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No hugging, no learning: The limitations of humour

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Abstract

This article claims that the capacity of humorous works to influence our attitudes is limited. We can only find something funny if we regard it as norm-violating in a way that doesn't make certain pragmatic demands upon us (e.g. to defend the norm). It is compatible with these conditions that humour reinforces an attitude about a norm-violation. However it is not compatible with these conditions that we reject some existing attitude. Such a rejection would require that we recognize our attitude as norm-violating in a way that has pragmatic force. Thus if a humorous work reveals the absurdity of something, we can either find it funny and not have our attitudes significantly influenced, or else be significantly influenced but not find it funny.

1. Introduction

Philosophers of art have sometimes argued that artworks can influence our attitudes. This is often taken to involve the depiction of circumstances from a certain perspective, such that audiences are disposed to carry that perspective into their everyday lives, and regard real things differently as a result (e.g. Young 2001: ch.3; Graham 2005: ch.4).¹ This procedure may not often have a radical influence. But as part of fully-engaging with a work, we are certainly motivated to temporarily adopt the attitudes the work portrays towards its subject matter. So for at least the duration of the engagement we experience the pull of seeing the world in a certain way. Repeated exposure to such a pull is accordingly quite likely to have an impact, and in a few cases we may be quite dramatically affected.

Note that by 'attitude' I mean broadly the evaluative stance we take towards some object or state of affairs. Thus while a shift in attitude can be brought about through the acquisition of new beliefs, the most direct impact is an affective one. For instance, we shift from being afraid of a dog to being reassured by it. Or we shift from a heartfelt commitment towards a

¹ Young 2001: ch.3; Graham 2005: ch.4

political movement to contemptuous rejection. Accordingly, it may often be the affective dimension of an artwork that plays the most vital role in shifting our attitudes.² For example, the way that a work like *Black Beauty* may shift our attitude towards the treatment of horses is a function of the tragic light in which their lives are depicted.

A tragic ethos certainly seems apt to urge us with some force to reconsider our attitudes towards the world. But how about comedies? Can a humorous work encourage us to change our attitude while also getting us to laugh? It is likely that in being amused, the audience may for the first time appreciate the absurdity of something. Plausibly this is a central goal of satire. However, I claim that the capacity of humour to influence our attitudes is limited by the conditions under which we are able to find things funny. I will argue that we can only find something funny if we regard it as norm-violating in a way that doesn't make certain cognitive or pragmatic demands upon us (to defend the norm, or to abandon our norm-commitment). It is compatible with these conditions that humour reinforces our attitude that something is norm-violating. However it is not compatible with these conditions that, on the basis of finding it funny, we come to reject an existing commitment. Such a rejection would require that we recognize our commitment as norm-violating in a way that has pragmatic force. Thus if a humorous work reveals the absurdity of something, we can either find it funny and not have our attitudes significantly influenced, or else be significantly influenced but not find it funny. Other genres do not seem to have such a priori limitations to their potential impact upon us.

2. Finding something funny

To justify my argument I need to first articulate and defend two necessary conditions for the experience of finding something funny. Note that I'm not trying to characterise what is distinctive about the amused response, or what's distinctive about amusing objects. Rather I'm interested in identifying a distinct and robust cognitive process or appraisal that gets us into the state of finding something funny. Identifying such a process must be at the heart of any comprehensive theory of humour however. It will significantly determine what features of objects are likely to stimulate amusement, as well point us towards possible functions or benefits of amusement.

² It is moreover acknowledged that artworks are unreliable sources of new true beliefs (e.g. Gibson 2003; Graham 2005).

The conditions for amusement that I propose build on the incongruity theory; roughly the view that all humour involves recognizing something to be incongruous. This is widely believed to be the best candidate for a general theory of humour. One can find hints of it right back to Aristotle (in *Rhetoric* 3.2) and some contemporary formulations are very sophisticated (e.g. Morreall 2009; Carroll 2013). Indeed, philosophers have recently suggested that the two main competitor theories—the relief and superiority theories—may be trying to answer a different question. Achieving relief, or feeling superior to others may be understood as values or benefits of humour, rather than the conditions for finding something funny (e.g. Jones 2006; Smuts 2006; Zamir 2014). As such they can potentially complement rather than contradict incongruity theory. My account in particular will make some connections to psychological relief.

However, there are certain key problems for the incongruity theory that have long been recognized: 1) the notion of incongruity is too vague and; 2) we don't have a good distinction between humorous incongruity and non-humorous incongruity. The two conditions I provide are attempts to solve these problems. As mentioned, they are pitched as necessary conditions for amusement. Possibly they are also jointly sufficient.³ Though it is evident that factors of timing, repeated exposure, relevance, and context play an important role in the arousal of amusement, I suspect that these factors facilitate the conditions I propose rather than present significant new requirements. At any rate, my argument for the limitations of humour only requires that the conditions I propose are agreed to be necessary.

3. Defining incongruity

As mentioned before, the incongruity theory states that whenever we find something funny, we recognize it to be incongruous in some way. When James Beattie first introduced the term, he used it in a relatively literal sense to refer to situations where two or more things within an assemblage are not congruent, or fitting together (1779: 318). However other writers have extended incongruity to include things that are inconsistent, distorted, exaggerated, unexpected, unusual, irrelevant, or inappropriate. With all these interpretations on offer, we can appreciate why the ability to identify incongruities in all funny things may only be due to

³ Several authors repudiate even the possibility of sufficient conditions Morreall 2006: 63-64; Martin 1983: 78; LaFollette & Shanks 1993: 329; Cohen 2005: 473. Aaron Smuts (2006) also describes it as 'the holy grail' of humour research, implying that it is somewhat tricky.

its vagueness.⁴ Pretty much anything could be incongruous in at least one of these respects, such that for any putative counter-example, we'll always be able find something incongruous about it from some point of view. This could make the theory unfalsifiable.

A good formal definition of incongruity comes from Michael Clark (1970), who derives his account from Schopenhauer (1844, Vol 1, §13; Vol 2. ch.8). Clark defines incongruity as an experience in which we subsume under a concept something that doesn't match the things typically subsumed under that concept. A clear case is when the instance just doesn't fall under the concept at all, as in a category error. However Clark thinks the incongruous instance may contrast with typical cases in other ways. Unfortunately he doesn't spell out these other ways in any detail. For instance, he says that the incongruous instance may be grotesque, even though this just seems to be another way of saying that it's incongruous.

My preferred specification of incongruity is that the object is construed as violating a norm. This is not unique to me. We see appeals to norms in John Morreall (2009) and Noël Carroll's (2013) work, as well as the psychologists Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2010) who propose what they call a 'benign violation' theory. The appeal to norms has notable advantages. First, norms are relative to the social and psychological background of the individual, helping us to make sense of the subjective and culturally variable nature of humour. Second, violations can be more or less intense (relative to one's background commitments) giving us one way to explain different intensities of amusement. Third, there is plausibly a common psychological mechanism for detecting norms and their violation across the various moral, social and practical domains in which we find humour. This could allow for the existence of a distinctive psychological mechanism for arousing humour.

However, norms can be understood in several different ways, so it is important to be clear about what sort of norm-violations we are talking about. The first distinction is between norms concerning how something generally is (statistical norms) and norms for how something ought to be (rule-based norms). It is only the latter kind I appeal to, where some sort of rule or constraining force is in play. The second distinction is between norms that are grounded in non-intentional nature, such as the laws of physics or teleological norms regarding the morphology of living creatures, and norms that are grounded in intentional

⁴ E.g. Carroll worries that incongruity is a "baggy concept" (2013: 81) and "insufferably vague" (2013: 98).

actions or attitudes. Again I appeal only to the latter.

Naturally any attempt to more narrowly specify the theory in this way will bring with it the risk of counter-examples. Consider for instance the following well-replicated experiment by Goran Nerhardt (1970): Nerhardt had individuals pick up a series of identical looking weights, the last of which was either much lighter or much heavier than the rest. Picking up this last weight elicited laughter, indicating that amusement may have been found in the violation of a statistical norm.⁵ In my defence however, I think it just as likely that the participants saw humour in the way they were tricked; they radically underestimated or exceeded the effort required by the task, where the operative norm is to make one's effort proportional to the task.

Meanwhile the exclusion of teleological norms and laws of physics may be controversial because violations of these norms are often found in cartoons. However, as far as I can tell, we never see humour based exclusively on such violations. Rather, physical violations contribute in some way to the violation of a rule grounded in intentional actions or attitudes. For instance, a man with one leg longer than the other keeps walking in circles. Or consider when Wile E. Coyote runs off a cliff and fails to obey the law of gravity until he realises what has happened. Clearly, the laws of physics have been violated here, but absent the character's grossly accidental behaviour, I think we would find the scene miraculous rather than funny. Thus I suggest that we primarily engage with the scene as an aim-based violation.

Finally ugliness is often funny (e.g. gurning and the ugliest dog in the world competitions). Isn't this a teleological violation? I admit this is a tricky case. However one definite intentional norm that is probably in play (in amusing cases) concerns grooming and public presentation. That is, it is funny to pull ugly faces when the norm is to present oneself as attractive. I would add that it should not be very surprising if people sometimes take cases of natural ugliness to be blameworthy.

Overall, the norm-violation condition is comparable to Clark's approach in that to find something funny, we must view that thing in relation to a concept that it does not standardly fit. That is, we must understand a certain way (or limited range of ways) one ought to behave relative to a type of activity in a type of context (e.g. how one ought to speak, how one ought

⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for proposing this counter-example.

to dress). This then allows us to experience the object of amusement as in some way wrong (even if we find it hard to articulate how exactly it is wrong). However the norm-violation view is more precise than Clark's view because it doesn't cover some of the ways that incongruities could be admitted on Clark's account. Most importantly, violations don't simply contrast with the norm-fitting cases; they are more definitely contra-indicated by the norm. Second, norm-violations are not necessarily unexpected or surprising. Certainly norm-violations are quite likely to be unexpected, but many of the things we find funny are quite predictable. Third, the norm-violation doesn't have to be rare. It could be extremely common, as in cases where a comedian points out some common folly of human behaviour. All this allows for very subtle cases of humour where someone's behaviour isn't even particularly unusual. So long as one's attention is drawn towards the way the norm is being violated, the person's behaviour could just be a little bit rude or awkward.

My constraints on the relevant norm-violations still leaves a great deal of latitude, since it covers practical norms (if one wants x, then one ought to y), moral norms, social conventions, norms for mental actions (e.g. believing or reasoning) and certain constitutive norms for category membership (e.g. what counts as a legal move in chess). Violations of any of these kinds of norms is a potential source of humour. For example, puns violate linguistic norms, dirty jokes violate norms of propriety, Tom and Jerry cartoons violate norms of physical harm, and meta-jokes violate norms for telling jokes.⁶ Indeed there is an enormous and ever-growing number of intentional norms, and audiences cannot always be relied to bring the expected norm to bear. For instance, I think a key reason why clowns are often not funny for mature audiences is because we subsume the clown under the norm for clown behaviour. As a result we don't experience the clown as violating everyday dress codes or standards of bodily grace, but as satisfying the norms for how clowns ought to appear and behave.

Finally, my account allows for three distinctive ways to violate a norm. 1) One can violate a norm by failing to live up to it. This corresponds to humour based on stupidity and incompetence. 2) One can actively oppose a norm. This corresponds to humour based on rudeness or immoral behaviour. 3) One can also exceed a norm for performance (relative to a type of individual). This corresponds to cases of humour where a character's extraordinary

⁶ E.g. a man walks into a bar... He's an alcoholic and it's destroying his family.

success or facility is amusing.⁷

4. Amusing Incongruities

The claim that all things we find amusing are viewed as violating a norm is a starting point, but further specification is required to do justice the experience of finding something funny. There are many things that we can find norm violating without finding them funny. Examples include murders, physical anomalies, and surrealist works of art (cf. Bain 1875: 282-3). This is the second key problem for the incongruity theory: how to distinguish the amusing incongruities from the non-amusing ones.

A plausible condition, though not one I endorse, is to rule out those sorts of norm violation that are the object of a negative emotion like fear or anger. Thus it is common to suggest that the incongruity has also to be ‘non-threatening’ in some sense (hence the ‘benignity’ of the benign violation theory). The thought here seems to be that if the incongruity directly undermines some concern of ours, the relevant emotional responses of fear or anger will inhibit the response of amusement.

The problem I have with this condition is that merely specifying that the incongruity must be non-threatening does not give us a variety of incongruity that positively invites amusement. It is not very plausible to claim that, as a default, we will find incongruities amusing so long as additional factors of threat, loss or offence are absent. Rather the most plausible default attitude to take towards incongruities seems to be puzzlement or curiosity.

In order to avoid puzzlement, we need some positive condition that explains how we manage to enjoy the incongruity. This is the condition advanced by Clark (1970) and more recently endorsed by Marmysz (2003: Chapter 7) and Morreall (2009: 15). How could we enjoy incongruities? One idea is that we feel psychological reward in the acquisition of information, and that resolving incongruity is a means to this (e.g. Schultz 1976, Kulka 2007). For example, puns might be funny because we realize the alternate possible meaning of a word in the context presented, and we effectively learn something rather surprising.

⁷ For instance, the film *Pleasantville* (1998) is thematically based on humour of this type. Many characters are excessively nice. Meanwhile in one scene the bemused protagonist finds that no matter how he throws a basketball it always falls perfectly into the basket. This violates a rule for human intentional action.

However this account cannot be right because there are plenty of jokes which do not invite the resolution of incongruity. For instance, take the following joke:

Q: What's yellow and dangerous?

A: Shark infested custard.

If the suggestion is that we get pleasure from resolving incongruities then one might say that it pleases us to discover that it is indeed the case that shark-infested custard is both yellow and dangerous. But that kind of account would ignore the patent ridiculousness of what is described. If there's any resolution here, it immediately gives way to the deeper incongruity of how sharks manage to get into your custard (cf. Carroll 2005: 163-164). So regardless of whether it is possible, shark-infested custard remains highly absurd, and it is the sheer absurdity of that thought that makes it funny.

A better view is that we enjoy the incongruity as an incongruity. This better captures the phenomenology of humour, where we simply delight in the thing itself. Indeed, I agree with Morreall that humour qualifies as a distinctive kind of aesthetic experience; we value the incongruity for its own sake.⁸ Moreover our amusement is bound up with the intensity, subtlety or inventiveness of the norm-violation; traditional aesthetic virtues.

However, there are non-humorous cases of incongruity that satisfy even this condition. Mike Martin is particularly strong on this point. He notes that when we admire surreal paintings we enjoy their surreal properties for their own sake. Similarly, Martin relates a case described by Freud, in which a foot fetishist became sexually excited upon seeing a scraggy and incongruously shaped foot (1983: 77-78).

Now it's worth noting that a lot of surrealist art is excluded by my stipulation that humorous norm-violations cannot rely exclusively on teleological norms (e.g. the distended legs of the elephants in Dali's *The Temptation of St Anthony* 1946). However there are surrealist works that don't rely on such violations. Consider for instance Magritte's *Young Girl Eating a Bird*

⁸ In contrast some philosophers argue that amusement is an emotion (e.g. Carroll 2013; Sharpe 1975). I won't side-track the discussion by addressing this debate, but in brief I think finding things funny satisfies Kant's disinterestedness criterion (the thing is still amusing even if it's purely imaginary or fictional) even if the reality of some cases of humour (such as an insightful caricature) can be a source of additional pleasure. Another way to put this is that unlike the case of being emotionally aroused by fictions, it is not philosophically puzzling to be amused by fictions.

(1927). Similarly, while certain aspects of fetishist's excitement may be focused on the foot's teleological violation, he may also be stimulated by the thought of breaking social norms.

I think that as the literature on comedy currently stands, there is still no good response to these sorts of counter-examples. Morreall's ultimate solution is to say that humorous incongruity is just that kind of incongruity that gets us to laugh (2009: 73-75). But this is to shift to a different issue concerning what is distinctive about the humour response. It doesn't help us to discern the conditions for finding something funny (cf. Smuts 2006). Meanwhile Noël Carroll (2013) stipulates that the incongruity shouldn't puzzle us, or annoy us. But a deeper account should explain how we manage not to be puzzled or annoyed by the incongruity.

5. Non-seriousness

There is a general approach to this problem that I believe is promising. A number of philosophers and psychologists have placed humour within the category of play behaviour (e.g. Kant 1790 Part I, §54; Eastman 1930; Morreall 2009; Apter & Smith 1977; Martin 2007). This seems to be inspired by the case of tickling, which some believe to be a form of play fighting. The idea is that we manage to shift into a playful mode of thought, where we are no longer practically, emotionally engaged with the world in the same way.⁹

I think this is the way to go, but it needs to be carefully articulated if it is to exclude surreal or fantastical art. After all, surrealist works might also be considered playful explorations of reality. As such, my proposal for the playful mode of engagement is to appeal to a definite sense of non-seriousness. From a certain perspective, it sounds trivially true that to find something funny is to find it non-serious. However, the substantive point is to think about the factors that encourage us to take a norm-violation seriously and then undermine these in the case of humour.

In the previous section I argued that comedy brings into play intentional norms concerning how one ought to behave. Intentional norms are generally psychologically taxing. Unlike statistical norms, we have to live up to intentional norms or hold others up to them. Furthermore, when norms are violated this typically calls for some kind of pragmatic

⁹ Apter 1982 in particular is a good source for the claim that amusement requires one to be in a non-goal oriented state.

response. A violation threatens the norm. We normally respond to such threats by correcting or condemning the violation, or at least taking heed not to commit such a violation ourselves. An alternative pragmatic response is to change one's mind about the status of the norm; to regard norm-compliance as untenable, or undesirable. This sort of thinking is as true of fictional presentations as real life presentations. It is, for instance, characteristic of dramas to raise such issues. What I suggest is unique about humour however, is that we are released from the very pragmatic demands that would normally be raised by the apparent norm-violation. This is because we realise that the violation is not a serious one. The relief from this demand can help explain why humour is intrinsically pleasurable.¹⁰

So far, this additional necessary condition should be reminiscent of the proposal that the violation be non-puzzling or non-threatening. However the notion of a cognitive or pragmatic demand giving way to playful mode of appreciation is more specific.¹¹ In particular, I think we can specify a process whereby the norm-violation is construed as non-serious by means of an appraisal or inference that is made about the violation. I shall outline this appraisal in two steps.

First we appraise whether or not a norm has been intentionally violated. The determination here depends on the *prima facie* appearance of the violation. In particular, it is not to be confused with a more reflective recognition of a factual difference between humour produced intentionally and humour produced accidentally. Whether the source of humour is a fiction, a professional comedy performance, or a happening from everyday life, we judge initially whether the scenario with which we are presented involves (or depicts) someone either accidentally or deliberately violating a norm.

If the norm-violation is regarded as accidental (e.g. trying but failing to live up to a norm) then it can only be experienced as non-serious if we also determine that it is not the kind of violation that we are required either to guard against or to correct (at the time of amusement). For instance, in the Woody Allen film *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Virgil's bid to escape prison with a gun made out of soap is foiled when it starts to rain. There is no demand here to take careful note in case we should fall into such error ourselves. Thus the nature of the

¹⁰ Clearly this claim is comparable to the relief theory of humour. But note that the psychological relief from pragmatic implications is compatible with greater bodily stimulation.

¹¹ I will also admit the possibility of humour in threatening circumstances below.

violation itself here is not the kind that encourages pragmatic concern. Alternatively, the lack of a pragmatic demand may be drawn largely from our own indifference. For instance, a lot of cruel humour trades off our sense of immunity to certain failings. Audiences laugh at fat people, or cats falling off ledges when they perceive such instances (rightly or wrongly) as violations to which they are invulnerable, and which moreover they lack any responsibility to correct.

Note the way in which this condition can exclude certain non-amusing accidents. For example, car crashes are accidental norm-violations. But we may judge ourselves to be vulnerable to such errors. We may also feel disposed to provide assistance. Consider in contrast a driver checking extremely carefully before pulling onto the highway only to be suddenly struck by a meteorite. This violation of road safety is so beyond the pale that it's not the kind of failing we need to guard against, and so it is potentially funny.

Meanwhile, if we appraise a norm to have been deliberately violated (e.g. someone acting rudely) then it needs to be clear that we are not invited to take the norm-violation as a potential candidate for endorsement, or something that genuinely places the norm in doubt.¹² It looks like the principal way this works is if we can come to construe the norm-violation as unreal in some way. For example, it can be funny when a child is naïvely offensive, because we recognize both that a norm has been actively violated and that no malicious intent is actually in play.¹³ Much dark humour similarly seems to function in this way. We may be presented with all kinds of outrageous or immoral behaviours but it is understood that the author doesn't really want people to behave in such ways, or that such behaviours should in real life go unpunished.¹⁴

Finally, cases where a norm is exceeded can come in either intentional or unintentional varieties and the same basic conditions apply as specified above. Thus, cases where someone accidentally exceeds a norm, (e.g. when Tobey Maguire in *Pleasantville* scores the basket no matter where he throws the ball) appear so improbably lucky that we experience no demand

¹² Cf. analyses of linguistic humour where it has been suggested that the primary implied proposition is; 'here's a crazy thing that no one should endorse' (cf. Raskin 1985; Morreall 2009: 36).

¹³ Similarly cases where a vegetable is shaped like a penis technically count as active violations of the norm of propriety, but of course they are completely absent any prurient intention.

¹⁴ Note that some norm-violations may be regarded by the audience as so extreme that regardless of signals that they are not really endorsed, we take them to have genuine norm-violating repercussions, and so we take them seriously.

to abandon or update our standards for human behaviour. Meanwhile, cases where a character satisfies their intention (such as the precocious little girl who knows all about brain surgery in *The Man with Two Brains*) are regarded as unreal.

It is important to reiterate that experiencing a deliberate norm-violation as unreal is not the same as witnessing a fictional character violate a norm. *The Godfather* is fictionally norm-violating, but is not generally amusing. This is because once we're situated imaginatively within the fictional world, we are typically encouraged to take what is presented as if it is not fictional. Thus when fictional characters are funny, it can be because their norm-violations fall into the accidental type outlined above. Alternatively, the fiction takes an extra step to signal the unreality of the character's behaviour.

It's worth noting that an impression of the non-seriousness can be stimulated more easily in fictions than it can be in real-life. For instance, background cues such as light-hearted music, the absence of normal reactions in other characters, or even the mere knowledge of engaging with a comic work can signal the unreality of an active norm-violation. Thus we can often find behavioural norm-violations to be amusing in fictional contexts that in real life might be disturbing or offensive (cf. Carroll 2013: 81-82). A similar thought is often expressed with the notion of comic distance. Distance is when the reality of a character's suffering or the consequences of that suffering are downplayed. This factor can contribute equally to the sense that a deliberate violation is unreal or that an accidental violation is not one that needs to be guarded against.

In general, the ways in which we pick up on such comic cues are potentially complex and subtle, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore them. However it is quite possible for the comedy to present everything in a quasi-serious manner, and for the content of the norm-violation itself to be implausibly construed as something that makes pragmatic demands upon us due to its highly exaggerated or self-defeating nature.

There was a recent news story that illustrates this point quite well. An Irish woman had a job application to a teaching agency in South Korea rejected. Apparently the agency sent her an email saying "I am sorry to inform you that my client does not hire Irish people due to the alcoholism nature of your kind." The woman was reported as saying "When I got the email, it was so abrupt and short. I actually laughed when I read it initially..." (McCauley 2014).

What we see here is that the woman initially took the response to be so grossly in error that it was not plausibly the product of a genuinely offensive intention. Immediately after this however, she realised that they really meant it, so her amusement switched to anger.

Similarly, there are conditions where a violation can shift from appearing not to make pragmatic or cognitive demands to making them. For instance, if a comedian were to persist in his or her norm-violation outside of the performance context, it would normally stop being funny. Persistence, particularly in the face of correction, undermines the interpretation of the norm-violation as either unreal or inconsequentially accidental. It is for similar reasons that if violating behaviour is attributed to a mental disability, a sensitive audience will not find it funny anymore. In such cases the individual is seen as acting in earnest or genuinely struggling to avoid error. Any norm-violations that occur are thus neither unreal nor non-seriously accidental.

6. Dealing with counter-examples

If the above account is correct, we have conditions that distinguish non-humorous incongruities from humorous incongruities. We only find something funny if it is viewed as 1) norm-violating 2) in a manner that is determined to be non-serious. Note that these two conditions are in tension with each other. We more readily take norm-violations seriously than non-seriously. So in order to deliver non-seriousness, one might be tempted to reduce the degree of norm-violation. But it seems the best comedy will maximally combine norm-violation and non-seriousness, and that is hard to do.

Let us now see how this proposal deals with potential counter-examples. The condition of non-seriousness rules out the fetishist case, since the fetishist not only experiences the scraggy foot as norm-violating, but also desires or endorses that violation. Thus there is a positive sense in which the fetishist wants the scraggy foot to be real or non-accidental; they have serious intentions towards the violation.

Meanwhile, in surrealist works like *Young Girl Eating a Bird*, the girl's behaviour does not appear to be accidental, so we treat it as an intentional norm-violation. However, we do not detect signs or nudges that the scene is to be treated as unreal (within the confines of engaging with a fiction). On the contrary, we may judge that Magritte intends to disturb us

with a genuine possibility. Thus we do not find the painting funny.¹⁵

Another potential counter-example to my model concerns our capacity to be amused in circumstances that are in fact threatening to us. For instance, I have sometimes found occasion to laugh at myself while suffering some wretchedly sick condition or painful dental surgery (at least for a few seconds). While this scenario may violate a norm, in what sense can it be regarded as non-serious? The existence of gallows humour similarly suggests that humour can be found in the darkest of circumstances.¹⁶

Cases of suffering like this qualify as unintentional norm-violations on my account, specifically the failure to protect oneself from harm, or to avoid peril. Non-seriousness should accordingly come from the loss of a demand to correct or guard against the violation. Thus I suggest that one is at least momentarily able to distance oneself from the pragmatic commitment to avoid one's suffering; to admit one's helplessness. Note that one can still regard one's suffering as a bad thing. Yet temporarily, one does not experience the demand to do anything about it because one construes oneself as hopelessly incompetent to do so. Similarly, we often laugh at scenarios that result in pain (even to ourselves) and death (to others at least) so long as magnificent stupidity is displayed. Consider for instance the Darwin Award, a comic award given to people who remove themselves from the gene pool as a result of immense idiocy. The errors highlighted here are so foolish that all pragmatic implications are obviated. There is nothing to learn here.¹⁷

A final sort of counter-example follows from the observation that many comedians seem to be trying to convey a serious message by means of their routines or comic fictions. How is this compatible with the apparently non-serious nature of humorous norm-violations? Arguing that comedies are indeed limited in their capacities to change our attitudes is precisely the bullet I want to bite. Thus I will address this point in detail in the following section. I will allow that comedies can teach us to some extent while simultaneously getting

¹⁵ Other Magritte works are more definitely amusing. For instance, the reverse mermaid depicted in *Collective Invention* (1934) seems to me to be helplessly floundering. Thus it is failing to live up to a practical norm in a manner that does not call upon me to guard against or correct the violation.

¹⁶ Along similar lines, it may also be objected that there are cases where we find something funny despite, or even because laughter is normatively discouraged. Such cases do not affect my account. The psychological conditions for finding something funny are distinct from considerations regarding whether one ought to find it funny.

¹⁷ This is not to deny that we might fluctuate between amusement and feelings of pity or sadness. Sometimes humour can be in tension with other feelings.

us to laugh, but that there are definite limitations to this capacity. Thus comedians wanting to convey a serious message may not be employing the most effective means to do so.

7. Learning from comedy

The general model of cognitive influence that I introduced at the beginning of this paper is that by expressing a certain attitude towards an object, a work encourages us to adopt this attitude for at least the duration of the artistic engagement, and potentially carry that same attitude into our non-artistic lives. Since comedies work with norm-violations in particular, it is attitudes towards these norms that will be particularly in play.

In general, a norm must be at least implicitly grasped prior to the comic event for us to be able to detect its violation in the object of amusement. A comedy may thereby draw our attention towards this norm in a way that reinforces our commitment. That is, we appreciate more keenly what is right by contrast with what is wrong. I will not deny that this qualifies as a form of influence. However, my arguments about the limitations of humour concern to what extent there's an opportunity to change or reverse an attitude. On the basis of the conditions for humour I have outlined, I will examine two possible cases: 1) we newly adopt the attitude that something is non-seriously norm-violating and; 2) we newly adopt a non-serious attitude towards something we already regard as norm-violating.¹⁸ I'll deal with the second, less radical, possibility first.

7.1 The non-seriousness of a norm-violation

Cases where we acquire a non-serious attitude towards something we took to be an intentional violation are rather limited in their significance. An illustrative example is where a friend plays a trick, like jumping out from behind a bush, and it takes a few moments to realise it's only a trick. More generally, if what is newly appreciated or learned is supposed to be that an apparently deliberate norm-violation is in fact unreal or pretend, then this seems less a case of significant influence than a case where an earlier shift of attitude (to regard something as intentionally violating) is undermined or defeated. At best one might learn not to trust norm-violating appearances (or one's friend) so much.

¹⁸ A third possibility—that we learn the norm-violating status of something we already regard as non-serious—can be quickly dismissed. Non-seriousness is supposed to be a mode or manner that the norm-violation takes. Accordingly it does not strictly manifest prior to noticing the norm-violation, although background cues might dispose us to view novel norm-violations as non-serious.

Cases where an accidental norm-violation is newly regarded as non-serious are somewhat more significant. This corresponds to certain forms of satire. For instance, we may already regard a politician's action to be misguided when a satire presents their behaviour as absurdly self-defeating or grossly incompetent. Here a pre-existing disdain for the politician is likely to be strengthened.¹⁹ However, according to my model, the most distinctive import of comedy is that we feel no need to guard against or correct such errors. Naturally, if we already feel disdain for the politician, we do not want him or her running our country. My point is that amusement will not spur or add any heat to such an implication. The attitude of amusement itself expresses something more akin to indifference.

It might be suggested that mockery can have indirect implications. That is, we present an exaggerated case in which the politician's act is obviously violating in order to draw the audiences' attention towards a less exaggerated norm-violation which ought to be corrected. This coheres with the observation that in comedy our attention is generally drawn towards the norm in play. However, the implication that the target of one's mockery needs to be genuinely corrected seems fragile while still encouraging an audience to laugh. Any implication that a serious norm-violation is in play is a reason not to laugh. It can thereby undermine the comic ethos.

Compare this with cases where one might learn something about oneself: If someone mocks me for dropping a ball by exaggerating my clumsiness, the indirect implication that I really ought not to drop the ball may be clearly suggested, but if that's so, I am not encouraged to laugh at myself. On the other hand, if I do feel encouraged to laugh at myself, I can regard myself as free from liability. Either the mistake is understood to be so obvious that there's no need to make a note about avoiding such errors in the future, or else my incompetence is so total that there's no realistic prospect for correction (cf. the pain avoidance cases considered in the previous section).²⁰ Either way, although attention is drawn towards the norm, no practical steps towards guarding against the error are demanded.

7.2 Both a norm-violation and non-serious

Let us turn now to the case in which we newly come to regard something as both norm-

¹⁹ This claim is supported by empirical studies into the impact of satire. See Becker (2014), Esralew & Young (2012), and Gruner (1995).

²⁰ This analysis also applies when one laughs at oneself for a silly error like searching for one's glasses only to find them on one's own head.

violating and non-seriously so. We need only be concerned with accidental norm-violations here. Learning of a non-serious deliberate violation does not differ significantly from the case in which we learn only non-seriousness. Meanwhile, it doesn't make much sense to learn of one's own beliefs or actions that they are unreal intentional violations.

By way of considering the prospects of significant attitude change in comedy, let us examine the example of *Life of Brian*. It might be claimed that this widely admired comic film could potentially reveal to a Christian the absurdity of their religious commitment. The argument might go as follows:

- (1) In *Life of Brian*, numerous individuals in the film develop religious commitments in a manner that is obviously unjustified. We are encouraged to laugh at their religious commitments.
- (2) If we regard what is depicted as sufficiently resembling real-life historical circumstances, we are encouraged to similarly laugh at real-life religious commitments; to view them as absurd.
- (3) If we hold religious commitments, taking on the invited attitude towards religious commitments, even temporarily, could encourage a significant change of mind.

Now it should be noted that the 'message' supported by a work of art is rarely as unambiguous as I have assumed here. Indeed parts of the film suggest that Jesus would be the merited target of religious devotion. However, given that some people do come to interpret the film as supporting the more radical rejection of religious commitment, it seems theoretically possible for a fairly similar film to unambiguously support the more radical message.

So suppose that I interpret *Life of Brian* as bearing such a radical message, while also holding a definite religious commitment. The film invites me to regard religious commitment in general as funny, that is, as a non-serious norm-violation. The direct implication is that my own religious commitment is so clearly norm-violating that it doesn't need to be guarded against or corrected. However, since my religious commitment is something I definitely endorse, I cannot construe it as a hopeless error, or an easily avoided mistake. Even if I agreed that my attitude is norm-violating, that is a very serious violation with which I must

pragmatically engage. Thus I cannot both take on the invited attitude and be amused, even temporarily.

If the religious committed viewer agrees that the comedy has hit the mark, they are more likely to experience humiliation than amusement. In time, this humiliation may pass, and the individual may be able to laugh wholeheartedly at his or her past errors. Yet humiliation must come first, and this process will be more lengthy and more painful the more strongly one is committed to the attitude that is held up to ridicule. There is a similar process where consequences reveal incontestably that you have acted in a stupid manner. It takes time before one can look back on one's idiocies with amusement.

Meanwhile it is worth noting that mockery is a highly unreliable stimulus to attitude change. It is at least equally common for the individual to be outraged by such a brazen attack upon his or her commitments. The attack may even encourage a defensive response in which the individual's zeal is strengthened. After all, it is rarely if ever the case that comedies present careful refutations of a particular world view.

Another possible response is that the viewer distances themselves from the attitude that is being mocked. A religiously committed viewer may well interpret *Life of Brian* as inviting one to laugh at the way in which these particular people in these particular circumstances form their religious commitments. Accepting the absurdity of that specific behaviour is compatible with continuing to support the formation of religious commitments more generally. But of course, this would entail that significant influence is unavailable, since the audience avoids drawing the more radical interpretation of the work.

The final possibility is that the viewer laughs along because they do not take themselves to have any considered commitment to the practice held up to ridicule. We see this quite a lot where comedians point out common human follies. Often they do so by caricaturing an exaggeratedly misguided intention at work. But in actual fact, most people engage in the folly without the sort of intention identified by the comic. For example, it is common to lean to the side when watching someone trying to putt a golf ball. A comedian might point out the absurdity of expecting our behaviour to have any influence on the ball. However, people don't lean when watching the golf ball with the explicit intention that doing so will affect the ball's path. They do so unreflectively merely as a manifestation of the desire or expectation

that the ball should move in the corresponding way. As such, the audience that laughs at such an observation does not experience a demand to give up a considered commitment. They understand that if they were to have such intentions they would be grossly incompetent, but they don't regard themselves as having such intentions. Thus again, there isn't much of a significant learning experience here.

In order to see the likelihood of these various responses, it may be helpful to consider a case analogous to the Life of Brian case: Suppose a comedy invites one to laugh at people who believe the world is round. Such a belief is absurd. Many people may believe the world is round, but that's due to an accident that all right-thinking people can easily dismiss if they aren't hopelessly incompetent. Now, assuming one does agree the world is round, one can respond in one of two ways: The most likely response is to deny there's an invitation to abandon one's belief (one judges the target of the humour not to be the real commitment to a round world). Alternatively one construes the comedy as genuinely suggesting that the real world isn't round, but one does not feel invited to laugh. Instead the comic suggestion seems bizarre or annoying.

Now it might be possible with patient reasoning or demonstration to convince one that the world is not round, and at that point one may be in a position to laugh at one's previous belief. But's that a serious matter. Similarly, to be able to regard religious commitment as a non-serious error, one must first come around to the idea that religious commitment is wrong. However, suppose one comes to regard religious commitment, in general, as wrong. Now the influence afforded by the comedy is less significant. At best, one's attitude may be reinforced, because it suggests that something one already regards as wrong is non-seriously wrong. This would correspond to the first sort of influence I described above.

Overall, the more I am committed to an attitude, i.e. the more significant the prospect of giving it up would be, the less possible it is for me to regard its wrongness as amusing. Thus the conditions under which comedy might afford significant attitude change invite humiliation rather than amusement. And the conditions under which the individual can laugh entails that the ways in which he or she could be affected is strictly limited in significance. In other artistic genres, the serious implications of a lesson do not seem such a barrier to adopting the attitude the genre is inviting one to take.