

## **HUMOR AT THE LIMITS OF THOUGHT**

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“Before I start to talk, I’d like to say a few words!”

Certain philosophical paradoxes that are discussed in all seriousness by philosophers in their sophisticated technical jargon, at times reveal themselves in everyday life contexts. One who finds himself in such a context may not realize the philosophical implications of his position, especially if he has no training in philosophy; but if he is clever enough to reflect upon it, he may come to apprehend the contradictions he is trapped in. Consequently what initially looked like a tenable and even obvious belief may suddenly be shaken up. There are various psychological reactions people have in such cases; the dogmatist may wish to cover up the situation by playing on words, or even using more sophisticated techniques of self-deception, whereas the open-minded person by realizing the ridiculous position he has put himself may get a feeling of incongruity. Such a feeling is at times valuable: it is both a sign of epistemic progress, and also the source of a certain type of humor, that one may call “humor at the limits of thought”. This essay is an attempt to depict this type of humor by considering certain humorous stories and relating them to relevant technical paradoxes in philosophy; a moral to be drawn from our discussion will be that this type of humor results from and is a precious tool for us to come to understand the contradictions that lie at the limits of human thought and language.

## I

Let us then start off with a popular Nasreddin Hodja story:

The Hodja, who has recently been appointed as the judge of the local court, is administering his first case. After listening to the statement of the prosecutor, given his inexperience and spontaneity, he immediately says:

“You are right!”

And then, listening to the defense lawyer, the Hodja in full confidence shouts:

“You are right too!”

His wife, who is at the trial to give the Hodja emotional support in his first case, furiously reacts:

“Hodja, how can both parties be right?”

After giving a moment of thought to this, the Hodja says:

“You are right too!”

Given his “open-mindedness” the Hodja could have reacted the same way to someone who points out the irrationality contained in the last word of his last utterance...and ad infinitum.

The story captures, in a simple and elegant manner, what in the literature is at times referred to as “the paradox of relativism”. Just like the Hodja, many take pride in not having a dogmatic attitude, giving every thought serious consideration and the benefit of the doubt, being open to alternative views with the belief that everyone is entitled to their point of view. As a result some wish to defend a relativist notion of truth, a doctrine that has gained popularity in all traditions of philosophy starting from its earliest years. Yet it is a doctrine that seems to refute itself, as the Hodja story indicates: if everyone is entitled to their view, then the one who claims the opposite is also entitled to her view. Consequently Hodja, who initially holds the relativist position, ends up having to agree with his wife who claims otherwise. Hence the relativity of relativism.

What the observant listener learns from the Hodja story may be no less than what he would learn from Quine’s elegant statement making exactly the same point: “Truth, says the cultural relativist, is culture-bound. But if it were, then

he, within his own culture, ought to see his own culture-bound truth as absolute. He cannot proclaim cultural relativism without rising above it, and he cannot rise above it without giving it up.”<sup>1</sup> The implications of the Hodja story seem not to differ from what is contained in Quine’s words, though the former is funny but the latter is not.

## II

G.E. Moore has taught us that there are true propositions that cannot be sincerely asserted. One may never sincerely utter, says Moore, “It is raining, but I don’t believe that it is raining,” despite the fact that it may well be true. Such utterances are paradoxical, not because there is an inconsistency contained in the asserted proposition, but rather because a sincere utterance of the sentence pragmatically implies that the speaker both believes and does not believe that it is raining. In dealing with such cases, we need to appeal to a technical distinction, due to P. Grice, between what a sentence means in a language and what is implied in the conversational context in which that sentence is uttered by a speaker. Moore’s example, no doubt, brings to light an important philosophical issue, though we all know that no one in their right mind would even attempt to make such an assertion. However there are more subtle contexts in which Moore’s Paradox, or something very similar to it, reveals itself, that at times go unnoticed. Quite recently I was watching a live interview with a famous pop singer on national TV. At one point he was asked what he thought was his best quality. With no hesitation he proudly responded by saying “Modesty!”, which appeared to be a very immodest answer. It seemed as if the more he talked about his modesty, the more he undermined the truth of what he said. But what should this poor chap have done? If he sincerely believes that his best quality is modesty, then how could he answer the question? Maybe he could have more cautiously said: “Sorry I can’t tell you what my best quality is, for if I did, it would no longer be my best quality.” Even that may not do, for if he is firmly convinced deep inside about how modest he is without ever saying it to anyone, he may appear to be a modest person on the surface but not really be one. After all it is one thing to act modestly

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1. W.V.O. Quine, “On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World” (Quine, 1975).

and another to be modest. So should we conclude then that a genuinely modest person should not believe that he is modest? Or one may hold that a modest person can truthfully say, and even try at length to show how modest she is, as long as she does not think of modesty as a good quality. Such a person may say “Unfortunately I am a very modest person, but I am working on it, I will hopefully recover soon.” But that seems to be a very modest statement, which we would not expect to hear from someone who thinks of modesty as a bad quality.

There are other such cases. Consider, for instance, a middle-aged man, who is caught up in the routine cycle of his nine-to-five job and his monotonous family life, complaining to his friend: “In my youth I was such a nostalgic person...but I have lost it all together now...wow those were the good old days...!” Ridiculous, but it could happen. If one can be nostalgic about an old pleasant experience such as one’s first love, why can’t one be nostalgic about being nostalgic? After all the feeling of nostalgia may in fact be a pleasant experience for some. Should we posit “levels of nostalgia”, similar to Tarski’s “orders of truth” or Russell’s Theory of Types, to deal with such paradoxical cases?

### III

Human cultures are based on conventions. Most notably the speakers of a language agree upon certain rules of grammar. The layman speaker in general has difficulty articulating the very grammatical rules that he uses daily. It is the task of the linguist to try to reveal them. However, as linguists do so they use language as well, which also is based on certain rules. This is perhaps one of the reasons that led Wittgenstein to conclude that not all rules can be articulated in language: such rules cannot be “said”, claims Wittgenstein, but only be “shown”. After arguing for this position in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein then goes on to give examples. Ironically, in the Introduction to the English translation of the *Tractatus*, Russell noted that “Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said.” Now the very same Mr. Wittgenstein later gave up on some of his fundamental views concerning human language, though he consistently held on to this claim. An example he gives in the *Philosophical Investigations* concerns “the Standard Meter”, which at the time was a rod kept in Paris: “There is one thing of

which one can say neither that it is one meter long nor that it is not one meter long, and that is the standard meter in Paris.” (§ 50). This time the reaction came from Kripke, when he humorously but also forcefully complained: “if the stick is a stick, for example 39.37 inches long, why isn’t it a meter long?”<sup>2</sup>. So then goes the controversy, though both parties agree that there are certain types of sentences at the foundational level that set the rules of the use of a particular term giving them a special status.

Now similar issues are raised in other types of conventions that are not *prima facie* philosophical, for instance in the case of contracts, constitutions and other legal documents. Parties that attempt to agree on an issue, try to articulate all the terms explicitly to secure their rights in case of a conflict. But trying to secure everything verbally at times leads to humorous results. Consider, for instance the opening statement of the chair of the Constitutional Committee: “Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to open the floor to discuss the bill that proposes to amend the ninth article of our constitution that states that the first article cannot be amended.” For the lawmaker this is serious stuff, yet, for some others there is humor here. No doubt there may in fact be certain pragmatic reasons why contemporary constitutions contain such articles that seem to be logically redundant.<sup>3</sup> In any case the humor no doubt leads into certain philosophical issues. It may for instance be argued, from this case, that every convention must have some unarticulated terms that its participants agree upon, similar to the “absolute presuppositions” of Collingwood<sup>4</sup>, or the “boundary sentences” of Wittgenstein. A simple humorous story taken out of actual legal practice brings up a host of issues regarding the foundations and the limits of legal documents in particular, and human conventions and languages in general.

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2. S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1972: 54).

3. There are various examples of constitutions, currently in use, that contain such articles. Some, like the German and the U.S. Constitutions, are more cautious, in that they contain an article that states that certain articles cannot be amended, including itself. Douglas Hofstadter, whose philosophical humor I admire, created a game out of this in his *Metamagical Themas* (Hofstadter 1985: 70-90).

4. R.G.Collingwood argues in his *Metaphysics* (Collingwood 1940) that the absolute presuppositions are ineffable, and have no truth value; however he then goes on to argue that the metaphysician’s job is to reveal these absolute presuppositions, after which they are no longer “absolute”.

#### **IV**

The claim that everything about the future can be predicted leads to a contradiction, even if the future is causally determined. In realizing this Popper constructed a powerful argument against “historicism”, which he claimed was at the roots of Marxism. It is impossible, claims Popper, to predict certain future states of our societies. The main reason being that to make such predictions requires one to first predict how knowledge will grow in the future. But claiming to know in advance what we will learn in the future is a contradiction, for if we know it today it is no longer future knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This line of reasoning equally applies to the knowledge of an individual as well. If, for instance, I were to ask myself “what will be the first new thing I will learn tomorrow?” I would be trapped in the same kind of paradoxical result. It would seem that I cannot know today what I will learn tomorrow, for if I know it today then I will not be learning it tomorrow. Now consider the same kind of paradox that emerges in quite an ordinary context in the words of this romantic teenager: “I am sure that I will meet an attractive lady next year and have an affair. I wonder what she is doing now? Perhaps I could try to contact her earlier so that I wouldn’t have to wait for another year to have my affair. Wouldn’t that be nice?” Silly story, though there are quite serious philosophical questions underlying the teenager’s thought process regarding future reference and determinism; issues still waiting to be tackled after more than two millennia of philosophical work.

#### **V**

The Principle of Sufficient Reason, which states that for everything that there is there is a sufficient reason for it to be as it is and not otherwise, is no doubt a serious philosophical doctrine, even if it is false, containing no humor whatsoever; but then consider the story about Buridan’s Ass who starves to death given that he cannot find a sufficient reason to decide which of the two bags of hay he should approach, given that they are identical and at the same distance from it.

Now why is it that the Principle of Sufficient Reason lacks humor but Buridan's Ass is a funny story, when it seems that they have a similar philosophical content? One reason, I suppose, is that the latter ridicules the "over-rational" person who tries to make sure that there is a sufficient reason in every deliberate choice he makes. Now of course we do not come across such asses, but we no doubt at times find ourselves in very similar situations. I remember once, as a child, deliberating on whether I should go for a bike ride before it gets dark, or whether I should visit grandma to get a bite of her freshly cooked cookies, finally missing out on both. I then came to realize the ridiculous situation I was in. I not only laughed at myself, but the whole episode made me think about different levels of rationality. Only after a decade did I come to realize the serious philosophical problems that lie beneath it.

## VI

History of philosophy has taught us, perhaps more than anything else, that even the most obvious-looking beliefs we have are in fact questionable. This I take to be the greatest achievement of philosophy. An enormous amount of good philosophy emerged in dealing with the problem of skepticism that is still a hot issue in these contemporary times. The most extreme form of skepticism, to my knowledge, is due to Peter Unger, who denies that there is any knowledge whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> For one to know a proposition, argues Unger, it should be 'all right for him to be certain' that his belief is true. He then goes on to show that it is 'never all right for anyone to be certain about anything', and in effect concludes that 'no one knows anything.' We discuss his extreme position and its implications in all seriousness. A certain obvious reaction to the argument is that the conclusion seems to defeat, or at least, undermine itself. Assuming that there is no knowledge, Unger cannot know, on his own account, that this is the case. "I know that I know nothing", the famous line which at times is perhaps wrongly attributed to Socrates, is, on the face of it, self-defeating. So then either Unger's

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5. The argument appears in the Preface of his *Poverty of Historicism* (Popper 1957), and is discussed in length in his *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism* (Popper 1982).

claim is false, or, if true, it is unknowable. A striking result. Hence, the Paradox of Extreme Skepticism. Let us now consider an “open-minded” philosophy student, convinced by Unger’s argument, saying: “Given that it is never all right to be certain about anything, we must question all our beliefs no matter how obvious they may seem...or, wait...am I mistaken?”

## VII

It is a common trend among philosophers to discuss paradoxes that emerge at the limits of human thought in isolation from the practical affairs of daily life. That is perhaps one reason why we do not find any humor in those serious philosophical discussions. But when such paradoxes reveal themselves in practical life, we at times notice a form of humor. Consider the Hodja story again: now why is it that it contains humor though Quine’s argument does not? Different theories of humor would give different accounts of this. The so-called Superiority Theory, different forms of which have been held by Hobbes and others, would suggest that by hearing the punch line we suddenly realize the ridiculous position that the Hodja has put himself in, which in effect makes us feel superior to him, or to anyone in his position, or even possibly to our former self if we have put ourselves into such a position in the past. It may be the case that appreciating the humor in this story may serve as a means for some to declare to the rest of the world, to the non-philosophical public, or to the narrow minded pseudo philosophers, how shallow they are. This, however, could only be a partial explanation, for exactly the same could be true of the impact of Quine’s words. Learning the contradictions that lie at the bottom of truth relativism could make one feel superior to intellectuals who have proclaimed this doctrine, though this may not be accompanied by any laughter or other signs of humor appreciation. The Superiority theory at best gives us a necessary condition — though that could also be questioned for certain types of humor —, but not its sufficient conditions.

Another popular view, generally referred to as the Relief Theory, on the other hand, would suggest that we get a feeling of relief upon hearing the story as a result of our suppressed desires. This could happen in various ways of course;

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6. P. Unger, “An Argument for Skepticism”, (Unger 1974).

some may simply find relief in the fact that they are not in Hodja's position, yet some others may get the same feeling upon realizing that truth relativism, at least this naïve version, is not a tenable doctrine as they may have once thought. Whatever the psychological reasons are in getting a feeling of relief from a story, it again would only account for a partial explanation of the fact that we find the Hodja story humorous, for the same kind of relief may result upon hearing Quine as well where there is no humor involved. The so-called Relief Theory, usually attributed to Freud, even if true, does not seem to enlighten us on what the essence of humor is. Socrates could have put it in these terms: "is it because we get a sense of relief out of it that makes a story humorous, or do we get relief out of a story because it is humorous?"

Perhaps the most widely accepted theory of humor is the Incongruity Theory, according to which there is an incongruous situation involved in a story that makes it humorous. The conversation that takes place in the Hodja story is not something we would expect to hear from a judge in a real court hearing. It is the duty of the judge to pass judgement on who is right and who is wrong, but the Hodja finds all positions right, including his wife's who says that both parties cannot be right. Hodja's remarks are so much off the track that given the context of a court hearing we inevitably get a feeling of incongruity. The Incongruity Theory does not seem to face the same problems that the two previous theories have led into. This time the essential element suggested by the theory does not seem to be involved in Quine's argument. Though some sympathizers of truth relativism may find Quine's conclusion unexpected, this hardly amounts to an incongruity.

Humor at the limits of thought may at times give us a feeling of relief, or make us feel superior to others or our former self, but most importantly it is the incongruity our intelligence creates that is essential to the humor in such contexts.

### VIII

As we try to search for the limits of human thought and language, the limits of our rationality and our logic, we find ourselves trapped in paradoxical results.<sup>7</sup> Philosophers in all seriousness come up with unprecedented and imaginative theories in order to find resolutions, only to find themselves caught in higher-order subtle traps of their own. The liar always takes his revenge!<sup>8</sup> When such paradoxes and contradictions reveal themselves in ordinary discourse we at times find within them humor that makes us realize the absurdities that lie beneath and beyond our thoughts. It is a way of ridiculing ourselves that creates the humor, though at the same time it gives us a feeling of being intelligent enough to realize our own limitations. Philosophical humor is then serious stuff; it is where philosophy finds its direct contact with the human condition. As Wittgenstein once noted, “a good and serious work in philosophy could be written which consisted entirely of jokes.” After seriously considering his remark, I now wonder whether he was only joking. Well if he was joking, then given what he says, he could have been serious...or was he?

Humor at the limits of thought...it may not make us laugh out loud, but only give us a slight chuckle...yet it is the deepest among all forms of humor.<sup>9</sup>

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7. In his provocative book, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, (Priest 2002), Graham Priest argues that that the attempt to explore the limits of thought gives rise to what he calls “true contradictions”. As expected, his view has not been taken too sympathetically by most of his commentators. Though I too am far from being inclined to accept the view that there are in fact true contradictions, I believe that the book powerfully demonstrates how the Great Dead Philosophers, in all traditions, were trapped in paradoxes in their search for the limits of thought. Though the book has a very serious academic style on the surface, it also contains subtle humor that makes the reading so enjoyable. The resemblance of the title of my essay with that of his book is not coincidental.

8. Perhaps the most popular and the oldest paradox in philosophy is the Liar Paradox: “I am now lying”, or the contemporary version, “This sentence is false” seem to be sentences that cannot be truthfully uttered without falling into a contradiction. Attempting to resolve the paradox by saying that such sentences are neither true nor false leads into another paradox, referred to in the literature as the Revenge of the Liar. If “This sentence is false” is neither true nor false, then it would seem to follow that “This sentence is neither true nor false” would have to be a true sentence, again leading to a paradoxical result.

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