

# *FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR LAUGH* *A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF* *COMPREHENSIVE* *THEORIES OF HUMOR*

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**I**t's dark. You move slowly, creeping through the bushes, putting your feet down carefully to keep from snapping twigs or crunching leaves. You try to stay just a few steps behind your friend Grok, just close enough to be able to make out through the darkness the ears on the wolf pelt draped across his shoulders. Suddenly, a noise, a twig snaps off to the left. Grok grunts under his breath. You stop; time does the same. Your spear feels heavy in your hand but you grip it tightly, tensing everything as you squat into an athletic stance. You grit your teeth and start taking shallow breaths into your chest as your heart pumps faster and your mind focuses, suddenly sharply aware of everything- internal and external. You stare at the spot where you heard the snapping, and you hear another, closer. You brace yourself; what will it be? Fight or flight?

But then, through the darkness, you recognize the source of the sounds. As he comes closer, you realize it was your little brother, Robby. You smile, unclench your muscles, throw up your hands in relief, and you take deep, diaphragmatic breaths, adding just a slight vocalization so your friends will know everything's okay and relax too, and then you all go back to thinking about different types of stone. In case you weren't mentally acting it out as you read it, that process (with a few hundred thousand years of evolutionary refinement) is laughter, and this is its commonly accepted creation myth.<sup>1</sup> Laughter evolved as a way to relax upon discovering that a perceived and prepared for threat wasn't real.

But that's where "commonly accepted" stops in humor theory. For as long as humans have been writing down their thoughts, there have been theories of humor, theories which try to pick out one note from an orchestra which they can call the source of funny. Unfortunately, humor is *complicated*. How else do you explain that Steve Martin, a man who deserves the title of "funniness

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<sup>1</sup> Carr, Jimmy, and Lucy Greeves. *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes*. London: Penguin, 2007. Print. 20.

expert” if anyone does, said while looking back on his career, “I sometimes try to determine if a particular idea is funny. I picture myself at the back of a darkened theater, watching the bit in question unspooling on the screen, and somewhere, in the black interior of my brain, I can hear the audience’s response. Thankfully, when the movie is finally screened, I discover that my intuition is not always right.”<sup>2</sup> Every comedian who’s ever stood up on a stage echoes this sentiment: people who live and die based on figuring out what’s funny can’t reliably do it. How arrogant do you have to be to think you can sum up the source of humor in one simple sentence?

I believe there are three<sup>3</sup> not-entirely-distinct sources of funny. The first is logical funny, which I’ll call “wit.” The best way I can describe this is as a tickling within the brain, caused mostly by verbal constructions called jokes. The second source is social laughter, which I’ll call “humor.”<sup>4</sup> Social laughter comes from a seemingly-magical<sup>5</sup> ability people have to make each other laugh by primarily non-verbal means and is often not tied to anything an outside observer would consider “funny.” Finally there’s emotional laughter, which I’ll call “Limonian Comedy” because a man named John Limon first described it. The best I can do to identify a unifying factor to all these, a “Grand Unified Theory of Humor” of sorts, is this: laughter is the third option in the fight or flight dilemma, choosing not to confront a threat but to ignore it. Thus laughing at something is letting it have its way with you, offering no resistance. From this I conclude that funny is that to which we willingly submit.<sup>6</sup>

The 17-year-old-kids-who-think-they-know-everything of the “theories of funniness” world are the empirical scientists, who’ve recently started doing experiments on laughter. The two most notable of these are Dan Dennet and Robert Provine. Dennet, in conjunction with his grad student and co-author Matthew Hurley, defines laughter as “the destruction of an erroneous cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, Steve. *Born Standing Up: a Comic’s Life*. New York: Scribner, 2007. Print. 203.

<sup>3</sup> In my first draft this number was one, in my second draft it was two. This is my third draft. I see no reason why this number should stop increasing

<sup>4</sup> We don’t have good enough language for talking about different types of funniness, and this is the most annoying consequence of that. From now on, I’ll try to use “humor” only to refer to the source of social laughter. Unfortunately, when I quote philosophers I’m going to have to use humor as a synonym for funny. Sorry.

<sup>5</sup> Like the humors from Medieval medicine. Get it?

<sup>6</sup> Submission, as it’s defined in the dictionary or as it’s used by people, doesn’t really mean what I’m using it to mean here. What I’m talking about here is something that doesn’t really have a word attached to it, so I’m using “submission.” I’m using it to mean things you might not think that it means though, so if at some point you feel yourself thinking, “that’s not submission!” you’re probably right. Ignore the petty semantics though and try to figure out what I mean by the other thing, the thing you’re thinking isn’t submission. If you’ve got a better word for it I’d love to hear it, submission sounds so academical and pretentious.

frame.”<sup>7</sup> This needs a little explaining. Cognitive frames are an idea put forth by Gilles Fauconnier, who suggested that when our brain imagines something, it creates a “mental space” in which that thing can exist.<sup>8</sup> So when you imagine a bear coming out of the jungle to attack you or throwing a touchdown pass to win the Superbowl,<sup>9</sup> you’re creating a universe in your mind to simulate these things happening. These spaces do not have to be consistent with reality, that’s why you can imagine yourself in the Superbowl, but they do have to be internally consistent, which is why you can’t imagine a person who’s, say, both tall and short.<sup>10</sup> Because the brain’s major job, or at least the big fluffy part in the front’s job, is predicting the future, we are constantly and involuntarily creating new mental frames as we try to imagine how the next few minutes, hours, or days will play out.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, we humans are absolutely terrible at making predictions, so as our brains run off into the future like a galloping camel they create a confusing clutter of correct and incorrect frames. If these frames are going to be at all helpful to us in choosing behavior, we need some trick to weed out the erroneous frames from the good, what Dennet calls “debugging.” Dennet offers no insight into how we go about this “costly, resource-consuming, attention-demanding effort,” but he argues that laughter is the doggie treat held in front of our noses by evolution encouraging us to learn the trick for ourselves. In his own words, “laughter is the joy of debugging.”<sup>12</sup>

But this definition begs an important question: who’s in charge of handing out the laughter-treats to our brains? The question leads to the work done by Robert Provine, work which led him to conclude that “laughter is under weak conscious control.”<sup>13</sup> Two of Provine’s experiments stand out as especially enlightening. The first you can do for yourself, right now: ask someone to laugh. They might be able to squeeze out a chuckle or an awkward “ha-hah-heh,” but ultimately their “efforts to laugh on command will be forced or futile.”<sup>14</sup> The need to overcome this handicap is the inspiration for Provine’s second experiment: he observed an improv class doing their “laughing exercise.” In this exercise the students “gathered in a large circle and one by one each attempted to laugh. Individually, their efforts were not impressive- most of their laughs sounded forced and artificial.” Even actors, people who are proud of their ability to fake emotions, can’t laugh on command. But

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<sup>7</sup> Dennet, Daniel. “Daniel Dennett Bucharest Conference on Humour.” Bucharest Conference on Humour. Bucharest, Romania. Lecture.

<sup>8</sup> Dennet Bucharest

<sup>9</sup> You, not the bear

<sup>10</sup> Dennet Bucharest

<sup>11</sup> Dennet bucharest

<sup>12</sup> Dennet bucharest

<sup>13</sup> Provine, Robert R. *Laughter: a Scientific Investigation*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000. Print. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Provine, 50.

then Provine writes one of the most illuminating sentences in all of laugh literature: “they laughed more convincingly when they gathered in groups of two and four and laughed with and at each other – their difficulty in laughing on cue became a legitimate trigger of involuntary laughter.”<sup>15</sup> What made them laugh was exactly one thing: other people.

This dependency of laughter on social factors is a phenomenon Provine touches on in much of his work. In one experiment, Provine studied subjects’ “laugh lives” and found that people “laughed about *30 times* more when they were around others than when they were alone – laughter almost disappeared among solitary subjects not exposed to media stimulation.”<sup>16</sup> In another study, he found that “eye contact between friends (the people you laugh with) also facilitates laughter.”<sup>17</sup> In this only-slightly-creepy study, Provine approached people in a park and tried to make them laugh. What he discovered was that people would rarely laugh at him, but when they had friends with them they “typically shifted their gaze to each other and laughed.”<sup>18</sup> This seems to be the first security flaw in the mental cookie jar containing the laughter treats: we can’t get in ourselves, but if we trust them, other people can get in for us.

In fact, it’s easy for other people to make us laugh; they don’t even have to be funny. That’s what Provine’s last and most interesting study found: only 10-20% of laughter is inspired by something that feels even remotely funny.<sup>19</sup> The typical comments that preceded laughter were things like “it was nice meeting you too,” or “I know!”<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that only the giggliest schoolgirls would call any of these lines themselves funny, or that virtually no common theme runs between them verbally, they produce laughter. This forces the conclusion that whatever makes these statements funny is non-verbal, and thus that humans have a seemingly-magical ability to extract laughter from each other by entirely non-verbal means.<sup>21</sup> This might be where we get the idea that “laughter is contagious” or that we can “make” someone laugh.

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<sup>15</sup> Provine, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Provine, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Provine, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Provine, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Provine, 40.

<sup>20</sup> The full list of Provine’s 25 typical prelaugh comments: “I’ll see you guys later.” “Put those cigarettes away.” “I hope we all do well.” “It was nice meeting you too.” “We can handle this.” “I see your point.” “I should do that, but I’m too lazy.” “I try to lead a normal life.” “I think I’m done.” “I told you so!” “I was completely horrified!” “There you go!” “I know!” “Must be nice!” “Look, it’s Andre!” “It wasn’t you?” “Does anyone have a rubber band?” “Oh, Tracey, what’s wrong with us?” “Can I join you?” “How are you?” “Are you sure?” “Do you want one of mine?” “What can I say?” “Why are you telling me this?” “What is that supposed to mean?” It can be found on pages 40 and 41 of *Laughter*.

<sup>21</sup> I’m relatively sure that the the cause will turn out to be something other than magic, but I don’t know what it is so that’s the best I can do.

We're six pages in and already I'm contradicting myself. First Dan Dennet said that laughter was the result of the destruction of a bad cognitive frame, but now we have laughter going on in the unconscious, non-verbal ether of communication between two people, not within their minds. Dennet's definition of laughter's cause is completely incompatible with the fact that saying "I hope we all do well" makes people laugh. Most importantly, many of the statements on Provine's list of laugh inducing comments do not require cognitive frames at all, but exist in reality, regarding what is going on around the laughers. This forces our first distinction, between logical and social laughter, but its roots reach as far back as that first caveman's laugh.

If you look back at that scene from the Stone Age, you'll realize there are two separate laugh episodes, each with different causes. First, you realize that the perceived and prepared for threat is not a threat at all, but your little brother, which lets you relax by laughing. But then, because you're laughing, your friends laugh as well, because your laughter must mean that you've realized the threat isn't real. This is a subtly, but importantly, different cause. In the former, realizing yourself that a threat isn't a threat makes you laugh; in the latter, realizing that someone else has realized the threat isn't real makes you laugh. Social laughter is what has evolved out of this second source.

This explains the contagiousness of laughter, but what about Provine's finding that it takes two people? To explain this, we have to look at the two different social roles laughter plays: as a message broadcast from you to your friends that everything is okay and as a signal back from them that they understand. Going back to Provine's laugh-inducing-comments, we can easily see the first in "We can handle this," and the second in "I see your point." These are the two halves of social laughter: a way of showing that everything is okay and a signal confirming understanding.<sup>22</sup> This makes trust an essential element of social laughter, because by definition we're more likely to believe and understand messages from people we trust.

Of course, now we have to go back to the first laugh episode from the Stone Age scene, the one caused by realizing for yourself that the perceived threat wasn't real. It's partly a social laugh, but it starts internally as the result of a nice bit of logic being done by the brain, that is, as Dennet's reward for the destruction of an erroneous cognitive frame. Over the last several thousand years, however, logical laughter has grown much more complicated, and Dennet's theory doesn't capture all the beauty of some of its funniest forms. To see this, we need to look at jokes. A joke is a very specific thing. It starts with a setup, in which one or more assumptions are introduced, and ends

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<sup>22</sup> If you're thinking that these overlap a bit, they do. In fact, the laugh to show that you understand something is itself a signal that everything okay when that's the message it's a response to. This could be why laughter has a tendency to build upon itself.

with a punchline that manipulates those assumptions to produce laughter. We all know hundreds of them, but I'll give two examples that are widely known and widely liked so that I can refer to them and nobody will feel bad because they don't have any friends to tell them jokes.

A panda walks into a bar and orders a burger and some fries. When the fries come, he eats them and then very calmly shoots the guy at the table next to him in the face. Then he pushes in his chair and calmly starts walking towards the door. The bartender, flabbergasted, says to him, "What the hell are you doing!?" The panda says, "I'm a panda. Google me." The bartender whips out his phone, googles "Panda," and the first result says, "Panda Bear: Eats shoots and leaves."

A cop pulls a guy over on the highway. He says to the guy, "Excuse me sir, you were going 20 miles an hour over the limit, you're swerving back and forth between lanes, what's going on?" The man says, "I'm sorry officer, I've got these penguins in my back seat and I don't know what to do with them!" The officer looks in the back and sees that the guy does, in fact, have a whole bunch of penguins. He says to the man, "Take them to the zoo and I'll let you off with a warning." The man agrees. The next day, the cop sees the same guy driving down the road and pulls him over again. When he gets up next to the car he sees that the penguins are still in the car, only now they're wearing sunglasses. "What the hell, I told you to take those penguins to the zoo!" Said the cop. "I did!" Said the man. "They loved it. Now we're going to the beach!"

A joke is a magic trick in reverse. The joker takes something that doesn't exist, and he appears it. A panda walks into a bar; a guy is driving down the highway with penguins in his car. This new thing, like all new things, scares us a little bit, and we wait eagerly to find out more about it. Then, with a whole bunch of misdirection and showmanship, suddenly the joker makes the thing re-disappear. This panda uses Google; those penguins enjoy spending an afternoon at the zoo. We can no longer imagine the thing being real, and it vanishes in a puff of logic,<sup>23</sup> along with all our concern over the appearance of a new thing.

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<sup>23</sup> The phrase "vanishes in a puff of logic" is stolen from the irreproachably-funny Douglas Adams, who uses it an excellent joke that is relatively relevant to this discussion but too long to reprint. It can be found here: <http://scott.yang.id.au/2005/10/the-babel-fish/> or by Googling "vanished in a puff of logic".

It's easy to explain what makes either of these two jokes funny in the language we have so far. The setup creates cognitive frames that put the audience in a state of arousal thanks to a perceived threat. The punchlines, however, reveal that the threat isn't real. As a reward for this error-detection, and to relax their bodies from the unnecessary arousal, the audience members laugh. There, see, I've done it. I've explained why jokes are funny.

Except, this explanation is missing something, something as important as it is hard to name. It's a feeling, not from one of the five senses but from within your brain, a slight tickling that we don't understand and that makes us feel kind of strange, but that we like tremendously. Just identifying this feeling as the reward for the evolutionarily advantageous job of "debugging," as Dennet does, is not enough. For 2300 years philosophers have been shooting words at this feeling trying to pin it down, and they've nicked it to within an inch of its life, but it's still fluttering.

Aristotle fired the first successful volley when he published his theory of the ridiculous. To Aristotle, "the ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harmful to others."<sup>24</sup> This is certainly a definition of something, but it fails to settle the question of "what makes something funny?" It does, however, give us the useful word "ridiculous," and it attaches the very-important-in-a-few-pages caveat that it's only funny until someone gets hurt.

The next important development came 1800 years later with Thomas Hobbes' dominance theory put forth in *The Leviathan*. Hobbes saw the world as a "constant power struggle" and believed that laughter and victory were deeply related.<sup>25</sup> As Hobbes put it, "laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."<sup>26</sup> Again, this certainly isn't the entire picture of funny, it captures just a corner of the humor in either the panda or the penguin jokes, but it makes a few important contributions. The simpler of these is that funniness is a triumph over some problem, which is the de-arousal we're already familiar with, although it adds an element of triumph that wasn't there when we were just realizing threats weren't real.

But the word "sudden" makes the bigger contribution by identifying the important requirement that a joke surprises us. Picking up on this word sudden, however, Dennet explains that

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<sup>24</sup> Krichtafovitch, Igor. *Humor Theory: Formula of Laughter*. Denver, CO: Outskirts, 2006. Print. 2.

<sup>25</sup> This quote comes not from Hobbes but from Krichtafovitch on page 3

<sup>26</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *The Elements of Law and Politic*. University of Virginia Library. Feb. 2002. Web. 18 December 2010. Chapter 9.

surprise often acts as an emotional amplifier,<sup>27</sup> and this seems to be a better interpretation of the impact of suddenness. Think about that person you know who for the life of them cannot tell a joke. When this person butchers a joke by adding too many words and telegraphing the punchline, the funniness of the joke, the verbal property it has which tickles our brains as they try to assimilate it, usually survives.<sup>28</sup> Its effect is just muted thanks to the absence of an amplifier.

Release theory, pioneered by Immanuel Kant, was the next major theory to come up, and it has a lot of adherents with a lot of slightly different interpretations. This is essentially the theory we started with: a joke begins by setting up tension in the audience and ends by revealing that the source of tension doesn't exist, allowing the audience to laugh and release it. Herbert Spencer added one interesting wrinkle when he observed that this is only funny if "we expect something big and find something small."<sup>29</sup> If we expect Wile E. Coyote to be hurt when he catapults into the ground but he's okay, it's funny; if we expect him to be okay but he dies it's not.<sup>30</sup>

This brings us to the most recent and best logic-based theory of humor: incongruity theory. Arthur Schopenhauer proposed the theory, and he used the word "absurd" instead of incongruity, twisting release theory in just such a way as to explain what makes something funny instead of what makes people laugh. Where release theory focuses on the shrapnel shot off by an exploding cognitive frame, incongruity theory looks at the bomb. Schopenhauer sees laughter coming from the incongruity between expectations and reality, which can describe either a man walking out of the woods where a lion should be or a Googling panda bear.

I'm going to propose my own theory of what makes jokes funny now, but it's nothing more than a combination of all the theories I've just listed. That feeling that something is funny is the feeling of your brain trying to grasp something that it just barely can't, of your brain straining to understand something, and if a few conditions are met this feeling can be turned into laughter. To see how this works, we have to look more closely at the process of evaluating cognitive frames.

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<sup>27</sup> Dennet, Bucharest.

<sup>28</sup> This is obviously an anecdotal argument, but what I'm claiming is that this phenomenon exists sometimes, not always, and therefore I think the fairly relatable anecdote is sufficient defense.

<sup>29</sup> Krichtafovitch, 4.

<sup>30</sup> It's almost impossible to say that something is "not funny." A scene where Wile E. Coyote decides to leave Road Runner alone and have a nice dinner at a restaurant instead, only to be banged on the head twice with a hammer when he says he wants two lumps in his coffee, might work, and a scene where he takes the day off to relax in the sun only to get skin cancer and die wouldn't be out of place in a dark comedy. This is exactly what I'm trying to argue though: there's a possibly infinite number of ways something can be funny.

We construct cognitive frames on the fly as life demands them, and to pull this off we have to build them out of the mental models we've put together over the course of our lives.<sup>31</sup> So when you read, "a cop pulls a guy over on the highway," your brain grabs its cop, guy in a car, and highway models off its shelf and moves them around like a kid playing with action figures. The straining I'm talking about comes when you have to imagine a model doing a new, absurd, ridiculous thing. If you can figure out how this new thing is impossible, you get to throw out the whole frame it existed in and earn one of Dennet's "joy of debugging" laughs. But sometimes, these new things turn out to be quite possible, and we get to add a feature to our models.

My favorite example of one of these types of jokes is Mitch Hedberg's: "On a traffic light green means 'go' and yellow means 'yield', but on a banana it's just the opposite. Green means 'hold on,' yellow means 'go ahead,' and red means, 'where did you get that banana at?'" Most people's models of bananas and stop lights had almost nothing in common before they heard this joke, but the joke forges a new connection between them. This is just as helpful as throwing out an impossible new model, and so doing it earns us a laugh as well. Thus logical laughter is not just "the joy of debugging" but "the joy of thinking," as any type of thinking can lead to laughter.

But there are still moments we cannot fully explain the humor of, the clearest examples of which come from stand-up comedy. This is my favorite stand-up bit of all time, the closer to George Carlin's best HBO special, 1996's *Back in Town*.<sup>32</sup>

Now there's one thing you might have noticed I don't complain about: Politicians. Everybody complains about politicians. Everybody says they suck. Well, where do people think these politicians come from? They don't fall out of the sky. They don't pass through a membrane from another reality. They come from American parents and American families, American homes, American schools, American churches, American businesses, and American universities. And they're elected by American citizens. This is the best we can do folks. This is what we have to offer, it's what our system produces. Garbage in; garbage out. If you have selfish ignorant citizens- if you have selfish ignorant citizens, you're gonna get selfish ignorant leaders. Term limits ain't gonna do you any good, you're just gonna wind up with a brand new bunch of selfish, ignorant Americans.

So maybe, maybe, maybe it's not the politicians who suck. Maybe something else sucks around here. Like the public. Yeah, the public sucks. There's a nice campaign slogan for somebody: "The public sucks, fuck hope." Fuck hope. Because if it's really just the fault of these politicians, then where are all the other bright people of conscience? Where are all the bright, honest, intelligent Americans ready to step in and save the nation and lead the way? We don't have people like that in this country. Everybody's at the mall, scratching his ass,

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<sup>31</sup> Dennet bucharest

<sup>32</sup> I'm guessing any of you who are fellow comedy nerds will want to fight about this. '96 was a sweet spot in George's career after his enlightenment-producing heart attack, before he got too old to really act out his bits.

picking his nose, and taking his credit card out of his fanny pack and buying a pair of sneakers with lights in them.

So I have solved this little political dilemma for myself in a very simple way: On Election Day, I stay home. I don't vote. Fuck 'em. I don't vote. Two reasons- two reasons I don't vote: first of all? It's meaningless. This country was bought and sold and paid for a long time ago. The shit they shuffle around every four years? [mimes masturbating] doesn't mean a fucking thing. And secondly, I don't vote because I believe if you vote, you have no right to complain. People like to twist that around, I know, they say, they say, "well, if you don't vote you have no right to complain." Where's the logic in that? If you vote, and you elect dishonest, incompetent people, and they get into office and screw everything up, well you are responsible for what they have done. You caused the problem, you voted them in, you have no right to complain. I, on the other hand, who did not vote, who did not vote, who, in fact, did not even leave the house on election day, am in no way responsible for what these people have done and have every right to complain as loud as I want about the mess you created that I had nothing to do with.

So I know that a little later on this year you're gonna have another one of those really swell presidential elections that you like so much, you'll enjoy yourselves, it'll be a lot of fun, I'm sure as soon as the election is over your country will improve immediately. As for me, I'll be home on that day doing essentially the same thing as you, the only difference is, when I get finished masturbating, I'm gonna have a little some-thing to show for it folks. Thank you very much.

By now you should recognize in this bit many of the techniques I've talked about so far. The bit certainly sends the message that although everything seems terrible, it will all be okay, and the audience will probably relate to what George says enough to produce a laugh or two. And George certainly makes the audience think, flirting with the limits of logic but ultimately making several new connections between apparently unlike things. But neither of these descriptions captures what makes this bit so incredibly funny and so deeply satisfying.

To really explain the extent of the funniness in George's "Don't Vote" bit, I have to tell you about John Limon's theory of stand-up comedy. The first and most important part of the theory is "abjection," which Limon uses to refer to a comedian's ability to turn himself into the disgusting parts of humanity that we wish we could get rid of. At its most literal level, the abject is feces and all the other lovely bodily fluids, which explains comedy's fondness for fart jokes, but metaphorically the abject can be anything from social neuroses to being fat.<sup>33</sup> By talking about these abject parts of

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<sup>33</sup> Limon, John. *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. Print. 4.

himself in a confident and accepting way, a comedian makes his audience okay with something that was bothering them about themselves, letting them release the tension it had been causing. In Limon's words, "stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal)." Abjection is basically saying what you shouldn't say or being what you shouldn't be.

What sort of things should you say and be? Limon calls these things sublimines. By definition, the sublime is anything immeasurably great because "passing beyond the confines of the world is exactly what the sublime is engaged to do."<sup>34</sup> In less lofty language, sublimines are the cultural expectations, personal values, and ideals that sit atop unclimbable pedestals as the Best Things. They're things like the importance of voting, the ability of democracy to pick good leaders, and the superiority of the American people. We don't decide rationally on our sublimines, there's no application or interview process, they weasel their way into our minds as a result of advertisements, stories, and off-hand remarks our parents make when we're four years old. In fact, because they are "immeasurably great" they necessarily cannot be rational. What they are, then, is emotional. Sublimines are not things we "think" or "know," they're things we "feel" or "believe."

Also because of their immeasurable greatness, sublimines are expectations we can never live up to. The perfect older sisters of our psyches, sublimines lurk in the back of our minds, insisting we compare everything to their impossible amazingness, making reality look ridiculous in comparison. This makes us feel bad for not living up to them, and that creates anxiety which comedy can turn into laughter. The trick behind this conversion is that reality is real and the sublime is not, so the right comparison can actually make the sublime look ridiculous because it is so impossibly unrealistic. When this is done well, we can throw out our sublimines, or at least kick them to the ground for a minute, along with all the anxiety they cause us.

Limon's only instruction for how to make these comparisons is the last part of his theory, and he calls it "joke work." If you look back at the "Don't Vote" bit, George never explicitly explains the point he's making, that Americans should be okay with their terrible politicians because a well-functioning democracy is an impossible fantasy<sup>35</sup>, but he comes just close enough for the audience to put the pieces together on their own. The assembly an audience has to do in their own heads to the Ikea furniture of comedy is joke work.

Joke work is important for two reasons. First, it's the shield comedians hide behind that lets them safely address the taboo topics of sublimines. Even between friends, talking about sublime

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<sup>34</sup> Limon, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Actually, I think it's more likely he's arguing that Americans should drop out of society and stop voting. Either way, he never makes himself clear, which is all we need to know for right now.

subjects typically degenerates into two or more people closing their ears and minds as they yell their opinions at each other's faces, but the subtlety and indirectness of joke work let the comedian slip behind the mental fortifications of dogma. George Carlin can call Americans fat, stupid, and lazy because he doesn't call them "fat, stupid, and lazy," he says they're "at the mall," and the audience fills in the rest.

Secondly, joke work is what separates the emotional laughter of Limonian Comedy from social laughter. Where social laughter was often unconscious and non-verbal, joke work requires that emotional laughter be at least partly conscious and verbal. There is, undoubtedly, a social element to the message that it's okay to fall short of the sublime, but social funniness would communicate this message non-verbally, depending mostly on trust and confidence, while emotional laughter depends on logic and reason. Emotional laughter is different from social laughter because, although the seed comes from another person, the plant's roots take hold inside the laugher's mind, whereas social laughter lives in the space between two talkers.

But now emotional laughter looks just like logical laughter. Don't worry, these are different too. Logical laughter finds its funny in the joy of thinking; a logical joke can have absolutely no emotional significance and still be funny, like Steven Wright's famous line, "it's a small world, but I wouldn't want to paint it." Emotional laughter comes from discharging sublime-induced anxiety, so even though it involves thinking, the humor comes from the emotional de-arousal, not from the thinking. Compare the deep, emotionally satisfying laughs of the audience to the "Don't Vote" bit with the light hearted giggle of the penguin joke's listeners and this difference becomes acutely obvious. Thus emotional laughter is a sort of Frankensteinian synthesis of logical and social laughter, made with parts of both but all of neither.

If you've been paying attention to what I've said so far, you may have noticed that I keep saying certain things "can" be funny and thought to yourself, "yes, but those things aren't always funny." This is true. Not all thinking makes you laugh, nor does every tarnished sublime or social signal of okayness. This leads to an important question: what makes something not funny? The answer to this question is what finally ties all these types of funny together.

While most comedians would argue that no topic is off-limits for humor, normal people disagree. These normal folks argue that truly serious problems, for instance cancer, poverty, or rape, are not funny because we should try to solve them instead of just accepting them and laughing. John Morreall explains this objection by stating that "by laughing at a friend who is too drunk to stand up,

for example, we're not trying to help that person."<sup>36</sup> With just a little logic we can turn that around to say that laughing at something is deciding not to do anything about it, to let it run its course and enjoy the chaos. To put this into a single word, laughing at something is submitting to it.

To understand how laughter is submission, it also helps to go back one more time to our hunting party of cavemen. We've already established that these cavemen laughed because the tension they had built up preparing for a fight became unnecessary, but what actually happened inside the cavemen's minds that let them release that tension? They finally acknowledge, feeling safe enough to do so now that the threat has vanished, that someday soon the rustling in the bushes won't be a friend. One day something will come out of those woods that will rip them apart and eat the pieces – but it wasn't today, so they laugh. Without this acknowledgement their laughter is a hollow, mechanical process that would be not just involuntary but unconscious, merely a mystical spasm whose origin is unknown. It is only by acknowledging the threat that has vanished, and accepting how threatening it was, that laughter can take on its deeply cathartic properties.<sup>37</sup>

But laughter is a very particular kind of submission, after all few wrestlers tap out of matches in fits of laughter, and people rarely give themselves up to the police with a guffaw. According to John Morreall, submission is funny if it is playful.<sup>38</sup> Play is an ancient state of being which, "in humans and animals alike... occurs in the absence of urgent physiological needs... [and is] spontaneous activity not carried out under pressure of external necessity or danger."<sup>39</sup> Basically, play is the stuff that wouldn't really matter except that we enjoy it. If laughter is playful submission, then funniness is frightening chaos to which we willingly submit.

Submission is the most fundamental and universal trait of funniness that I can find. With wit, our brains grasp at impossible ideas only to eventually submit to their impossibility, or they find a new connection between things and laugh at how silly they were to have not seen it before, submitting to the vast, unknowable frenzy of the world. With humor, we allow another person to take us from a serious state of trying to solve a problem into a playful state of not worrying about it, or we laugh to show that we can relate to how someone feels, surrendering our own ability to

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<sup>36</sup> Morreall, John. *Comic Relief: a Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print. 94.

<sup>37</sup> This idea is derived from former *Tonight Show* head writer Gene Perret, who writes in *The New Comedy Writing Step by Step* that a sense of humor is "the ability to see things as they are, recognize things as they are [and] accept things as they are." (Perret, 16.)

<sup>38</sup> Morreall, 50. The actual quote is "The basic pattern of humor: we experience a cognitive shift; we are in a play mode; we enjoy the shift; we laugh." I've substituted the more all-encompassing "submission" for "cognitive shift."

<sup>39</sup> Morreall, 34.

articulate our feelings to them. In Limonian Comedy, laughter is submission to the unattainability of sublimines, but without the playfulness of joke work this submission would turn into hostility and rejection.

But I don't want you to think that's my conclusion: that playful submission is the key to all laughter. In fact, my goal, rather than to identify the secret source of laughter, has been to create a taxonomy of funny, and this is merely my meager first attempt. The most valid criticism of this paper is that the lines between my categories are extremely blurry, and that every joke seems to tangle my three strains of funniness into an absurd Gordian knot. I do not deny this, rather I embrace it. Simplifying something so beautifully complex as funniness and laughter into the measurement of a single variable is to completely miss what makes it worth examining.

E.B. White once said that "humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."<sup>40</sup> In line with this mentality, the way most people have analyzed funny throughout history has been very much like sticking a knife in its chest, pulling out an organ and going, "look, this is what makes a frog work!" Incongruity, absurdity, abjection, humor, these are all just organs that some jokes have and others don't. But when you look at something truly funny, you find that there are dozens of organs all working in glorious harmony, and *that's* what makes the thing so beautiful. In many ways, funniness comes from our brain's constant search for new things, so it is almost impossible to comprehensively define it, as much of what will be funny tomorrow is necessarily not funny today.

This constant reinvention of funniness is what I want to end with, because I believe it's what really makes laughter so special. Normal people view the world through a serious lens, which, when pointed at a problem, reveals only two options: fight or flight. With only these two options there are only two possible outcomes, either you win or the problem does. But through the playful lens of funniness we can see a third option with infinite possible outcomes. This is why there is no magical recipe to create laughter: funny must be invented specially for each new situation one encounters. But when you do come up with a joke, when you find a nugget of funny buried in a moment, it can do the alchemist's trick of turning an ordinary win-lose situation into a golden chance for everyone to win. Funny is the third option, found in the cracks between the ordinary and the expected. Fight, flight, or laugh. That's what's so cool about humor.

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<sup>40</sup> I bet you thought I was going to go this whole paper without referencing this quote. Unfortunately, International Law prohibits any analysis of humor from omitting this quote. This was a very close call.

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