

For the second aspect, Morreall uses the terms exhilarating or lively to describe the play of thought that happens when encountering humor. For example, a rapid-fire exchange of wits with a friend, or the punch line to a joke, or the shock of a clown slipping enlivens the mind. This exhilaration is akin to solving a problem or having an insight. While

we may have been in calm contemplation prior to our discovery, once we find a solution, our thinking quickens, and we might even smile or laugh to express our enjoyment. Lastly, humor is liberating. With humor, we can play with ideas and expressions, say things that in polite company would be frowned upon. Moreover, humor allows us to challenge beliefs and ideas that we find problematic, either within ourselves or externally, and present the problematic in a less aggrieving manner. And we can embrace unreason, make the ludicrous or the incredulous seem normal and vice versa, thus gaining a new perspective on things, liberating us from mental ruts. Accordingly, Morreall's conception of humorous enjoyment is complex. We don't simply like humor (though it can be enjoyed simply); our enjoyment is richer than that. It's a social experience that's enlivening and liberating, it challenges us to consider things anew in exciting ways, even if only briefly.

The last condition is that our enjoyment of the cognitive shift is (generally) expressed in laughter. Morreall points out that whether or not people think of humor in terms of "cognitive shift" or "play mode," they definitely understand the link between humor and laughter. Historically, it wasn't until the late seventeenth century that humor and laughter were separated. This is in part explained by how humor develops in humans. As Paul McGhee notes in his study on the development of humor and laughter in humans, human infants begin laughing around 4 months of age, whereas humor development is tied to language development and happens much later.⁶¹ Undeniably, of the phenomena that cause us to laugh, the cognitive shift is a common feature of most, as many of our reactions to various forms of incongruity are expressed through laughter. As previously mentioned,

⁶¹ Paul E. McGhee, *Humor: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1979). Aristotle also noted that laughter happens around 4 months of age, but with the caveat that only when a baby laughed did it become human.

being surprised, discovering a solution to a problem, and being told a joke all involve cognitive shifts where our enjoyment is often expressed by laughing. There are exceptions, of course, either where the laughter has nothing to do with a cognitive shift (such as a nervous disorder) or where the cognitive shift isn't enjoyable (such as embarrassment), but, nonetheless, laughter and cognitive shifting are often coterminous.

While I will discuss laughter as it relates to my various ideas on humor throughout the dissertation, my focus is on humor and its educative potential and so I don't explore laughter, nor do I have anything interesting to say about it. I realize it may seem strange to both want to focus on the experience of humor and exclude laughter from the discussion. Nonetheless, as noted in the introduction, one reason I exclude laughter is that many of the reasons we laugh have nothing to do with humor, as Robert Provine notes in his study of laughter.⁶² As a reminder, laughter is, according to Provine's work, often beyond our conscious control, often used as a type of social emollient, and not as an indicator of whether something was either funny or humorous. There are two examples that come to mind in this regard. The first is one he mentions, that in venues like comedy clubs, much of the laughter serves as a signal to others that you are having a good time, that everyone is part of the group, and that everyone "gets it." The laughter in places like comedy clubs also has to do with the contagious nature of laughter, sometimes called contact laughter. That is, we tend to laugh harder, louder, and longer when others are doing the same. The other example is that of everyday learned responses. For instance, we often smile or laugh on greeting each other, or we might nervously laugh when someone is making us uncomfortable, or even when we don't know the answer to a question. For example, if we

⁶² Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

are asked for directions to some place in town, we often laugh as we apologize for not knowing the answer. None of these situations are necessarily what we consider humorous situations, but they all involve laughter.

Richards' Playful Appreciation of Incongruity

While Morreall's explanation of humor and my claim that it also works as a description of the experience of humor, especially incongruity types of humor, serves the purpose of broadly laying out that experience, Richard Richards defines humor in a simple, yet elegant way, emphasizing certain aspects of the experience I find helpful to this project. He states, "Humor, as I understand it is the playful appreciation of incongruities."⁶³ Richards, in agreement with Morreall, notes the importance of being in a playful frame of mind in regards to interpreting incongruities humorously, both its creation and appreciation. He defines appreciation as "the process of recognizing the worth of something,"⁶⁴ noting further that "the kind of appreciation involved in exercising the sense of humor...is evaluative, it involves the possession of relevant knowledge, and it works independent of liking," comparing appreciation of humor to aesthetic appreciation.⁶⁵ The sense of humor, then, is the "attitude or set of attitudes that involve a tendency to notice, explore, and sometimes create incongruities, and to appreciate them in a playful way that is usually pleasurable."⁶⁶ For Richards, it's not just that we are in a play mode when engaging with humor, it's that without playing with the incongruities we experience, or, put differently, without playfully enjoying those incongruities and without appreciating that play, we aren't engaging in humor. This added element of appreciation is important for

⁶³ Richard C. Richards, *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor* (Healing Time Books, 2013), 30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

chapter 4 and developing a humorist worldview, but one weakness of Richards' theory is that he does not give much weight to the emotions in the experience of humor. He does agree with Morreall, at least indirectly, that there is no specific humorous emotion (he doesn't address whether amusement is an emotional state), and instead emphasizes attitudes over emotions, arguing that attitudes are habits built over time and emotions are short-lived, physiological phenomena. It is unclear what role emotions play in the development of attitudes for Richards, as he doesn't go into detail on how attitudes develop, except to note they are long-term structures that direct perceptions, beliefs, and even emotions and how we understand those things. However, as Brown notes above, this seems to ignore much of the work done in neuroscience about the interplay of affect and cognition and how affect directs the activity of cognition.

Similar to the defense of Morreall above, I acknowledge that Brown's critique holds for Richards as well, but still argue his ideas allow for a space where emotions play a central role in motivating the establishment of attitudes, especially those involved in the sense of humor. For instance, as we develop our appreciation and enjoyment of interpreting incongruities in a humorous way, what motivates such an interpretation is not only the affective state of pleasure (that is, pleasure or enjoyment to some extent involves "feeling good"), but we also notice the pleasure others take in our interpretations. This further motivates us to pay attention to what those around us find both funny and humorous.⁶⁷ That is, there are feelings of belonging, pleasure, joy, friendship, and so on involved in the social experience of humor, and these affective states motivate the development of the set of attitudes necessary for detecting and playfully interpreting

⁶⁷ Richards argues that we first develop a sense of the funny, that is, a sense of what elicits laughter, and then we develop the sense of humor through attending to the disjunction of humor and laughter.

incongruities humorously. What is appealing about this formulation is its emphasis on both appreciation and attitude.

In adopting Richards understanding of humor, then, I also add to it an important motivating role for the emotions he leaves out. One of the dangers of focusing on incongruity as it relates to humor is that of making humor too cerebral, too much a function of one's cognition. While both Richards and Morreall recognize a place for affect through the pleasure experienced with engaging in the humorous interpretation of incongruity, both fall short of recognizing the central motivating role it plays in directing just such an interpretation, as Brown argues. Moreover, affect also plays a role in how we express humor as well, something neither Richards nor Morreall discuss. If humor is a social experience, then so is how we express that experience and it is in this expression that affect helps guide us. Take for instance the concept of timing in stand-up comedy. Whatever is involved in timing, one aspect of it is the feeling or intuition comics develop in both delivering their material, but also in shaping its expression. Certainly pausing at the proper moment to allow for laughter is important, but more so than that, shaping the material so that it both expresses that particular comic's unique worldview and delivering such in a way that influences the mood of the audience is an affective skill. In developing this sense of timing, the comic takes both an epistemic step back, seeking to find the places where audiences react most favorably, while developing an intuition as to how to move the audience where they want them to be when delivering the punch line. All of this is to say, that in accounting for our experience of humor, what's important is to recognize the interplay of cognition and affect, and we miss such if too focused on one aspect over the other.

Educational Understandings

If I am claiming that humor is potentially educative, one would be right to ask how I understand the concepts of education and the associated terms educative and educational. I draw on two definitions of education, with the first offered by Mordechai Gordon in his book *Humor and Human Flourishing*. Gordon defines the term broadly, claiming education refers to “any interaction among human beings in which intellectual learning, emotional development, or moral or spiritual edification takes place.”⁶⁸ There are several things this definition captures that are helpful in understanding humor’s educative potential. The first is that education is a social experience “among human beings.” While Gordon does not go into detail about his definition, we can conjecture that he thinks education particular to humans without denying that other animals (as well as other organisms) learn. The same claim has been made concerning humor and laughter, that they are peculiarly human attributes. Whether this is actually the case in either regard, what is true about both humor and education is that they are social experiences. While we can certainly engage in both humor and education alone, we are introduced to them through social means (language, group settings, norms, mores, etc.), and we mostly engage in them while interacting with others. Furthermore, through engaging in education and educational activities (studying, group projects, reflective writing, etc.), we come to understand others, ourselves, and the relationship between the two more fully.

Next, education encompasses several facets of our existence. There is cognitive growth through learning a host of information, discovering how that information fits together into systems of information, and how to solve problems that come about when

⁶⁸ Mordechai Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing: A Philosophical Exploration of the Laughing Animal* (New York: Springer, 2014), 67.

that information comes into conflict, that is, when incongruity arises. We also develop emotionally throughout the various education processes we engage in throughout our lives. Not only learning to recognize, differentiate, and name our emotions and emotional states, we also come to better appreciate their complexity, how to adjudicate among conflicting emotions, and how to express our feelings. Furthermore, we are exposed to a range of emotional expressions through both our interactions with others, as well as through the various (con)texts we encounter. These interactions transform us, for better or worse. The same holds true for humor in that our sense of humor develops over time through coming to recognize how we and others interpret incongruities humorously and how those interpretations are expressed and when it is appropriate to express them. If we take Hurley, Dennett, and Adams' theory of humor as being partially correct, there is a further connection with humor in that what motivates our engagement with it is the epistemic emotion of mirth. This would also account for Brown's assertion that humor, as a type of reasoning, is motivated by the emotion of wonder.⁶⁹

Lastly, when we engage in education we also engage in moral and spiritual edification. On the moral front, we learn what is right and wrong, what is polite, what is helpful and hurtful, and at an early age, we begin figuring out the kind of person we want to be, a process that lasts the rest of our lives. We are exposed to rules, laws, consequences, rewards and punishments, both through formal (schooling) and informal (peer interactions) means. All this produces the type of moral person we both are and are becoming. On the spiritual side, we learn about religious and aesthetic aspects of our existence, the divine and the beautiful, good and evil, transcendence and sin, how humans have sought to

⁶⁹ This idea of humor as type of reasoning I leave to others to explore, though I do recognize this a s rich vein to as yet be mined in humor studies.

capture a vast array of the ineffable, in ways great and small. Humor too speaks to the moral and spiritual components of human existence. Satire censures those in power, and parables exemplify human foibles. Humor also allows for enjoyment of our absurd existence, allows us to laugh with pleasure at our daily experience of incongruity, to make light of what could otherwise be a stultifying life. That is, humor is one way to live aesthetically. For Gordon, education encompasses a wide assortment of types of learning, learning we participate in with other people, learning that is both turned inward and expressed through our behavior toward others. That is, education, it would seem, is about how to live a life, about how learning to live a life is a life-long endeavor, that it transforms us in the process.

Morreall agrees with this sentiment, stating, "Education is supposed to be preparation for life. It should foster the intellectual and personal attributes needed to be a successful, well-rounded human being."⁷⁰ Both Morreall and Gordon agree that education is about how to live a human life, though for Gordon something only counts as educative if it partakes of the types of learning he mentions (though it's hard to imagine what doesn't). For Morreall, something could be considered educative even if it didn't prepare one for life, presumably, though he might be apt to label such miseducation. Both authors agree that education involves intellectual growth (what Morreall calls attributes), indicating there are several attributes that go into being educated. The same holds true for personal attributes as well, and I take this phrase to indicate something similar to Gordon's emotional development and moral and spiritual edification. Or, at least in calling emotional, moral, and spiritual learning personal attributes, this seems unproblematic if we take "personal"

⁷⁰ John Morreall, "Humor, Philosophy and Education," *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 120.

to mean something like “strongly related to the self.” Morreall gives education a more specific end than preparation for life, however.

He makes the normative claim that the intellectual and personal attributes of the individual should be fostered to the extent they lead to a successful, well rounded human being. Nonetheless, he never articulates what he means either by “successful” or “well-rounded,” but perhaps I can do so for him. Broadly speaking, we can take “successful” to indicate a general level of well-being in the areas of physical health, financial stability, personal and professional relationships, one’s inner life, and so on. This would be the case to the extent that an individual is capable of leading a relatively content life. To be “well rounded” usually refers to being highly capable in several aspects of the subject to which that descriptor applies. For example, a well-rounded baseball player has a decent batting average, can field the ball well, has a good understanding of the strategies inherent in the game, and so forth. That is, he doesn’t stand out in any one respect to the exclusion of other skills necessary for the game, but instead is recognized as someone who is capable at most, if not all, of those skills. To be a well-rounded human being not only indicates the same factors as being a successful individual, but also indicates familiarity with and a certain level of facility in human beingness. Put differently, the well-rounded person has close friendships, is a good romantic partner, reflects on her past mistakes, gets along well with her colleagues, is good at her job, knows how to productively handle the frustrations she encounters, keeps current on the issues of the day, can successfully operate her smartphone, etc. A well-rounded human being also has a certain level of appreciation for the aesthetic, has some level of spiritual sense, and is concerned with things other than her immediate situation.

It seems then, according to Morreall's definition, education operates at two levels. I argue this is the case since preparation for life, while being a necessary condition for becoming a well-rounded human being, isn't sufficient for being such. At the base level, education should prepare us to lead a life, a life that meets our basic needs for food, shelter, personal relationships, mental and physical health, being a productive member of our community, and so on. It fosters a basic set of intellectual, personal, and social attributes that allows for deeper forms of education, both in the sense of providing cognitive skills to acquire those forms, but also gestures toward why one might want to pursue at least some forms of deeper education. Once someone heads down this path then, arguably they are on the road to becoming well rounded. From Morreall's definition, we can see connections to humor, some of which he makes explicit and which I discuss in more detail in later chapters. For example, humor can foster certain virtues according to Morreall, such as patience and open-mindedness. It can also strengthen friendships, a point Gordon makes, as well as resolve tensions in situations involving conflict.

The question, then, is in light of the definitions just discussed, in what ways is humor educative? One connection is that both humor and education are concerned with our experience of incongruity. For humor, incongruity is central to our experience of humor, but how we interpret and express such an experience is what counts as humor. Education too is concerned with incongruities. In one sense, education imparts in us the tools necessary for both discovering the tensions between our expectations and our experiences of the world around us, as well as resolving at least some of those tensions. Humor is part of the enjoyment we experience in living a human life, and education too is part of this enjoyment. Humor contributes to being a well-rounded, morally and spiritually

edified human being, and education is central to such endeavors as previously noted. Humor involves cognition in the recognition and resolution of incongruities, and in the playful interpretation of those incongruities. It involves affect in the enjoyment we take in interpreting those incongruities humorously, in the motivating role it plays, as well as in the social experience often involved in expressing and engaging with humor (as well as the laughter that usually accompanies such sociality). Humor, like education, can liberate us from taking things too seriously, from preconceived notions, and from being stuck in unthinking ways of acting. Humor, like education, can transform us.

With this set of definitions or understandings of humor and education, we begin to see how humor might be potentially educative, and how incongruity plays an important role in both my understanding of humor and education. In the next chapter, I discuss how humor as understood instrumentally can support or encourage learning, both in the classroom as well as in other areas, such as supporting certain moral virtues. I also introduce the concept of a quasi-intrinsic good, a concept that acknowledges those goods that straddle the line between instrumental goods and intrinsic goods, and I argue humor is just this type of good. These ideas lead eventually to my discussion of the humorist worldview in chapter 4, but first I explore the instrumental understands of humor.

CHAPTER 2

HUMOR, INSTRUMENTALITY, AND EDUCATION

Part of how I understand the term “educational” in this dissertation is as an “interaction among human beings in which intellectual learning, emotional development, or moral or spiritual edification takes place.”⁷¹ Additionally, education is supposed to prepare us for life and “should foster the intellectual and personal attributes needed to be a successful, well-rounded human being.”⁷² Added to these components, I also understand education to be transformational, that one cannot enter into an educative activity without being changed. If this is what it means for something to be educative, then in what ways does humor fit within this conception? Or, put differently, how is our experience of humor educative? To answer this, chapter 2 outlines perhaps the most common way, generally speaking, we understand or engage with humor: instrumentally. By this I mean that many of the ways humor is utilized are done instrumentally so, with the most familiar being its use for entertainment purposes. Nevertheless, outside of humor’s entertainment value, humor’s worth is often described in terms of how it supports or enhances things deemed more worthwhile, such as moral virtues or social cohesion. In this regard, humor is educative to the extent it contributes to “intellectual learning, emotional development, or moral or spiritual edification.” That is, humor too becomes educative in its role as supporting player in the various ways some other endeavor is educative.

In order to see how humor is involved in these endeavors and how it supports “preparation for life” toward the ultimate end of becoming a “successful, well-rounded

⁷¹ Mordechai Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing: A Philosophical Exploration of the Laughing Animal* (New York: Springer, 2014), 67.

⁷² John Morreall, "Humor, Philosophy and Education," *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 120.

human being,” I discuss the instrumental use humor is often put to for educative purposes. This involves a discussion in three parts. In the first part, I sketch the difference between the concepts of instrumental and intrinsic goods, as well as noting a middle category, those things both worth pursuing for their own sake and yet are not considered purely intrinsic. I call the goods in this category quasi-intrinsic. The next section discusses instances of the use of humor that are narrowly instrumental through exploring whether humor has a positive impact on learning and why this might be the case. In this section, I focus on whether and how humor contributes to learning within an educational context. From here, I move on to how humor is instrumental in a general sense, such as in its ability to entertain us, reduce stress, or strengthen various virtues. While it is certainly the case that some of these effects or benefits apply to an educational context, they are not exclusive to such contexts. In the last section, I discuss the limitations of understanding and engaging with humor in primarily instrumental ways.

The Instrumental and the Intrinsic

The terms “instrumental” and “intrinsic” are often set within the context of explorations of the good life, human flourishing, what makes for a full life, and so on. Within this category, much of the conversation concerns things (objects, goals or ends, actions, activities, something’s worth, etc.) that either contribute to or detract from either obtaining or pursuing the good life. I use the terms “goods” as a stand-in for this set of things for the sake of consistency. Furthermore and traditionally speaking, there are two broad categories of goods discussed in relation to pursuing or obtaining the good life: instrumental and intrinsic goods. In general, we understand a good to be an instrumental good or instrumentally valuable when it is utilized in some fashion to achieve an end

beyond itself. Some goods we utilize have no value beyond their use to achieve some further end or goal and are purely instrumental. Money, hammers, and computers are examples of this, as their only use is to secure some further good we find desirable. Additionally, we utilize instrumental goods to obtain other instrumental goods, such as using a hammer and nails to make a bookshelf for the sole purpose of holding books. One thing to note is that I discuss the concept of instrumentality in relation to goods that are in service to something else. This is in contrast to another way of understanding instrumentality, that of adopting an instrumental attitude or worldview. While I will discuss this understanding in the last section of the chapter, for the time being, I focus on instrumentality in service to other things.

Other goods that arguably have intrinsic value, or are valuable independent of any advantage achieved or how one goes about obtaining the good, can also serve instrumental ends. For example, while the Arts are arguably intrinsically valuable and should be included in a K-12 education for this reason alone, some proponents of Arts inclusion make the case for their importance to the school curriculum because they have been shown to raise standardized test scores. The hope here is that, through demonstrating their instrumental worth, performance-minded administrators are more likely to keep music, art, and dance programs in the school curriculum, with students apprehending their intrinsic value while also realizing their instrumental benefits. This last example brings up an important point; that of how the instrumental is often contrasted with that which has intrinsic worth, where intrinsically valuable goods are worth pursuing independent of any benefit accrued (and even in some cases where some type of detriment might accrue), and instrumental goods are held in lower regard or are seen as secondarily important.

Intrinsically valuable goods are what make life worth living, while instrumentally valuable goods are both how we often go about obtaining intrinsic goods, while adding to or supporting a comfortable existence.

One way to think about this contrast is to consider some of things that make our life worth living, but that could be substituted for something else without diminishing the quality of our life and thus inhibiting the pursuit of a good life. Take the example of music. While a life without music would be a greatly diminished one, the type of music and the ways one enjoys such can be substituted for each other. For instance, it isn't necessary to be able to play an instrument or carry a tune to pursue the intrinsic good of music, just as it makes no difference if one hates rap and only listens to Nickelback. The instrumental ways one chooses to apprehend the intrinsic good of music are substitutable, and are therefore of secondary importance to enjoying music in general. Or, by way of another somewhat controversial example, love is worth pursuing for its own sake in addition to the things it adds to one's life. That is, if my life were loveless, then it seems clear my life would be diminished in that I'm not really living much of a life. However, the kinds of love I choose to pursue, romantic, filial, or platonic, are arguably instrumental in the sense of being substitutable for one another in obtaining the larger intrinsic good of a love-filled life. As an adult, if I choose to embrace the love of my friends to the exclusion of finding a romantic partner, then, while I might miss out on those experiences involving romantic love (and perhaps filial love as well to some extent), I'm still living a life full of love.⁷³

From the above it becomes clear that instrumental and intrinsic goods are interwoven in two senses. The first is that in order to achieve certain goals or obtain

⁷³ I admit this would need more argumentation to be completely convincing, but that is beyond the scope of this dissertation as this is only an example.

certain goods, we have to employ instrumental means, such as money. That is, often in pursuing intrinsic goods I must pursue instrumental goods as well. In order to strengthen my friendships, I need to spend time with my friends, and in order to do that I often need to spend money on travel, entertainment, and gifts. It is not the case that any one of these things is necessary to friendship, but due to certain cultural constraints (gift giving in recognition of special occasions) and life choices (pursuing a certain career that requires one to move away), money becomes a necessary instrument by which my friendships remain solid. And those friendships are part of what constitute the good life. The second way these two concepts are interwoven is due to our ability to treat something we generally think of as intrinsically worthwhile as only instrumentally so. For instance, education is often described only in terms of what it can do for future careers and earnings, or increasing test scores and not in the sense of it being a central component of a rich human existence. However, there does seem to be a third category (or perhaps boundary zone is a better description) we can utilize when it is unclear whether something fits within the instrumental or intrinsic category. That is, there seem to be goods that are pursued for their own sake as well as for how they contribute to some future or further good or set of goods, what I call quasi-intrinsic goods.

Quasi-Intrinsic Goods

There are two ways, I argue, quasi-intrinsic goods occur or come about. One is that through utilizing an instrumental good or process in pursuit of something intrinsically valuable one ends up pursuing that instrumental good worth for its own sake. Here I mean this in the sense that one feels one's life would be significantly diminished if that (now quasi-intrinsic) good were not available. It is not the case that I'm arguing the instrumental

good becomes a wholly intrinsic good, just that it moves beyond its instrumental function. For instance, Lilith might exercise regularly in order to improve her cardiovascular health, so as to lower her cholesterol and reduce the chances of some catastrophic cardiac event, and thus be able to meet her familial obligations fully. Through developing this habit, she discovers she actually enjoys exercising for its own sake, as well as both the external and internal improvements it brings. Or, someone might learn various programming languages in order to pursue a career as a software developer and discover a kind of beauty in making order out of chaos and bringing into reality something previously only imagined. That is, one feels that one's life is importantly diminished by not pursuing these things, even if these new goods are only recently (and perhaps temporarily) transformed from the wholly instrumental into the quasi-intrinsic. In the case of exercise, it could be that Lilith reaches a level of fitness such that she is satisfied enough to pursue other things, that is, she reimagines her own flourishing in terms that don't include exercise as more than instrumentally valuable. Alternatively, it could be the case that exercise is no longer an option due to other time constraints, and so Lilith re-envision her life such that regular exercise loses its status as quasi-intrinsic and once again becomes wholly instrumental.

Humor can be quasi-intrinsic in this way. Imagine that, someone named Mande writes for a popular television sketch comedy program and has a knack for turning a joke, for seeing how to make the mundane funny or make the already comedic funnier. However, this skill isn't anything more than a way to pay the bills and the thing she's most passionate about is poignant love stories set in future, fantastical lands. Because on an almost daily basis Mande is reinterpreting mundane events and experiences in a comedic light, she comes to see how worthwhile such a practice is to not only her career but to the thing she's

most passionate about, her poignant sci-fi stories. Furthermore, she becomes unable to imagine not engaging with humor in all most all facets of her life. That is, the thing that had once been only instrumental has now become something the absence of which would diminish the quality of her life on more than a financial level.

The other type of a quasi-intrinsic good is that of something that is both pursued for its own sake and supports the obtaining of a further intrinsic good. This is a subtle distinction, but an important one. In the above category, an instrumental good is transformed into a quasi-intrinsic good, whereas in this second case the good is already a quasi-intrinsic good. Humor serves as a good example of this category as humor is the type of good that is *almost always* in the service of something else.⁷⁴ For instance, humor is often used in conjunction with comedy to entertain and produce laughter. Or, humor can help one step back and not take so seriously the situation one finds oneself in, such as when one is running late and can't find one's keys. Humor in these instances serves some larger purpose beyond simply engaging in humor for its own sake. However, a life without humor is a diminished life. On meeting someone with a stilted sense of humor, we find them off-putting and wonder what happened to make them so strange and feel that they are missing something important. Alternatively, when we say someone has a good sense of humor, this can indicate that not only does this person laugh easily, but also that she takes life's vicissitudes lightly, that she has a good perspective on their impact on her life. While it is rarely the case that we meet someone with no sense of humor, we can imagine that if such a person exists, they would be more automaton than human.

⁷⁴ Other things such as mindfulness or contemplation are goods that fall into this category.

Humor and the Narrowly Instrumental

Now that the stage has been set, I want to discuss narrowly instrumental uses of humor: Using humor to directly impact learning in a classroom setting. This is in contrast to the more indirect impact humor has in the schooling examples mentioned below, such as reducing stress and anxiety, which would arguably happen independent of the context in which the humor happened. Many teachers use humor in their classrooms, often as a matter of habit and disposition, but also with an eye toward positively impacting the learning environment in their classes. This being the case, then, we can ask two questions about this positive impact, both empirical in nature (as most discussions of instrumentality necessitate): Is there evidence that humor does in fact impact learning positively? If so, what accounts for this positive impact?

Humor and Learning: Two Examples

To the first question, there is a definite, though not absolute, answer in the affirmative. Much of the empirical literature on humor's use in educational settings is concerned with humor's impact on learning and the learning environment. It makes sense that a behavior so widely engaged with by both students and teachers would draw the attention of those interested in establishing what behaviors used in a classroom setting impact how people learn. Toward that end, I discuss two studies: the first claims to demonstrate a direct connection between humor and learning, and the second that demonstrates a more indirect connection.

The first study, conducted by Avner Ziv, consists of two experiments. The initial experiment was conducted in a one-semester introductory statistics course, and the second, a replication experiment, was conducted in a one-semester introductory psychology

course.⁷⁵ Both studies divided the participants into a non-humor and a humor group and examined the students' performance on the final exam. In the initial experiment, the same teacher taught both groups the entire semester, and was instructed in the optimal amount of humor to use per class session (3-4 times) with the humor group, and used humor related to the course material in a very specific way: 1. The instructor taught the concept. 2. The instructor illustrated the concept using either a joke or a cartoon. 3. The instructor then paraphrased the concept after the laughter subsided.⁷⁶ For the replication experiment, a different instructor taught both the control and experimental groups of students, though he had been present in the previous course and was trained in the proper teaching procedure used in the previous experiment. For both experiments, the humor group outperformed the control group by approximately 10% on the final exam, which consisted of 50 multiple choice questions on the material covered using the humor intervention.

The second study was importantly different, in that this study sought to examine student perceptions of their own learning in relation to perceived teacher humor orientation (HO), or the disposition to produce humorous messages.⁷⁷ Melissa Wanzer and Ann Frymier surveyed 314 students across two introductory communications courses, asking them to first complete a 17-item self-report measuring their humor orientation. The students were then asked to think about the instructor that had taught the class immediately before the communication course they were currently in, and filled out a humor orientation survey on that instructor. All data were collected in the 11th week of a

⁷⁵ Avner Ziv, "Teaching and Learning with Humor: Experiment and Replication," *Journal of Experimental Education* 57, no. 1 (1988).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁷ Melissa Bekelja Wanzer and Ann Bainbridge Frymier, "The Relationship Between Student Perceptions of Instructor Humor and Students' Reports of Learning," *Communication Education* 48, no. 1 (1999).

16-week semester. What Wanzer and Frymier found was that “students indicated that they learned more from instructors perceived as high HO’s,” that is, “When students perceived their teacher as having a high humor orientation, students reported...performing more learning activities.”⁷⁸

While these are not the only studies to demonstrate a connection between humor and learning, they do offer an interesting picture of instrumental uses of humor in service to an important educational activity, that of learning the course concepts and, in Ziv’s case at least, being able to demonstrate mastery. Ziv’s study used humor in a constricted way, regulating the content (course-related), type (joke or cartoon), duration (3-4 times every class period for an entire semester), and delivery (the 3-step process mentioned earlier) of the humor in order to solidify the learning of the concepts being humorously illustrated. While he gives no explanation in this particular article as to why humor increases the learning of course concepts, in other places he argues that humor contributes to learning through its ability to gain and hold students’ attention. This explanation seems unproblematic, as humor is often used as an attention getter in public speaking, as a way to relax the audience and bring them along with you as you communicate your message, and the same could and does hold true in the classroom. It is obvious that, as a teacher, I need my students to pay attention to my explanation of important and unfamiliar concepts in order to increase the chances they will learn those concepts. As for humor also keeping students’ attention, perhaps it something similar to watching a comedy or stand-up performance. Since there is an expectation built through anticipation of the next joke, and students come to expect that more humor will be used throughout the class period, they

⁷⁸ Ibid., 57.

thus pay more attention in anticipation of the next joke. Alternatively, perhaps it is the case that the humor snaps students' from the boredom they were experiencing, allowing them to refocus their attention. Here the humor is not so much maintaining attention as allowing students the space to maintain it themselves. Whatever the case, it seems plausible that this explanation of humor's contribution to learning is at least sometimes accurate.

Furthermore, this explanation also reinforces an understanding of humor as wholly instrumental, while recognizing its importance as one tool to increase the chances of students' learning the course concepts and achieving the intrinsically worthwhile goal of receiving an education.

Wanzer and Frymier's study differs in its explanation of how humor contributes to learning. Here we see that students think of themselves as more motivated to engage in "learning activities" in those classes where the instructors are thought of as having a high humor orientation. If this is the case, what explains such a connection? For Wanzer and Frymier, it is the concept of "immediacy." Charla Crump defines immediacy as "behaviors which reduce physical and psychological distance between those interacting and enhance closeness to one another."⁷⁹ Behaviors such as learning student names, initiating discussions with students before or after class, and using personal examples are examples of immediacy behaviors. A study conducted by Joan Gorham and Diane Christophel, which Wanzer and Frymier use as evidence for their assertions, sought to understand the relationship between humor, immediacy behaviors, and learning. They found, "Teachers use of humor in the classroom is related to learning and that the most desirable learning outcomes are associated with the quality as much as the quantity of humor used in

⁷⁹ Charla A Crump, "Teacher Immediacy: What Students Consider to be Effective Teacher Behaviors," (ERIC Document Reproduction Services, 1996), 3.

conjunction with other immediacy behaviors.”⁸⁰ That is, the use of humor without utilizing other immediacy behaviors showed no correlation with increased learning, while the use of course-relevant humor in conjunction with other behaviors shows a positive correlation. This, then, helps explain why students who perceive their instructors as having a high humor orientation are more motivated to engage in learning activities, and, ultimately, to learn the course material.

Here again humor has instrumental value in relation to learning by increasing motivation through increasing the affective connection among student, instructor, and course concepts. One important difference between the studies is that for Wanzer and Frymier, how instructors use humor is less important than for Ziv, though both admit the humor needs to relate to the course content to be most effective. This lack of strict technique for delivering humor would allow for a more free-flowing style of humor, which would appeal to those instructors whose humor style is off the cuff. Whatever the case, humor used in this narrowly instrumental manner seems to show educative benefits and therein lies its educative potential through its support in motivating learning activities and its contribution in learning course concepts and the learning environment in general.

Humor as Generally Instrumental

This section discusses humor how humor is either used in generally instrumental ways or has purely instrumental benefits. In that regard, I explore three instrumental uses of humor. The first is humor as entertainment, the second is humor and behavior management, and the third examines humor’s contribution to both intellectual and moral virtues.

⁸⁰ Joan Gorham and Diane M. Christophel, "The Relationship of Teachers' Use of Humor in the Classroom to Immediacy and Student Learning," *Communication Education* 39, no. 1 (1990): 61.

Humor as Entertainment

While most people do not associate education with entertainment, with some even claiming they're mutually opposed, entertainment arguably supports educational activities through offering a respite from everyday concerns and cares and making things more interesting. Entertainment is meant for distraction, to allow us time to enjoy something purely for the sake of enjoying it without any larger project or agenda. Entertainment serves the important function of giving us a break from the practical and lets us see how fun, enjoyable, and interesting life can be when we disengage from our concerns. Furthermore and arguably, we encounter humor largely through avenues of entertainment. Television, movies, online sites, and joking around with friends and family are all ways we engage with humor as entertainment on a regular basis. In fact, humor is practically synonymous with comedic entertainment in all its varieties, whether it is through such things as stand-up, sketch, rom-com, black comedy, humorous writing, or joke-telling. Richards actually defines comedy as "the attempt to provoke laughter in others,"⁸¹ which supports his demarcation between the sense of the funny and the sense of humor.

The argument being that as we grow from childhood to adulthood, we begin to develop a sense both of what makes us laugh and what makes others laugh. Richards calls this the sense of the funny. This grounds the later development of our sense of humor as we discover that some of what makes us laugh are the playful ways we interpret the incongruities we experience. Moreover, as our aesthetic sense grows, we come to appreciate the humorous interpretation we give these incongruities, thus leading to the playful appreciation of incongruity he defines as the sense of humor. Of course, in

⁸¹ Richard C. Richards, *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor* (Healing Time Books, 2013), 28.

discovering what makes us and others laugh, we do so through many of the avenues of entertainment mentioned. By observing our parents and siblings tell jokes, through the silly antics of cartoon characters, and by saying things and noticing how others, especially adults, respond to those things and repeating and adjusting them to determine what else will happen, we come to understand how to be funny. In this way, comedic entertainment (taking Richards description as accurate in some sense) plays an important role in the development of richer forms of humor and the humorist worldview described later.

Admittedly, humor as entertainment is only weakly educative in the sense of broadly supporting educational activities. No doubt, taking a break from worries and obligations is helpful in becoming a well-rounded person in Morreall's sense. This is the case as it lets us enjoy life without needing to find any deeper meaning in our momentary activities, that is, it alleviates moral and epistemic burdens such that when they do arise we are better able to act in correct ways and have the mental fortitude to determine just what those correct ways are. Nevertheless, in order to achieve this instrumental good there are multiple activities and combinations of activities one could pursue, for example, meditation, hiking, running, or reading cozy mysteries. Since we encounter humor as entertainment regularly and often unintentionally, whereas with the activities mentioned we need to set aside time to indulge in them, this makes enjoying and creating humor for entertainment purposes an easy way in which to obtain the good of mental fortitude just described.

One other weakly educative benefit of humor as entertainment is its ability to gain and hold one's attention. This speaks to Ziv's explanation in the previous section of why humor might contribute to learning the course material, in that by presenting something in the relatively novel manner entertainment often does, we are more prone to pay attention.

Combined with the pleasure entertainment brings, we want more of it, and wait to see if that will happen, paying attention to the source of entertainment. That is, humor as entertainment can snap a students' mind out of a rut, bringing it back to the task at hand of learning the course concepts and content.

Humor and Behavior Management

I use the phrase "behavior management" in a broad sense to mean the encouragement and discouragement of certain behaviors, whether those behaviors are external actions or internal mental states. For example, I might seek to be a kinder person by quelling hateful thoughts about conference reviewers who seem to be more interested in pushing their intellectual agenda than actually engaging with the content of my proposal. I do so through repeating aloud the mantra "they're only human" and thus seek to glean what is helpful and usable from their comments and remember they are terribly flawed human beings and thus deserving of forgiveness. Humor, because it depends on the recognition and humorous reconciliation of incongruities, can be used to encourage and discourage certain behaviors, in ourselves as well as others. Moreover, humor is also pleasurable, as well as being strongly associated with the pleasure of laughter it often produces, and this too can be helpful in encouraging and discouraging behaviors.

John Meyer's study on the four functions of humor used in communication is a good example of humor's ability to encourage and discourage behaviors.⁸² The functions fall into two broad categories, unification and division, with the four functions being identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Often times in political speeches politicians draw on all four functions to achieve their ends. During candidate debates and rallies, not

⁸² John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (2000).

only will candidates mock those candidates from the opposing party, signaling that the people enjoying the digs (whether expressing such through laughter or not) both belong to the right party and understand why they're different from those that don't. They will also crack jokes about the policies and practices of other candidates in their own party running for the same office. These jokes serve the purposes of both identification and differentiation, and they "encapsulate [the candidates'] views into memorable phrases or short anecdotes, resulting in the clarification of issues or positions."⁸³ The hope is that those enjoying such humor will behave in the way wanted, by casting a vote in that candidate's favor, but also that in the future those voting will support the policies proposed by the candidate, the party, or both. Furthermore, through using humor in its identification function, candidates promote "right thinking" about their party and the opposing party.

Humor can also be used to reduce tension or stress due to such things as fear or anxiety. For instance, Stephen Rareshide surveyed approximately fifty 5th and 6th grade teachers and found that they used humor as a way to reduce tension in the classroom.⁸⁴ By reducing tension, students were less likely to act out. Scott Dickmeyer, in a review of the literature on humor in the classroom, noted that one benefit of using humor was to reduce student's fears or anxieties and notes that a study done by Debra Korobkin found humor "decreased academic stress, anxiety toward subject matter, dogmatism and class monotony."⁸⁵ Ronald Berk has conducted several reviews and studies testing whether humor used both in the instructions to and content of exams helps to reduce test anxiety

⁸³ Ibid., 319.

⁸⁴ Stephen W. Rareshide, "Humor in the Classroom: Implications for Teachers' Use of Humor in the Classroom," ed. U.S. Department of Education (Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, 1993).

⁸⁵ Debra Korobkin, "Humor in the Classroom: Considerations and Strategies," *College Teaching* 36 (1988): 155. Cited in Scott G. Dickmeyer, "Humor as an Instructional Practice: A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Humor Use in the Classroom" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association, New Haven, Conn., 1993), 8.

and increase performance.⁸⁶ He found that “students typically felt that humor was effective in reducing their anxiety and helping them to perform better on their exams.”⁸⁷ James Neuliep comments at the end of a study done on the use of humor by high school teachers, that these teachers use humor “as a way of putting students at ease, as an attention-getter, as a way of showing that the teacher is human, as a way to keep the class less formal, and to make learning more fun.”⁸⁸

In these instances, humor is used to encourage both external behaviors and internal emotional states with the goal of making learning more likely. Externally speaking, it is certainly the case that disruptive behavior is problematic in many ways. It interrupts the learning of the student(s) acting up and fellow classmates, and it puts the teacher in the position of having to punish those students, often publicly, which can lead to embarrassment and further acting out. In extreme cases, it can lead to violence, either emotional or physical, and it can taint the entire semester. Humor helps to ease the tension in the classroom before such a situation blossoms into something more and it can help repair the damage done when such situations occur. This isn't to say humor should be used as a strategy for ignoring deeper issues that the acting out might be a symptom of. However, exploring and working through those deeper issues needs time and reflection, and in the

⁸⁶ Ronald A. Berk, "Does Humor in Course Tests Reduce Anxiety and Improve Performance?," *College Teaching* 48, no. 4 (2000); ———, "Laughterpiece Theatre: Humor as a Systematic Teaching Tool," *Essays on Teaching Excellence* 17, no. 2 (2005-2006), <http://podnetwork.org/content/uploads/V17-N2-Berk.pdf>; Ronald A. Berk and Joy Nanda, "A Randomized Trial of Humor Effects on Test Anxiety and Test Performance," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 19, no. 4 (2006); Ronald A. Berk and Rosalind H. Trieber, "Whose Classroom is it, Anyway? Improvisation as a Teaching Tool," *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching* 20, no. 3 (2009).

⁸⁷ Berk, "Does Humor in Course Tests Reduce Anxiety and Improve Performance?," 153.

⁸⁸ James W. Neuliep, "An Examination of the Content of High School Teachers' Humor in the Classroom and the Development of an Inductively Derived Taxonomy of Classroom Humor," *Communication Education* 40, no. 4 (1991): 354.

instant when the disruptive behavior occurs, humor is useful in moving the situation into a more productive space.

Concerning humor and learners' emotional states, a reduction in anxiety, stress, and behavioral problems helps put students more at ease, and thus increases the chances they will do things such as ask questions when they don't understand something, share their work with others, and perform better on assignments and assessments, once again increasing the possibility for learning to occur. That is, humor is one strategy in encouraging certain behaviors that contribute positively to both the learning environment and student (and teacher) self-efficacy. Here things like motivation, focus, and a positive student-teacher relationship are included. Dickmeyer notes that, among other things, humor helps to foster open communication and to increase student participation.⁸⁹ In a study conducted on the use of humor in discussing issues of health and nutrition with high school students, the authors found that students who viewed a humorous lecture covering health issues and improvement strategies stated they were more motivated to improve their health than those who hadn't viewed the funny lecture.⁹⁰ As Randy Garner notes, humor's ability to support these kinds of inner states is most likely due to how "humor helps an individual engage the learning process by creating a positive emotional and social environment in which defenses are lowered and students are better able to focus and attend to the information being presented."⁹¹ Put differently, humor is a tool used in service to others things that contribute to learning the course concepts and in developing habits that support deeper forms of learning.

⁸⁹ Dickmeyer, "Humor as an Instructional Practice," 6.

⁹⁰ Carol S. Conkell, Charles Imwold, and Thomas Ratliffe, "The Effects of Humor on Communicating Fitness Concepts to High School Students," *Physical Educator* 56, no. 1 (1999).

⁹¹ R. L. Garner, "Humor in Pedagogy: How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha!," *College Teaching* 54, no. 1 (2006): 177.

Even in non-schooling contexts, humor can serve the same role in increasing the chances for learning to happen through encouraging certain behaviors. In a Krav Maga class, where the focus of the martial art is on very practical applications for self-defense, using humor can help alleviate the stress of having to both perform actions that are unfamiliar, painful, and potentially harmful, as well as the stress of the potential embarrassment of looking silly when performing or mis-performing such actions. By being relaxed, the student is more likely to perform the correct actions necessary to defend herself against a simulated attack, thus aiding in developing the muscle memory necessary to defend herself against actual attacks. The same holds true for most any performance-related activity, by being relaxed practitioners are better able to perform the correct actions and thus successfully execute the performance. Humor used by both the student and by the instructor can help to ease performance anxieties and thus produce better results.

Humor and Virtues both Intellectual and Moral

This last section addresses how humor can be used to help foster certain moral and intellectual virtues. In this case, humor plays a supporting role in the development of the intrinsic good of certain virtues. Gordon, Morreall, and Richards all argue humor contributes to both moral and intellectual virtues, usually in the sense of helping us to treat others better as well as thinking more clearly. One thing to note is that while this section divides the virtues between moral and intellectual ones, this is not meant to endorse the claim that they are in fact so starkly separate. It is most likely the case the virtues are often both intellectual and moral in nature and practice, but as certain authors discuss them

separately, I do so as well for ease of organization. To that end, I begin with two intellectual virtues mentioned by all three authors.

1. Humor and intellectual virtues

Each author describes the first intellectual virtue differently, but I will call it freedom of thought. Morreall emphasizes that our experience of humor involves a type of disengagement from immediate practical and emotional concerns. This distancing or disengagement is necessary to avoid taking the incongruity within the humor so earnestly as to resolve it in a practical or serious manner. Through this disengagement from the immediately practical, we gain a type of freedom of thought. Morreall describes this as open-mindedness, or being open to new and unusual experiences, leading a person to be more adaptable to unforeseen circumstances and more accepting of the unfamiliar.⁹² Gordon claims that humor “is quite comfortable with incongruities and ambiguities of language and meaning,”⁹³ and can help one “develop a tolerance for disorder, ambiguity, and incongruity.”⁹⁴ For Richards, humor can help one develop a type of objectivity of thought, understood as “relative freedom from the influence of passion.”⁹⁵ It is not the case that Richards thinks we can or should remove passion from our thinking, but that instead, by engaging with humor, it can “free us from the grip of a given passion, or liberate us from an especially problematical orientation.”⁹⁶ This freedom of thought not only allows for playfully interpreting the incongruities we experience in a humorous light, but allows us to see anew our situation and evaluate it with dispassion. The hope is to come

⁹² John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 112.

⁹³ Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*, 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁵ Richards, *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor*, 95.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* This also recognizes Deborah Brown’s critique of the importance placed on the distancing effect in humor theories mentioned in chapter 1.

to a better understanding of that situation, and ultimately, to make better decisions regarding our actions in addressing that situation.

Relatedly, humor supports the development of another intellectual virtue, that of creative thinking. Richards defines creativity as consisting of the “ability to put ideas together in new ways,” arguing “that is precisely what humor attempts to do.”⁹⁷ Humor has the property of being perspective-giving, by promoting new perspectives on things we both take for granted and things newly experienced, and this is what ties these two intellectual virtues together. Through the creation of humor, but also through its enjoyment, we actively construct this new perspective, and this constructing necessitates creatively reinterpreting our experiences, where we come to recognize the unusual and avoid the taken-for-granted. For example, my friend Jacqacia never misses a chance to turn any conversation toward a lengthy digression on her current emotional troubles, often revealing uncomfortable details about her personal life. As she is a friend, I want to help if I can, but it can be frustrating that every conversation is so emotionally fraught. Part of the incongruity involved is the difference between what is meant to be a casual get-together and the seriousness of the conversation, as well as both the trivial nature of many of the topics she discusses and the trauma such triviality represents for her. Therefore, I tend to view Jacqacia as both a desperate playwright and a therapeutic cheapskate. During our conversations, I often (in my mind) play the part of her *pro bono* therapist in the play she’s constantly writing and enacting. Through my creative interpretation that leads to a humorous perspective, I have come to understand that Jacqacia trusts me with her problems, looks to me as a shoulder to lean on and someone with advice she considers

⁹⁷ Ibid., 93.

viable, and that I do in fact value her continued friendship in spite of the (mostly) minor annoyance of such emotionally weighty conversations. Without the ability to view her through such a creative and humorous lens, I would miss the opportunity for developing a deeper friendship, as well as what she has to teach me about living the life she does and the ways in which she navigates such a life successfully. Not only does humor help foster such intellectual virtues as freedom of thought and creative thinking, but it also helps to foster moral virtues as well.

2. Humor and moral virtues

Morreall notes that “understanding the virtues that humor promotes is largely a matter of seeing which emotions humor reduces.”⁹⁸ This is important, since much of what motivates moral action depends on overcoming countervailing feelings. We often don’t feel like doing the right thing (being kind, helping a neighbor, telling the truth) because to do so makes us feel bad, is frustrating, or we don’t really like the person we’re interacting with, but nonetheless, in order to meet our moral obligation we do so in spite of those countervailing feelings. By engaging with humor in these instances, we can reduce the tension between our obligations and how we feel about meeting them and thus are better able to be the types of moral individuals we envision ourselves as being.

One moral virtue all three thinkers claim humor contributes to is patience. For patience, the emotion reduced would be impatience, and usually includes a feeling that time is being unkind in delivering a satisfactory outcome. Richards gives the example of how humor can help to make an interminable lecture less boring by counting out the professor’s verbal ticks. Implied here is that instead of impatiently waiting for the lecture

⁹⁸ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 116.

to end and becoming increasingly frustrated at the seeming pointlessness of it all, the student uses humor to make light of the professor's imperfection. Through developing the virtue of patience, he perhaps learns something he might have otherwise missed. Of course, having to wait for most anything can be a cause for impatience, whether that's waiting in line somewhere, for test results to see if surgery is needed, or for someone to call you back about a job, humor can help to increase one's patience with the inevitability of having to wait for something and someone. Moreover, building patience in these less important venues can help to develop patience in certain situations that might demand extended bouts of patience, such as saving for a house or losing a significant amount of weight, or working toward becoming a more compassionate person. Having a sense of humor when things seem unobtainable helps one to persevere in spite of feelings of hopelessness or frustration.

Related to the virtue of patience is that of tolerance. As noted previously, Gordon argues humor helps us to develop tolerance for the ambiguity and disordered thinking we often encounter, and through adopting a humorous attitude toward such things, we are better able to cope with that ambiguity and resolve that ambiguity by either clarifying or accepting it. The moral virtue of tolerance is similar, in that we encounter people, cultures, behaviors, and so on that confuse, upset, or even offend us at a deep level, but that it is unclear we have right to try and change. Tolerance isn't the virtue of accepting whatever comes your way, but instead involves discernment. In those instances where it's unclear as to what the right action or emotion is toward something, one weighs the moral import of the related actions or feelings, and if one determines the thing is better left as is, it is tolerated. However, this does not mean one will not feel frustrated or disappointed and this

is where humor can support this virtue in two ways. The first is by alleviating the negative feelings and turning disappointment or frustration into something to joke about. More importantly, through viewing the ambiguity of the situation humorously, one can better determine the morally correct action by stepping back from one's own understanding and feelings. This does not mean one gives up convictions or that they are just "laughed off." It does mean one recognizes that many moral situations are ambiguous concerning right actions and feelings, and if this is the case, then what is needed is tolerance. Tolerance is a hard-won virtue, and humor can help to make that victory easier to achieve.

One last thing concerning moral virtues and humor I will mention is how humor promotes self-transcendence. Morreall labels self-transcendence, which he defines as "rising above personal concern to appreciate the interests of others," as a "basic moral skill" that grounds the other moral virtues.⁹⁹ Gordon agrees with Morreall's description, adding that self-transcendence also includes being able to "enjoy the amusement that this broader view provides."¹⁰⁰ Richards sums up both views, stating, "In the broader context, we may appreciate our own incongruities better, and understand we, and our problems, are not as important as we thought."¹⁰¹ Here we see humor's distancing effect and perspective-giving capacity at work once again. In order to fulfill our moral obligations, we often need to sublimate our desires and act in the best interest of others. However, that can be difficult if we can't get outside of those desires, if we can't transcend our own understanding of the situation and gain a new perspective. For instance, in order to tolerate the differences of others, I need to move beyond my desire that the world always conform to how I want it to

⁹⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰⁰ Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*, 93.

¹⁰¹ Richards, *A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor*, 97.

be and realize that others' understandings and ways of being not only deserve to be realized, but in fact, might also be a legitimate way to live in the world, perhaps even a better one.

Often, self-transcendence is discussed in terms of the inner workings of the self in regards to moral, mental, and emotional states, but practically speaking, self-transcendence is about how to successfully navigate the world, how to build life skills such that the chances of me being both morally good and practically successful, i.e., well-rounded, are increased. By this I mean, for instance, in order to learn from past mistakes in relationships, I need to step back from my feelings of hurt and dissatisfaction and examine whether my understanding describes the situation in as complete a way as possible. This could be in romantic relationships of course, but this could also include instances of being fired from a job for poor performance, where I was too quick to blame others for their mistakes and not honest with myself about a lack of knowledge and an unwillingness to ask for help and guidance when needed. Practically speaking, by not being honest with myself, that is, by not transcending my own understanding of the situation and feelings of hurt and disappointment, I have not been successful in navigating the world of work, neither have I met my moral obligations to treat others honestly and respectfully, nor to myself to take responsibility for my actions. In this instance, I need to hone the moral skill of self-transcendence and by viewing my firing humorously, I am better able to step back from those negative feelings and be candid about the situation. Humor supports this increased self-understanding. It becomes a tool to help in building and improving the self, a tool for reinterpreting the events so that I can now learn from them. The goal is to see where I was

mistaken and what I need to do next time, what actions I need to take and limitations I need to accept in order to not only perform my job better, but to be more fulfilled.

Here then is an example of humor as both instrumental good, something I use to achieve the intrinsic good of a virtuous character, and as a quasi-intrinsic good. Through using humor as a lens to reinterpret my more painful or problematic experiences in order to distance myself from negative feelings and gain a new perspective on those experiences, I am building the habit of employing that lens to interpret other experiences as well. By engaging in this process, I improve my chances of leading a more fulfilling life, as well as filling in the details of what that actually entails. That is, I lead a better good life.

Conclusion

What are we to make, then, of humor's educative potential in relation to its instrumental uses? Perhaps the most common understanding of and engagement with humor is instrumentally so, usually through comedy and entertainment. However, if we stop there in seeking to understand what humor has to teach us, we miss the deeper ways humor educates us. That is, while instrumental uses of humor are incredibly useful, they are limited in expressing the full range of what humor has to offer. In that vein, I discuss the limitations of using humor in only instrumental ways. One thing to note is that this section in no way negates the benefits of using humor instrumentally mentioned in the previous sections, but instead discusses the limitations and missed opportunities for engaging with such an important human activity in deeper, more meaningful ways.

The Limitations of Humor and the Intellectual and Moral Virtues

In developing our character, in striving to become the type of virtuous person we think we ought to be, we have to become aware of both our strengths and our

shortcomings. The disengagement necessary to our experience of humor helps with this evaluation. We develop patience through humorously accepting we have to wait, we develop tolerance by recognizing there is more than one set of correct actions or beliefs about how to live a good life, we hone our creative abilities by stepping back and humorously reinterpreting otherwise distressful circumstances, and so on. However, these virtues are not achieved easily and if we allow ourselves to become too disengaged, we can become cynical to the point of becoming stagnated in our virtuous development. That is, by just engaging with humor for its perspective-giving ability without further reconciling and reimagining our self in light of that new perspective we run two risks.

The first risk is a type of virtue diletantism. For instance, I may find myself butting up against someone else's understanding of the world, say the way they talk or the fact they always need for things to have a practical application or they're a sports fan, that I find both irritating and arguably detrimental in a host of ways. However, instead of giving into my irritation I make a joke, resolving apparent incongruities, dissolving negative feelings, and gaining a new(ish) perspective on my interactions with such people. That is, in my mind I have (further) developed my virtue of tolerance. The problem arises when, instead of really accepting that just because someone speaks differently, focuses on the practical, or loves baseball, I simply accept that they do not understand their own limited life-view. The virtue I have developed is only a shallow tolerance for my own irritation and not the tolerance of realizing there are multiple and equally valid ways to live a life. That is, I have misunderstood what true tolerance entails. It is certainly true that in being less irritated by my coworkers I am easier to work with, get along better with others, and so on. But, by using humor only to distance myself from negative emotions, instead of seeking to

understand the value of different ways of living in the world, I have not actually realized the virtue of tolerance.

The second risk is that, in order to become the kind of person I think I should be, hard, tedious, difficult, and consistent work is required. Through only treating humor as an enjoyable tool to use in supporting this development, I run the risk of using it as a way to both avoid that hard work and alleviate the disappointment of not being my best self. That is, I've disengaged from the negative feelings and only engaged with the pleasure. By falling short of the glory of my best self, I find where I need to focus my attention and efforts in order to shore up those virtues, but by avoiding the work necessary to realize such failings, I'm short-circuiting the feedback loop necessary for my virtuous development. What is needed instead is a type of humorist worldview, where the recognition of the absurdity of the human condition underlies all my attempts at becoming a better version of myself, thus accepting that I am both ridiculous and in deadly earnest about myself and my interactions with the world, something developed in more detail in chapter 4.

The Limitations of Humor as Behavior Management

One limitation in using humor to encourage certain behaviors is that it's unclear that humor itself serves any unique purpose. It is certainly the case that one of humor's benefits is the pleasure it produces, and in this way when seeking to encourage or discourage certain behaviors, it's a more enjoyable tool than scolding or public embarrassment. Nevertheless, in cases of making the learning environment more enjoyable or the bonding function of humor in political messages, humor seems easily substitutable for other things that could achieve the same ends. And, while I argue this critique is a weaker one, in that it holds true for most instrumental uses of things along these lines (e.g., yoga in the classroom

or campaign slogans), it is an example of how instrumental approaches to humor have the limitation of substitutability.

Another limitation of using humor as a type of behavior management is its overuse in helping to alleviate stressful situations. That is, there is an argument to be made for not alleviating stress sometimes. By this I mean that it can be more productive to experience the stress and either develop a full range of resources to cope with it or to seek to understand the cause of the stress or anxiety in order to perceive the root of the problem. If I only or even mostly turn to humor in order to alleviate the negative feelings associated with my anxiety, then I can miss the opportunity to find out what the cause is and then work toward reducing or removing (if possible) the thing causing the anxiety. That is, using humor as a way to avoid problems that need tedious but important and difficult work in order to address them is problematic. This is to trade the aspect of disengagement for the aspect of pleasure of our experience of humor and, once again, to give short shrift to the ways humor can bring to our attention inconsistent beliefs, misunderstandings, and places of ambiguity that can sometimes only remain unresolved.

The other limitation is that of using humor as way to manipulate others toward unsavory ends. In the example of the four functions of humor in communication, we are all familiar with the way humor is used to dissemble, to make things appear to be better than they are, or to mock someone such that they appear so ridiculous that any actual solution they might suggest to an important problem is immediately dismissed. While this is more a problem of individual ethics than anything inherent in humor, this is perhaps one reason why the Superiority Theory remains in circulation as a theory of humor. Because humor can be easily turned into a tool of derision and simultaneous unity (humor's conservative

function), thus allowing us to feel superior to the butt of the joke without having to address the parts of us also revealed through such derision, it's understandable that humor gets a bad rap as a tool of manipulation instead of revelation. Humor isn't distinct in this regard, many usually healthy and existentially productive interactions can be used nefariously, but it is certainly the case that this is a limitation of using humor as a tool in achieving one's ends without considering the impact of using humor to do so.

The Limitations of Humor as Entertainment

This seems clearly limiting if we only focus on how humor is used to entertain. The danger here comes about through dismissing the message, critique, and comment the content of humor brings to light, content which often has deeper meanings or import. Take as an example the satire used on such programs as *The Colbert Report*, *Last Week Tonight*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Nightly Show*. As Christie Davies notes, "Satirists often find they are taken as serious exponents of the very ideas they oppose and mock....Indeed for satire to work as humour it needs to be written in such a way that *some* readers will misunderstand the serious hidden message it contains."¹⁰² For those taking the satire seriously, they of course miss how the humor is meant to force the listener to question the very thing being affirmed through the satire. But, even for those who understand the satire, the danger is that as entertaining as the humor used in these programs can be, this can become the focus instead of the tool delivering the message. For those already in agreement with the critique, a smug self-righteousness can set in, and these programs become a political support group for the same-minded. For others, the fact that the satire is mixed with other, often cruder, forms of humor can indicate that the critiques presented

¹⁰² Christie Davies, "Humour is Not a Strategy in War," *Journal of European Studies* 31, no. 3/4 (2001): 396-97.

aren't to be taken seriously after all, and thus they miss out on the opportunity to truly engage with and learn from those same critiques.

In the end, as entertainment is meant for enjoyment purposes only, engaging with humor in only this way keeps humor at a surface level and doesn't allow for deeper explorations of purpose and meaning humor enjoys. Humor as entertainment serves a needed purpose by giving us a break from our everyday concerns, but when that becomes the central understanding of humor and our relation to it, we've done a disservice to both.

The Limitations of Humor's Impact on Learning

In empirical engagements with humor, there are some standard questions we can raise that relate to these two studies, and studies of this kind in general. For instance, what do the authors count as humor? As we've seen, in this dissertation I use a specific understanding of humor, one meant to (largely) account for how we experience humor. However, for Ziv, he relies on accepted types of humor (jokes and cartoons), as well as (at least implicitly) the signal of laughter to confirm that these things are indeed humorous. Since he is uninterested in larger philosophical issues of what exactly humor is, depending on these indications of humor is unproblematic for his study. Wanzer and Frymier avoid this question altogether by leaving it to the students surveyed to determine what counts as humor for them. Undoubtedly, for both studies there is some conflation of the funny with humor, that is, conflation of that which causes us to laugh with the playful appreciation of incongruity. However, in their defense, there is most likely enough overlap between the funny and the humorous in these instances to render such issues unproblematic for empirical purposes.

The same question can be raised about the definition of learning as well. In order to measure whether humor positively impacted student learning in both experiments, Ziv used a 50 question multiple choice final exam. He does state that multiple choice tests, if constructed well, can capture conceptually complex understanding, and if so, then it seems to be the case that students' learned something during the semester beyond memorizing some set of facts and regurgitating them for the final exam. How transformative of the students' worldview or how much they were changed by the experiences of in their introductory statistics or psychology courses is difficult to determine from the type of instrument Ziv used however. That is, there is no indication whether the students experienced deeper learning or even were motivated to explore such. Concerning Ziv's study, it seems clear that using humor positively impacted the intellectual growth of his students, so at least some level of education happened, though whether such learning contributed to the becoming well-rounded persons is inconclusive.

Once again, Wanzer and Frymier avoid the issue altogether by letting students self-report on their learning, assuming students can tell whether or not they've learned something. In either case, humor supported learning to some extent, whether that learning was of a deeper, more existential sort or simply a cognitive one, the instrumental use of humor lends itself to most easily being measured only along cognitive lines. It's certainly the case that Wanzer and Frymier could've included in their surveys more existential questions, since students were self-reporting perceived increases in learning anyway. We can imagine questions regarding whether high humor orientation in instructors led students to be more honest in regard to cheating or reporting accurate reasons why they failed to complete an assignment, or in their dealings with the instructor and other

students outside of the classroom. But in focusing on how humor contributes to learning and only defining learning narrowly, these deeper, more personal forms of education are often overlooked.

I realize this is the typical argument against treating the intrinsically worthwhile in an instrumental manner, such as why eliminating the Arts from the K-12 curriculum for the sake of more standardized testing misses the point of the Arts. While this may be accurate and explained by the nature of empirical disciplines, it still treats humor as only having instrumental value in a narrow sense and once again relegates a fundamental and important interaction to what it can achieve in regards to something small instead of how it supports living a more fulfilling human life. Furthermore, it serves as an example of the limitations of adopting a narrowly instrumental outlook. This outlook moves beyond treating something as instrumental in the service to obtaining other things, and instead becomes purely strategic in its approach to all interactions. That is, if I adopt a narrowly instrumental outlook as a teacher, then all of my behaviors toward my students only serve the purpose of increasing the possibility of learning the course material. I learn my students' names not because I want to bridge the gap between us, but because it makes them feel more connected to the class and thus they are more likely to act in measurably productive ways. I only utilize humor to refocus attention or to increase test scores, not because it's an important aspect of my personality as both a teacher and person.

In the case of adopting a narrowly instrumental attitude, I've limited the possibility of being open to what students have to teach me, limited the possibility of students taking control of their own learning, and given myself too much control. More than keeping the classroom teacher-centered, in adopting this outlook on my teaching practice all of my

actions need to serve the purpose of increasing learning of the course material. However, in order to do this, I can't share control of the class with anyone else. Furthermore, I can't allow any interactions that might jeopardize course learning to take place but that might be productive of deeper or even alternative types of learning. However, this circumvents the other ways we become well-rounded human beings. We develop into such through listening and questioning, through rebelling, through feelings of confusion, anger, frustration, and learning to cope with, overcome, or accept such feelings. Moreover, such an approach to education eliminates addressing the intersection of personal circumstances with what happens in the classroom, that is, the personal impacts the educational.

From the various discussions of the limitations of using humor instrumentally, we can see a further theme emerging. In using humor wholly instrumentally we run the risk of ignoring the deeper ways humor allows us to interact and come to grips with ourselves, our understandings and beliefs, and the ways we successfully and unsuccessfully interact with others and the world around us. That is, if we only concern ourselves with humor's instrumental value, we miss the necessity of humor in pursuing a good life. Certainly, there are many benefits in using humor as a tool, as something to support other instrumental goods, as well as supporting those things of intrinsic worth. Humor can be helpful in supporting learning, in getting your message across, in developing certain virtues, and in helping to enjoy life. Nevertheless, as this chapter notes, humor can be so much more. Humor pushes back against the absurdity of the human condition, not just by allowing for the momentary pleasure and laughter it can bring, but also by allowing for a view of the world that places the suffering often caused by such absurdity in perspective. This perspective is what I call the humorist worldview, and is what chapter 4 develops in detail.

Before delving into the humorist worldview, I first set the stage by discussing three other related worldviews: The Tragic Sense of Life, The Ironic Stance, and *Homo risibilis*.

CHAPTER 3

CONFRONTING INCONGRUITY: TRAGEDY, IRONY, and *Homo risibilis*

Humor's educative potential is revealed through its contribution to the learning environment, in the way it supports the development of virtues and moral skills, and in the role it plays in helping students learn course content. That is, from chapter 2 we see how humor is educative in instrumental ways. In this chapter and the next, I move beyond examining how humor plays a supporting role in educational endeavors and take up the question of what is educative about humor. The argument I make is the following: Humor is a type of self-education motivated by our regular encounters with incongruity. A central part of our experience of being human, both at the individual, subjective level and when we broaden our view, is that of the gap or tension between how we think the world is ordered and how the world often does not meet those expectations. This experience is summed up nicely by the word incongruity. No matter location or life situation, the experience of incongruity constitutes a regular part of our activity. Whether we enjoy solving riddles, such as crossword puzzles, watching a nightly talk show, or discovering something is not where we thought it was, we encounter incongruities of multiple varieties daily. More than this, incongruity appears at the existential level. A beloved pet is sick and needs to be euthanized, so you make an appointment with your vet, ensuring that a natural process happens in a most unnatural way. Or a friend betrays your confidence by revealing something you told her in secret. Or you lose your faith in God, and now the world you thought you understood explodes into something unmanageable and unforgiving in its indifference. These instances of existential incongruity teach us about ourselves, what we

understand and do not understand, how deep our commitments are to certain metaphysical explanations, and can even lead us to doubt the purpose of human existence.

From these examples, it is plain that our experience of incongruity is often troublesome, a cause for ambivalence, worry, and even suffering. This being the case, frameworks or worldviews (I use the terms interchangeably) have been offered for explaining, coping with, and learning from incongruity. However, before discussing these, the first part of this chapter outlines in detail the experience of incongruity. This then leads to a discussion of absurdity as understood by Thomas Nagel. I go on to outline three frameworks for coping with incongruity based in absurdity: the tragic sense of life, the ironic stance, and *Homo risibilis*. The chapter ends with a discussion of the insights and limitations of each worldview. In discussing the possible worldviews one could adopt, there is no one clear worldview that emerges the winner, since how one chooses to frame one's life ultimately depends on how one understands one's life in relation to incongruity. Instead, it explores the various attitudes offered to manage our experience of incongruity in order to set the stage for my own strategy for coping with incongruity. Toward that end, let's begin by exploring in more depth the experience of incongruity.

The Encounter with Incongruity

That we experience incongruity regularly is uncontested, and there have been several examples throughout the dissertation which demonstrate this common experience. I would go as far as to argue that a central aspect of human experience is regular encounters with incongruity. However, it is certainly true that not all incongruity is experienced humorously or even enjoyably and, in fact, much incongruity is unpleasant. While there is no need to reiterate the argument as to what differentiates the experience of

humorous incongruity from other interpretations (see chapter 1), it is useful to discuss the experience in a little more depth. By way of reminder, Marie Collins Swabey describes four categories of incongruity that help to conceptualize our experiences of incongruity: ambiguity or equivocation, fallacies of irrelevance, disparities of modes of operation, and extremes of scale. These categories are frames which comedic writers and actors often take advantage of to make us laugh, but they also offer insight into how we encounter incongruity whether humorous or otherwise, both in our everyday interactions, but also on deeper levels. More than this, though, they demonstrate the interpretive nature of incongruity and its relation to how we are constituted as meaning-making beings and how that disposition is generative of the various frameworks we adopt toward coping with incongruity.

As an example of the interpretive nature of incongruity is one Swabey notes, that of an elephant being terrified of and running away from a mouse as an illustration of incongruity based on extremes of scale. However, another example is that of the infamous picture of tourists holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa. How humorous that something as small and weak as a person can hold up something as large and heavy as a 200-foot marble bell tower, or at least millions of tourists over the centuries have thought so. Nevertheless, neither of these examples contain an inherent incongruity. In the first instance, the sizes of both the mouse and elephant suits their condition, whether standing side-by-side or miles apart, and it's certainly not the case that elephants are exceptionally terrified of mice in reality. They only become incongruous by comparison. In the second example, it is precisely our knowledge of the fictitious nature of the situation (whether experienced in person or photographically) that creates the humorous incongruity. There would be no

incongruity if someone tried to hold up the toppling tower, as they would be crushed, and all our expectations concerning that scenario would be met in the proper way.

Undoubtedly, if pressed, people would admit that there is nothing inherently incongruous about these two scenarios and that what makes them humorous is their purposeful juxtaposition and the subsequent interpretation of such *as* humorous. What is interesting, however, is the use of this type of incongruity to justify claims that human existence is meaningless, that because the universe is so large and we are so small, that, ultimately, the actions we take don't matter. For some, this cosmic incongruity coats everything with a veneer of humor. Others think this a reason to despair.

Through this we come to understand that when we talk about incongruity what we are talking about is the perception and interpretation of two or more simultaneous objects (construed broadly), which produces a tension between our expectation and actual experience of those objects. Furthermore, the experience isn't one that necessarily engenders a humorous reaction in people, and unsurprisingly so. Perhaps a more accurate way to describe one's reaction to incongruity is discomfort. The experience of incongruity presents a puzzle that must be solved and not all solutions are pleasant. That is, often incongruity results in suffering, at least to some degree. If I lose my keys only to find them in my pocket and end up being late for a job interview, resulting in my not being hired, then the incongruity experienced most likely results in suffering. The qualification is necessary since it is certainly the case that I could interpret the incongruity as some sort of cosmic comic karma. Alternatively, I could deny altogether the connection between being late to the interview due to my not finding the keys in my pocket and not being hired, thus eliminating either the suffering or the humor from the experience. However one might

decide to interpret this experience, what needs emphasizing is just this fact of interpretation and the choices available to us in interpreting that experience.

Of course, the above assumes there is a choice to make, and I think this correct. What I am not arguing is that, in the previous example, on realizing I lost my keys, I choose my immediate emotional reaction of panic, surprise, or disappointment. Those emotions I can't help but experience. What I am claiming is that, beyond the immediate emotional states undergone, we have the ability to step back and determine the attitude we take toward any set of events. Certainly this holds true after the fact, but arguably we can do the same in midst of the experience as well. The experience of calming oneself before giving a speech or motivating oneself to persevere through some physically exhausting activity or deciding to be happy for someone instead of jealous of their success are examples of efforts undertaken to reinterpret present, immediate circumstances. Once again, it is not that the immediate emotions of fear, capitulation, or jealousy are something I choose to experience. But it seems to be the case that through reflection, realization, and effort, one can redirect or bring to bear alternative emotional states through conceptualizing anew the current situation, and therefore alter the direction of the initial emotional and cognitive state, as well as the ongoing interpretation of the experience or set of experiences. That is, while I can't control how I immediately interpret a situation, I can reinterpret the ongoing situation in a way of my choosing. To be clear, even this choosing isn't completely free; it's still constrained by a host of factors. Nevertheless, there seems to be good reason to think that we can choose to some extent how we interpret experienced events.

Nevertheless, one would be right to further ask, given the fact of choice, why is it that we interpret the experience of incongruity one way rather than another. There are

obvious candidates that guide any chosen interpretation, such as personality disposition, physical and mental health, the influence of friends, family, and society, one's host of life experiences, atmospheric conditions, and so on. However, just as important are the frameworks or worldviews one adopts toward one's life as a whole, and the human endeavor more generally. Discussed below are several frameworks one could adopt toward the experience of incongruity that also speak to an overall understanding of the human condition. It is certainly the case that not only does one adopt a certain worldview toward one's life, but usually one adopts several overlapping (and sometimes conflicting) worldviews. A quick note on my use of the term "worldview." As opposed to the more traditional understanding of *Weltanschauung* as being an all-encompassing understanding of our experience and interaction with the world around us, my use is of the more colloquial variety. Here, worldview is not all-encompassing, instead it indicates a way one comes to understand a certain subset of experiences. Much in the way people use the phrase "personal philosophy" to mean a set of attitudes and behaviors one seeks to enact to guide one's life in specific circumstances, I am using worldview in a similar vein. Hence, its interchangeability with the phrase "interpretive framework" and why someone can adopt overlapping, perhaps even conflicting worldviews. Thus, someone can have a Worldview writ large that explains, to some degree, the why of everything (e.g., Christianity), as well as other worldviews that help flesh out and explain a subset of human experience, such as the experience of incongruity.

In answer to what guides one in interpreting the experience of incongruity, it is the interplay between the candidates mentioned previously (family, healthy, social norms, etc.) and the overarching Worldview one takes toward human existence, meaning, and

endeavor. Because of this, the worldviews examined below are frameworks one can adopt and move through in coping with incongruity, all with something to recommend them, as well as inherent limitations.

Nagel's Absurdity

Before I discuss these worldviews, however, I want to outline a different understanding of incongruity that grounds these worldviews, that of absurdity. Arguably, our experience of incongruity runs along a spectrum, from simple incongruity, say colors that don't mesh, to incongruity that impacts how we understand the value or worth of the human condition. This latter incongruity often goes by the name of absurdity and, as Thomas Nagel states, "Many feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually."¹⁰³ There is a certain conceptual and descriptive overlap between the terms incongruity and absurdity. They both can be described as the distance or tension between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. However, the term "absurd" arguably carries with it affective baggage that the term incongruity does not and that baggage is grounded in the idea that human existence lacks an overarching or defining purpose or meaning. That is, not only does the term "absurdity" recognize there is a tension between expectation and experience, but also that this tension indicates or gives support to the contention that human life has no inherent meaning. This being the case, we can understand absurdity as a specific type of incongruity. If we look for examples of absurdity, we can find them in the art of Dadaism, the writings of Samuel Beckett, and the filmography of Christopher Guest. Here the content of their art is meant to play with and put on display the ways in which we treat our existence as inherently meaningful when in fact it is only so

¹⁰³ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716.

because we take it to be so. Because we treat objects and actions as having an inherent meaningfulness that, viewed from another perspective, there is good reason to question and ultimately abandon, we enact our own absurdity.

From this affective baggage, we also see the link between a primitive understanding of nihilism and absurdity, demonstrated by such examples as a fur covered coffee mug or two characters worriedly waiting for someone who never arrives. For many, the term nihilism is understood as the belief that nothing has any value or that everything is meaningless and life is therefore absurd. I call this a primitive understanding because as stated it is self-refuting. If I claim everything to be meaningless, then so is that statement and I'm left in an ambivalent state of not having a good reason for thinking life to be meaningless but still feeling that it is. A more sophisticated understanding of nihilism is that there is nothing inherently valuable or meaningful about our existence (our actions, beliefs, ideas, relationships, etc.) and, once we recognize such, we are free to make meaning for ourselves. That is, we are free to provide meaning where and how we will. Nonetheless, the argument that life is absurd because it is meaningless is common. This being the case, Nagel argues that the common reasons given as justification for why existence is absurd, while adequately capturing the force of such feelings, are ultimately wanting.

Common Arguments for Absurdity

The first argument as to why life is absurd Nagel mentions claims the actions we take in the present won't matter in a million years and therefore our lives are absurd. But, Nagel states, if this is true, then conversely nothing that happens in a million years matters now. If the things we do currently can't stand on their own in terms of mattering, how would it help if they somehow mattered in a million years? If we have an obligation to

future generations to leave the planet in good condition (clean air and water, plenty of natural resources, etc.), this matters now not because of some unspecified future but because moral *qua* environmental obligations matter at all.

Another defense of absurdity is the oft-expressed sentiment that we are miniscule in some manner (our size, the length of our lives, or the fragility of our existence) in relation to the vastness of the universe. As such, the actions we take have such little impact that all of our strivings amount to nothing and those strivings are thus absurd. Nagel finds this argument unconvincing as well. He argues that if indeed our lives are absurd currently, would they cease to be so because we lived forever? Or would they cease to be absurd if we were much larger or the universe much smaller? The answer in these cases seems to be no. While he admits that these types of reflections on our smallness are tied intimately to feelings of meaninglessness, it is unclear what the connection is.

Lastly, people often argue our lives are absurd because, through death, “all chains of justification must leave off in mid-air.”¹⁰⁴ That is, all our efforts to learn, earn money to buy things to support and enjoy our lives, build relationships, and become better people are all “an elaborate journey leading nowhere.”¹⁰⁵ However, this argument is misconceived along several lines according to Nagel. To begin with, life isn’t a series of activities only justified through some further member of the series. We repeatedly engage in activities, such as taking medicine to alleviate seasonal allergies, whose chain of justification comes to an end and needs no larger justificatory process or further context beyond that. Another problem with this particular argument is that it leads to an infinite regress (or perhaps infinite egress is more accurate). If every activity we engage in is only justified through the part it

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 717.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

plays in some later activity, then there can be no arrival at a final justification. Lastly, by misconstruing the justificatory process, this argument makes an empty demand of us: “It insists that the reasons available within this life are incomplete, but suggests thereby that all reasons that come to an end are incomplete. This makes it impossible to supply reasons at all.”¹⁰⁶ Since it is the case that the standard arguments for why human existence is absurd don’t stand up to scrutiny, what argument is there that Nagel thinks captures accurately the absurdity of the human condition?

Nagel’s Argument for Absurdity

There are two levels of absurdity Nagel thinks important to demonstrating the overall absurdity of the human condition. The first is that of the mundane level. We often perceive a “conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” as at least part of what makes our individual lives absurd.¹⁰⁷ Waiting in a lengthy line at the DMV to turn in a form only to find out it could have been submitted electronically, scrambling to find your car keys only to discover them in your pocket, having your car detailed just before it rains, and so on all lend themselves to a regular feeling of life’s absurdity. Generally we attempt to alter these discrete absurd situations, either by changing our reality or our expectations, though sometimes the best we can do is rectify the absurdity imaginatively. However, even if we view our individual lives as continually or wholly absurd, instead of just discretely so, we would be right to ask how that translates into thinking human existence absurd as a whole.

The second level of absurdity, what Nagel names the philosophic level, comes about through “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 718.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.”¹⁰⁸ It seems uncontroversial that, in general, people take their lives more or less seriously, whether we consider any particular individual a serious person. In chapter 1 I mentioned that we rank-order our actual and possible pursuits, or that at least we could do so on reflection. Some of these pursuits we take seriously enough to form into habits, thus alleviating the need for conscious attention. For instance, in cases of dieting to become healthier, I enact rules for myself in order to achieve a healthier physical state, following them to the point I no longer consciously recite them before eating. That is, they become habits I develop toward the pursuit of becoming physically healthier. Furthermore, we have a general life scheme we envision for ourselves in which we pursue such things as increased physical health that further support that scheme. That is, not only do we plan for the short term, but we also encase those short-term plans within a larger framework that influences both the present and our perceived future. As Nagel notes, we pursue our lives to a more or less a degree, with more or less energy, and we can’t help but do this.

However, this drive to pursue, plan, develop habits and relationships, learn, experiment and fail, only to go on to repeat all of this wouldn’t lead to absurdity if it weren’t coupled with self-reflection and reflexive practice. (I differentiate between taking the time or stepping back in order to examine one’s own states of being (self-reflection) and adjusting one’s beliefs and habits accordingly with what one decides about such states (reflexive practice).) This holds true for both short and long-term plans. We evaluate whether the ways we pursue our lives currently increase the chances for our lives to become what we want of them. Moreover, we reevaluate that longer-term understanding,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

questioning if we were right all along in envisioning our lives as being of a certain stripe. The pursuit of higher education is good example.

We can imagine someone beginning her undergraduate degree in engineering, doing so partly motivated by what she thought would be abundant riches that an engineering degree granted, but also due to a report written in sixth grade. The purpose of the report was for students to explore future possible careers, and, for some reason, being an engineer held a certain appeal for her. Independent of the disconfirming evidence in high school of her performance in math and science classes, engineering was the path to which she clung. In this instance, she made both short and long-term plans around a vision she had of herself in some indeterminate future. However, once in college, she was forced to step back and question both those plans and the vision of herself due to her inability to pass basic calculus and physics courses. Eventually this leads her to revamp both her career plans and the type of person she thought of herself as being both in the present and in the future, as well as the recognition of the absurdity of basing one's life on a report written in sixth grade.

For many, this stepping back happens at the level of existence, where events lead to questions of "What's it all worth?". This question is fundamentally asking whether human existence has meaning, and while not all who ask such a question do so on such a grand scale, the fact that as human beings we can and often do step back and question the meaning of any and all justifications leads to Nagel's understanding of absurdity. He puts it succinctly, stating

The things we do or want without reasons and without requiring reasons — the things that define what is a reason for us and what is not — are the starting points for our skepticism. We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and

recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose concerns are so coolly regarded.¹⁰⁹

That is, we have the capacity to become spectators of our lives, but, Nagel remarks, there isn't much to be done in this spectating capacity, so we continue pursuing our lives as active participants. As Nagel notes, the reason absurdity arises is due to the way we as human beings are constituted as meaning-making types of entities with a propensity for regular self-transcendence. Moreover, through being so constituted, we seek reasons and justifications for our beliefs and actions while simultaneously bringing those into question. If we were constituted differently such that we didn't both seriously plan and pursue our lives while also stepping back and questioning the validity of the entire justificatory system, then this absurdity would disappear. Nevertheless, we aren't those types of entities, nor would we want to be.

This collision, then, this tension between how we expect the world to be and how we actually experience it and the conclusion that life is therefore meaningless because of such is where the absurdity happens, that is, not out in the world but within ourselves. Absurdity is an act of perception or interpretation, a sense we have of how our existence unfolds. "If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either," Nagel posits, summing up his essay, "and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."¹¹⁰ If we are to live ironically, what reasons does Nagel give for adopting this framework? From what little he states, there seems to be two reasons. The first is that Albert Camus' answer of heroic striving in spite of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 720.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 727.

the absurdity and suffering of our condition is overwrought and denounces what Nagel sees as one of our most interesting human characteristics: the fact of our absurdity. That is, Nagel understands the ironic stance as embracing instead of denying our fundamental condition. The other reason is that the ironic stance recognizes “the cosmic unimportance of our situation,”¹¹¹ and allows for a type of enjoyment of or playfulness with such. Whereas heroism or fatalism (a type of existential despair) takes up the initial mistake by making our absurdity the justification and motivation for engaging in heroic or fatalistic actions, thus in effect negating the insight it claims to embrace.

This concept of absurdity is central to the three worldviews outlined next, or, I should say, the concept of absurdity is foundational to the three worldviews outlined next and I take Nagel’s argument for why our lives are absurd as the explanation of that concept. While I do discuss in more detail the ironic stance briefly mentioned, I begin with a different worldview, one that claims that the suffering, pain, despair, and ambivalence brought about by our absurd condition are *the* driving force of our lives: the tragic sense of life.

Absurdity and the Tragic Sense of Life

Lydia Amir describes another understanding of what the recognition of the absurdity of existence leads to, that of the tragic sense of life, taking the term from the work of Miguel de Unamuno.¹¹² The tragic sense of life springs from the same place as Nagel’s discussion of incongruity: the absurdity of human existence. However, the tone this incongruity takes is importantly different. Amir describes the ground of this tragic sense as

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Lydia Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, and Kierkegaard* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

the recognition that ambiguity, uncertainty, and ambivalence are all central to the experience of life. That is, in contrast with Nagel's arguments for absurdity, the tragic sense of life is affective first, then cognitive. For Nagel, while the affective force certainly motivates the claims to the meaninglessness of life, in his mention of such, the sentiment seems akin to the feeling you have when you think someone is watching you, that tingle on the back of your neck that, when you turn around, often disappears when you can't find anyone staring. The feeling motivates you to turn around, but what takes precedence is the epistemic process of analyzing the evidence in validating that feeling and then dismissing it as unfounded once that evidence is determined to be lacking.

The same seems to hold true for the feeling of meaninglessness many encounter. Children are excellent at pointing out the repetitive nature of our daily lives — activities involving personal hygiene, picking up after oneself, or sleeping. They are certainly not wrong that, at least sometimes, these activities feel as if they have no point beyond the doing and repeating of them. While, as parents are wont to do, one could argue that in fact these activities play a foundational role in ensuring a more energetic, less cluttered, less diseased life, the important point here is that the affective component of the experience motivates a deeper examination of the logic behind these activities, leading to the conclusion that, no matter how meaningless they feel, these activities actually serve an important purpose. Of course, a deeper, existential sentiment of meaninglessness would provoke different feelings, though Nagel doesn't discuss this. For Amir's description of the tragic sense of life, however, these deeper feelings are vital.

What recommends the tragic sense of life as an interpretive framework in Amir's view is the recognition that life is fundamentally lived in and through irresolvable

contradiction. That is, for the tragic sense of life, there is no way out, no cathexis that rehabilitates the tragedy and transforms it. Instead it traps us in a “tyranny of desire” until our death. This tyranny of desire (based in her reading of multiple authors, including Freud, Unamuno, Schopenhauer, and Martha Nussbaum) comes about because we have needs, desires, and wishes that require reason to fulfil them. Nevertheless, we recognize the inadequacy of reason to either fulfill these things or that in order to fulfill them reason must pay too high a price. This tension causes suffering. Like Nagel, Amir recognizes we crave meaning in our lives, but that any meaning we find can ultimately be questioned, thus undermining any foundation we might build in determining that meaning. Ultimately, no matter the meaning we find, we remain unfulfilled but still desiring, and thus are trapped in this ambivalent state, by this tyranny of desire, which we can’t reason our way free of.

For the tragic sense of life, once we understand that ambiguity, contradiction, failure, and ambivalence constitute the experience of being human, we can begin to accept life as tragic. Amir takes the term “tragic sense of life” as indicating a state of affairs when an “unfortunate event disrupting the existence of the individual or an entire people” ends up “crushing the possibility of disposing of one’s life or destiny freely.”¹¹³ More so than this though, she argues that the term also “expresses a certain tonality of experience and thought, or manner of relating oneself to the experience of being, and a way of understanding this experience, of thinking about it and communicating it.”¹¹⁴ It is not the case that this tonality is built on a systematic worldview, Amir claims. Instead, the tragic sense is one way of explaining the realities of being human, grounded in “insights,

¹¹³ Ibid., 221.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

intuitions, and feelings,” where suffering takes center stage, and the incongruities experienced provoke tears instead of laughter.

Amir takes these insights into human existence as epistemologically useful, but denies there is no way beyond the tragic sense of life. That is, the tragic sense of life, manifested in the tyranny of desire and its conflict with reason, offers an accurate description of our fundamental experience of being human. Yes, life is absurd in the way Nagel outlines, but, Amir implies, Nagel sells short the affective impact on our lives, our actions, and our relationships with others and ourselves. How horrible is it that we are constituted in such a way to both crave meaningfulness but never to be able to satisfy that desire ultimately? For many thinkers within this worldview, religion offers a way beyond the tragedy. It does so by providing hope, through being released from this tension in the next life. This happens because we either cease to desire self-satisfaction and instead only desired the glory of God, or we merge with a universal consciousness, or we realize everything is an illusion. That is, the self is negated in some way, and thus desire and reason are no longer in tension, we no longer suffer, and life is no longer tragic.

However, this metaphysical answer is problematic. Nagel addresses this answer to absurdity, arguing that no matter the foundation offered that gives meaning to our lives, we can still step back and call into question the entire thing, and are thus back where we started. Furthermore, this answer isn't convincing for some, who see belief in a higher power as false, as rife with irreconcilable contradiction, or as simply unbelievable. Amir agrees that this metaphysical baggage isn't appealing and offers her own stance on the absurdity of the human condition, one that embraces and ultimately transcends the tragic sense of life without the metaphysical grounding and further includes the comic

possibilities that this absurdity often engenders. While I outline her stance later in the chapter, I first discuss another common stance toward the absurdity of existence, that of the ironic stance.

The Ironic Stance

The impetus for ironic living begins with accepting that human existence is fundamentally absurd, that, as Kieran Egan puts it, “without some clear foundation, some bedrock of truth, human life and our sense of the natural world are chaotic and meaningless.”¹¹⁵ In order to combat sinking into despair, the ironist instead acknowledges the meaninglessness of life while still living purposively. The irony manifests in the smirk the ironist has on her face as she seriously pursues her life, knowing that while she can’t help but do so in Nagel’s sense, she also recognizes there’s nothing actually grounding this seriousness, and that, in fact, the act of seriousness is just that, an act. This is the tonality with which she lives, the lens through which she can step back and take her life in, can push back against the despair that might otherwise manifest itself. Egan’s definition of the ironic stance, grounded in the thought of Kierkegaard, is this:

The ironist can “cut loose” from the constraints of false knowledge that hold bound in time and place those who fancy they have secure knowledge. Their knowledge, to the ironist, is simply a shared agreement about representing reality for local purposes at a particular time. To confuse these contingent forms with secure representations of reality is to be unable to pull free of local, temporary conditions...Removing the burden of simplistic beliefs allows the ironic soul to rise “upward” out of local constraints and achieve autonomy.¹¹⁶

From here we can understand how the ironic stance differs from that of the heroic or fatalistic view. The ironist, as do both the hero and the fatalist, accepts that life is absurd.

¹¹⁵ Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). 139.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

However, this acceptance entails no justificatory process leading to further action. Instead, the ironist is free to adopt an attitude of “might as well” in the sense of making of her life what she will or finding a type of distanced pleasure in the act of pursuing her life. This recognition of our absurd condition removes her from the suffering such absurdity can often incite by detaching her from the experience of it. That is, the ironist is never “in the thick of it,” but instead sits outside of it or above it.

The Ironist and the Ironic Stance

As Egan notes, the ironist, in the vein of Socrates, embraces the contingency of our representations of reality, what we often call knowledge, recognizing that they are agreed upon representations, usually for some particular purpose. This being the case, she is free to question deeply the why and how of the knowledge held most dear, revealing what drives the adoption of such knowledge, what prejudices are in place, and calling those to attention. What this realization allows for is the recognition and acceptance that no one view or understanding of reality, life, or how things are can be, much less is, *the* correct one. Thus, the ironist is free “to slip from perspective to perspective...applying in one perspective modes that are proper to another.”¹¹⁷ However, this lack of security, and slippage between different understandings of reality can be just as unsettling as the affective nature of the tragic sense of life. If this is the case, then what is to recommend it over the tragic sense? That is, what’s the benefit of adopting the ironic stance?

Egan notes several reasons why this stance is to be recommended. The first is that it recognizes the limitations we live under; it gives voice to the constraints of an existence without ultimate meaning, without an ultimate narrative by which to shape our lives. This

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 145.

reduces inauthenticity by freeing us from constraining beliefs and ideas, and the actions we take on behalf of those. One advantage of this is mental flexibility, that of both trying on new perspectives, as well as taking from various perspectives what is useful and combining them in new and interesting ways. But more so (and another thing to recommend its adoption), it allows for a kind of conceptual playfulness, the possibility of living aesthetically, and, as Egan describes, “To live well, or as well as possible, within the constraints of these contingencies.” Furthermore, “One can construct meanings...with others for the purpose of living well and not causing pain.”¹¹⁸

Here we see that the ironic stance is proactive in coping with incongruity, that, unlike the tragic sense of life, it offers a type of therapy for the painful realization that human existence is ultimately meaningless. Furthermore, by acknowledging that the constraints on our conceptions of reality are generally self-imposed, the ironist is free to make art out of reality, in the sense of adopting a conceptual playfulness in the combining and deconstructing of metanarratives. However, what this also indicates, according to Amir, is that the ironist stands too far removed from the muddiness of human experience. In discussing her proposed therapy for coping with incongruity, she states, “I use [the term] *humor* even when addressing human ridicule because the higher comical stage is characterized by a leveling sympathy and compassion, which are necessarily involved in humor, but alien to irony.”¹¹⁹ The lack of sympathetic engagement typifies the ironic stance for Amir and makes engaging in ironic living shortsighted. She argues that life is to be lived from the inside, in a way that embraces the suffering as well as the humorous pleasure we derive from our absurd condition. This is unavailable to the ironic stance because of its

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁹ Amir, *Humor and the Good Life*, 276.

reliance on an outsider perspective, seeking to avoid the pain of absurdity and denying the insights offered by the tragic sense of life concerning the central experience of ambivalence. Because of the limitations of both the tragic sense of life and ironic stance, Amir offers her own take on the absurdity of existence.

***Homo risibilis* as a Way Beyond the Ironic and Tragic**

Amir, like Nagel, thinks that one need not despair about our absurd condition. However, unlike Nagel, Amir argues that we embrace a life-view she calls *Homo risibilis* (translated as the laughable or ridiculous animal). Amir accepts that we cannot escape from the never-ending cycle of desiring and the inability but constant striving by reason to fulfill that desire that is the absurdity of our condition. This fact of our condition lends itself to a “double and contradictory interpretation” of life being both tragic and comic.¹²⁰ However, the possibility of such an interpretation isn’t enough by itself, Amir notes, to favor one interpretation over the other. Instead, she suggests, if something is both comic and tragic (or has the potential to be understood as such), then, in the end, that thing cannot be solely tragic. The reason being that “the tragic lacks the capacity of uniting contradictions that the comic possesses.”¹²¹ Humor or the comical (she uses these terms interchangeably) embraces the fact that the conflict between desire and reason is often irresolvable, but provides a relief to this tension that is unavailable to the tragic sense of life, is receptive to ambiguity, and “congenial to the doubts necessary for a tragic view of life.” This helps us to develop a higher-level comic awareness, what Amir calls *Homo*

¹²⁰ Ibid., 261.

¹²¹ Ibid.

risibilis, which results from accepting our ridicule or, put differently, our inherent ridiculousness.¹²²

This term for Amir is something more than just a substitute for absurdity and “originates with an eleventh century monk’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories*.”¹²³ She also notes the use of the term by others (Montaigne, Bergson, and, more recently, Simon Critchley), and that it is often contrasted with the description of human beings as *Homo ridens* (the laughing animal). Through embracing the ridiculousness of the human endeavor, we do not step outside that endeavor as much as allow for the distancing effect of humor to help us gain a new perspective. Furthermore, Amir argues, for this stance to have any weight, we must recognize ourselves in the ridiculousness surrounding us, embracing and enjoying it. *Homo risibilis* accepts the insights of the tragic sense (the unresolvable tyranny of desire and the tension between expectation and experience) but rejects the tonality of pain and suffering, rejects the brooding on such suffering by accepting our condition and laughing through our absurdity. Thinking back to the definitions of humor offered by Morreall and Richards, Amir wants us to embrace the sense of humor, the distancing effect it has, and the pleasure it brings through the playful enjoyment of incongruities, and, substituting absurdity for incongruities, we can both accept our lives as absurd and find enjoyment in that absurdity.

Amir further argues that by accepting our inherent ridiculousness we transcend both the comic and the tragic. We transcend the tragic by being able to admit of a non-solution to the problem of the tyranny of desire. Most solutions ask us to give up or

¹²² Amir takes the word ridicule from the French thinkers she draws on to ground her ideas, claiming that in French the word ridicule doesn’t carry the same negative connotation as it does in English. She therefore uses ridicule, ridiculous, and ridiculousness interchangeably to describe *Homo risibilis*.

¹²³ Amir, *Humor and the Good Life*, 262.

transcend our desires, or subsume them under our rationality. However, to do either is to give up a central aspect of our humanity. *Homo risibilis* embraces the comedic aspect of our pointless striving, much like the ironist, accepting that we can't but pursue our lives with seriousness while recognizing this is all an act. However, it transcends this comic aspect through becoming aware of our inherent ridiculousness. The idea being that, akin to how in a play what makes the comic protagonist comedic is his unawareness of just how ridiculous his situation is, what makes our existence ridiculous is not being aware of just how absurd it is. Furthermore, much like if the comic protagonist were to realize the ridiculousness of his situation he would cease to be comic, once we admit the inherent ridiculousness of our situation, it nullifies the comic nature of our situation. That is, by embracing that our existence is both tragic and comic, by accepting that this makes our existence ridiculous, we move beyond that ridiculousness.

The Conclusion

I have discussed multiple ways thinkers have proposed to cope with the regular encounter with mundane incongruity, as well as the encounter with incongruity at the existential level we experience, focusing on three worldviews. Now I move on to discuss the insights and limitations of these three worldviews. I do so with a view toward the next chapter, which offers another way to understand and cope with incongruity and existential absurdity that has been overlooked I argue. However, my account recognizes the insights offered by the tragic sense of life, the ironic stance, and *Homo risibilis*, while avoiding some of the limitations of these stances. Some of what is discussed next has been gestured at in the previous sections, but I take a more systematic approach here.

Nagel's Absurdity

Nagel's description of the absurdity of our existence captures well what it is to live in a world that feels at odds with both what we want and what we expect, providing a powerful reason for accepting that human existence is in fact absurd. However, what Nagel doesn't leave us with, except for the vague suggestion of living ironically, is a way to cope with this absurdity and since we can't do anything besides cope with it, this is problematic. In some sense, one might argue that Nagel offers the beginnings of a worldview, in that, his argument for why life is absurd at the metaphysical level and how our everyday encounters with absurdity inadequately justify our feelings of absurdity, provide a solid grounding for explaining our experience of incongruity. Nonetheless, as he only gestures at a way to move beyond this fact of our existence, I argue he does not offer a robust enough account to qualify his claims as a worldview in the sense of the three described here.

If Nagel is correct, then the only thing that stops us from pursuing our lives seriously is death or debilitating event. Furthermore, while we can try to ignore the nagging feeling that our lives are absurd, or absurd at least sometimes, for many this proves to be an unsuccessful strategy. It is unsuccessful in part because the nagging feeling of absurdity is motivating the reaction of forced indifference, thus granting only a temporary reprieve at best. But perhaps a bigger reason this strategy of indifference is unsuccessful is because the cultural trope of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence is so widespread. French cinema and religion are two big cultural forces that regularly embrace the ultimate meaninglessness of human life and are virtually inescapable. This being the case, then

Nagel's vague gesture toward ironic living as a coping strategy is no more affectively viable than the fatalism or Camusian heroism he decries.¹²⁴

One could argue that this critique is somewhat unfair, in that what Nagel offers in his essay is an argument for both why life is incongruous at the mundane level, but, more powerfully, why in fact human existence is absurd. While he does mention ways of coping with this fact, says Nagel's defender, that isn't the point of the essay. Nagel offers a way out and ostensibly leaves it to others to flesh out his suggested coping strategy. However, it seems odd that Nagel doesn't do more by way of beginning to build a positive program for coping with our absurdity considering his critique of other ways of coping, namely heroism and fatalism. He offers good reasons for rejecting these two stances, but offers nothing in the way of reasons for taking up living ironically. While I agree that Nagel's main concern is providing an analytic argument for the absurdity of human existence (as opposed to the more common ones offered by existentialists), he still leaves us short-changed in the coping department. However, what I think worth keeping from Nagel is his two-part distinction between what I have called the mundane and existential levels of absurdity, as well as his argument for why human existence is absurd as a whole.

The Tragic Sense of Life

It would seem to be the case, then, that the tragic sense of life makes more sense as a description of what's so weighty about our absurd condition: that human existence means living with the tension between expectation and desire, and this tension entails suffering. Thus, as a worldview that accepts the absurdity of human existence, it provides a more

¹²⁴ Concerning Camus' answer to absurdity, Nagel's essay doesn't do it justice. For a both helpful and brief discussion, see Gordon's chapter titled "Camus' Struggle with the Absurd: Rebellion as a Response to Nihilism" in *Humor, Laughter and Human Flourishing*.

compelling way to understand that absurdity beyond the mere recognition of the meaningless of life. This suffering, though existential, almost metaphysical in nature, manifests itself in ordinary life. For instance, through the death of a loved one shortly before receiving a substantial tax refund he could've used to help fund further life-prolonging treatment or accepting a job one didn't really want days before being offered the position that one did, we feel as if life is playing tricks on us. The insight that not just incongruity, but the meaninglessness entailed by absurdity is cause for suffering is what makes the tragic sense of life so powerful as an explanation. Cognition plays an important role in the recognition of the absurd but it's the affective force that serves as both motivation and explanation for adopting this worldview. However, once we accept this as accurate in regards to the experience of being human, what are we to do with this revelation?

The tragic sense of is limiting in both its explanation of our experience of absurdity as well as what it offers by way of a coping strategy. While it accurately describes the suffering entailed by the ambivalence of much of what we experience, not every experience of ambivalence is necessarily painful. Sometimes ambivalence entails vacillating between feelings of joy or excitement, or happiness and contentment, or states that carry a neutral valence. The same holds true for experiences of absurdity and incongruity, in that, not all experiences of these states are painful or a cause for suffering. Of course, those committed to the tragic sense of life never deny that we experience happiness or joy, or claim that because human existence is tragic then everyone feels that tragedy strongly. Nonetheless, it is hard to see, then, why so much credence is given to the suffering experienced, beyond the visceral weight of the suffering. Admittedly the tragic sense of life is a tonal interpretation

of our life experience, and there is no doubt that we have all suffered to some extent, but even so, it is unclear why this fact is the main point of focus and thus guides our interpretations of the incongruous in such a totalizing way.

Furthermore, as Amir notes, what the tragic sense of life desires is ultimately what it can't provide, a cathexis or therapy for this suffering. In this regard, what some prominent tragic philosophers look to is the hope and relief provided by religion.¹²⁵ While we might suffer in this life, in the next life that suffering is removed or transformed in exaltation and thus there is hope. However, it's difficult to accept that this hope is enough to counter the weight of our earthly suffering, and for those that deny any type of afterlife, then no hope is offered and what seems to be left is despair. Moreover, adopting this stance would seem to lend itself to a type of fatalism, but this seems paradoxical. If our encounters with incongruity are only incongruous because we deem them so, then human existence is only tragic because we interpret it as such. But this gives us leeway to adopt an interpretive worldview that makes the most sense for us. This being the case, then there is no fate to which we are tied in this regard, whether or not one thinks that fate tragic.

However, one could argue that the fate that awaits us is that life could not be anything but tragic due to the facts of our biology and culture. That is, because we are meaning-making and meaning-seeking types of social entities, supported by both the way we evolved and the institutions we set up to support that evolution, and because we have both the ability to call into question any reasons we develop to justify the meaning we make, this tension can't be experienced as anything but ultimately tragic. Our fate, due to the inherent limitations of our nature, is set, not because it could never have been

¹²⁵ Amir mentions Blaise Pascal, Kierkegaard, Lev Shestov, and Unamuno as belonging to this group.

otherwise, but because of where we find ourselves currently. And admittedly it seems to be the case that we are limited in this regard, as both biological and cultural beings, to experience the tyranny of desire. But the fact that we can't but experience this tension and that sometimes this tension causes suffering doesn't entail interpreting such as tragic. If we are to give meaning to this tension and we are free in some sense to interpret it in various ways, then, why not do so ironically instead of tragically? That is, we need not deny that our absurd condition causes suffering, that the tyranny of desire is central to our experience, but we are also not stuck wallowing in despair.

The Ironic Stance

The argument just mentioned is one line along which a committed ironist might argue. If Amir is correct in her description of what constitutes tragedy and the tragic sense of life is in part predicated on understanding that life is tragic because one is not free to dispose of one's life as one wishes, then the ironist denies this is accurate, and demonstrates through living ironically that one can indeed dispose of one's life as one wishes. Of course, this disposition accepts that life is meaningless, and therefore the ironist is not free to ironically lead a meaningful life in the sense of actually thinking life is meaningful. In this regard the ironist and the ironic stance is as constrained as the other stances discussed here in accepting the absurdity of human existence. But what the ironist can do that those who adopt the tragic sense of life cannot, is to find a certain enjoyment in life's meaninglessness. We can imagine a perfectly happy Christian housewife whose happiness is due to the hope her religion provides for a better life beyond the tragedy of her earthly existence. Just as we can imagine an embittered professor of literary criticism whom no one really likes being around because she constantly feels the need to note the

underlying irony in all she and everyone does. That is, whether the ironist appears to be a joyful person or not most likely depends more on how she expresses her personality than anything else.

What the ironic stance allows is for one to enjoy the meaninglessness of life because one is able to play with perspectives, to try on different ideas without fully committing to them, and this is due to the distance one has from cementing those perspectives or ideas as truth. This playfulness brings about something like disengaged enjoyment, and it is this disengagement that provides both the therapy for the ambivalence of our experience, as well as a dilemma. On the one hand, by adopting the ironic stance I am no longer trapped in despair, no longer weighed down by the tragic sense of life. On the other hand, to avoid this despair, I am taking a (somewhat) unsympathetic view of the human condition. That is, the ironist looks on those who commit to one version of reality over another with pity, as not understanding the contingency of their assuredness, and, with the air of an outsider, plays along but with no fellow feeling. Or, at least, this is what I take Amir to be implying in her quote earlier about the “leveling sympathy and compassion” of humor that is alien to irony. And as much as this might be heavy handed, it does seem to be the case that the ironist is the eternal outsider and is often intellectually smug toward those who hold too tightly to their understanding of reality. What this amounts to is that the strength of the ironic stance is also its limitation, that it promotes a distanced engagement with others, their ideas, and commitments that lends itself to cynicism.

Amir's Homo risibilis

Looking to walk something of a middle ground, at least initially, between the tragic sense of life and the ironic stance, Amir argues for the ridiculousness of human existence,

which she names *Homo risibilis*. It walks this middle ground by first accepting life as absurd in the way outlined by Nagel, but further argues that what comes from such an acceptance is just what the tragic sense of life ultimately describes — suffering caused by the tyranny of desire. Since this tension between reason and desire cannot be denied, what Amir argues for instead is that we transcend this tyranny. We do this by recognizing that the set of circumstances that makes something tragic is also grounds for thinking it comic. Once we accept this, while also recognizing that the comic interpretation provides relief from the tension created by the absurdity of existence, we begin to see that what is needed to transcend the tragic sense of life is humor.

For Amir, the reason why the ironic stance is problematic is because it takes the distancing capacity of humor too far. It takes it too far both by disengaging from the messiness of life and by denying that suffering is central to the experience of being human. To suffer is to be intimately engaged with the experience of being human, and this is something the ironic stance cannot allow. Suffering, in part, means committing to something as real and then watching as that reality is shattered, and Amir thinks this aspect of our experience worth embracing. Through accepting that the tyranny of desire is inescapable, through recognizing that this is also grounds for comedy, and by engaging sympathetically with the messiness of experience, we develop a higher comic sense, that of *Homo risibilis*. By acknowledging our inherent ridicule, by conceding we are ridiculous creatures, we both accept that we cannot escape the tyranny of desire and that this fact is grounds for humor. If something is both tragic and comedic, then it cannot be wholly tragic. However, as we cannot escape the tragic element, we can at least recognize and accept both the comedy and tragedy of our existence. Once we accept our own ridicule, we have moved

beyond tragedy and nullified the comedy, and achieve a kind of serenity through transcendence concerning what we cannot change. This is what I take to be both the flow and force of Amir's argument. That through tragedy we achieve comedy or humor, and through negating the comedic grounds by recognizing our own ridicule we transcend both, which can, in time, lead to serenity.

While this seems like an improvement on both the tragic sense of life and the ironic stance, it isn't without its difficulties. In discussing her argument for the transcendent nature of *Homo risibilis*, Amir draws an analogy. She claims that much like in a play that what makes the comedic protagonist comedic is that the ridiculousness of his situation remains unacknowledged, humans are stuck within an absurd existence because they haven't recognized and acknowledged their own ridicule. Once they recognize and accept that condition, they will have eliminated what accounts for its ridiculousness, and have thus transcended it, just like if the comedic protagonist were to acknowledge the absurdity of the situation he would cease to be comic.

However, this seems problematic. For one, it's unclear that the analogy between a comic character needing to be ignorant of what makes his situation absurd and, once discerned, ceasing to be comic and the same holding true once we recognize the inherent ridiculousness in ourselves and human existence in general. Amir is certainly correct that, if in Aristophanes' *Clouds* Socrates was to admit he cared nothing for earthly problems and that this often caused him to ignore clear and present dangers, then his falling into the well, while still funny, ceases to be comedic. However, if I admit that I am trapped by the tyranny of desire and that human existence as a whole is absurd, am I now free of anything? There is certainly relief to be found in both discovering, admitting to, and accepting one's

situation, and in that sense I am free from (some of) the stress caused by living an absurd existence. But it's unclear how I've now transcended my ridicule. I agree that the tragedy and comedy of existence are intimately intertwined, as Amir notes, and that to transcend one could entail transcending the other. I also agree that the pain of existence happens many times because we do not acknowledge our situation and thus are unable to see a way free. Where I think the analogy fails is that our existence is not enough like that of a comedic character's to draw any conclusions from such a comparison. I am always stuck in my absurd existence, no matter if I recognize its absurdity or not. And while I can find pleasure in my encounters with the absurd, those encounters never stop happening, there is a never-ending supply of incongruity to surprise me. Therefore, I am always in the middle of transforming tragedy into comedy, never being able to transcend either.

Even if we can transcend such, it is arguable that we do not want to. In taking this transcendent view, we run up against the same problem as the ironist, that of becoming the ever-present outsider, one who walks among humans but is not human herself. While Amir's transcendent fool would seem to be nicer to have around than the ironist, the fool still browses the department store of life, trying things on but never buying. That is, they are the bane of those of us who work on life's commission. Further, Amir's description of the serenity achieved by what I label the transcendent fool is unappealing in the way gurus are often unappealing. It is not that gurus, those who have achieved a certain spiritual transcendence through study and self-sequestration, are not insightful or do not have valuable things to impart, it is that their lives are so uninvolved in the daily existence of the rest of us, so unlike what we experience that the applicability of what they impart is low. Instead, what I argue, is that for those of us down in the valley, we need a strategy for

coping with incongruity and absurdity that doesn't take us beyond such things, but keeps us there in the middle without that absurdity destroying us, without it sinking us into despair.

This being the case, in the next chapter I offer my own worldview, what I call the humorist worldview. Nagel's description of our condition, that it is absurd because of our need for meaning and that we ultimately have no justifiable grounds for any meaning we make rings true and so I accept that also as a basic premise for the humorist worldview. However, I take what Amir calls the tyranny of desire as capturing what Nagel means by absurdity, while more fully describing the affective force such a condition holds for us. What Amir does with her description of the basis for the tragic sense of life is bridge the mundane and philosophic levels of absurdity in a way Nagel's essay either ignores or simply cannot. And I take her critique of the tragic sense of life as offering no therapy or cathexis other than hope in the afterlife as accurate. Concerning the ironic stance, I adopt its playfulness and its emphasis on freedom, but, with Amir, see it as too removed from many of the experiences of what makes life worth living, that it is care-less in a way that seems problematic to the social nature of the human endeavor. From *Homo risibilis* I take humor's sympathetic engagement with the messiness of our daily lives, but deny we can transcend this through accepting our inherent ridiculousness. I think it is not actually possible to transcend such, but even if it were, that the outcome would negate not only the tragedy but the comedy of life. If our coping with incongruity is to avoid heading down these darker paths, then we need a different angle on the absurdity of our existence.

CHAPTER 4

THE HUMORIST WORLDVIEW

Previously, I argued that we could understand humor as a type of self-education motivated by our encounter with incongruity. Here I outline what I take this to mean through a discussion of the humorist worldview. I begin with a brief discussion of several factors that influence one's adoption of the humorist worldview. Following that, I outline the five aspects of the humorist worldview. First, I argue that this worldview is grounded in our everyday experience of incongruity and discuss why this is important for the humorist worldview. Second, I cover the perspective-giving nature of both humor and the humorist worldview. Third, I outline the necessity of reinterpreting our initial experience of incongruity and how this contributes to building the habits of mind that make the humorist worldview possible. Fourth, I discuss the conceptual playfulness central to reinterpreting our experience of incongruity along humorous line. Last is the aspect that ties this all together, that the humorist worldview is a type of education of the self. However, not only in the final aspect, but also throughout the chapter I argue as to how the humorist worldview realizes its educative potential. I also compare this to the educative potential of the three worldview discussed in chapter three, outlining the similarities, as well as the differences, among all four worldviews.

Der Grundwerk

That we experience incongruity regularly, if not daily, is undeniable, and that we can further choose how to respond (within limits) to such encounters with incongruity was previously illustrated as well. Furthermore, I noted that whatever worldview one chooses to embrace concerning incongruity, that such a worldview is influenced by a combination

of factors, including personality disposition, upbringing, physical and cultural constraints, financial circumstances, and so on. This complex of things is what I call our situatedness. We are situated in certain contexts, socialized in a certain manner, brought up to believe and behave in a certain way, influenced by both physical and emotional growth, all of which go into the formation of the various worldviews, beliefs, ideas, and so on we hold. In terms of the interpretive frameworks or worldviews we develop, our situatedness both provides a range of options while simultaneously limiting that range. This holds both in the sense of narrowing the options from which we have to choose, but also in the sense of us being aware of various things as options in the first place. What this means, then, is that just because there are a range of worldviews open to us doesn't tell us anything about what options are available to any particular individual.

If this is the case, then what makes the humorist worldview appealing as a way of not only coping with incongruity, but also engaging in habits of self-education? A part of the answer comes from the "leveling sympathy and compassion" of humor toward the everyday that Amir contrasts with both the ironic stance and the tragic sense of life, arguing they can be too disengaged from the muddiness of human experience. If we admit this criticism, then someone who might be attuned to developing a humorist worldview is someone whose situatedness leads them to value the muddiness of everyday interactions and relations. Furthermore, this person recognizes that he is at the center of that muddiness, that incongruity only exists because he experiences the discrepancy between aspiration and experience as something incongruous. That is, those who develop or adopt the humorist worldview recognize that one's experience of incongruity is central, and that interpreting such as humorous comes at one's own expense so to speak, as much as it

comes from interactions one has with the world around one. This experience is both affective and cognitive, it involves the feeling of discomfort and the cognitive distance to take that discomfort and tilt it toward pleasure.

One way to conceptualize this tilting is through the art of improvisational comedy or improv for short. In improv, one of the central tenants for improvisers is “Yes...And.” In playing a scene, everyone participating experiences a doubling of sorts. There is the character one is playing, and the player herself. Each player agrees with what the other player establishes or initiates in the opening of the scene (Yes) and then, subsequently, heightens or adds to that initiation (And). For example, if in a two-person scene player one establishes that the players are a couple experiencing financial troubles, then player two agrees with the scenario established and seeks to raise the stakes in some manner. However, this does not mean that player two’s character has to agree explicitly that the couple is having money troubles. That character could be in denial and the way the player heightens the situation is by having his character buy increasingly expensive gifts for the other character in order to make that character feel better.

This is the tilt and where much of the comedy happens. In improv, making the everyday strange, exploring the normal but in a way that brings to light the absurdity of our daily experience (without a script) is the power of this form of comedy. Furthermore, good improv is an exploration of the everyday, the relationships and interactions one has, both with others and with oneself. In one’s everyday existence, one goes along in a normal way until one experiences a disconnect between aspiration and experience. Once this happens, one honestly acknowledges the moment or current circumstances (Yes), interpreting such an experience, influenced partially by one’s situatedness, and tilts that

interpretation toward the humorous (And). Through engaging in this interpretative tilting, one comes to realize things about oneself, how one believes the world should be, how one realizes the ways in which the world pushes back, how (in)effective one's coping mechanisms are in dealing with the discomfort of this tension, and so on. Furthermore, from this we can see the educational value of stepping back from how one usually understands things and doubling one's perspective through engaging in humorous (re)interpretations in order to understand oneself anew. This in effect is the humorist worldview.

I also previously noted that discomfort was the feeling that describes the general experience of incongruity. However, put more succinctly and, borrowing from the description of the tragic sense of life, is that discomfort is the affective tone of our experience of incongruity, whether we feel that discomfort as a cognitive itch or whether we think of it as an emotional tingle, the incongruous upsets our comfortable understanding of things. The discomfort generated by our encounters with incongruity brings to light something interesting in regards to humor and our sense of humor: both turn inward and at the same time turn outward, that is, another doubling of perception happens. Through encountering incongruity in the everyday and reimagining that encounter along humorous lines, the humor is both about how we understand the incongruity and the encounter with that (usually external) incongruity. There is an analogy here with conflicted beliefs. It can be difficult to detect conflicted beliefs through pure reflection. However, when confronted with a scenario that brings that conflict to light, we are often able to discover both the conflict and its origins. Put differently, we need that interaction with external circumstance to help us learn about the internal conflict and

engage in further moments of self-education. Self-education doesn't happen in a bubble. Of course, one needs to be open to learning from these encounters, and through adopting a humorist worldview one can further this habit of mind. What is important here is that in both instances of tension or conflict, how we understand such is motivated through thinking that the conflict arises externally and realizing that its most salient aspect is the way we both interpret and learn from such an encounter. This leads back to Nagel's point about how the absurdity of our existence is only absurd for us.

For the tragic sense of life, the absurdity of our condition is cause, ultimately, for suffering and this determines the overall tone of our existence. While there is no relief from this tone within this worldview, the tragic sense of life does offer a way to cope with our absurdity through both accepting the fact of our absurdity and acknowledging that it leads to suffering. The ironic stance offers a way of coping by first accepting that our lives have no ultimate meaning and using this as a springboard into discovering and making meaning for oneself. Furthermore, the ironic stance allows one to take up a way of life without entirely committing to it, while recognizing that any new way of being must be lived ironically. Amir's concept of *Homo risibilis* also acknowledges suffering as inescapable and that we are free to make meaning for ourselves, but claims these by themselves are not enough. Instead, Amir claims we can transcend the inherent ridiculousness of our existence by recognizing and accepting both the human condition as ridiculous and that we ourselves are ridiculous as well.

The humorist worldview, then, incorporates the insights of these three worldviews, while avoiding certain limitations. This is not to claim the humorist worldview as ultimately superior. Instead, within the many ways of coping with incongruity, the

humorist worldview adds something additional, that is, it fills in a gap among those worldviews. What the humorist worldview seeks to do is to provide a therapy for our experience of incongruity at both the mundane and existential or metaphysical levels so that we might comprehend ourselves more fully and be able to more successfully/robustly/flourishingly act in the world.

One limitation, I argue, of the three other worldviews is that they offer an outsider's view of human experience and its absurd condition. In one sense, it seems to be a necessary condition of constructing and discovering a worldview (even in the limited sense I use the term throughout) that it be from a perspective broad enough to encompass a large swath of both one's own experiences, as well as human experience more generally and therefore would seem to demand an outsider's perspective in order to gain that breadth. Admittedly, this condition holds for the humorist worldview as well. However, for the three other worldviews, this outsider's view is arguably the privileged view. While the humorist worldview affords such a lens, it does not privilege it. Instead, it seeks to balance the experience of the mundane and the existential, though admittedly it favors the mundane. I use the term existential in the way the phrase "existential crisis" is often used, where one experiences a (more or less deep) questioning of how one lives one's life in regard to career, family, or ethical scheme for example. Nevertheless, I also intend the term to be understood in a way similar to Nagel's use in his essay, namely as a description of a certain human condition, that of the conflict between meaning and justification and the fact that those can always be called into question.

The other worldviews do provide ways of coping with deeper forms of incongruity, especially absurdity. Moreover, while imperfect, each worldview does recognize something

important about our experience of absurdity. For instance, the ironic stance copes with incongruity by acknowledging that there is no ultimate meaning or justification for our actions and beliefs beyond the justifications we offer for them. This being the case, the ironist is free to commit to and break from whatever beliefs she deems worthwhile. The coping is that of living a life and engaging in commitments (whether relational or ideological) with the understanding that there is no justification needed beyond the desire to engage with those commitments. This recognition allows for the breaking and taking on of new commitments without such a practice being utterly destructive of one's self.

By comparison, the tragic sense of life provides a way of coping with our encounters with incongruity, specifically at the existential level, through taking the result of Nagel's conception of our absurdity very seriously. Here the concern is with the suffering such an absurd existence engenders. Explaining why there is such fundamental suffering in our existence provides part of the therapy, while the other part is provided by the acceptance of such an explanation. Though there is no hope provided by such a view in this life, many claim hope in the form of relief from suffering in the next. Amir's *Homo risibilis* takes a different tack. The therapy for the regular encounter with incongruity and the fact of our absurd existence is achieved through accepting that incongruity causes suffering, recognizing that such tragedy can also be interpreted in a comedic light, and realizing this means our existence isn't tragic but ridiculous. Furthermore, by accepting that we are ridiculous, we transcend such a state and can achieve a type of peace of mind or tranquility. Amir's worldview provides a sort of proto-program one can engage in to cope with incongruity and the absurdity of the human condition.

If one can choose from the menu outlined, one would be right to ask why I am offering a new item. I do so in part because there is something missing within these worldviews. As previously mentioned, there is not one *true* worldview one can adopt in coping with absurdity, in part because our relationship to our absurdity is inconsistent. This may sound strange, as if I am trying to have it both ways. On the one hand, I am arguing that humanity has as a fundamental experience this tension between aspiration and reality, between reason and desire, that is, this muddiness that stands between the meaning we need in our lives and the insecurity that our reason brings to light. We cannot help but be absurd creatures; that is our fate. On the other hand, however, I claim we can choose how to interpret that fate, as if fate were open to interpretation. In this sense, I take it that what we are doing is adopting an attitude similar to how we cope with the fact of our death. We cannot help but die, and this often entails discomfort (put mildly) brought about by the feeling as if life is never-ending and knowing that it does in fact end. Therefore, just as we can adopt certain attitudes toward death, we can do the same toward our absurdity. And just like there is no one proper attitude toward our death, there is no single therapy for coping with both our existential absurdity, as well as the mundane absurdities we encounter daily.

Another reason to offer a different approach to coping with incongruity, especially of the absurd variety, is that there is something else missing from the other worldviews. It is certainly the case that which worldview one adopts depends on one's situatedness and how any particular worldview successfully describes the why of the world. What then, is one to do if the worldviews one discovers misses the mark? Why invent a new one instead of rectifying the others? Certainly for some reconciliation is what is needed. However, as

outlined in the previous chapter, there are certain aspects of the three worldviews discussed that can't be reconciled, certain fundamental or foundational elements that make them unappealing. If this the case, then, what I offer here is a different framework, one not only for interpreting absurdity, but our encounters with incongruity combined with a type of self-education that avoids these irreconcilable elements, while retaining the insights that the three worldviews offer.

Aspects of the Humorist Worldview

The humorist worldview is a framework for coping with the spectrum of experiences of incongruity, with this framework consisting of four aspects: the everyday experience of incongruity, the perspective-giving capacity of humor, reinterpretation of incongruity, and playfulness. These aspects comprise the humorist worldview and are impacted by and affect our experience of incongruity and its humorous interpretation. The purpose here is to demonstrate both how the humorist worldview comes about and why it is an important tool for coping with the travails of our existence. Furthermore, what I hope to indicate, at least indirectly, is to what type of person, or at least why in general, this worldview would be appealing. One thing to note is that I move between discussing our experience of humor and the part that experience plays in the humorist worldview. What this also means is that I draw on a host of examples that are based in everyday experiences, as well as drawn from stand-up, improv, and other, more formal comedic enterprises. While I am certainly not claiming that in order to adopt a humorist worldview one needs to be funny or enjoy the types of comedy mentioned, it is arguably the case that most who adopt this worldview will enjoy these sorts of things. Furthermore, those who specialize in producing humorous or comedic interpretations of human experience often have insights

to our encounter with incongruity that serve both as models and sources of reflection. That being the case, these examples are by no means meant to privilege one type of humorous expression over another.¹²⁶

The Everyday Experience of Incongruity

Our everyday experience of incongruity is central to the humorist worldview, as these everyday experiences are what drive most of our interactions with humor, both in the content of the humor and the motivation to interpret the experience of incongruity in humorous ways. As mentioned, we experience incongruity along a spectrum, from something as simple as someone's strange fashion choices to something as life-altering as the death of a loved one. However, while noting this is the case, in chapter 2 I argued we commonly experience humor through instrumental types of engagement, and much of those experiences are about our everyday interactions. Sitcoms, jokes with friends, funny advertisements, and even humor in one's internal monologue are often focused on the ways mundane incongruity can be interpreted humorously. The humorist worldview recognizes that this is where most of the incongruity we experience comes from, that rarely are we in the midst of a crisis such that we are forced to reexamine our lives in light of such an event. This being the case, then, the humorist worldview is enmeshed in the everyday experience of incongruity.

One thing to clarify is that within this spectrum of experienced incongruity, not all experiences rise to the level of needing a humorous interpretation, nor is it a unified category. As much as the experience of incongruity might be universal in a broad sense, this does not indicate that there is agreement as to whether any particular experience will

¹²⁶ Except for puns. That is the lowest form of humor.

count as incongruity. Incongruity is woven into the fabric of experience itself through the need we have to make meaning from those experiences. Because many of our experiences can be interpreted in multiple ways, they conflict and this conflict is discomforting. While incongruity is discomforting, the ways we cope with this discomfort varies. Some incongruities we simply accept, others we resolve in a neutral way, while others are upsetting enough that we might need to alleviate the stress of the situation. I mention this in order to make clear that not every single encounter with mundane incongruity needs or demands a humorous interpretation. Certainly mundane encounters that carry more emotional weight, such as the frustration caused by waiting for a coworker's report you need to create your presentation only to have the presentation cancelled, fit within the purview of the humorist worldview. But other things, like someone talking loudly in the library or being told the wrong time by a stranger, might be cause for nothing more than a mental note that those things occurred. However, while it is the case that not all encounters with incongruity warrant a humorous interpretation, it is equally unclear which encounters will, at least in any prescriptive sense. Instead, as I discuss further on, what one develops is a sense or habit of mind as to the when (and how) of engaging in humorous interpretation.

This emphasis on the everyday experience of incongruity is an important difference between my view and that of the tragic and ironic worldviews. These views privilege a more removed understanding of the human condition. Admittedly, Amir's view is different, in that she begins with the muddiness of everyday experience, especially in regards to the suffering that this experience often entails. Nevertheless, she ultimately goes beyond the mundane through the recognition of our inherent ridiculousness. However, I argue that beginning or ending with a transcendent view misses something important, that of the

never-ending, regular encounter with incongruity. This isn't to claim that the other worldviews don't give any weight to mundane encounters with incongruity, they do so at least indirectly, but to argue that they don't give enough weight to those encounters. The fact of our existence is the mundane, and this is (part of) what makes the extraordinary so interesting. The extraordinary breaks us out of that routine, frees us from ruts and habits, shows us things that wouldn't otherwise come to light. Nevertheless, the extraordinary happens irregularly and unpredictably, and isn't necessary to free us from ruts or to understand something in a new light. For that we need distance to engage in both discovery and creative reimagining, and humor and the humorist worldview provide just this distance.

It isn't the case that the humorist worldview denies there is value to engaging with incongruity on the level of the extraordinary, such as thinking human existence can be understood as wholly absurd. In fact, I find Nagel's argument (mostly) convincing in this regard. However, in agreeing with Nagel, my view refuses to undervalue the fact of our lived experience of incongruity. This can perhaps be understood as a sort of chicken or egg problem in the sense that there might be no clear way of determining whether mundane encounters with incongruity lead to thinking human existence absurd at the metaphysical level, or vice versa. Do I accumulate incongruous experiences, often times interpreting them as humorous, where eventually they reach some sort of critical mass and I conclude that not only is my existence absurd but human existence as a whole absurd? Or, does some catastrophic incongruity happen that causes me to reexamine my life in light of the fallout of such an event and I recognize the meaninglessness of it all, cope with such through humor and adopt a humorist worldview, and that filters down to my everyday encounters

with incongruity? This becomes a false dichotomy if I'm claiming one path must precede the other, and this is why the chicken or egg analogy is apt, in that there is no good way to determine an answer ultimately and it's just as unimportant.

Be that as it may, I do think (argue seems too strong a word) that for many, the encounter with mundane incongruity, along with perceiving the same seems to hold true for others, leads us to conclude that the tension between aspiration and reality is a universal human experience and thus human existence is incongruous, perhaps even absurd, at a deep level. Furthermore, there is an additional reason that the humorist worldview is grounded in the everyday experience of incongruity that has to do with the idea of practice. To become proficient at recognizing how incongruity can be interpreted humorously, one needs to pay attention to both when and how one experiences that incongruity and determine how one goes about finding the humor in such experiences. The same holds true for using humor, especially in regards to making people laugh or being regularly funny. Being regularly funny not only entails understanding your audience, but further entails practicing being funny, being willing to fail, and learning from your mistakes. Most people are occasionally, even accidentally funny, and many are funny with friends and family, but few are regularly so to a broad audience. Furthermore, few take the time and energy needed to learn the skill of being regularly funny, and once they do, then their practice pays off in the sense of developing a disposition toward being funny, a habit of mind where the funniness flows naturally. In adopting a humorist worldview, by encountering and interpreting incongruity along humorous lines on a regular basis, one creates the conditions necessary for developing the worldview. And as we encounter incongruity at the mundane level so often, it makes sense that the humorist worldview is in

part developed through the practice of interpreting our regular encounter with incongruity humorously.

However, this isn't to claim that there aren't additional conditions that obtain in this process. Many never make the leap from the accumulation of humorous interpretations of mundane incongruity to a deeper sense of absurdity. For those that do, there seems to be a disposition to look out into the world and find common threads, to be open to discovering how lives interact and what this tells one about living a human life both individually and as a whole. Certainly a worldview that embraces the educative potential of humor, especially its potential for educating the self, unsurprisingly also embraces reflexivity and openness. It's also unsurprising that self-education is as much about living an everyday life as it is about searching one's soul and striving toward being the type of person one wishes one were. But this is an important overlap with the humorist worldview. Both recognize that we live our lives in the everyday first and only subsequently engage in distanced reflection on the human condition. Since this is the case, the space needed to live a more robust, everyday kind of life is opened through engaging in the humorist worldview. Not only does this help improve our everyday existence, but it can't but further help allow for a more robust existential existence as well. While this is a bold claim, part of what lends it credence is the perspective-giving capacity of both humor and the humorist worldview.

Perspective-Giving

By the phrase "perspective-giving," I mean that humor and the humorist worldview offers a new perspective on the experience of incongruity through interpreting that experience as humorous. That is, we learn something new about ourselves and our understanding of things through engaging with humor and cultivating a humorist

worldview. Put differently, the educative potential of humor is realized through the new perspective gained by engaging in the enjoyment and creation of humor. The new perspective comes about through the affective distance necessary for experiencing humor initially, which allows one to step back from the immediate experience and recreate that experience along humorous lines. This perspective-giving capacity of humor seems especially evident in the creation of humor. For instance, the topics regularly covered in stand-up routines are fairly broad. Such topics as relationships, raising children, growing older, interactions with other people, the oxymoronic, the strangeness of one's own ideas, owning pets, words, and dating are all common in the setups and punch lines of routines. What makes this material interesting and insightful is the perspective comics bring to these topics, that is, the things we learn by approaching these topics through a humorous lens. A tenant of stand-up comedy is that while interesting content is good, what's better is the unique perspective a comic brings to that content. In crafting routines, comics consciously think of ways incongruities might be presented through a new perspective, one that leads people to think differently about that content. Even for those not invested in a comedy career, in telling a funny story for instance, one tilts one's perspective on the events experienced in order to discover or reveal the humor. Put differently, humor, through its distancing effect, allows room for one to tilt one's perspective and learn something from such an exercise. This is how I argue humor is perspective-giving; it both opens up room for and creates a new, or at least different, perspective.

Arguably, the same holds true for enjoying humor as well. As mentioned, stand-up comics purposefully craft their sets in order to lead the audience into thinking about the subject matter of the set in a new light. Sometimes this is evidenced by a sudden, short

outburst by a single audience member who is struck by the new perspective, and sometimes it's the entire audience rejecting the new perspective through a stunned shout of surprise. The same holds true for the process of discovering the humor in an experience of incongruity in one's everyday existence. At times one is simply struck by the humor of the situation, say when two billboards are next to each other, one advertising a new charter school and the other bail bonds, reminding one that schools are often like prisons and wouldn't it be nice if there were bail bonds for schools like there are for prisons. It's not that one saw the billboards, consciously paused and thought how those two things could be juxtaposed in a humorous way, then expressed such aloud. Although I do think this describes the process fairly accurately, I don't think this is a wholly conscious process. It is more the case that, due to one's beliefs about schools and prisons, and certain habits of mind present, the humor suddenly appears in the mind's eye. This is in contrast to the way in which I came up with this example, which was to think to myself "what would be an interesting example of coming across something that wasn't meant to be humorous, but, depending on one's outlook, beliefs, dispositions, habits of mind, etc., one would be struck by such in a way that would offer an example of the perspective-giving nature of humor and the humorist worldview." As I'm already convinced of the connection, at least metaphorically, between schools and prisons, for me this example offers no new perspective.

Nonetheless, in arguing that humor is perspective-giving, this isn't to further argue that those perspectives are always new in the sense of novel. It could be the case that one already believes schools and prisons share too much in common, and seeing the billboards reminds one of what one already believes. The tilt happens "locally" in this instance, in that

one's perspective is shifted away from seeing the billboards as just advertisements to seeing them as inadvertently making a comment about society and schooling that one already adheres to. However, it could also be the case that one has floating in the back of one's mind ideas about schooling and prisons and the similarities between the two that have never coalesced until one is struck by the humor presented by the billboards, and in this instance the humor does indeed generate a novel perspective. This isn't to deny that, in certain instances, humor leads to a new perspective in the sense of never-before been expressed by humanity, however, I imagine this is rare.

If the above holds for humor, then the next thing to examine is the relation of this perspective-giving capacity to the humorist worldview. The important difference between the experience of humor and the humorist worldview is a habit of mind that increases the chances of garnering a new or different perspective on the currently experienced incongruity. Put differently, through developing the humorist worldview, one is disposed to interpreting incongruities humorously as a policy, such that, when one experiences incongruities, one's disposition is to find the humor in them. This being the case, one would also be more likely to experience the perspective-giving capacity of humor. This humor feedback loop and perspective-giving is why the humorist worldview is perspective-giving itself, unsurprisingly, as it partakes of the capacity of humor to do the same. Furthermore, the humorist worldview allows for a meta-perspective on the perspective gained through the humorous interpretation of any given incongruity encountered. In thinking about habits of mind or dispositions, if one, through developing a humorist worldview, is more likely to both interpret incongruity humorously and gain a new perspective on that

experience, then one is also more likely to question that new perspective if one finds it incongruous within one's web of beliefs.

This aspect of the humorist worldview is also shared by the three other worldviews discussed. The tragic sense of life certainly offers a new perspective, though perhaps just the one, on the things one experiences, including those that are incongruous. That perspective is, arguably, that all experiences eventuate in suffering. For the ironic stance and Amir's view, there are more opportunities for a variety of perspectives. For the ironic stance, as one discovers and tries on new worldviews and ways of being, one's understanding of things is shaped anew by such. Furthermore, the ironic stance also forces a meta-perspective, really a constant reminder, that any new way of being is, ultimately, without meaning and warns one not to be fooled otherwise. Amir's *Homo risibilis* acts in a similar way as that of the ironic stance, in that through engaging in the comedy of our existence we gain new perspectives on the things experienced, but it too contains a meta-perspective that reminds one that we are inherently ridiculous creatures and to keep that in mind when one begins taking oneself too seriously.

A further way in which the humorist worldview is perspective-giving comes from the improv example discussed previously. While the emphasis was on the idea of tilting one's interpretation of the experience of incongruity toward the humorous, something I discuss in more detail in the next section, I also mentioned that improv players experience a doubling of perspective brought about through being both player and character simultaneously. Analogously, when one interprets incongruity humorously, one experiences a doubling of perspective. While I have in mind specifically instances when the

incongruity is of a more negative sort, I argue the analogy holds more generally as well.

Take the following example.

Lets say you are in love with your close friend Shelia and have decided to tell her about how you feel. You plan a romantic picnic at a park both of you often take walks in, inviting Shelia under the false pretense of yet another friendly stroll. As you are setting up the blanket and basket, storm clouds begin to gather, which you promptly ignore. When Shelia arrives, she stops and stares, looking uncomfortable, and begins walking slowly over to where you are excitedly motioning for her to join you. Before she sits down, you both feel the first few drops of what will shortly become torrential rain. You both look up at the sky, and as the rain falls increasingly faster, Shelia flees back to her car, secretly glad she was able to avoid what would've been a terribly awkward, and perhaps friendship-ending conversation. As you watch her drive off, heartbroken and soaking wet, a sense of the ridiculousness of this whole scenario overcomes you. You smile and shake your head, beginning to understand what a bad idea this was in the first place. While still heartbroken, things don't seem as hopeless as they did a moment ago. By reinterpreting the incongruity of the expectation of a romantic picnic and the beginning of a new relationship and the sudden washing away of all your hopes and hard work, you are able to step back from your painful immediate experience and gain a new perspective on how, due to your loneliness, you tend to over interpret demonstrations of friendly affection for signs of deeper feelings. That is, you experience the doubling of the you that is heartbroken because Shelia doesn't share your feelings and the you that understands the whole thing as wrongheaded in the first place due to loneliness and misinterpretation. Through the cultivation of your

humorist worldview, you have gained a better understanding of both the situation and yourself through interpreting the incongruities you recently experienced humorously.

Reinterpreting Incongruity

As the humorist worldview enables new perspectives on one's experience of incongruity, it does so through reinterpreting or reimagining that experience. John Marmysz, in his article discussing Kant's concept of the sublime and whether humor is a category of the sublime, argues, "The humorist is uniquely capable of extracting pleasures from a painful world by interpreting circumstances in a different manner from the way most people would naturally interpret them."¹²⁷ This resonates strongly with my conception of the humorist worldview for several reasons. First, the humorist worldview is an interpretive framework that actively tilts the incongruities we experience along humorous lines, drawing pleasure from such an interpretation. By using the word active, I mean to indicate several things. One is that there is a degree of conscious interpretation happening when we encounter incongruity and tilt it to discover the humor in such encounters. This is necessary since the experience of incongruity is not inherently humorous but discomfoting. The other is that in adopting the humorist worldview one enacts a degree of control over how one experiences incongruity and further acts to experience that incongruity humorously. Put differently, one actively seeks to interact with the world humorously by reinterpreting much of what one experiences in light of how that interaction could be or is humorous.

However, I am not claiming that one must always consciously interpret one's experiences. Instead, as with all interpretive frameworks, one establishes habits of mind or

¹²⁷ John Marmysz, "Humor, Sublimity and Incongruity," *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* 2, no. 3 (2001): 12.

dispositions that help one to discern when and how to interpret the incongruity humorously. Here, I define discernment as the capacity to distinguish something toward the end desired and in the way one wishes to achieve that end. One obvious way discernment is key is through discerning how the incongruity can be tilted toward the humorous. Several factors influence this, including one's situatedness and one's previous interpretations of incongruity. Furthermore, the types of humor one engages with regularly, both in creating and enjoying humor have an effect. The connection to instrumental understandings of humor plays a role in this regard. As we largely encounter humor through forms of entertainment, then those forms of entertainment will effect and help form one's humorist worldview. This also speaks to the ways in which one cultivates one's humorist worldview, by reflexively engaging with humorous entertainment so that one is aware of the ways one is being influenced.

Another aspect of discernment is determining what counts as something to be interpreted humorously. Once again, one's situatedness influences this, but what keeps the humorist from slipping into clownishness or boorishness is recognizing not only when his interpretation is best left unexpressed, but that there are simply certain things that can't be interpreted humorously, at least not at the time they're experienced. Because our experience of humor entails distance from certain countervailing emotions, if an experience is sufficiently traumatic for instance, a humorous interpretation won't be possible. Not only trauma impacts one's ability to interpret incongruity a certain way, but anything that distracts one does as well, such as a puzzle that needs solving or experiencing the incongruity through a sense of wonder.

Furthermore, what counts as something available to be interpreted humorously is an important act of discernment. This can happen in different ways. For example, imagine a friend confides that while at a bachelor party, the groom tells a series of racist jokes. He notes that he was stunned and unable to laugh along with others who seemed unconcerned the jokes were told in the first place. The reason, he explains, was that in being told a joke that violates deeply held ethical tenants, he was unable to distance himself from the detrimental stereotypes and language the joke embodied and furthered through its telling. He couldn't gain the necessary distance to break free from both the practical concerns the joke embodied and the countervailing emotions provoked in order to enjoy the cognitive shift of the joke (to put it in terms of Morreall's description of the humor process). It's not that, in the abstract, he couldn't understand why someone might find the joke humorous, it's that his ethical commitments didn't allow for that particular interpretation of the incongruous experience. Furthermore, what struck him as incongruous wasn't the joke but the context in which it was told: a bunch of white guys, who otherwise thought of themselves as open-minded and progressive, telling a joke about black men and who would avoid telling such a joke in mixed company for fear of offending others. To his mind, you couldn't both claim to have certain ethical concerns for the well-being of others and perpetuate horrible stereotypes about black people through telling jokes of that nature. While this was an experience of incongruity, it was one he could interpret playfully or enjoy. Thus, his ethical commitments made that experience of incongruity unavailable to him for humorous interpretation.

Earlier I mentioned one thing needing to be discerned in developing a humorist worldview is whether it is appropriate in any given circumstance to express one's

humorous interpretation of the experienced incongruity. This speaks to another facet of Marmysz's quote, that when he states "by interpreting circumstances in a different manner from the way most people would naturally interpret them," there appears to be a conflict between the humorist worldview being embedded in the muddiness of everyday existence and being set apart through the way most people interpret incongruity. That is, how can one both claim to be taken up with the everyday while also being set apart from the way most people interpret incongruity? The improv example earlier comes into play here in the sense of the doubling of consciousness available as both character and player simultaneously. To be involved in the muddiness of the everyday while stepping back from that involvement is something we commonly experience. That is, we often both immediately experience something, while also noting both the fact of that experience and how we feel or think about the experience. This doubling doesn't remove us from the muddiness of the everyday. Instead, it allows us to remain there and still examine such from the perspective of a disengaged, though very much interested, observer. This doubling acknowledges both the experience in its immediacy, as well as how we understand and incorporate that experience within our web of beliefs. Admittedly, these habits of mind take practice. In order to discern, for instance, what's available for humorous reinterpretation, as well as discovering the humor available in encounters with incongruity entails a trial and error process combined with reflecting on what one thought successful in regards to the humorous reinterpretation (and how one measures success as well). Through practice, one builds a habit of mind that one can employ while experiencing incongruity and immediately begin playing with possible reinterpretations of that experience along humorous lines.

Playfulness

The idea of playfulness deployed here is in the vein of “playing with.” Through recognizing (and re-cognizing) our experience of incongruity along humorous lines, we play with the possible interpretations available to us, imaginatively recreating the experience in order to discover the humor. This, then, is what I — borrowing Richards’ description of play — mean by play in the context of the humorist worldview: the imaginative recreation or reinterpretation of the experience of incongruity along humorous lines. There are a several reasons play is important to the humorist worldview. The first is that through engaging in imaginative recreation of our experience, we can utilize the distance necessary to engage in humor to discover new ways of thinking about the subject of the incongruity that are revealing, educational if you will, and thus relating to the perspective-giving nature of humor. Next, we can also engage in a kind of critical examination of our beliefs and understandings of the incongruities experienced through, for example, imaginatively taking the experience to its logically absurd conclusion. In doing so, we can discover conflicts among our ideas, or come to realize that we do indeed hold beliefs we had not explicitly thought of ourselves as holding. Through discovering these things, we can begin rectifying such conflicts or delving deeper into why we hold the beliefs we do and deciding what changes to make to both how we think and act. Furthermore, by not taking the experienced incongruity (too) seriously and by enjoying the way in which we play with the interpretation of that experience, what might be an otherwise painful experience can be transformed into an enjoyable discovery. Both Mordechai Gordon and Cris Mayo note how the use of humor in covering difficult material allows the student to engage with the material in a less defensive way, thus possibly being more open to what it

has to teach. The same can hold true when engaging in self-ridicule with an eye toward self-examination. Discovering that one isn't living up to the ideal one holds for oneself can be difficult to both discover and admit. By engaging with humor in this discovery or learning process, one can more easily accept one's shortcomings and further work toward realizing that ideal.

Moreover, playing with one's interpretations of incongruity is a type of aesthetic experience. Both Richards and Morreall also claim that the experience of humor is a type of aesthetic experience and both agree that aesthetic experience involves developing an appreciation for the subject of the experience, as well as the experience itself. For Richards, it is an appreciation of incongruity that gives humor its aesthetic weight, and this appreciation is central to his definition of humor. Morreall's claim isn't as straightforward. He denies that all experiences of humor qualify as aesthetic, pointing to humor that degrades, shocks, or embarrasses and the subsequent enjoyment of such as examples of humorous experiences that are non-aesthetic. He claims that what makes a humorous experience aesthetic, in part, is the motivation of the person enjoying the humor. To the extent that someone playfully enjoys the cognitive shift brought about during the humorous experience for its own sake is the extent to which that counts as an aesthetic experience. That is, "Humor is aesthetic to the extent that it is not mixed with self-interested pleasures."¹²⁸

While pinning whether an experience counts as aesthetic to someone's motivations seems problematic, the important point I take from both Richards' and Morreall's discussions that is pertinent to the humorist worldview is the importance of playfulness to

¹²⁸ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 72.

their definitions of the experience of humor (something the ironic stance and Amir's ideas also take as central). Moreover, the humorist worldview itself is an aesthetic worldview. This is the case in the sense that the interpretative framework set up by this worldview makes playfully appreciating the humorous interpretation of one's experience of incongruity foundational. Much like both humor and the humorist worldview participate in humor's perspective-giving capacity, humor and the humorist worldview participate in the appreciation of playfully interpreting incongruity along humorous lines.

There are two further ways I see playfulness operating within the humorist worldview. The first is that when I encounter incongruity, when I perceive it, I choose to interpret the tension humorously by playing with the various interpretations available. For instance, if at the funeral service for my grandmother, my 8-month old daughter begins farting uncontrollably, I could simply find it funny that everyone tries to ignore my farting baby during the eulogy. I could make some joke about how little Matilda takes after her namesake. I could turn bright red and rush out of the room. I could be angry that someone whom I loved and respected so much is being disrespected in such a crude way. All of these interpretations I can play with, finding them more or less amusing, briefly adopting the various perspectives of parent or attendee, and even imaging how my grandmother might react. Even in the act of imaging a scenario such as the above, I playfully flit from one interpretation to the next, finding pleasure in some more than others. That is, not only is there a type of playful enjoyment of incongruity in the experience of humor itself, but this playfulness extends to the humorist worldview's reinterpretation of (imaginatively) experienced incongruities as well.

The second way playfulness operates within the humorist worldview is at the existential level. Imagine someone who has trained for a career he is passionate about, that, however, is no longer in demand. Worrying about his future, he thinks to himself “Great, now I’m highly trained at being unemployable.” One could say that he has a sense of humor about the situation, which is certainly true, but more than that, he has playfully reinterpreted this existential crisis to find the humor in the situation (at least temporarily). Or, imagine a church deacon who has lost his faith, but remains committed to the congregation he helps shepherd for various reasons (a sense of obligation, friendship, community involvement, etc.), mentally calling himself the Black Sheep Shepherd, recognizing humorously the incongruous nature of his atheism and apparent devotion. He playfully accepts this conflict, finding pleasure in what is no doubt a painful state of being. By enacting this humorist worldview, the deacon not only finds a way to delight in his existential condition, but he is better able to cope with its absurdity.

This playfulness is a further realization of the humorist worldview’s educative potential. Through engaging in playful, humorous reimagining or reinterpretation of experiences of incongruity, I draw on both past experiences of engaging in such reinterpretations, that is, the practice of reimagining, as well as all what I’ve learned and believed about the current experience. Put differently, I make real what I’ve learned in order to provide an example of such for others and myself and to see if my understanding is correct, that is, that it indeed expresses a humorous reinterpretation of the currently experienced incongruity. This I take to be what these aspects of the humorist worldview build toward, that of a way of educating the self, of making oneself intelligible (to one’s self).

Education of the Self

From the previous section, one can see that much of what the humorist worldview reveals is a better understanding of one's experience of incongruity, along with a more robust understanding of one's beliefs and commitments in relation to that experience. That is, through developing and engaging with a humorist worldview, one engages in self-education. The concept of self-education used here is partially inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer's essay "Education is Self-Education" (though departs in significant ways from the ideas outlined there).¹²⁹ As the title indicates, Gadamer claims any kind of education one engages in is education of the self. In one way, this is self-evidentially true, in that any type of education one engages in, one's self is the thing or part of the thing being educated. Here I define "self" in regards to the complex of interwoven beliefs, ideas, motivations, physical embodiments, emotions, relations to and with others, past actions, future plans, and so on that we think of as constituting our individuality or personhood. Self-education, then, is coming to understand better that complex of interwoven things, seeing how and why one thing influences the other, and further seeking to influence the outcome. Put differently, I understand self-education to be synonymous with robust self-cultivation. In imagining and pursuing my better self, in coming to understand myself more fully, in being honest about strengths and weaknesses and learning to both work around and accept my limitations, I am actively cultivating my personhood.

There is a different understanding of the self-education left unaddressed in the above description, that of self-education as self-help or self-reliance. This is perhaps a more common way in which to understand this term, in that, people often seek opportunities to

¹²⁹ Hans Georg Gadamer, "Education is Self-Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 4 (2001).

improve themselves by learning about meditation and mindfulness, or taking a seminar on increasing one's wealth, or perhaps by reciting daily affirmations they read in a book on increasing confidence. None of these things are necessarily at odds with understanding self-education as robust cultivation of the self. However, they are a thinner and somewhat limiting understanding of self-education. For one, they generally involve improving oneself independent of others. Moreover, while others are often present in some regard, they play a secondary role in such an education. While acknowledging that this conception of self-education is indeed thinner, I am still including it in my use of the term. The reason being that, once again, this thinner conception is encountered more often in the everyday and can lead one to a place where the more robust understanding takes precedence in a similar way that as one reflects on one's encounters with mundane absurdity one can be led to an understanding of existential absurdity.

Discussed previously was how the humorist worldview shares in humor's perspective-giving capacity. In this, one not only gains a different way of understanding a belief or set of beliefs, but one also utilizes the distance necessary to recognize the limitations of one's current understanding of that belief or set of beliefs. The perspective-giving process also speaks to an engagement with self-cultivation through evaluating one's current understanding and further questioning that understanding by casting it in a new light. For instance, imagine you are an impatient driver, abusing those slower than you and berating those going faster. If, on remembering George Carlin's famous quip about how everyone driving faster than you is a maniac and everyone driving slower than you is a moron, you come to realize that the problem is your impatience and not the other drivers on the road, then this new perspective is a humorous act of self-cultivation through

recognizing one's limitations. Perhaps you come to realize your impatience is really an expression of your frustration with your career or your unhappy relationship. Whatever the cause of your impatience, through interpreting your actions humorously, you've come to better understand yourself. What you do to address such a limitation further is another act of self-cultivation motivated by one's engagement, at least in part, with humor.

One difference between individual experiences of humor and the humorist worldview (really more an extension or broadening of the above) is that the humorist worldview cultivates one's disposition to understand better the tensions between beliefs and actions, between aspirations and experiences, and even between beliefs themselves. Whereas in any single instance of humorous interpretation of incongruity I can discover specific tensions related to that humorous moment, the disposition created by cultivating a humorist worldview leaves one open to both enjoying regular humorous interpretations of incongruity as well as learning from the regular encounter with incongruity. Arguably, this disposition helps foster a habit of mind productive of humorous interpretations of incongruity, thus increasing the chances of further developing robust understandings of one's beliefs, actions, motivations, relationships, etc., resulting in a self-education feedback loop (at least ideally). Admittedly, this disposition to engage in humorous self-education entails other, related dispositions such as reflective self-awareness, a desire and willingness to examine the underlying causes of one's beliefs, a certain amount of skepticism about surface appearance or explanation, a desire for a more robust understanding of oneself and one's place in the world, and so on. This set of dispositions is not unique to the humorist worldview, though the humorist worldview arguably lends itself to cultivating these dispositions in conjunction with the disposition to reinterpret

incongruity humorously. Interestingly, these all seem to be philosophical dispositions as well, though perhaps not surprising, as others have noted the similarities between engaging with humor and engaging with the philosophical enterprise.¹³⁰

Another aspect of Gadamer's essay central to the self-educative nature of the humorist worldview is that of seeking to feel at home with oneself or wanting to feel comfortable in one's own skin, both at the mundane and existential level. This seeking recognizes that we often feel out of place in our own lives, as if we are living them on the wrong side. This desire motivates certain actions one takes to alleviate them, and these actions are self-educative. This holds true for the other frameworks mentioned. No matter whether I think existence tragic, ironic, or inherently ridiculous, what I am seeking is a way to be at home, both in the world and with myself, and the process I go through is a process of self-education. The importance of feeling at home with oneself and one's place in the world can't be overstated and is a central motivation for thinking through the purpose of one's existence in the first place. If the affective tone of the experience of incongruity is discomfort, then it is unproblematic to also describe it as uncanny or unsettling.

In seeking to regain that sense of being at home in the world, one might engage in a process of reflecting on the feeling of being unsettled, seeking out what's generating it, and engaging in self-therapeutic conversation. Alternatively, perhaps one jumps from one pleasure-inducing substance or activity to the next, avoiding the discomfort altogether. In adopting a humorist worldview and accepting the centrality of incongruity to the experience of being human, one accepts that not quite feeling at home with oneself is a reoccurring theme. Nevertheless, in both accepting this theme and engaging in humor to

¹³⁰ Amir and Morreall among others.

alleviate the stress of such a feeling, one is able to better cope with such a situation, and, ultimately, gain a degree of the *heimlich*. More accurately, it's generally the case that one feels more or less at home with oneself throughout one's life, occasionally feeling totally at home, and the humorist worldview both helps one to cope with such a feeling and to recognize what might be generating such feelings in the first place. That is, this worldview provides a way to explore why such a sense arises and a therapy for when it does. In this instance of coping with the sense of not being at home, the humorist worldview helps one to accept this fact as opposed to resolving it. If it is the case that this uncanny sense is something we generally experience throughout our lives, then it is something that cannot be resolved ultimately and therefore must be accepted. It is certainly the case that if a humorous interpretation of incongruity brings to light tensions between beliefs, often one seeks to examine those beliefs and resolve that tension by rejecting one or another of the beliefs or through synthesizing both in to a new belief. However, certain things can't be resolved and instead must simply be accepted and by finding the humor in instances where feelings of unsettledness arise, one is better able to cope with such situations through playfully reinterpreting one's experiences and gaining a new perspective.¹³¹

While the focus of the discussion so far is turned inward, self-education is also an effort to understand others and one's relation to and with others. In engaging in more formal educative activities, this becomes clear. In schooling, one is surrounded by others, constantly learning from teachers, peers, friends, and so on. However, the presence of others extends to the various platforms I engage with online, the entertainments I enjoy, the texts I read, and for Gadamer, the traditions I am born into. More than this, these others

¹³¹ Amir makes a related point in outlining her view.

are integral to learning about the world and all it contains, but others are further integral in how I understand myself, my place in the world, and how I interpret my experiences. What this is getting at is how intertwined the self, others, and the world are, which makes understandable our experience of incongruity regularly being about the tension created by how we expect others to act, how they actually act, and how we act toward others. Furthermore, even when there is no other person involved, we often experience incongruity through the conflict of rules and procedures others have established and how those rules and procedures are enforced or carried out. An example of the importance of others both in our experience of incongruity and in developing a humorist worldview is through the ways in which we tell stories of our past. Often those stories are both reinterpreted along humorous lines, when at the time we found nothing humorous about the experience, and contain some type of (either explicit or implicit) moral lesson, which is tied to the humorous reimagining and that we often hope to impart to others.

As an example of a self-educative experience that was not very humorous originally, but became so in subsequent retellings, take the following story. My friend Ibrahim loves to recount the story from his senior year of undergrad when he spent spring break hiking the Smoky Mountains with the Geology Club. Not being an avid hiker, he mostly stuck to the established trails on the various group outings. However, one day he was feeling adventurous, and, wanting to see if there were better vantage points to photograph the beautiful outcroppings the group had hiked to, decided to follow a faint trail up the side of the mountain he discovered while wandering. Two of his friends, Michelle and Super Robbie, saw him take off up the path and decided to follow him, much to his surprise, and it wasn't long till the trail disappeared and all three were lost. Instead of turning around,

Ibrahim suggested they continue forward, arguing that the trail would most likely pick up shortly. This turned out to be a terrible idea, especially for him and Michelle. After an hour of wandering around, where both Ibrahim and Michelle had fallen several times and with multiple bruises and scrapes, the three of them slid their way down the other side of the outcropping, dirty and exhausted. Except for Super Robbie, who was both optimistic and athletic, and came down the mountain unscathed and only slightly dusty. In telling this story, Ibrahim noted that everyone thought it funny after the fact, though during he was mostly terrified. There is even a picture of the three of them on his phone, with Robbie facing the camera arms spread wide, and Ibrahim and Michelle facing away, backsides covered in dirt as proof of the whole adventure.

At the time, Ibrahim remembered thinking that he was both glad and embarrassed that Robbie was there, as Robbie had helped him through a difficult spot when Ibrahim had been afraid to climb back up a slope they had gone down for fear of falling off the edge of the outcropping. Years later, he took away from the countless retellings of the story the need to be honest about one's limitations, both as an outdoorsman and photographer, as well as being grateful for companions who were there to help. Through the humorous retelling of this at times terrifying event (Ibrahim being afraid of heights), Ibrahim not only was able to learn something about himself, but the role others played in that recognition was central to his growth. Robbie served as an example of someone who knew what he was capable of, understood his limits, and was able to help others through a difficult spot because of this. Ibrahim's recognition of this fact of Robbie's self-understanding, spurred on by the humorous reinterpretation of his own experience of a shared event, led to an episode of self-education.

There is another avenue of self-education to discuss, that of how the humorist worldview also supports the instrumental uses of humor outlined in chapter 2, especially concerning moral education. In this regard, the humorist worldview broadens the development of the virtues through creation of habits of mind or dispositions to examine the tension between one's actual and ideal self. For example, if one wishes to become more patient, then one needs to recognize those instances when one is being impatient, such as in the George Carlin quote mentioned earlier, and then practice patience. In this situation, engaging in some humorous reinterpretation of the incongruity leading to the testing of one's patience can help one engage in the proper practice of patient persevering. However, another way to engage in moral self-education is through the idea of ridicule as a test of truth. This idea is part of Lord Shaftesbury's theory of humor, as Amir notes, though what he means by this is both unclear and contested.¹³² One interpretation, however, is that if one's beliefs are able to withstand the trial of self-ridicule then one can rest assured of one's commitments to those beliefs.

For example, imagine I have a friend named Bruce who claims to believe that in all most all circumstances "honesty is the best policy." Nevertheless, Bruce regularly tells white lies. From my perspective, he has more of an honesty "is sometimes the best policy, but usually it's just something I use to achieve a certain purpose and to feel good about that" policy. In confronting him directly about this inconsistency, Bruce always has a justification for lying in each situation. It is not until he engages in some self-mocking dialogue along the lines of "Oh look, another 'special circumstance,' huh Brucie?" that he realizes his commitment to his original beliefs about honesty are weak. That is, his

¹³² See pgs. 40-49 in Amir, *Humor and the Good Life* for a discussion of some of the various interpretations of this idea.

commitment to the belief about himself in regards to being an honest person is shown to be lacking. By failing the test of truth presented through self-ridicule, Bruce has learned something important about his moral character and is now free to either strengthen that commitment by refusing to engage in light lying or revamp his stance of honesty being the best policy. Whichever direction his moral growth takes, by enacting self-ridiculing dialogue in the form of mocking humor, he has playfully learned more about himself. This being the case, I want to revisit a point I discussed briefly above, that of the feeling of being at home with oneself and the ways self-education helps one to achieve such a state.

Self-Education and Honest Living

If a way to understand self-education is as a striving to feel at home in the world, then this process arguably entails endeavoring to live more honestly. The phrase “to live more honestly” is set against the term “authentically,” as the latter seems more expansive, including not just being honest with oneself, but achieving to a certain degree one’s best self. That is, authenticity carries more weight than living honestly, a weight I forego in favor of something more easily achieved, more approachable, and more in line with my focus on the everyday. I am using the phrases “honesty” and “honest living” in something like the following way: to live honestly is to clearly acknowledge and accept one’s present circumstances, that is, how one is actually living one’s life (instead of how one wishes one were). This acknowledgement and acceptance is done to the best of one’s ability (taking into consideration such things as level of knowledge and understanding about one’s circumstances, one’s various commitments, one’s mental state, etc.). The object of this honesty is to describe clearly one’s present states of affairs, with the purpose of such honesty being to create a space of evaluation and coping with the incongruities often

experienced between aspiration and reality. That is, how can I participate in the self-education provided by engaging the humorist worldview if I lie to myself about why I'm experiencing a tension between my aspirations and reality or even what I truly aspire to and what I also believe to be true about myself and the world? By not being honest with myself about how I'm living my life, I won't be able to rectify these feelings of not being at home in the world.

The humorist worldview provides opportunities to learn how to live in a more honest way as much of the educative potential for the humorist worldview and humor in general is as a type of moral, character, and even aesthetic education, that is, as a type of self-education. Put differently, the humorist worldview aids in this process of honest living in helping one to confront one's beliefs and understandings and to examine more fully one's way of being in the world through reinterpreting the tension between expectation and experience humorously. This being the case, I discuss how I see the humorist worldview aiding in living (more) honestly through comparison with the other worldviews. One thing to note is that while I do critique the other worldviews, one shouldn't take this as an indication that I am arguing one should therefore abandon these other worldviews and take up the humorist worldview. There are a host of reasons one might think the tragic sense of life depicts human reality more fully than other worldviews independent of its take on our experience of incongruity. The same holds for the ironic stance, that whatever one wishes to accomplish in living ironically might go beyond how well or poorly the ironic stance copes with incongruity. Once again, as this dissertation is an exploration of a way to cope with incongruity previously unexplored, so in coming to understand the interpretive

framework of the humorist worldview, I do so in light of the other worldviews in order to better understand its strengths and limitations.

The Tragic Sense of Life and Honest Living

One way that one might go about living more honestly is to be freed from illusion and the various worldviews discussed previously approach this differently. For the tragic sense of life, one begins the process of living more honestly through sitting with or confronting the tragedy of existence. This confrontation begins by first accepting or acknowledging that suffering is indeed an inescapable fact of human existence and thus of one's own life. Furthermore, in confronting this fact one looks to understand the affect such has on one's life. That is, not only do I recognize and admit my circumstances, but I further seek to understand the reach of those circumstances on my beliefs and actions, the way I live my life, my relationships with others, and so on. Confronting further indicates deciding how to address this circumstance once its impact has been evaluated. Beyond recognizing where and how the situation is impactful is evaluating that impact, determining not only how the situation effects one's life but the extent to which that impact is helpful and harmful, both currently and in the future. That is, confrontation with the inescapability of suffering helps one to understand fully what it means for tragedy to be the tone of existence, for there to be a single note always underlying of the music of living a human life.

From this process of confrontation, the educative potential of the tragic sense of life emerges. In sitting with the fact of the inescapability of suffering (and thus tragedy), as well as the moments of suffering we directly experience, we let go of the illusion of hope. The hope that suffering is something that one can avoid. This arguably goes hand in hand with the fear of experiencing suffering, in that we both fear we will suffer and hope (and actively

act) to avoid that suffering. However, as this is a false hope according to the tragic sense of life, we do ourselves more harm than good in engaging in such fruitless endeavors.

Moreover, and beyond the inevitability of suffering, we avoid the false hope of ultimate meaning (at least in this life). That is, we accept and are freed from the hope that there is some deeper meaning to our thoughts and actions beyond the fact they exist and what we do with them.

Nonetheless, we can learn from our reaction to our inherent tragedy, thus giving us a chance to be more honest in our interactions and stop looking for meaning beyond our wide-ranging present. The tragic sense of life further reveals its educative potential as a space of disillusionment, a space where one can confront our inherent tragedy, as well as confronting one's own reaction to such a fact, discovering the ways one might deny or avoid this fact. Concerning one's relationships with others, by being freed from illusion, we avoid (or at least reduce the chances of) enabling the same illusion in others, avoid engendering false hope, and promote a path toward an honest existence. And, as much as there is no therapy for this tragedy (in the sense of regaining what was lost), there is a type of coping through acceptance and disillusionment, through learning how to act more honestly in one's everyday existence, and through coming to understand oneself more fully.

Certainly living a (more) honest life through learning or discovering what it means that existence is tragic is a valuable outcome of adopting the tragic sense of life as one's interpretive framework. Nevertheless, as I argued previously, the tragic sense of life takes the fact of our suffering too seriously. If this is the case, then how can it sustain the honesty one achieves through adopting such a worldview? It is not just that one is disillusioned, discovers a more honest self, and then lives only an honest life from then on. Honest living

is a continual struggle against giving back into illusion, against self-deception, and toward a more robust understanding of one's self, of who one is and who one wants to be, what it takes to achieve such, and the gap between the two. This being the case, by taking the fact that encounters with incongruity lead to suffering too seriously, those adhering to the tragic sense of life run the risk of giving back into illusion, the illusion that existence is only or even mostly tragic. That is, in claiming that the tragic sense of life takes the fact of our suffering too seriously, I am in part questioning why, of all the experiences humans regularly encounter, suffering is the one that carries the most weight, so much weight in fact, that it colors the tone of all human existence. Admittedly, suffering is a terrible thing, and it is certainly the case that some people (and swaths of people) experience more than their fair share of suffering over extended periods, perhaps their whole lives. However, as terrible as this is, for the tragic sense of life what provides the tragic tone isn't any particular experience of suffering, but that because our life has no inherent meaning all these particular experiences don't lead anywhere beyond the experiencing of them. However, this holds true for people who experience nothing but joy or wonder or ennui their whole lives. If no experience gives meaning to human existence, then to privilege one runs the risk of making that experience the thing that implicitly gives one's existence meaning. This is the illusion that negates the potential of becoming a more honest person through confronting just such a tragic tone, in that one is no longer free to sit with the meaningless of existence. Taking all of this into account, the humorist worldview offers something more.

For one, it too acknowledges that encounters with incongruity can be cause for suffering and that suffering is indeed inescapable, but inescapable in a certain sense. For

the tragic sense of life, suffering is inescapable in two ways. The first is that as human beings we can't help but experience suffering in some way, whether or not that suffering is caused by the experience of incongruity. However, the tragic sense of life claims more than this. It's not only the case we suffer, but that all experiences eventually lead to suffering as they are ultimately without meaning. It is this sense that the humorist worldview denies. As mentioned, it is unclear both why suffering should carry the weight it does so that it becomes the measure of response to the meaninglessness of existence and why it is actually the case that this ultimate meaninglessness is cause for suffering at all. The humorist worldview claims that instead of suffering we find humor in the tension between the expectation that all of our mundane actions add up to something beyond themselves and the reality that they don't. So while the humorist worldview doesn't embrace the freedom from disillusionment in the same way that the tragic sense of life does, it does promote honest living through accepting that there is no ultimate meaning to our lives, and it does avoid falling prey to the re-illusionment of the tragic sense of life.

This is also to say that the perspective-giving nature of humor and the humorist worldview leads to a more honest existence, just by another route. Through coming to understand what one believes more fully, one is able to eliminate false beliefs and perceptions and act more honestly in the world. Put differently, by re-cognizing the tension between one's own expectations of oneself and the reality of how one acts, one can either rectify one with the other or eliminate both and adopt a wholly new understanding of oneself. Moreover, the humorist worldview helps one to develop habits of recognition and reflection, such that one can continually engage in a better understanding of oneself and one's situatedness. Additionally, by acknowledging that the experience of incongruity can

lead to suffering, one discerns whether those experiences are available for humorous interpretation. Therefore, as much as one isn't necessarily freed from the illusion of hope of finding some ultimate meaning to human existence in the same way as one is by engaging with the tragic sense of life, one is able to live more honestly through coming to more fully understand oneself and one's inconsistencies in thought and action and seeking to rectify that tension.

The Ironic Stance and Honest Living

The ironic stance too allows one to live more honestly, doing so through helping one accept the contingency of meaning. Put differently, the ironic stance accepts that any way of representing reality is nothing more than shared agreement, and while such shared agreements can be powerful, they are no less provisional for being so. What this brings about for the ironist is freedom from "local constraints," that is, traditions or ways of being and understanding that claim universal grounding, but which in fact simply rest on habit and shared agreement. The recognition of this contingency opens up space for the ironist to discover for herself other ways of being and understanding through exploring different worldviews, values, ideas and seeing how they resonate with her in the way they depict or describe reality. At the same time, the contingency of any of the worldviews she explores means she is also free to engage playfully in some creative conceptual editing, combining in new and interesting ways the aspects she finds accurately describe reality and excising the aspects she finds limited or problematic. This playfulness leads to new perspectives, new ways to express and critique what is often taken for granted. Through this act of exploring various understandings and ways of being, the ironist learns to live more honestly through crafting meaning for herself, instead of simply accepting the meaning she was born into.

That is, the ironic stance is productive of new perspectives as one explores new ways of being in the world. Living ironically then, while accepting along with the tragic sense of life that life has no ultimate meaning, lends itself to being more actively engaged in creating meaning and exploring various avenues to create new meaning.

This perspective-giving capacity of the ironic stance is something the humorist worldview has as well. Nevertheless, there are important differences in the way that capacity is manifested. For the ironic stance, the new perspective develops through striving to make meaning from one's life in light of accepting that meaning is something one has to constantly (re)create. This contrasts with the new perspective gained through the process of the humorist worldview of creatively reimagining our encounters with incongruity along humorous lines. It can certainly be the case that within the ironic stance one is presented with a new perspective through, for example, incongruously adhering to a way of life that usually requires a deep commitment to an established metaphysics (say religious practice of some kind) and knowing that this deep commitment rests on nothing more than shared agreement and further finding this tension humorous. Just as one can imagine someone with a humorist worldview engaging in the exploration of various ways of being and thus gaining new perspectives as she goes through this act. Nothing about either worldview necessarily excludes the realization of a new perspective through the process of the other. Nevertheless, the usual way of each worldview of discovering a new perspective is markedly different, in that for those cultivating a humorist worldview, the new perspective is gained through reinterpreting encounters with incongruity, whereas for the ironic stance, it is gained through seeking to make meaning for oneself independent of whether that meaning making entails encounters with incongruity.

In addition to gaining new perspectives, one interesting outcome of adopting an ironic stance toward the world seems to be a gain in what I call existential resiliency. Because the ironist accepts there is no ultimate meaning in any of the ways of being she explores and creates, when those ways explode, they do so with less destructive force. That is, she learns a type of resiliency in the face of existential threats and comes to evaluate the fallout for the damage it actually does instead of what it might do. This seems especially important in light of how damaging the collapse of one's interpretive framework can be.

For example, if being raised to believe in the Christian conception of god, one comes to deny that god's existence later in life, then the collapse of one's metaphysical framework can leave one feeling set adrift, anxious and sad about how to explain the world around one. However, in coming to understand existence ironically, one comes to understand that things aren't as bad as initially thought, since one didn't lose as much as initially believed. It's not that one's loss of faith isn't cause for suffering, but that, on realizing and accepting that life has no ultimate meaning, one realizes one is free to now take up a new way of being that more accurately depicts the world around one.

Here the humorist worldview shares something else in common with the ironic stance, in that, through learning and practicing reinterpreting incongruity along humorous lines, one is better able to bounce back from the discomfort and disappointment such encounters can produce. Put differently, one gains a sense of humor about failure, even existential failure, and is therefore better able to cope with the fallout, better able to honestly evaluate the failure and its implications, and better able to choose honestly the next steps one needs to take. This seems to be an important difference between these two worldviews and that of the tragic sense of life. In regards to the collapse of one's way of

being, such as becoming an atheist after living life as a believer, the tragic sense of life can only offer a sympathetic nod for the suffering such a collapse entails, since such a thing couldn't result in anything but suffering. However, for the other two worldviews, one is able to reinterpret such an experience, exploring new ways of being that help one to make sense of the world anew.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the ironic stance and the humorist worldview. In seeking to discover new ways of being, the ironic stance lends itself to being disconnected from the everyday experiences of what it means to live a life through the process of living any way of being ironically, that is, disconnected from the muddiness of actually living that life. While this can be helpful in evaluating the values and rules of any way of life in light of whether they make sense for one's own life, it can leave one unable to value the mundane properly. As argued earlier, we mostly live our lives within the mundane and occasionally break through into the extraordinary, but what gives the extraordinary its weight is our involvement in the day-to-day, the rut of existence. The ironic stance disallows this rut and further denies the suffering inherent in this rut by distancing itself from being involved too closely in any way of being beyond existing in one's current context. The humorist worldview, on the other hand, is intimately involved in the rut of existence, seeking to learn from the incongruities encountered, as well as the humorous interpretations of such. Because of its involvement in the mundane, the humorist worldview is more aware of the conflicts within the meaning one makes for one's life, is better able to evaluate what changes need to be made and to further act on them. That is, through its involvement in the day-to-day, the humorist worldview increases the

chances of honest living. This aspect of the humorist worldview is something it shares with Amir's *Homo risibilis*.

Homo Risibilis and Honest Living

Amir's view, *Homo risibilis*, seeks to maintain a middle ground between the ironic stance and the tragic sense of life by incorporating the insights from both and ultimately transcending each worldview through the acceptance of the ridiculousness of the human condition. This acceptance not only happens at the level of human existence, but, in order for it to have any lasting impact, must be accepted at the subjective level as well. *Homo risibilis* lends itself to honest living in various ways. For instance, by accepting that suffering is a regular outcome of encounters with incongruity, one is better able to respond properly to the incongruous experience. That is, one is better able to determine whether that experience is open to various types of reinterpretation, one of them of course being humorous. Furthermore, in recognizing that suffering is inescapable, one can become more sympathetic to those suffering through a similar bout of incongruity.

While this is the case, Amir's insight that whatever is tragic can also be comic helps to transform that suffering into humor and laughter, thus ameliorating — at least to some extent — the pain of such tragedy. Moreover, one is better able to understand the impact of the suffering and experience of incongruity, learn from that experience, and come to understand oneself better through being offered a range of interpretations. This happens through the process of admitting that incongruity causes suffering but also acknowledging that one doesn't need to dwell in that suffering, and furthermore, that one can reinterpret the incongruity comically. Amir's view offers a more robust level of educative potential through embracing the insights of the tragic sense of life and recognizing the ridiculousness

of the human condition, leaving open a transformative space. In denying the strong interpretation of the inescapability of suffering and embracing the weaker interpretation, Amir's view seems to embrace two types of freedom. One type is the freedom from illusion of false hope that the tragic sense of life provides. However, the other type of freedom is an embrace of the freedom to interpret our experience (of incongruity) along comic lines, a freedom shared by the ironic stance (though different in flavor). However, as both of these types of freedom are limited, Amir takes the additional step of reinterpreting the ambiguity of incongruity as ridiculousness. Once we accept our inherently ridiculous state, we can transcend this state through such acceptance. According to Amir, this transcendence can bring about a sense of tranquility, where one is even more able to cope with the travails of human existence.

Both *Homo risibilis* and the humorist worldview focus on engagement with the muddiness of human experience, which includes engagement with the everyday experiences of incongruity. To be clear, for Amir the muddiness of human experience includes more than just incongruity, comprising a range of experiences, from tragedy to boredom, excitement to contentment, and especially including the way these things are interwoven. My concept of incongruity, while expansive enough to include experiences such as tragedy and excitement (say at solving a puzzle), does not include other experiences such as boredom or contentment. That is, as experiences such as contentment are not necessarily incongruous, they therefore do not fit within the purview of my concept of incongruity. Nevertheless, as the humorist worldview is grounded in incongruity, this isn't a severe limitation of my view.

However, *Homo risibilis* ultimately abandons the mundane in favor of transcending what Amir sees as our ridiculous state, whereas the humorist worldview dwells in the mundane with the occasional foray into the extraordinary. This is an important difference in regards to honest living and learning how to accept both our limitations and realize the educative potential of this worldview. It's not just that by abandoning the muddiness of our experiences it's unclear how *Homo risibilis* remains grounded, for if the foundation of Amir's view is abandoned, it seems like it would cease to be able to guide us in how to live and how to do so honestly. It is also that there is always more to learn from our everyday existence as our circumstances and subjectivity are regularly changing, such that the answers and understandings garnered in one phase of our lives will not always gel with our current phase.

The humorist worldview, as it is always situated within the everyday, can change with our changing circumstances to help us both live honestly and face our limitations. That is, through engaging in a humorous reinterpretation of our encounters with incongruity regularly, we are in a regular state of self-education. This is perhaps the most robust way in which the humorist worldview realizes its educative potential. Of course, this regular state of self-education demands that one engages in habits of self-reflection, discernment, evaluation, and honesty about what one believes, how one acts and behaves towards oneself and others, and so on. Nevertheless, in engaging in the habits created through utilizing the humorist worldview, one is also building the habits of self-education just described.

Conclusion

The humorist worldview offers a way for us to learn from our everyday encounters with incongruity. It does so through bringing to bear a humorous reinterpretation or tilting of these experiences. Through such reinterpretations, we learn about ourselves, about the ways we understand the world, our beliefs, and the interactions between these things, that is, we engage in (developing habits of) self-education. In this chapter, I have discussed why it is necessary to ground the humorist worldview in everyday encounters with incongruity, in part in order to recognize how we regularly engage in humor through various avenues of entertainment. Combined with this is that we rarely are engaged in existential crises such that we are forced to reexamine our lives in light of such circumstances. Nevertheless, to grasp fully the force of the humorist worldview, we do have to accept that our existence is fundamentally absurd, and moments of self-doubt on a fundamental level help us to realize this fact.

The three other worldviews discussed also begin in a place of absurdity, acknowledging that existence is indeed absurd. However, where these views go from there is importantly different. My purpose in outlining the humorist worldview is to fill in a gap left by these other worldviews, especially in regard to how incongruity is part of our mundane interactions with the world.

I conceive of this gap in terms of humor's educative potential, with that potential being most fully realized through acts of self-education. All of the worldviews discussed realize their educative potential in various ways, being more or less limited in those realizations. However, to reiterate a theme, no one worldview can be said to ultimately win out over the others. Instead, it seems more important to recognize that what is needed are

ways to make sense of and cope with the incongruities one encounters regularly, both at the mundane and existential levels. The humorist worldview, with its grounding in the everyday experiences of incongruity, is arguably well suited for such coping. But more than just coping, it allows for one to learn from one's reactions and humorous reinterpretations, while at the same time finding pleasure in such reinterpretations and encounters. Furthermore, by engaging with the humorist worldview, one is able to live more honestly by building habits of mind such as discernment, reflexivity, and, ultimately, a more robust understanding of how one best flourishes. Of course, as with the other worldviews, the humorist worldview is not without its limitations. Therefore, I briefly discuss these limitations next.

One limitation the humorist worldview shares with the ironic stance is that it can lend itself to dilettantish engagement with one's experiences and understandings of the world. For the humorist worldview, as one expresses one's humorous reinterpretations, often times others will laugh at such reinterpretations. Moreover, while producing laughter isn't part of the enjoyment of humor directly, it can and often is a subsequent pleasure to engaging in humor. However, the danger is that one pursues the laughs instead of engaging with or even ignoring the educative potential of the humor. As argued in the first chapter, humor and laughter are distinct things and often conflated when it comes to discussing humor. Therefore, while it is understandable that one would see laughter as being intrinsic to humor, in this case, it actually inhibits one's ability to learn from one's humorous reinterpretations of incongruous experiences. That is, when one is focused solely on getting laughs, one misses opportunities for self-education. It's not the case that the statement or

act of producing or initiating the laughter can't also be insightful, it's that in focusing on the laughter one is less likely to realize such insights.

This tendency can be mitigated in several ways. The first is by cultivating a sense of self that prizes self-honesty and examination. Through this habit of mind, one comes to realize that what one is doing is focusing solely on generating laughter at the expense of learning anything from one's humorous reinterpretations. In addition, from this one can refocus one's attention on learning from the humor, while still making others laugh. The second way to mitigate this tendency is by acquiescing to the need to make others laugh until one is pulled up short by the fact that often what makes others laugh isn't, eventually, what makes one's self laugh. In this moment, one gains clarity into what one is missing, namely that one is missing out on leading a more robust life by taking advantage of momentary pleasures. In admitting this, one is now free to refocus on what one can learn through humor, while not entirely foregoing the pleasure experienced from causing laughter.

Another limitation is that one can be seen as clownish, as someone who needn't be taken seriously and who can't take things seriously. Anyone playing the fool runs this risk. While this isn't so much a limitation of the humorist worldview in terms of its capacity for self-education and honest living, the consequences of not being taken seriously can be demotivating in terms of engaging and expressing one's humorous insights. It's not just that this is frustrating, both in the sense of achieving one's ends, say of having a certain kind of conversation or arguing for what one thinks is morally right and not being taken seriously in this regard. It is further frustrating in not being able to trust oneself and one's own understanding of who one is. By this I mean that, in understanding who one often

depends on how one is perceived and received by others. If others regard one as fundamentally unserious, it can be difficult to take one self seriously. In this regard, one does have to develop a type of perseverance if one truly thinks that the humorist worldview has much to offer. Through this persevering one could come to find that what's important in engaging with the world through the humorist worldview is that the ends, a more robust understanding of the self, which further leads to both more fulfilling interactions with others and one's situatedness, is worth the misperception of others. Admittedly, this can be something difficult to cultivate, however, nothing comes without a price.

As with any worldview or interpretive framework, one has to decide if the limitations one encounters negate the explanatory power and educative potential of that worldview. In the case of the humorist worldview, I argue that its limitations, at least the ones outlined here, do not outweigh the value it has in both explaining and revealing one's self to oneself. Furthermore, I argue that it can help one to lead a more honest, and thus flourishing, life, and can reveal to one the incongruity between what one believes and how one acts on those beliefs. Tempered with certain habits of mind (such as discernment), honest evaluation of one's understanding of things, the acceptance of the absurdity of human existence, and grounding in everyday interactions, the humorist worldview has much to offer through realizing its educative potential, especially its potential for self-education.

In the final chapter, I address what it might mean to both teach as one who has cultivated a humorist worldview, as well as what it might mean to teach the humorist worldview. That is, in cultivating a humorist worldview, how might that impact the way in

which one interacts with the course material and the students? What impact would it have on content selection and how would one assess whether one was in fact helping one's students to cultivate a different, more robust understanding of humor and its educative potential? Furthermore, what are the steps one could take to help students cultivate their own humorist worldview and come to understand humor in terms of something more than simply entertainment? Can you teach others how to be funny and, if so, is there educational value in doing that? What are the drawbacks to including such a goal in one's teaching practice or curriculum? These questions are central in thinking through how the humorist worldview both influences one's teaching practice and are the focus of the final chapter.

CHAPTER 5

TEACHING AND THE HUMORIST WORLDVIEW

In this dissertation, I have sought to reimagine how humor can be understood as educative. Humor is unavoidable and we have come to expect it as a normal part of our everyday interactions with others and the world at large. Because humor does not stand out as a special kind of interaction, few are reflective about its use and what it indicates about beliefs and ideas present within us. In this final chapter, I briefly explore how the educative potential of humor and the humorist worldview might be engaged in regards to the practice of teaching. These areas are fruitful for further research for those interested in how cultivating a humorist worldview could affect how they teach. One reason to cultivate a humorist worldview in others is that, in helping others to come to understand their experience of incongruity humorously, one's own humorist worldview is deepened. Moreover, as humor is a social experience, cultivating a humorist worldview is a way to strengthen one's relationships through shared experiences, especially experiences of laughter. While for most of this dissertation I have made a clear distinction between humor and laughter (and still think those distinctions hold), it seems pertinent in this chapter to bring them back in conversation with one another. Furthermore, while I do not treat these areas of further research in any depth, my hope is they provide inspiration for others to do so.

As it is the case that we often experience humor instrumentally, as a type of relief from the seriousness of living, the place I begin is with the question of whether you can teach someone to be funnier. That is, in the first section I address whether one can teach others to be funny and if so, whether there is a benefit to doing so. As my understanding of

the funny, taken from Richards' description outlined in chapter 2, is an act or behavior meant to elicit laughter, I also discuss the importance of laughter in regards to using humor in the classroom and teaching others to be funny. Unsurprisingly, I argue you can teach (yourself and) others to be funnier than (you and) they already are and doing so can be a valuable, educative endeavor. I argue this is a natural starting place not only because we often think of humor as something that's meant to be funny, but also because we often think that if something claims to be humor that isn't funny, then its description needs rethinking. Furthermore, much of the research on humor in the classroom conflates laughter and humor, or at the least uses laughter as an indicator of when humor occurs, so it seems that someone interested in using (more) humor in the classroom would begin with seeking ways to be funnier.

In the section following, I discuss whether one has an obligation of duty to teach or guide others in developing a humorist worldview. That is, if one understands the humorist worldview as something morally and practically worthwhile, does that further entail an obligation to help others in coming to understand the experience of incongruity in a similar way? If there is not an obligation to help others cultivate a humorist worldview, then is there anything prohibiting one from doing so? I argue that the answer to the first question is no, that one does not have an obligation to teach others about the wonders of the humorist worldview and to further help them in developing their own. However, if one wishes to do so, then there is not anything morally prohibitive about such an endeavor. My conclusion is that the humorist worldview, as with any other worldview, cannot help but influence one's actions and ideas, including one's teaching practice. As this is the case, then

seeking to cultivate such a worldview in one's students is morally acceptable, though not required.

In the third section, I outline how one might teach to and with a humorist worldview, how doing so might influence not only the content one might choose to examine, but how one might conduct one's classroom as well. Admittedly, what is discussed in this section more easily applies to humanities classes than STEM classes. However, that is not to say there isn't something here for those who teach math or science. It is more the case that the content itself can be limiting in this regard and a teacher might need to be more creative in the ways she incorporates humor in her classroom material. Nevertheless, others things such as making her classroom as space where humor and laughter is both welcome and encouraged, where, for instance, she helps students to realize that mistakes happen and they are often best approached with a sense of humor, are independent of the content of the course. However, for most people, humor and being funny are synonymous, and that is where I begin.

Teaching Others to Be Funny

One area of further research that has been gestured toward in this dissertation is the relation of being funny to humor. That is, while embracing a distinction between humor, laughter, and funniness, and seeking to examine how humor helps us understand ourselves more fully, it is certainly the case that a path toward cultivating a humorist worldview is through trying to make others laugh. One place where more work needs to be done is in clarifying what we mean when we talk about making someone funnier in the sense of teaching them to be so. Sometimes people are asking whether one can teach someone who isn't at all funny to be funny in some way. Even this is somewhat ambiguous. One

implication is more insult than honest inquiry, in that it implies that someone lacks any sense of humor and couldn't possibly be taught how to make others laugh, as they do not have the necessary foundation for doing so. The person asking whether one can make this humorless person funnier does so sarcastically, indicating that that humorless person doesn't know how to take a joke or is too wrapped up in the practicalities of life to relax enough to enjoy humor. I will say, that if there are people with absolutely no sense of humor out in the world, they should be pitied, and left as they are since there isn't enough material to work with to cast them in a new mold. If this is what one has in mind when asking whether one could teach this type of person to be funnier, then the answer is clearly no.

However, it is rare that one encounters such individuals. Instead, it seems what we usually mean is whether we can make someone funnier than they already are. This way of putting the question admits that the less-than-funny person has some foundation of humorousness, but that such a foundation is shallow in some way. By "funnier than they already are," we can mean is it possible for one to teach someone who makes others laugh in some marginal way, to make others laugh more often or more heartily. We can also mean can we teach someone who doesn't laugh much, to enjoy a wider variety of humor or engage with humor more often than they currently do, that is can we help them to deepen their sense of humor. Another way to explore this question is whether it's possible to teach others to be funnier who 1) take things too seriously, or 2) are somewhat dull-witted in the sense of not understanding much of the humor they encounter, or 3) who find themselves incredibly funny despite evidence to the contrary. That is, can these three categories of people learn to both recognize their shortcomings in regards to humor and can we help

them develop a more sophisticated understanding of their own sense of humor as well as how to express that sense of humor. In thinking through whether one could teach these sorts of people to be funnier, the assumption is that doing so is a valuable exercise.

Concerning the ideas outlined in previous chapters, one can ask whether there is some educative benefit to helping someone hone their ability to be funnier.

The reason I begin here is that one route to developing a humorist worldview starts with being funny. That is, in seeking to use humor to elicit laughter in others, one comes to discover that humor is so much more than a tool with which to generate laughter. That being the case, then beginning with how one hones such a tool or set of tools provides insights into the transition from being funny to cultivating a humorist worldview. By itself, becoming more critical of how and why people cause others to laugh seems educative. By becoming more mindful of one's own understanding, what one does and does not find funny, the importance of laughter in building and sustaining relationships, and how laughter can be detrimental to those same relationships allows for a more robust picture of one's situatedness.

This being the case, then a bit of a thought experiment is in order. In discussing how to make someone funnier, I am assuming both parties wish to do so, and am not simply promoting evangelical comedy-making. For the person taking life too seriously, what is needed is to demonstrate to them the importance of engaging in humor, that humor is something that serves multiple purposes and helps to communicate various things that can't be communicated in others ways. That is, to emphasize the instrumental value of humor. By understanding that engaging in humor, in both laughing at the humorous and seeking to make others laugh through using humor, the too serious person is able to gain a

perspective on their situatedness unavailable to them otherwise. Once motivated, the too serious person can use whatever skill they have in being funny and make others laugh as they see fit.

For the dull-witted, in order to teach them to be funnier, one approach is to expose them to more complex sorts of humor and explore why such things are funny with them. Here I certainly do not mean they need a firm grounding in humor theory, as it's unclear such a grounding actually helps to make one funnier. It is more the case that in conversation, say about a stand-up routine one just enjoyed, one discusses what each other found funny and why. Through this informal Socratic session, one can guide one's interlocutor toward a more complex understanding of humor and how to be funny. With this new understanding, the dull-witted slowly gains the ability to distinguish levels of humor and appreciate the differences in various styles of humorous expression. However, the end goal is not to transform the dull-witted into a humor snob. Instead, finding a broad range of humorous situations funny seems worthwhile. Moreover, by introducing more complex humor to someone whose sense of humor is somewhat unrefined, one not only introduces them to a richness of understanding previously unavailable to them, but this also helps to build their critical thinking skills through the analysis of what others find funny across a range of experiences.

In the case of the people who find themselves funny in spite of the fact that very few others do, this seems to be a case of either a lack of awareness or a lack of empathy. There is another type of person who resembles the self-verified comedian, those with a unique or quirky sense of humor. For this person, there might be reasons to let them be, since, in making them more sympathetic to what others find funny, one runs the risk of

extinguishing the very thing one is seeking to educate. However, for the self-verified comedian, helping them to understand that using humor to be funny is just as much about the relationship one has with the audience as it is about tilting the incongruities of life toward humor could help them out of this problem. For this person, it is less a question of whether they understand how to be funny and more a question of emphasizing humor's social nature. Teaching this type of person to become funnier is teaching them to become more aware of others, what others like and find funny, and to reflect on their situatedness as it concerns others.

For the three cases outlined, the acts of teaching are mostly informal, happen through dialogue, and depend on a type of relationship not present in other teaching scenarios. Nonetheless, by learning to use humor in this instrumental way, one can come to understand several things related to the humorist worldview. The first is the importance of one's situatedness and how that informs what one finds funny and how one expresses such. The second is that one begins to see the separation or gap that exists between laughter and humor, that you can have one without the other, and, in this way, one can begin to focus on humor, and begin to examine how it is an expression of the absurdity of the human condition. From this, one can begin to play with the incongruities one finds, both through one's everyday interactions with the world and with one's beliefs and ideas. One comes to understand how engaging with the world through humor supports other moral, intellectual, and emotional habits one finds desirable, even obligatory. However, this is another instance of the self-educative process that humor allows for, and doesn't necessarily speak to how one might teach the humorist worldview in a classroom setting. What it does

demonstrate is that the process of developing a humorist worldview can be taught, even if indirectly, through seeking ways to be funny and in seeking to make others laugh.

The Humorist Worldview and the Duty of Cultivation

Another area of further research is that of whether there is any duty or obligation to both teach with the humorist worldview and teach others how to develop a humorist worldview. That is, if one is convinced that the humorist worldview is something that provides a way of coping with encounters with incongruity and further it helps one to develop certain moral habits, dispositions, and habits of mind that are both desirable and conducive to human flourishing, is this enough to entail an obligation to help others in developing the same? One thing this is asking is whether there can be a duty or obligation to inculcate or cultivate certain worldviews or ways of understanding over and against others. Of course, this is part of the well-worn indoctrination debate, where the concern is with how one can possibly teach something like a worldview, even in the limited sense I use here, without at the same time infringing on students' ability to choose that worldview for themselves.

In exploring this research avenue, there are at least two possibilities of defense one can bring to bear. One is that it seems clear that one cannot help but indoctrinate students to some extent with a worldview or two. By this I mean how any particular teacher understands the world cannot help but determine how she relates to the ideas and actions of her students. What seems important is to provide the tools necessary for students to evaluate such worldviews, as well as providing a host of other worldviews with which to compare theirs against, being honest about both the advantages and limitations of any worldview presented. Arguably, it seems further incumbent on teachers to determine the

detrimental impact of any worldview or framework inculcated. This would necessitate a reflexive practice on the part of the teacher, and an honesty about the limitations her worldview places on her teaching practice, so that she could bring such limitations to the attention of students.

The other of possible line of defense is to note that, with the narrower understanding of “worldview” employed in this dissertation in regards to the humorist worldview, a teacher would have to present other worldviews that fill in the gaps or address experiences that the humorist worldview misses. For instance, the humorist worldview does not have much to say about our relationship to non-human animals and objects, does not explain what love or caring is nor how to engage with those experiences, ignores other aspects of human flourishing, and so on. As the humorist worldview is a limited one, a teacher would already bring to bear other interpretive frameworks to fill in such gaps, and this in turn guards against the indoctrination of the humorist worldview as the single or even dominating worldview. More would need to be said about such arguments; however, this would be a place to start.

In thinking specifically about the question of cultivation of the humorist worldview and whether the advantages of such produce an obligation, an objection to address is that what seems important about the humorist worldview is what it achieves, that is, the dispositions, habits of mind, etc., and not the worldview itself. If so, then it is arguably the case that other avenues can achieve the same results. Put differently, is there something inherently worthwhile about the humorist worldview that goes beyond the advantages it imparts?

An answer to such an objection would need to be in two parts. The first part is admitting that other worldviews — especially those previously discussed — provide a therapy for incongruity. Furthermore, one can develop the dispositions outlined in other ways. This being the case, then it would seem that one does not have an obligation to inculcate the humorist worldview as much as try one's best to help others develop the advantages the humorist worldview imparts. However, in answering this objection, the second part would address how the humorist worldview provides more than just dispositional advantages, that a strong reason it produces an obligation is that it appeals in a singular way to certain types of people. One would need to be careful to admit that it is not the case that the humorist worldview is universally the answer to the problem of incongruity. Nevertheless, the humorist worldview is unique in important ways, which would need elaboration and further argumentation as to why this might provide an obligation to present it as a valuable choice among others. In the end, it might be the case that one finds such arguments unconvincing as a whole, even if the second part seems to gesture toward some obligation to inculcate a humorist worldview in one's students.

However, even if one admits there is no *obligation* to inculcate any specific worldview, one would be right to ask whether there is instead something that would prohibit one from doing so in the case of the humorist worldview. Could there be, that is, something detrimental about inculcating the humorist worldview in one's students and if so, does that detriment outweigh the possible advantages? In responding to this objection, one would need to be careful not to fall back on treating the humorist worldview as *the* worldview to adopt in coping with incongruity. This brings to light the difficulty in determining to what extent something could be detrimental if there are multiple,

competing worldviews available to students to help them successfully navigate the world. Furthermore, in weighing the detrimental impact of cultivating any worldview, one needs to take account of how the detriment accrues to students, teachers, and the interaction among them and other parties in the schooling setting.

Some considerations concerning the use of humor in the classroom concern the types of humor one allows. Does one allow, say, offensive humor (racist jokes, for instance) and if so to what purpose? Furthermore, how does one address offensive humor when it arises? If one wants a classroom where humor is both encouraged and expected, then how much humor and what kinds of humorous expressions does one allow before it becomes disruptive and how much disruption is potentially educative and how much miseducative? How much and what kinds of humor does one allow students to engage in as opposed to the instructor? Many of these questions relate to how one wants to teach and the purpose of allowing and disallowing certain things in one's classroom. These questions also bring to light the ambiguity of humor as a form of communication, which is something to be aware of as one teaches with a sense of humor. In trying to communicate the humorist worldview through instances of humor, the message can get lost if the humor used gets in the way of that message. Moreover, while this topic is well researched, in any ethical discussions of the use of humor in the classroom, it is still something that needs acknowledgement and the development of a strategy for learning from inevitable miscommunications, as well as instances of offensive humor. In this regard, if one has already cultivated a humorist worldview, then some of these questions, such as to what extent one allows humor, what kinds of humorous expression is both expected and encouraged, and the ambiguity of humor as a form of communication, become increasingly pressing.

There are other considerations as well, in thinking through what might be detrimental about teaching with and to the humorist worldview. One objection to consciously adding humor to the one's curriculum might be that there just simply isn't enough time to add one more consideration, one more teaching style or philosophy to an already packed curriculum, especially in light of the limited amount of time and energy at teachers' disposal. This objection argues that in order to teach the humorist worldview, one has to sacrifice parts of the curriculum by excising other components (assignments, assessments, course materials, etc.) that might have a more immediate benefit (such as those tested over or building a necessary foundation for further study later). This jeopardizes the current education for those students, as they won't be learning what they need in order to move on to a deeper understanding of whatever subject, while further harming their future learning potential due to a lack of a solid grounding in the basics.

In reply, one can point out that teaching with a humorist worldview means both how you approach a subject matter as well as the content of what one teaches. If this is the case, then the course content need not necessarily be amended or at least amended excessively, in order to demonstrate both the centrality of incongruity and how one might go about coping with the experience of incongruity. Furthermore, it could be the case that one demonstrates, say, how scientific or historical discoveries don't proceed in a linear path, but instead are often accidents of fate or highly contested and often mocked before they're widely accepted. This could benefit students in helping them develop a more skeptical attitude toward ideas, demonstrating the need for gathering enough evidence before making a decision, and that failure is part of the discovery process. This attitude could be one the teacher adopts toward her own teaching practice, letting students in on how she

makes decisions, how her failures have led to improvements in her teaching practice, and how having a sense of humor about the inconsistencies in her own life have made her better able to cope with such things. All that is to say, while one would certainly need to consciously reflect and subsequently act on making changes to one's teaching practice in order to accommodate the humorist worldview, the amount of effort required isn't more of a burden than what is required of a reflexive practitioner in the first place. (Admittedly, while it isn't necessary for a teacher to amend her course materials, in practice she most likely would in order to better illustrate her understanding of the humorist worldview.)

Another concern one might raise is that, in admitting that not everyone will find the humorist worldview attractive, this way of stating it is too mild. It seems to exclude those who might otherwise find the humorist worldview offensive or harmful to their way of life. For instance, those who think learning a very serious endeavor, as it leads to increased life chances, and thus a more flourished life, might object to being taught that life is full of incongruities and these are best approached through making light of them. This person doesn't need to deny there are certain educative benefits to humor and laughter, just that those are best gained through occasional encounters with such in the classroom and more frequent encounters outside the classroom. Furthermore, this person could even admit that the humorist worldview is helpful in coping with one's existence, but isn't something to be imparted in the classroom.

In beginning to respond to this objection, one could acknowledge that the humorist worldview is indeed unattractive to many people, and that, furthermore, it could conflict with more serious ways of understanding the world and our encounters with incongruity. Nevertheless, the above objection creates a false dichotomy. Engaging with humor can be

very serious business, as professional comedians demonstrate. Moreover, humor is a reflection of what one takes seriously many times. By exploring those serious themes through the lens of humor, one gains a distance from them and is able to perceive them in a new light, one that leads to a more robust understanding of oneself. Here the classroom is an apt space to explore this type of conflict, to have open dialogue about what appears to be a paradox, that of approaching the very serious business of living through humor.

This all too brief exploration of the areas of further research into the ethics of teaching with and to the humorist worldview offers a lot of promise in regards to an area that is under theorized. However, I leave off here to outline one last area of exploration, that of consideration of the humorist worldview in the classroom.

Teaching with and to the Humorist Worldview

Assuming that one can either demonstrate a positive duty to cultivate the humorist worldview in one's students or at least demonstrate the advantages of doing so outweigh any detriments, the final area of further research addressed here is what it might be like to teach with and to the humorist worldview. However, this area of research seems importantly independent of whether one can make the case for moral grounds for deploying this worldview. As previously mentioned, the humorist worldview is appealing to certain types of people and if those people are also teachers, they couldn't help but be influenced by such an understanding. An important question, then, for practitioners to ask, is whether teaching to and with the humorist worldview provides an important space of learning for both students and teachers. And this question, I argue, is a definitive yes.

One approach to teaching with and to the humorist worldview is to demonstrate through the course materials, how central the experience of incongruity, contradiction,

paradox, etc., is to living a human life. Certain disciplines lend themselves to this more easily. History as whole is rife with incongruities in the form of happy accidents and colossal blunders. However, not just in history classes could one demonstrate this, but in courses where the historical nature of something isn't directly addressed. These courses can include discussions of the history of concepts, discoveries, and inventions. In biology, for instance, an instructor can mention Alexander Fleming's accidental discovery of penicillin and how from the untidy lab bench of a Scottish biologist came one of modern medicine's most important discoveries. In a philosophy course, an instructor can discuss the ridiculousness of the trolley problem and how a once somewhat interesting example used to capture certain moral intuitions became something altogether ridiculous. Alternatively, in an architecture or engineering course, an instructor could use examples such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa to demonstrate how something that looks like it should topple at the slightest gust of wind stays in place for hundreds of years. Other subjects, such as math courses, can use things like funny word problems or math jokes to both teach concepts and lighten the mood, while simultaneously demonstrating the need for a sense of humor in the face of something so difficult. What is important about the examples used isn't just that they're kind of funny, but that they demonstrate how incongruity could be upsetting but can also be a space of acceptance and enjoyment, a space of creativity and playfulness, that is, a humorous space.

In teaching with these examples, the instructor, along with her students, would analyze how an example is incongruous, both to a general audience and to the discipline specifically. Nevertheless, these conversations are also a way to discuss how incongruity is something we as humans perceive, not something out there in the world. These

conversations open up possibilities for further examination of how students might develop a way of tilting their experience of these incongruities toward humorous interpretations and why this is a viable strategy for not only coping with these particular instances of incongruity, but incongruity in general. Here the instructor could give examples from her own life that would resonate for students, and then ask them to provide examples for themselves. These conversations could be had over several class periods, as a way to not only impart to students the humorist worldview, but as a way to increase class cohesion and to demonstrate how the subject matter is connected to their everyday lives in ways that were not previously apparent. Furthermore, humor can help humanize the teacher for students, by bringing to light shared experiences of frustrations due to the experience of incongruity, and by demonstrating ways of coping with such experiences through humor and laughter.

Nevertheless, those who teach need to acknowledge the ambiguity of humor and the time and maturity needed to recognize how life is often incongruous and to develop this specific way of coping with such experiences are important considerations. This, then, is a call for teachers to pay attention to and seek to understand how their students currently cope with incongruity and, furthermore, how they might be using humor to do so. This is an important reason for teachers to take note of how the use of humor is indicative students' understanding of their world, as it provides insight and avenues of discussion not open to more serious approaches to certain topics. As mentioned in previous chapters, humor (and the humorist worldview) allow one to broach uncomfortable or discomfiting topics and ideas in a way that is less challenging, especially if the humor also includes laughter, thus providing a space for reflection on those topics and how one understands them. Here, then,

is a space to explore how negative reactions to humor (as well as laughter) and to the humorous interpretation of experienced incongruities affects both the learning environment and the cultivation of a humorist worldview.

One thing to explore in the classroom is how one's negative reaction to offensive or discomfiting humor and offensive or degrading incongruities provides a space for reflecting on one's own beliefs and attitudes, about what is and isn't open to humorous reinterpretation, and why this is the case. That is, on the subjective level, in examining why one has a negative reaction, one can better determine why one is offended. This is valuable in bringing to light certain prejudices one might have, for instance, or in better articulating what one thinks morally right. Put differently, one can ask of oneself what grounds one has for being offended and whether those are justified. This holds true for both students and instructors. Here one can ask questions about how to go about making the classroom a space for this kind of questioning, what kind of course materials and activities might either encourage or inhibit these conversations, and what resources might be needed to address the fallout from these conversations. As much as individual exploration of one's reactions to offensive humor is a worthwhile exercise, for the teacher and her classroom, there are opportunities to discuss the how and why of the offensiveness of the humor on a larger scale. What I mean by this is that there are topics available that aren't as individually focused, such as the history of certain types of humor and how such a history might describe social attitudes or practices. Or, how the use of ridicule is often used to scapegoat and belittle the other, to both degrade the other, as well as cement the other's inferior status. This can lead to conversations over what it means "to be able to take a joke," whether humor is an excuse to belittle or a way to broach taboo topics, and who gets to

make such jokes? Furthermore, by exploring who is offended by what and why, one can begin to understand the intertwining of larger social institutions with one's individual thoughts and feelings. That is, one comes to have a more robust understanding of one's situatedness.

Another space of exploration is how negative reactions to non-offensive humor might affect the learning environment and the cultivation of the humorist worldview in both teachers and students. A way this might happen is through an instructor who thinks of himself as incredibly funny but whose students feel otherwise. This is a version of the self-verified comedian mentioned previously. In this scenario, the instructor has already cultivated a humorist worldview and seeks to do the same in his students, however, the way in which he uses humor in his teaching, students just do not find funny. The worry here is that by not reading the room, so to speak, the instructor actually inhibits the cultivation of a humorist worldview in his students. This might happen due to their irritation at the instructor's humor, the fact that he doesn't let up or recognize how terrible it is, or the frustration and confusion generated by the instructor's use of humor. It is not the case that the instructor could not also use discipline-specific examples of incongruity to demonstrate the need for a sense of humor in coping with incongruity. Instead, the question is, in what ways would the instructor's use of humor inhibit students from understanding why such coping is needed? This also presents an opportunity for discussion around a certain type of blindness on the instructor's behalf, where he simply is not paying attention to his students in the right way, and further, what he might do to correct this fact. Furthermore, how might the interactions with students in this way,

especially upon recognizing that his use of humor presents an obstacle to what he wants to achieve, change his own understanding of the humorist worldview?

At a more practical level, one could ask how to approach instances where humor gets out hand, where students and the teacher abandon the lesson in favor of making each other laugh. Certainly, in some instances letting this happen might be worthwhile as a break from the everydayness of schooling and the classroom. Furthermore, there is an argument to be made in favor of releasing control of the situation to students, letting them see the importance of both the instructor and students participating in the creation of the learning environment. Nevertheless, how does one balance the seriousness of learning and the playfulness of humor and the humorist worldview? Some topics deserve solemn consideration, signs of respect that necessitate avoiding laughter, while others need concentration to wrestle with those topics and laughter could distract from this. How does one balance the need for these serious situations with the learning opportunities that humor presents without undervaluing one or the other? Something to avoid is to treat humor as only being unserious and other learning only as serious, as this creates a false dichotomy. Instead, along with one's students, one needs to discuss openly when humor might be inappropriate at the level of the class, family, or society as a way to understand something. It is arguably the case that anything can be tilted toward a humorous interpretation, but important conversations can happen between students and teachers about whether and what should be subject to such tilting.

Something not considered in this chapter are questions of what impact would and should humor and the humorist worldview have on teacher education. What would teaching with and to the humorist worldview mean for such things as evaluating teacher

effectiveness in the classroom, choosing teacher candidates, or training teachers to address behavioral issues in the classroom? If we are to take humor seriously, both its instrumental benefits as well as its quasi-intrinsic nature, how might such considerations require a new understanding of teacher education?

Seeking to cultivate a humorist worldview in one's students can be risky, but also has the potential to provide a more robust understanding of oneself and to impart a worldview to students that helps them both accept and cope with the absurdity of and in their lives. Cultivating this worldview demands reflexive practice, that one cares for one's students (in the multiple ways this implies), that one practices a kind of empathy, and that one be honest about the limitations one is under. Put differently, for many instructors and students, using humor is just something they do, a habit, not something they carefully reflect on and learn from. In part this is fine, in that too much forethought inhibits the natural flow of humor, interrupts the timing of making a funny or witty comment, and deflates the laughter before anyone has a chance to laugh. Nevertheless, it also ignores how humor is educative, in both instrumental and quasi-intrinsic ways. It ignores how humor allows for achieving new perspectives on the things we joke about and how humor lets us play with ideas and experiences, tilting them toward humorous reinterpretations.

Moreover, it ignores how, ultimately, we come to understand the world differently through gazing through a humorous lens on the incongruity experienced daily and at deeper levels. In cultivating the humorist worldview in oneself and one's students, these three broad areas of further research can help bring to light important considerations, things to both be wary of and look forward to. In the end, whether one finds such a worldview appealing depends much on the individual. However, I argue, the humorist

worldview is worth having on hand when incongruity rears its head and there is nothing to do about that except make a really funny joke.

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