



‘I Laugh Because I Must Not Weep’: Humour and Existential Angst

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ABSTRACT

While comic amusement is often valued for offering relief and shifting perspectives in challenging situations, it frequently arises from unsettling sources: repressed aggression, humiliation, or existential ambiguity. This paper explores the complex relationship between comic amusement and suffering, arguing that it is not merely a light-hearted response but a profound means of engaging with the absurdities and sorrows of human existence. It distinguishes between irony, which uses laughter to wound or distance, and humour, which processes pain to foster acceptance and resilience. Drawing on literary and philosophical works, the paper develops the idea that a sense of humour is a virtue, confronting life's contradictions not with denial or despair but with clear-eyed, if bittersweet, amusement. Analysing classical and contemporary theories of laughter clarifies the nature of a humorous perspective on life, which offers a blithe yet lucid way of accepting and responding to life's inherent contradictions.

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If there is one trait of Abraham Lincoln's personality on which all his contemporaries seemed to agree, it was his tendency towards melancholy. Friends and colleagues often described how, during meetings, he would lapse into silence, eyes closed, his face marked by a profound and indescribable sorrow. Yet, after a few moments, he would return to the conversation in good spirits, often lightening the mood with a joke. When asked about these sudden mood shifts, he is said to have replied, 'I laugh because I must not weep – that's all, that's all.'¹ This otherwise unremarkable quote, which serves as the title of this paper, captures the deeper function of laughter in the face of life's ambiguity and sorrow. Numerous studies have confirmed comedy's analgesic effects: it offers temporary relief from discomfort and reframes stressful situations, shifting perspectives and making them feel less threatening.² However, focusing solely on these general benefits misses the variety of forms comic amusement can take, as well as the particular mechanisms that give it therapeutic power.

Furthermore, although laughter is commonly associated with joy, it often springs from darker sources: repressed aggression, humiliation, or the emotional ambiguity that arises when meaning is disrupted. Paradoxically, the very sources of distress that unsettle us also fuel comic amusement. I refer to this as the dark side of laughter, an aspect that can serve very different purposes. Sometimes it functions as a weapon to shame or diminish others; at other times, conversely, it works virtuously, helping us face the contradictions of our condition, not to resolve them but to accept them with a rueful smile.

Not all laughter, then, is equal. In Section I, I distinguish between laughter as a weapon and laughter as a virtue, grounding the distinction in historical and theoretical perspectives. I argue that the term 'irony' best captures the former, while the latter merits the name 'humour'. In Section II, I show that, although classical theories of laughter recognize its darker aspects, they fail to adequately explain how humour, unlike irony, can process this darkness virtuously. Section III explores the source of humour's releasing effect, demonstrating why having a sense of humour should be understood as a human virtue. Section IV clarifies the nature of a humorous perspective on life, drawing a parallel between epistemological scepticism and the experience of life's absurdity. Finally, in Section V, I argue that a sense of humour offers a blithe yet lucid way of accepting and responding to life's inherent contradictions.

I. IRONY AND HUMOUR

Contemporary Anglophone theorists typically use 'humour' as a broad, all-encompassing term for anything deemed funny, with irony, jokes, satire, and wit classified as its subcategories. When laughter intersects with topics usually regarded as grave or painful, the immediate association is often with dark or gallows humour. For those exploring humour's virtuous nature, starting with jokes steeped in shallow sexism, racism, or homophobia may seem misguided. However, and this is particularly relevant to my argument, such jokes can serve different purposes. From a Freudian perspective, they may function as a coping mechanism, allowing individuals to release aggressive or sexual drives in a manner that is, at least to some extent,

1 Charles B. Strozier, 'Lincoln's Life Preserver', *American Heritage* 33, no. 2 (1982), <https://www.americanheritage.com/lincolns-life-preserver>.

2 Rod A. Martin and Thomas E. Ford, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, 2nd ed. (London: Academic Press, 2018), chap. 10.

socially acceptable.³ Alternatively, they can be wielded as tools of domination, used to humiliate others.

Crucially, the different ways jokes can be used point us towards a key distinction between distinctive forms of amusement, and I will focus on two in particular. I refer to the first as irony and the second as humour, though this choice of terminology requires clarification. As mentioned above, 'humour' is generally understood as an umbrella term encompassing all things associated with joy and laughter rather than a distinct subcategory. In contrast, I use 'humour' in a more specific sense to denote a unique kind of amusement that allows us to enter a complex and ambiguous mental state that helps us grapple with questions of angst and meaning. Thus, having a sense of humour is the ability to engage with this state of mind.

Irony is often seen as a counterforce that can sometimes be destructive, serving not only to demean others but also to question prevailing norms and reveal the boundaries of human comprehension. This characterization is relatively uncontroversial. To clarify, one need only consider the well-known example of Socratic irony, in which someone feigns ignorance to reveal the ignorance or contradictions of another, particularly their interlocutors. While this can be viewed positively as a method of uncovering the truth, it remains a form of manipulation, an attempt to extract information that can ultimately be used against the other person.

The idea that humorous amusement is uniquely tied to life's ambiguities, contradictions, and sorrows is a central theme in Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy. Several twentieth-century European thinkers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Emil Cioran, and Gilles Deleuze, have embraced this idea. Unlike most present-day Anglophone theorists, Kierkegaard does not treat 'humour' as a broad, all-inclusive term. Instead, he uses 'the comic' as the overarching term, under which he explores two specific subdivisions: irony and humour. The first is a form of detachment and critique where the ironist distances themselves from reality to reveal its contradictions and absurdities. It serves as a negative, often destructive force, challenging established norms and exposing the limits of human understanding.⁴ Humour, by contrast, is more constructive and oriented towards reconciliation. Whereas irony is characterized by pride and often creates separation between individuals, humour allows us to acknowledge and embrace life's inherent contradictions with compassion and acceptance. At one point, Kierkegaard even claims that humour represents 'the *confinium* [border territory] between the ethical and the religious'.⁵ This perspective suggests that, to perceive life's incongruities as humorous, it is necessary to experience them without pain, requiring a detached viewpoint, an aspect characteristic of religious orientation.

3 See Andrea C. Samson and James J. Gross, 'The Dark and Light Sides of Humor: An Emotion-Regulation Perspective', in *Positive Emotion: Integrating the Light Sides and Dark Sides*, ed. June Gruber and Judith T. Moskowitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 169–82.

4 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 2, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates / Notes on Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

5 Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 12.1, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 502. To explore the sources and the articulation of Kierkegaard's views on irony and humour, see John Lippitt, *Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

In a more secular manner, a comparable account of humour was developed by the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville in his *Short Treatise on the Great Virtues*. Following Kierkegaard, he asserts that irony lacks sympathy, describing it as a ‘weapon [...] almost invariably turned against others’.⁶ Humour, by contrast, is ‘a kind of mourning’,⁷ writes Comte-Sponville, as it compels us to accept the very things that grieve us. This marks a key distinction between humour and irony: humour serves as a way of coping with life’s ambiguities and pains, while irony, aligned with sarcasm and mockery, seeks to assert control and belittle others. According to Comte-Sponville,

[i]rony laughs at others (or when it is self-mockery, at the self as though it were another); humor laughs at the self, or at another as though it were the self; it always includes the self in the nonsense it brings about or exposes. I do not mean to say that the humorist takes nothing seriously (humor is not frivolousness). Simply, he refuses to take himself, his laughter, or his anguish seriously.⁸

Humorous laughing, thus, never stems from a sense of superiority and is not intended to humiliate others to correct their behaviour. It is always inclusive, and, to underline this aspect, he adds that ‘humor [...] can make us laugh at anything provided we first laugh at ourselves’.⁹ The difference between irony and humour is further exemplified by referring to a joke by the American comedian Groucho Marx: ‘I’ve had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn’t it.’ ‘Directed toward his hostess after an unsuccessful dinner party,’ observes Comte-Sponville, ‘the remark is ironic; delivered to his audience at the close of a performance, it is humorous.’¹⁰ Indeed, only in the second case is the mocker included as a target in his mockery. From this example, it is also evident that the French philosopher appeals more to pragmatics than semantics to characterize the difference between irony and humour. Namely, the same utterance, in which the words are the same and have the same meaning, can be ironic or humorous, depending on the context of utterance, the utterer’s intentions, and linguistic conventions.

A similar distinction between irony and humour is central to my argument, even if my focus is primarily on the latter, specifically its connection to existential angst. Although ‘humour’ is often used broadly today, the narrower sense I adopt here is far from marginal. On the contrary, it is deeply rooted in philosophical thought, particularly among contemporary thinkers influenced by existentialism, who often use the term to refer exclusively to an inclusive yet bittersweet cheerfulness that helps us navigate feelings of angst and the search for meaning. How this process works – and how the dark side of laughter can be transformed into a virtue – requires further clarification. In the next section, I will examine how various theories of laughter address its darker dimensions and differentiate its forms. Though insightful, I will show that these distinctions fail to account for the function of humour under my conception.

6 André Comte-Sponville, *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, trans. Catherine Temerson (London: Vintage, 2003), 213.

7 Ibid., 216.

8 Ibid., 214.

9 Ibid., 216.

10 Ibid., 215.

Even from an evolutionary perspective, laughter's origin reveals its connection to belligerence. Laughing is a process governed by the most primitive part of the brain that controls reflex activities and emotional behaviour. Given that the human smile often prompts a reciprocal smile, some argue that it serves to sublimate conflicts, tracing its origins to the threatening growl of an animal displaying its teeth as a sign of potential aggression.¹¹ At the same time, laughter is also distinctly shaped by practices and conventions. As a result, Terry Eagleton suggests that laughter is 'cusped between nature and culture'.¹²

Although laughter is not always tied to funny situations – sometimes functioning merely as a conversational filler – the major explanations developed over time to account for its underlying nature can be broadly classified into three principal theories: the release theory, the superiority theory, and the incongruity theory. These are commonly referred to as theories of humour; however, since I employ the term 'humour' in a more specific sense, to avoid confusion I refer to them here as theories of laughter. It has been rightly noted that these theories are not genuine rivals, as the first two primarily address the emotional or physiological mechanisms associated with laughter, while the incongruity theory is concerned with its cognitive dimension.¹³ In this section, I examine how these traditional theories engage with the darker dimensions of laughter and argue that they neither offer a comprehensive account of the phenomenon nor draw distinctions adequate to explain the function of humour as I understand it. Nevertheless, each theory succeeds in identifying features that meaningfully characterize certain – but not all – forms of comic amusement.

I begin with the release theory, not because it lacks shortcomings but because its conceptual structure is comparatively more straightforward. Even though traces of it can be found in earlier authors, its best-known advocate is Sigmund Freud. In his famous 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he claims that laughing can discharge an excess of repressed energy due to aggressive sexual drives. The linguistic and conceptual manipulations that characterize the joke's formal aspect deceive the superego, rendering it unable to exercise its censorship authority. The typically inhibited content is thus communicated to the other person in an acceptable and bearable way. In a joke, the unconscious reveals itself much as it does in a slip of the tongue or in a dream, bringing repressed contents to light.¹⁴ Therefore, according to Freud, the psychic energy typically invested in preserving certain essential social inhibitions is released through laughing. This means that our inner nature is far from ethically virtuous and requires energy to be kept at bay: jokes allow us to 'vent the pressure pot' in a socially acceptable manner.

Freud's assumption that the mind operates like a pressure pump has been widely criticized. Noël Carroll, for instance, contends that Freud's language presupposes that something repressed or built up must be released, an idea for which there is no

11 See Gervais Matthew and David Sloan Wilson, 'The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humor: A Synthetic Approach', *Quarterly Review of Biology* 80 (2005): 395–430.

12 Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 3.

13 Jerrold Levinson, 'Humor', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 562–67.

14 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), part 6.

clear scientific support.¹⁵ However, a more charitable reading cautions against taking Freud's language too literally. After all, when we laugh at a television show following a stressful day, attributing our response to a release of accumulated tension is not entirely implausible. As will become evident later, some form of release also plays a role in my narrower conception of humour. Arguably, the main shortcomings of Freud's theory lie in its exclusive focus on intrapsychic dynamics, which overlooks the cognitive distinctions between forms of comic amusement and neglects both the relational context and the social function of laughter.

The superiority theory, by contrast, highlights the relational dimension of laughter. It holds that we laugh when we feel superior to others. While most analytic philosophers trace this theory back to Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes, Sheila Lintott has persuasively argued that there is little textual evidence to support such attribution. Indeed, although all three philosophers acknowledge that superiority plays a role in certain forms of comic amusement, none maintains that it is either a sufficient or even necessary condition for laughter.¹⁶

This theory is also strongly associated with laughter as a social corrective, a notion widespread in modern Western literature. One need only consider Molière's introduction in his *Tartuffe*, defending himself from accusations of immorality brought against him by the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and the most conservative fringes of French Catholicism:

The finest maxims of stern morality are often less effective than satire, for nothing strikes most people more forcefully than seeing their faults portrayed before them. To expose vice to public ridicule deals it a powerful blow. People may endure reproach, but mockery is intolerable. They may not mind being mean, but never want to be ridiculous.¹⁷

Here, the function of laughter as a social and moral corrective becomes unmistakable: people may tolerate being seen as despicable, but when they realize their behaviour is laughable they seek to change it, not wanting to feel ashamed. The exact mechanism operates in Fielding's novels and those of most English novelists before Thomas Hardy, where comedy serves as an agent of social refinement. Because aberrant behaviour is exposed to ridicule, readers are discouraged from imitating it in real life, fearing similar humiliation.

For these authors, laughter serves a relatively straightforward disciplinary function. However, this role has never been as explicitly theorized as in Henri Bergson's study *Laughter*, which is often cited primarily for his definition of the comic as 'a momentary anesthesia of the heart'.¹⁸ It strikes me that contemporary authors tend to focus on

15 Noël Carroll, 'Humour', in *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 352.

16 Sheila Lintott, 'Superiority in Humor Theory', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (2016): 347–58.

17 My translation. Molière, *Tout Molière*, ed. André Versaille (Paris: Bouquins, 2022), 784: 'Les plus beaux traits d'une sérieuse morale sont moins puissants, le plus souvent, que ceux de la satire; et rien ne reprend mieux la plupart des hommes que le peinture de leurs défauts. C'est une grande atteinte aux vices que de les exposer à la risée de tout le monde. On souffre aisément des répréhensions; mais on ne souffre point la raillerie. On veut bien être méchant, mais on ne veut point être ridicule.'

18 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 5.

Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes when discussing the superiority theory, even though none wrote a dedicated treatise on laughter. In contrast, Bergson, who explicitly offers a superiority theory to account for all cases of laughter, is often overlooked in this context. According to Bergson, we laugh at behaviours that seem mechanical and monotonous because they deviate from what he calls 'a really living life'. In his vitalistic philosophy, life is envisioned as a free-flowing, dynamic process that 'should never repeat itself'.¹⁹ The notion that the comic arises from 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'²⁰ is introduced early on and sets the tone for much of the work. Bergson devotes the remainder of the text to reinterpreting a wide array of laughable phenomena – ranging from hypocrisy and inconsistency to excess and moral failing – in light of this idea. As for why we laugh, Bergson is unambiguous: 'Laughter must be [...] a sort of *social gesture*. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity [...] and [...] softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity.'²¹

Bergson contends that to laugh at others, we must suspend the empathy that binds us and view them with the detachment characteristic of aesthetic contemplation. In doing so, laughter fulfils its social function: correcting behaviours deemed unnatural by subjecting those who display them to humiliation. However, as Bergson himself emphasizes, if laughter's primary function is to intimidate through humiliation, it can hardly be considered 'absolutely just' or even 'kind-hearted'. Instead, it reveals the 'spark of spitefulness or, at all events, of mischief' present in all human beings.²² Laughter, then, may serve as a potent corrective tool, but the target of its ridicule is not always morally culpable. As such, this use of laughter reflects a less flattering aspect of human nature: our readiness to suppress empathy and surrender to egoism.

The 'looking down' stance at the heart of the superiority theory aptly captures the comic amusement found in irony and its more malicious forms: sarcasm and mockery. However, it proves an inadequate overarching theory, as laughter is not always driven by derision. On the one hand, laughter appears in children at such an early stage that it is difficult to argue they possess a developed sense of superiority. On the other hand, as Francis Hutcheson notes, true believers do not laugh at heretics despite considering them inferior.²³ Thus, since laughter can occur without any sense of superiority and, conversely, can be absent where superiority is felt, the sense of superiority cannot be a necessary or sufficient condition for laughter.

After highlighting the limitations of the superiority theory, Francis Hutcheson suggests replacing it with the incongruity theory – namely, that comic amusement comes from the apprehension of incongruity. Indeed, when someone reflects on an effective joke that made them laugh, it likely contains a sudden shift of perspective, an unexpected slippage of meaning, an arresting dissonance or discrepancy, and so forth. Consider the following joke: 'Why does it suck being a seismologist? It's all shift work, and there's no stability.' It is funny because it contains a slippage of meaning involving 'shift work' and 'stability'. The slippage occurs between the frame of reference of

19 Ibid., 34.

20 Ibid., 37.

21 Ibid., 20.

22 Ibid., 60–61.

23 Francis Hutcheson, 'Reflections upon Laughter', in *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, ed. Peter Kivy (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), 106.

general working conditions (the hardship of coping with a rotating pattern of shifts without economic stability) and the specific working environment of a seismologist operating with active shifts during earthquakes.

In many jokes, there is what Carroll calls a temporary 'derailment of sense' in which the ordinary thought process is disrupted and laws or conventions are broken.²⁴ If we add to these considerations that, in the case of infants, the actions most likely to elicit laughter are the unexpected and incongruous ones, it is not surprising that the incongruity theory has the most supporters nowadays. Compared to the other theories discussed earlier, it also carries the advantage of seeming 'less dark', even though its shadows are not absent. Despite its popularity, however, the incongruity theory has yet to convince everyone that it defines humour in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. First, since not all incongruities are funny, the theory fails to establish a sufficient condition for laughter. As Arthur Koestler points out, the emotional response likely depends on the context in which the incongruity arises.²⁵ Furthermore, Jerrold Levinson argues that incongruity is not even a necessary condition. In his view, classic slapstick – like a man slipping on a banana peel – does not involve any clear incongruity: we fully expect the fall, yet we laugh nonetheless.²⁶

While the incongruity theory faces other additional objections that I will not explore here, what matters for my purposes is its implication that comic amusement arises from a 'derailment of sense', a momentary disruption of our habitual expectations. Beyond its conceptual limitations, this feature is especially revealing when considering the darker undertones of laughter. Bergson and Freud were among the first to draw attention to the kinship between comic logic and the logic of dreams. According to Bergson, this is still logic, but 'a logic lacking in tension and, for that very reason, affording us relief from intellectual effort'.²⁷ In other words, comic amusement does not forgo coherence entirely; to some extent, it allows thought to drift through semantic territories usually disjointed or incompatible. This momentary suspension of the reality principle can offer a sense of relief, but, if pushed too far, the resulting disorientation may veer from pleasure into discomfort. Thus, the very mechanism that triggers amusement may also stir unease.

On closer inspection, the interruption of sense-making – even if temporary – reveals a dual nature. It is no coincidence that the ancient Greeks recognized this emotional ambiguity in the figure of Dionysus. In mythology, Dionysus embodies two starkly contrasting forces: he is the god of inebriation and sexual ecstasy but also death. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, for example, the women possessed by the god, who can make wine, milk, and honey flow from the rocks, are the same ones who, in a frenzy, find the strength to tear apart not only a herd of cattle but also the unfortunate Pentheus. Though this worldview may feel distant from modern sensibilities, it is

24 Carroll, 'Humour', 349.

25 See Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964). Noël Carroll, in *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), also outlines additional conditions explaining why we often perceive incongruities without finding them amusing. He argues that comic amusement arises when incongruities are perceived as non-threatening and not anxiety-inducing. They should also not be annoying or trigger a serious problem-solving attitude. For further refinement of Carroll's theory, see Michela Bariselli, 'Incongruity, Vagueness, and Pertinence: A Defence of Noël Carroll's Incongruity Theory of Humour', *Estetika* 61 (2024): 95–109.

26 Levinson, 'Humour'.

27 Bergson, *Laughter*, 188.

worth remembering that archaic societies were deeply unsettled when hierarchies collapsed, identities blurred, and distinctions dissolved. The disruption of meaning signals the threshold of Greek tragedy, where the presence of Dionysus is always palpable.²⁸

I have considered the three traditional theories of laughter for two main reasons: first, to show how laughter, typically associated with positive emotions, can also reveal darker dimensions of human nature, and second to demonstrate that, while these theories each capture essential aspects of comic amusement (release in certain types of comic amusement, a sense of superiority in irony and mockery, and incongruity in many jokes and funny situations), they must be rethought to account for humour understood as the particular kind of amusement that enables us to enter a complex, ambiguous mental state through which we can grapple with existential angst and the search for meaning. Among these theories, the incongruity theory – mainly when the interplay between anguish and relief is foregrounded – offers the most promising starting point for illuminating my central concern: how the dark side of laughter can be transformed into a virtue that enables us to engage meaningfully with the human condition.

III. SENSE OF HUMOUR AS A HUMAN VIRTUE

According to Comte-Sponville, humour is a ‘great virtue’ because, preventing us from taking ourselves too seriously, it is at the service of humility, which is another, and more commonsensical, ‘great virtue’. It also helps to deal with the sometimes-sorrowful experience of life because it ‘transmutes sadness into joy’ and ‘lightens [our seriousness], puts it into perspective, keeps it at a judicious distance and destabilizes it, and ultimately frees us from it [...] without destroying it altogether’.²⁹ Comte-Sponville’s intuitions are endorsable. Still, he leaves the machinery that produces this transformation in the dark. What exactly is a humorous viewpoint on life, and how can it be achieved? What does it require to transmute sadness into joy? Do humour and irony exhaust the whole spectrum of laughter?

Luigi Pirandello’s 1908 essay *L’umorismo* (‘On Humour’) offers a valuable lens through which to consider these questions. In it, he reflects on Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*, arguing that the playwright employs irony by mocking Socrates and thereby positioning himself as morally superior. Socrates, by contrast, embodies genuine humour: he attends the performance and laughs along with the caricature of himself.³⁰ Beyond this early distinction between irony and humour, which anticipates the views of Comte-Sponville, Pirandello’s central concern lies in differentiating the vague and superficial ‘comic’ from the more profound and reflective nature of the ‘humorous’. He illustrates this distinction through a well-known example: encountering an old woman in the street, her hair dyed, her face made up, and her clothes ill-suited to her age. The sight provokes laughter because she contradicts our idea of what a respectable elderly woman should look like. This laughter arises from perceived incongruity and a sense of superiority: we see what she either cannot or chooses not to see. Thus, there is nothing here that some of the traditional theories of laughter cannot easily

28 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

29 Comte-Sponville, *Short Treatise*, 216, 221.

30 See Luigi Pirandello, *L’Umoreismo* (Milan: Garzanti, 2001), 44–45.

account for. Pirandello contends that this is not humour, though. If we focus only on this superficial impression, we encounter the 'comic': the 'perception of the opposite' (*avvertimento del contrario*) that sparks laughter. Still, we can go further. When we think that that old lady arguably takes no pleasure in dressing up 'as a parrot' but she acts like this because, by hiding wrinkles and grey hair, she hopes to keep the love of a much younger husband, we can no longer laugh 'as before'. In this case, the reflection has led us through the 'perception of the opposite', allowing us to reach the 'feeling of the opposite' (*sentimento del contrario*), which stems from compassion born of recognizing human fragility and weaknesses. The 'perception of the opposite' defines the 'comic', while the 'feeling of the opposite' characterizes the 'humorous'.³¹ It is relatively clear that the latter, being a more complex state of mind, involves a sublimation of the perception of incongruity and superiority.

According to Pirandello, the comic can be understood in two distinct ways: either as an outcome or as a fork in the road between two possible directions. In the first interpretation, comic situations or expressions arise from perceived incongruities that, while potentially unsettling, are rendered harmless: amusement prevails, and any underlying discomfort goes unnoticed. In the second interpretation, which we might characterize as a crossroads, one can follow either what might be called Aristophanes' road or Socrates' road. The former leads to laughter rooted in superiority: irony and his malicious cousins, mockery and sarcasm. The latter gives rise to humour as a human virtue: here, laughter becomes a means of self-reflection, prompting us to confront our human condition, which aligns with Comte-Sponville's conception of humour.

However, to better understand humour's virtuous nature, it should be pointed out how Pirandello characterizes the transition from comic to humorous. He does not simply write that, once reflection occurs, we can no longer laugh, but instead that we can no longer laugh 'as before'. It is of paramount importance to pay attention to this 'as before', since it is undeniable that we laugh – or at least we smile, but the kind of external manifestation is, in this case, irrelevant – while reading about the various parrot ladies' counterparts who populate Pirandello's and other humorous authors' pages. Is it not true that we experience some form of comic amusement while reading Miguel de Cervantes or Flann O'Brien? Is it not funny when the drunk intellectual Stephen Dedalus is likely to be beaten by two soldiers in a Dublin brothel? All these situations present some incongruities; undoubtedly, one can speak of a relief of sorts. And yet, this relief is not due to a discharge of psychic energy or a perceived superiority. As in the case of Kierkegaard and Comte-Sponville's humour, Pirandello's 'feeling of the opposite' appears to be a more inclusive and reflective experience, somewhat linked to the awareness that, while laughing at the parrot lady, we are equally laughing at ourselves, at our own absurdity – or life's absurdity in general – that we recognize in the parrot lady in a concentrated manner.

Recognizing that the absurdity of the parrot lady mirrors my own may, at first glance, strike one as a rather unsettling realization. Yet it is precisely here that humour reveals its virtue, enabling us to experience the realization as a form of release. To explain how this is possible, Robert C. Roberts equates 'having a sense of humor about oneself' with what he calls 'blithe humility', a state marked by 'a lack of defensiveness (in the Freudian sense) and thus a kind of self-transparency, or openness to "seeing" painful truth about oneself'.³² For Roberts, this involves a degree of self-transcendence: the

31 Ibid., 173.

32 Robert C. Roberts, 'Humor and the Virtues', *Inquiry* 31 (1988): 142.

person with a sense of humour can dissociate from their own incongruous traits, regarding themselves more as an actor performing these traits than as wholly defined by them, and thus finds them amusing.

To me, Roberts's sense of humour aligns more closely with a gentler form of what Comte-Sponville describes as 'self-irony' or 'self-mockery', one in which we look down at the self 'as though it were another', and the comic effect arises from a (suitably tuned) superiority theory.³³ I believe the true source of humour's releasing effect lies elsewhere – namely, in the parrot lady's power to make visible the shared human condition behind our distress: the perception of our own incongruity. Her absurdity reminds us that we are not alone in feeling this tension; instead, it is something we all partake in simply by being human. In this sense, the Latin proverb *commune naufragium, omnibus solacium* (literally, 'a shipwreck shared is solace for all') captures the essence of this release more effectively than its English counterpart, 'a problem shared is a problem halved', which lacks the same depth of communal consolation.

IV. THE EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVE: SCEPTICISM AND LIFE'S ABSURDITY

I can now clarify why a sense of humour qualifies as a human virtue: it transforms life's absurdities – often felt as painful or disquieting – into a response that is less despair than a dry, knowing smile. But what exactly do I mean by 'life's absurdity'? Since Kierkegaard credits humour with a similar function, his understanding of absurdity seems to offer a helpful starting point. According to him, the sense of absurdity stems from the contradictory nature of life, which has to do with the impossible-to-complete effort of the Judeo-Christian self to reconcile the tension between temporality and eternity, body and soul, finitude and infinitude. More generally, it can be expressed as the perceived absurdity arising from the self's impossible-to-complete effort to reconcile the tension between reality and ideal.³⁴ However, this broader formulation risks obscuring the contradiction it aims to illuminate. While Kierkegaard's account is compelling within its religious context, the contradiction becomes too vague to fully convince when translated into more general terms, such as the opposition between reality and ideal.

In *Mortal Questions*, Thomas Nagel offers a more plausible explanation of why most people sometimes perceive their lives as absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually. In his opinion, this feeling stems from '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'.³⁵ As human beings, we have two perspectives from which we observe our lives. The main one, or internal perspective, forces us to live under the sign of necessity: we must make certain choices and put our best efforts into specific activities that seem more serious than others. Conversely, the second, or external perspective, enables us to 'step back' and survey ourselves and the lives we are committed to 'with that detached amazement which comes

33 Comte-Sponville, *Short Treatise*, 214.

34 Hubert L. Dreyfus, "'What a Monster Then Is Man': Pascal and Kierkegaard on Being a Contradictory Self and What to Do about It", in *Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 96–110.

35 Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13.

from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand'.³⁶ From this detached viewpoint – reminiscent of Kierkegaard's – all the commitments that have marked our lives reveal themselves as contingent and arbitrary.

At stake here is that each perspective lays claim to priority, though for different reasons. From within, life is meant to be lived, not observed, so the plausibility of the first viewpoint rests on the idea that there is no sense in seeking its meaning from the outside. Yet the external perspective seems more accurate, offering an objective vantage point. This viewpoint is appealing precisely because of its neutrality: the distorting effects of subjective divergence are reduced to zero, and things appear as they are, contemplated from what Nagel calls a 'view [...] from nowhere'.³⁷ The tension between these perspectives arises from our ability to adopt the external view while remaining the people whose deepest concerns are being so indifferently observed. In other words, we go on living our habitual lives despite the awareness that every facet of our existence appears at once meaningful and meaningless. It is here, caught between these two perspectives, that the contradiction of life and the accompanying sense of absurdity take root.

The distress caused by the inability to dispel the impression that all choices are equal and that there is no reason to prefer one over another is called existential angst because it stems directly from the experience of existence itself. The impression of the futility of all things and the sense of immobility that came with it is poignantly captured by John Barth in his second novel, *The End of the Road*. At the train station, the protagonist is overwhelmed by what he labels as the 'cosmic view' – Barth's equivalent to Nagel's external viewpoint – while meditating on where to go:

So I left the ticket window and took a seat on one of the benches in the middle of the concourse to make up my mind. And it was there that I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas. There was no reason to go to Cincinnati, Ohio. There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio; or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the Bradford Apartment Hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything.³⁸

According to Nagel, the apparent feeling of emptiness caused by the perceived absurdity of life, described here by Barth, recalls epistemological scepticism. Both arise from the interplay between our limitations and our capacity to transcend them using rational thinking. Given its relevance to our purposes, clarifying the stakes involved with scepticism is worthwhile.

Scepticism about the external world is the most notorious form of scepticism, and it seems to be inherently tied to realism. The moment we affirm the existence of a reality beyond our minds, we open the door to the unsettling possibility that our perceptions may not faithfully reflect it. This arises because we extend beyond the bounds of our ordinary beliefs by adopting an external perspective. And, once the seeds of scepticism take root, they are tough to uproot. Still, since scepticism seems theoretically hard to disprove as well as practically irrelevant – or even pragmatically inconsistent – at the same time, it is usual to counter the sceptic's arguments with

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Ibid., 208.

³⁸ John Barth, *The End of the Road* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), 72–73.

the claim that, although what we know about the world cannot be said to be sure, asserting on this basis that any kind of knowledge is unachievable would be an incoherent or, worse, ‘insane and intolerable’ move.³⁹ Yet, even among those who call themselves sceptics, very few act as if the external world – or any knowledge about it – does not exist. Philosophical scepticism, though, does not generally lead us to reject our ordinary beliefs ‘but it lends them a peculiar flavor’,⁴⁰ maintains Nagel. After recognizing that the validity of our familiar beliefs is not assured, we are compelled to revert to and accept them with a sense of wistful resignation. The same goes for the perceived absurdity of life: it has a dark and pessimistic aspect that can yet be redeemed when ‘our seriousness is laced with irony’.⁴¹

This may be merely a terminological disagreement, but in my view Nagel’s flavour metaphor offers a perspective on the human condition that is not ironic but humorous. Of course, accessing the external perspective does not preclude adopting an ironic stance towards oneself; however, such a stance often leads us to observe the self from a distance, as if it belonged to someone else and frequently with varying degrees of harshness, rather than fostering any genuine reconciliation with our contradictions. In this light, Nagel’s words help illuminate the insight shared by Comte-Sponville and Pirandello: that humour, unlike irony or sarcasm, serves a fundamentally positive function. A sense of humour is a virtue precisely because it enables us to confront life’s absurdity and sublimate existential angst into a blithe, if bittersweet, resignation.

V. CONCLUSION: SENSE OF HUMOUR AS A BLITHE RESIGNATION

My aim in this paper has been to show how a particular kind of comic amusement harnesses the darker aspects of laughter in a virtuous way, enabling us to come to terms with the human condition. I have chosen to call this ‘humour’, offering historical context to support this terminology. I have then examined the three traditional theories of laughter, arguing that, while each captures essential aspects of comic amusement – such as the release of tension, the sense of superiority in irony and mockery, and the incongruity found in many jokes – they fail in their current forms to account for humour as I have construed it. Among them, the incongruity theory – especially when emphasizing the interplay between anguish and relief – emerges as the most promising starting point for exploring my central concern.

Drawing on the writings of Pirandello and Comte-Sponville, I have identified the true source of humour’s releasing effect: humorous characters reveal the shared human condition behind our distress – namely, the perception of our own incongruity. Their absurdity reminds us that we are not alone in experiencing this tension; it is an intrinsic feature of human life. I have further clarified that the root of life’s absurdity is the same as that of epistemological scepticism. The sceptic’s dilemma and the experience of absurdity stem from our uniquely human capacity to adopt an external

39 Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1982), 60. For further discussion on the pragmatic inconsistency of scepticism, see Renata Ziemińska, *The History of Skepticism: In Search of Consistency* (New York: Lang, 2017).

40 Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 19.

41 *Ibid.*, 20.

perspective. In both cases, we confront a fundamental incongruity at the heart of our understanding of the world and ourselves.

For these reasons, the final section turns to how we might best confront such challenges. Following Nagel, I am persuaded that the possibility raised by the sceptic is irrefutable and warrants serious reflection. The same holds true for life's absurdity. Once we adopt the external perspective, our familiar convictions and the everyday hierarchy of priorities lose their apparent certainty. If so, what resources remain for us as we confront scepticism and absurdism, especially if we accept that they cannot be resolved?

Regarding scepticism, Nagel's flavour metaphor can be construed as a pragmatic response, which might be articulated as follows. Suppose the vast majority of our beliefs are correct in our world. Under those circumstances, our inability to rule out the possibility that we are living in an illusory reality does not undermine (the vast majority of) our ordinary beliefs. This is because, if we are indeed condemned to a lifelong illusion, our experiences and beliefs, including their consequences, will be our only reality. From this internal perspective, it would be unreasonable to call them 'illusory'; they constitute our genuine experiences and beliefs. Nevertheless, if our entire lives were spent within such an illusion, then reality would appear quite different from an external perspective beyond human reach. Consequently, some of our beliefs about the fundamental nature of reality would inevitably be mistaken. In this sense, sceptical doubt does not threaten (the vast majority of) our ordinary beliefs, but it profoundly challenges our aspiration to grasp the ultimate truth.⁴²

To my knowledge, life's absurdity can be addressed in two ways. One is to treat it as tragic, as Camus does. If someone is not willing to surrender to what Martin Heidegger calls 'falling' (*Verfallen*)⁴³ – the human inclination to interpret and experience life solely through the lens of trivial everyday dealings – then they should also avoid suicide, as it represents a flight from the problem rather than a confrontation with it. Instead, Camus advocates for defiance or disdain, suggesting that we can preserve our dignity by defiantly confronting a world indifferent to our appeals and choosing to live on regardless. While this will not eliminate the absurdity of our lives, it will imbue them with a sense of nobility.⁴⁴ Incidentally, Camus's call to confront an indifferent world with defiance and disdain is reminiscent of Emil Cioran's concept of 'the tragic, bitter irony of despair', which remains the only response 'once you have witnessed the fall of the entire world'. It is no coincidence that Cioran speaks of irony rather than humour as a final attitude. This is by no means a gesture of reconciliation; instead, it is a 'veiled

42 The notion that most of an individual's beliefs within such an immersive illusion must be true has been put forward with different lines of reasoning by some contemporary philosophers, among others Oets K. Bouwsma in 'Descartes' Evil Genius', *Philosophical Review* 58 (1949): 141–51, and Hilary Putnam in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981), 14. Recently, it has been retrieved and developed by David J. Chalmers in 'Structuralism as a Response to Skepticism', *Journal of Philosophy* 115 (2018): 625–60, and in *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Norton, 2022), chaps 6, 20, 24.

43 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962), 219–24.

44 See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Penguin, 1975), 109.

contempt', even more scornful than Comte-Sponville's irony, mocking both the world and the self as though equally lost.⁴⁵

Otherwise, life's absurdity can be met with blithe resignation, which mirrors Roberts's 'blithe humility' only insofar as resignation can be mistaken for humility. However, the two diverge in both spirit and implication. As I understand it, a sense of humour makes this possible, for it involves recognizing humour's inherently reflexive nature. Like Pirandello's parrot lady, humorous figures are not simply defined by incongruous traits that make them laughable; rather, they embody and reveal the absurdity at the core of the human condition: a heap of existents, inconvenienced and embarrassed by themselves.⁴⁶ Humour, in this light, establishes a reflexive relation between the one who laughs and the object of laughter: the former recognizes in the latter a different expression of the same human predicament, perceiving not just difference but kinship.

But what does this imply? To clarify the notion of reflexivity, consider the standard distinction between the relations 'being greater than or equal to' and 'being greater than'. The former is reflexive, as it can apply to a thing and itself; the latter is irreflexive since nothing can be greater than itself. A similar distinction applies to the attitudes of 'being humorous about' versus 'being ironic towards'. When someone is humorous about another, they are, in a sense, also being humorous about themselves. Humour is reflexive: it turns back on the self. By contrast, irony directed at others is typically irreflexive: it excludes the self from its scope. This, in turn, casts doubt on the apparent reflexivity of self-irony. Although it may seem to involve a genuine turning back on oneself, the reflexive gesture in self-irony is inauthentic, as discussed at the end of Section III. Rather than facing the self directly, self-irony tends to adopt a posture of detachment, observing the self from a distance as if it were someone else. Thus, the self becomes an object, something other, to be judged. In this light, the reflexivity of self-irony proves to be only superficial.

Against this backdrop, a sense of humour emerges as a distinctly human virtue. Unlike irony, which often functions as a counterforce without a precise moral aim, humour enables us to acknowledge the sources of our distress as inseparable from our very being while nurturing a kind of self-awareness that tempers our suffering without denying it. From an external standpoint, even our deepest existential anguish appears irrelevant – or, worse, laughable – given the jarring incongruity between the intensity of our emotions and the insignificance of our existence on a cosmic scale. Faced with this incongruity, we have a choice: we can either succumb to its pain or accept it with a wistful smile. In the latter case, we are not merely 'venting the pressure pot', as Freud seems to suggest. Rather, we are engaging one of humour's most profound functions: to render the contradictions of the human condition poignantly comic while exposing the very limits that define our existence. And to set a limit, as is often said, one must first be able to go beyond it. Our ability to adopt this external perspective carries us beyond such limits, towards an abyss we are compelled to confront, whether we wish to or not. Yet to approach that abyss with humour rather than despair is what allows us to endure our condition without ceasing to be human. It is in this capacity, finally, that the virtuous nature of a sense of humour truly resides.

45 Emil M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 91–92.

46 This alludes to Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 184.

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