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Primitive Humour

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Introduction

This article examines the question 'what is humour?'

In section 1, we set out default realist presuppositions about the question. In section 2, we characterize a broadly Moorean approach to answering the question.

In section 3, we introduce popular response-dependence assumptions about humour and express puzzlement about their popularity. In section 4, we present extant answers to our question: superiority theory; relief theory; play theory; laughter-dispositional theory; and incongruity theory. We find each wanting, subjecting incongruity theory, in particular, to sustained scrutiny, and offer a novel critique of the approach. In section 5, we introduce precedents for primitivism from metaphysics, epistemology and action theory. In section 6, we present several primitivist theses about humour.

In section 7, we conclude with some remarks about the methodological role primitivist theses can play in adjudicating answers to our question.

1   Default Humour Realism

Our question is:

(Q) What is humour?

One presupposition of (Q) is that there is a subject matter about which it asks: that there is humour. A *default humour realist* thinks it true that something is humorous. There are semantic reasons for accepting this. The content of plausible judgements provides forceful evidence for it. There are, for example, simple subject-predicate truths of the form '*a* is humorous', like,

   (1) *Four Lions* is humorous.

Truths like (1) entail our realist's first claim:

   (2) Something is humorous.

There are other expressions which share application conditions with 'is humorous'. Plausible examples include: 'is funny', 'is amusing' or 'ist komisch'. These expressions express the same concept: HUMOUR.

The (interpreted) predicate 'is humorous' and the concept HUMOUR are *humour representations*. One sort of realism, 'ostrich' nominalism, would hold that the explanation of the truth of (1) and (2) bottoms-out in the satisfaction of these representations (cf. Devitt 1980).

However, the default explanation of (1), (2) and their logical relations ontologically commits to a non-representational entity - the property *funniness* - which is possessed or instantiated by all and only funny entities. Further, there are truths for which 'humour' takes subject position:

(3) Humour is a value.

(4) Humour resembles wit more than it resembles mass.

Providing a semantic explanation for these truths and their inferential relations is difficult without committing to the property *humour* (cf. Armstrong 1980; Pap 1959).[1]

On this basis our realist accepts that there is a property *humour* which plays the role of semantic value for humour truths and inferences. The properties belonging to a system motivated and characterised in this way are not representational entities, but their intensions and interrelations mirror those of the concepts that stand for them. We mark this by prefixing 'R-' to their designators. Our realist believes in R-humour and she thinks that it is the subject matter of one exemplary reading of (Q).

If one interprets everyday humour judgements at face value, one finds a striking categorial diversity in the semantic values for their subjects and quantifier domains. It appears that among funny entities are:

(i) *concrete particulars* (material objects, persons, mental states, events, actions, sentence-tokens);

(ii) *abstract particulars* (propositions, mathematical entities, (e.g. redundantly convoluted proofs));

(iii) *instantiable entities* those particulars are *of* (especially property co-instantiations);

(iv) *cross-categorial complexes* (states of affairs, facts, situations).

Where she takes such a judgement to be true, our realist takes it to be true at *face* value and holds that entities of these categories satisfy HUMOUR and instantiate R-humour.

There are also squarely metaphysical reasons for positing a humour property. We appear to have experiential evidence for it. First, *funniness* appears to bestow distinctive causal powers on its instances. There are systematic causal connections between objects' funniness and responsive mental states of *humorous amusement* and of *humorous laughter*. Further, humour's effects are

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[1] Sometimes it is claimed that humour is 'a matter of degree' (Sharpe 1987: 209; Roberts 2019: 53, 89ff). If this implies that humour imposes a metric our realist suspends judgment (cf. Wolff 2019). She accepts that *is funnier than* holds of some pairs, but she only commits to an ordering which is: (i) *weak* because she thinks it epistemically possible that some things are equally funny; (ii) *partial* because she thinks it epistemically possible that some pairs are incomparable by the relation. If humour is not a matter of degree, our realist's claim that something is funny amounts to the claim that something is in the domain of the *is funnier than* relation. She expects that actual patterns of assent and dissent to applications of 'is (not) funny' reflect further implicit semantic restrictions and non-semantic norms of assertion (cf. Schnieder 2006: 44-47).

manifested, beyond the realm of individuals' psychology, in social, economic and political phenomena.

Our humour realist doubts that humour is a globally intrinsic property, that is, that intrinsic duplicates are always equally funny. Still, we appear able to project from a limited stock of examples of humour and recognize an extensive, perhaps indefinite, range of further cases. Further, nearly all of us intentionally intervene in the world so as to produce instances of *humour*, most of us doing so with a degree of success expected of attempts at bestowing a genuine feature on something. These two facts have their most elegant metaphysical explanation from the hypothesis that humorous objects share in a non-trivial *similarity* which guides our recognition of, and intervention in humour.

We call any property which discharges metaphysical roles an 'M-property'. and that playing humour's metaphysical role 'M-humour'. Some strands in humour literature appear to treat humour as both an M-property and an R-property. Humour is supposed causally active, but also investigated as if its nature were determined by its conceptual or semantic role. On the simplest interpretation of these strands an identity claim is implicitly assumed:

(RMI) M-humour is identical to R-humour.

We, along with our default realist, hesitate to accept (RMI). Without adopting heavyweight philosophical assumptions, it is unclear why the intensions of, and relations between, M-properties should coincide with those of properties semantically characterised (c.f. Bealer 1982: 9-11, ch.8; Lewis 1983; Ichikawa and Jenkins 2017). If M-humour and R-humour are distinct, our realist believes in both and she thinks that M-properties also provide exemplary subject matter for (Q).

Our default realist also thinks that HUMOUR is a value-encoding concept and that instantiating *humour* bestows value on its instances. She thinks that *funniness* is like the properties of *beauty*, *pleasure*, *friendship*, *ethical goodness*, *knowledge, practical or doxastic justification*. Our realist merely likens humour value to these values. She is not committal on deeper general issues about value, whether, say, values are *sui generis* or fundamental features of the world, or if they supervene on, or derive from the world's non-axiological profile. Further, beyond healthy desires for parsimonious explanation, our realist feels no pointed compulsion to reduce humour-value to any (combinations) of those values, nor to consequences for promoting them.

The motivations for default realism are defeasible. It might be argued that the patterns of assent and dissent for 'is funny' are too capricious to count as applying a genuine concept or property (cf. Pettit's 1991 '*U-ness*'), or perhaps it would have queer normative implications that render it unsatisfied (cf. Mackie 1977). Maybe apparent humour ascriptions merely function as expressions of non-cognitive attitudes about their objects (cf. Ayer 1946). Error-theoretic and expressivist proposals about humour strike us as worthy of consideration, especially if supplemented by fictionalist hypotheses (cf. Joyce 2005; Lewis 2005). However, we follow the established humour literature and defer to face value common sense judgements about humour.

2. Analysis

The philosophical question 'what is humour?' is to be answered by a sort of theory called an *analysis*. There are potentially many projects that might fall under that rubric (cf. Beaney 2013). However, we think that the dominant strands of philosophical literature manifest the contours of a traditional Moorean analytic project (c f. Daly 2010: Ch. 2, Moore 1903, Soames 2003: Chs.1, 3). First, as with Moore's approach, humour literature is largely trusting of common sense humour judgements. Second, like Moorean analysis, the humour literature typically trusts the grammatical forms of ordinary humour ascriptions to reflect their logical forms.[2] This contrasts with approaches that take grammatical form to be misleading (Russell 1914: 33-53) or those which apply *explication* or *regimentation* in supplying philosophically favoured logical forms for ordinary sentences (Carnap 1950: 7; Quine 1960: 159-160). We think that such 'interpretive' approaches to the logical form of humour judgements might present interesting perspectives on central topics in humour inquiry, but we stick to the simple view.

Formally, a Moorean analysis attempts to supply the right-hand side for a true universally quantified biconditional of logical form (A):

(A) $(\forall x)\,(funny\,(x) \leftrightarrow \_\_(x))$

The left-hand side is said to be the *analysandum*, the right-hand side its *analysans*, where both may be terms or concepts (c.f. Daly 2010: 45). There are further requirements on such an analysis. First, the biconditional is to hold of metaphysical necessity. The right-hand side provides modally necessary and sufficient conditions on the application of the left-hand side's term or concept.

Second, such an analysis imposes an asymmetry lacking from the truth-functional connective of propositional logic. The analysans should be informative about or explanatory of the analysandum, where these notions imply a distinguished direction. Traditionally, the asymmetry requirement is enforced by the demand that analyses be *non-circular*, where this is glossed, roughly, as the requirement that the term expressing the analysandum does not recur in the analysans.[3] The complex representational entity, FUNNY, for example is to be decomposed into simpler, explanatorily prior constituents. Since R-funny's substructure mirrors the structure of FUNNY's application conditions, the approach can draw out the sub-properties which explain R-humour.

With M-humour, the legitimacy of the approach is unclear. Attention to relations of explanatory priority foregrounds an implausibility in the (RMI) thesis. It's not merely that we might expect differing intensions for R-humour and M-humour. Rather, it may be that the explanatory ordering relations induced by a correct decomposition of HUMOUR diverge from the metaphysical explanatory ordering induced on M-humour by the world's metaphysical structure (cf. Ichikawa and Jenkins 2017: 118-124). This seems obvious with R-mass (corresponding to MASS) and M-mass and it's unclear why R-humour and M-humour should be different. For ease of exegesis, we leave (RMI) in place, but touch on these concerns in the remainder of the chapter.

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[2] Though we doubt that many would follow Moore (1936) in holding that 'exists' functions as a first-order logical predicate.

[3] We say 'roughly' acknowledging legitimate non-circular 'ostensive' definitions in which term meanings are analyzed by appeal to the extensions denoted by the (orthographically) same term (cf. Levinson 1990: 15 and 2006: 396; section 3.4 of this chapter) Further, some *connective* analyses are non-viciously circular analyses. They are informative but explanatorily 'flat' (Strawson 1992; Averrill 1992; Keefe 2002).

The Moorean approach to testing such analyses involves armchair consideration of actual and hypothetical cases. On this methodology, the source of evidence for and against putative analyses is information encoded in the analysandum and analysans, where this is available by reflection to competent term or concept users. Traditionally, the rationale for this approach appeals to the obtaining of *analytic connections* between the concepts, connections which are *transparent* to competent concept users (Moore 1903, ch. 1, Soames 2005: 46-47). On this view, the metaphysical modal facts sought by analysis have their source in conceptual truths, where these are available *a priori* and whose holding is transparent to competent concept possessors. Here, despite some concordance with introspective methods employed in the humour literature, there are overriding reasons to resist. First, there are forceful objections directed on the crucial transparency claim. It is plausible to think that a competent user of two terms expressing the same concept can fail to recognise the fact (cf. Rieber 1992, Soames 2003: 46-47).

Second, two interrelated strands of post-Moorean inquiry about reference and meaning wrought tectonic changes which problematize the traditional epistemology. A semantic strand undermined the traditional idea that the meaning (so reference) of a term is determined by internal psychological facts about its competent users (cf. Kripke 1980, Putnam 1975, Burge 1982). The conclusion drawn was an *externalist* one: facts about a term's referents can play a role in determining its meaning (Baghramian and Jorgensen 2013: 606). A metasemantic strand was initiated in Wittgenstein's (1953) *private language argument* (cf. Kripke 1982), Quine's (1960: ch.2) *argument from below* and Putnam's (1981) *permutation argument*. This strand indicated that extant metasemantic accounts – whether descriptivist, causal or interpretationist – could not exclude radical deviant semantic interpretations for our language and thought; they leave facts about reference (so meaning) radically indeterminate (cf. Williams 2007, 2019). One conclusion drawn here is that some notion of *eligibility for reference* must be introduced into metasemantic theory in order to distinguish correct from deviant interpretations (cf. Lewis 1983: 49-55, 1984).

One influential lesson is that the traditional introspective methodology for meaning or concept (R-property) analysis is unsuitable to its subject matter (cf. Williamson 2007: chs.1-2), and while the dust has not settled on how to move forward, one popular line on evaluating analytic proposals stresses not only closeness to matching up with users' applicatory dispositions, but also to eligibility-tracking abductive virtues – simplicity, strength, compatibility with plausible background hypotheses and fecundity (cf. Lewis 1983, 1984, McGee 2005, Sider 2001: xxi-xxii, Williams 2005). We doubt that HUMOUR is legitimately excepted from such considerations and hold that introspective methods are to be combined with abductive ones in testing putative humour analyses.

3: Humorous Amusement

Our realist, naively desirous of an explanation of humour's nature might be somewhat disappointed by contemporary literature. As Adrian Bardon points out, typical contemporary theories of humour amount to 'descriptions of conditions under which humour may be experienced rather than attempts to explain humour' (2005: 463). A rationale for the focus on humorous amusement is sometimes stated. Michael Clark proposes:

the humorous is so characterised in virtue of the human attitude or response to it: we call something "humorous" if it is apt to, or should, or deserves to amuse people, or some special sort of person. By "amusement" here...I am using the word in the narrower sense in which amusement is amusement at the humorous or comic or witty...(1987: 142).

Since there are humour-irrelevant cases of amusement – in holidaying, puzzle solving and epistemological endeavours – Clark cannily restricts the notion to humorous amusement, a restriction motific in the literature (cf. Martin 1987: 173; Scruton 1987: 157). Recently, Noel Carroll echoes Clark's claim embedding it in a vignette of humour-theoretic practice:

humour [...] is what comic amusement is properly directed towards [...] one way to illuminate humour is to analyse what it takes to give rise to the [...] state of comic amusement, and **work backwards** from there. Humour will then comprise those features of the objects of comic amusement that account for the provocation of that state (2014: 1, 4, 7-8; our emphasis in bold).

Jerrold Levinson (2006: 390) offers this:

Although [(Q)] has been here formulated in the objective mode, as concerned with what it is for something to be humorous, there is the **perhaps prior question**, in the subjective mode, of what it is for someone to find something humorous. But these are plausibly related roughly as follows: something *is* humorous iff it is *found* humorous by appropriate audiences under favourable conditions [...] Humour, **though patently a response-dependent phenomenon**, seems to have at least as much objectivity as beauty or virtue. (2006: 390; our emphasis in bold.)

We take these comments as indicative of a widely held hypothesis that humour facts are explained, in some way, by facts about states of humorous amusement.[4] We think that Levinson favours a dispositional rendering.

(D) For all *x*, *x* is humorous iff *x* disposes (appropriate) subjects to humorous amusement (in appropriate conditions).

The comments of Clark and Carroll, however, suggest some fitting attitude account on which to ascribe funniness to something is to affirm or endorse its *fitting* or *meriting* such states.

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[4] We're reading the comments as assuming (RMI and as expressing explanatory priority. Perhaps there are subtler interpretations distinguishing M-properties from R-properties or as involving connective analyses (see n. 3 above). We don't think either would capture the spirit of extant humour literature, but we'd be enthused about efforts in either direction.

(F) For all *x*, *x* is humorous iff *x* merits or fits (typical) subjects' states of humorous amusement.

Widespread acceptance of hypotheses like (D) and (F) construe the funniness of face value humorous objects as a shadow of psychological states of humorous amusement and directs inquiries about humour, as Bardon observes, to their putative source: the mental state of humorous amusement.

We do not reject any response-dependence hypothesis about humour, but they are peculiarly lacking in explicit motivation given their substantiality and extensive influence over humour inquiry.

There may be sources of motivation, however. One source of motivation might reside in a desire for secure epistemological foundations for humour judgements. This is implausible for merit accounts, since it is a supposed boon that they support the possibility of widespread error. Still, dispositionalists might propose that we have special, incorrigible access to the facts about our states of amusement that we lack for facts about the humorousness of their objects and that this makes the mental states a more reliable source of evidence (cf. Williamson 2000: 93). We fear that such a motivation might simply reflect a desire to adopt an introspective internalist approach, but we find it unconvincing on its own merits.

First, subjects frequently have better epistemological access to their environment than to their own psychology and we do not see why humour should be an exception (Williamson 2007: 5). Second, dispositional accounts appeal to subject and condition propriety. Yet it's unclear that a subject's epistemological access to such facts is generally more secure than her access to the facts about cases of humour.

Third, accepting, as we do, that our responses are generally reliable seems an adequate epistemological basis for humour inquiry and is a weaker, more probable claim than are substantial philosophical response-dependence theses.

Finally, there is just no obvious reason to think that encoding special epistemic security for our judgements is a desideratum on analytic theses about humour.

There might also be metaphysical motivations. When Levinson (2006: 389) proposes that cases of humour are 'joined by the common production of [humorous] amusement', rather than by their humour *simpliciter*, we wonder if his comment reflects puzzlement about how categorially diverse instances of humour could have anything in common beyond their status as intentional objects of states of humorous amusement - states more uniform than the face-value referents.

We think this line's appeal to qualitative uniformity is, ultimately, an appeal to ideological simplicity and have concerns that its apparent benefits are illusory. We suspect that the merited response account is adopting its central notions as primitive one. And we fear that adequate dispositionalist theories will have to posit multigrade relations (or ideal observers) in order to unify the phenomena.

Unifying categorially diverse objects by their relations to intentional states is not the only option. Fundamental concepts in logic, set-theory, mereology, mathematics, metaphysics and natural science unify objects and phenomena of extraordinarily diverse kinds. Yet on any sober understanding of intentional states - on which their invocation *might* be explanatory– such unificatory resources are not sufficiently powerful for the facts about the subject matter. Instead,

the fundamental concepts (or properties) are taken as primitives in their domains. (Though, they may be derivative given the concepts of another.)

Bracketing question-begging appeals to response-dependence, implausibly restrictive mind-dependence theses, or far-out hypotheses about intentional states, we think it is a live option to say something similar about humour. The facts about humour might outrun unification by appeal to relations to intentional states. And for humour inquiry, we think that HUMOUR is a promising primitive (see sections 5 and 6).

Finally, there might be axiological motivations. Historically, there's been a cloud of philosophical scepticism associated with humour value, a scepticism sometimes implicated in the philosophical neglect of humour inquiry (see Morreall 2009: ch. 5; O'Shiel: this volume). Response-dependence theses might be thought to provide a convenient way of neutralizing such scepticism. On the one hand, to experience humorous amusement is typically pleasurable and experiences of pleasure are intrinsically valuable (cf. Moore 1903). Perhaps humour's value is *instrumental* in bringing about valuable experiences (cf. Sharpe 2000). On the other, once tied into psychology, humour is well-positioned to produce valuable *consequences* of ethical, epistemological, cognitive, evolutionary, and social sorts. (cf. Carroll 2014: ch.3; Morreall 2009: ch.6). However, we think it would be disingenuous to accept response-dependence to motivate *instrumentalist* or *consequentialist* responses to humour value scepticism. First, such approaches face serious pressure in their traditionally favoured domains of application: theories of artistic and aesthetic value and their legitimate foils ought not be eliminated by analytic fiat (see Sharpe 2000; cf. Shelley and Watkins 2012). Second, while we accept that philosophical humour inquiry is sorely neglected, we don't think advocacy of humour value scepticism is responsible. It's implausible to think that humour value scepticism is a delivery of common sense and we think that any serious philosophical doubts about humour value flows from doubts about value in general, doubts that apply to better attended inquiries. The crucial concern, however, would be pragmatic or methodological. Building responses to scepticism into one's conceptual or metaphysical theories of humour is bad news. It is no more fruitful for humour inquiry than it is for aesthetics, ethics or the philosophy of mind. It's a concession that hobbles the successful development of theories that would answer serious questions about the distinctive nature of humour value and, perhaps, stimulate philosophical interest.

All of the major theories of humour we consider in the next section conform to Bardon's observation -they are chiefly directed upon elucidating states of humorous amusement.

4 Extant Accounts

Superiority, *Relief* and *Play* theories are often rendered as answering (Q) by giving a traditional analysis of the R-property of humorous amusement supplemented by response-dependence theses about humour. We agree with Levinson in thinking that advocates of those views are, typically, more concerned with the 'mechanisms of the humorous reaction than with its conceptual core' (2006: 393). We think that the projects are better interpreted as causal or metaphysical

investigations into M-properties[5], chiefly M-humorous amusement and, perhaps, also M-humour.[6] We think they fail as accounts of R-humour or M-humour.

4.1 Superiority Theory

In what is preserved of ancient and medieval writings on laughter, the behaviour is typically presented as an expression of malice toward its object, and the discursive tone is a cautionary one (Morreall 1982: ch. 2 and 2009: ch. 1; Lintott 2016). This tendency profoundly influenced modern era theorizing (Morreall 1982: 5, Carroll 2014: 345). In an oft-quoted passage Thomas Hobbes claims, 'the passion of laughter [humorous amusement] is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly' (1839: IX, 13). Hobbes's 'is nothing else but' has been interpreted as a connective of conceptual analysis, thus presenting the obtaining of a state in which a subject considers herself superior to another or her former self as necessary and sufficient for humorous amusement.

Responding to this interpretation, Francis Hutcheson provided many counterexamples of diverse kinds to the sufficiency of the analysans. He argues, for example, that seeing the impoverished when we are financially comfortable, or creatures 'in pain when we are at ease' will not elicit amusement and we will more likely feel pity or weep (1987: 29). Against the necessity of the condition there are witty observations, puns, absurd poetry and instances of absurd visual humour for which the superiority condition appears unsatisfied (cf. Carroll 2014: 11-14).

If genuine, these counterexamples indicate that the superiority analysans do not even agree with the actual extension of humour, let alone provide adequate modally necessary and sufficient conditions.

Recently, Sheila Lintott has presented textual evidence that in addition to superiority, Hobbes saw staleness of stimulus as inhibiting the passion of laughter and that he saw a role for novelty and unexpectedness in humour, features cited in popular modern-day incongruity theories (Hobbes 1839: IX, 13; Lintott 2016: 353-354). Further, Lintott notes that Hobbes's 'analysans' are more plausibly interpreted as being of a causal-psychological stripe reflecting his causal-regressive approach to analysis (Hobbes 1655; Levinson 2006: 393; Lintott 2016: 355).

Even qualified thus, where staleness is not at issue, the abundance and diversity of clear *actual* dissociation between cases of humorous amusement and cases of considered superiority leave even the most minimally interesting causal or metaphysical reading dubious.[7]

4.2 Relief Theories

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[5] Perhaps our humour representations should be 'engineered' to better reflect M-properties' intensions (cf. Cappelen 2018).

[6] Whether the connecting claim is best interpreted as conceptual or causal/metaphysical is unclear. We think they fail as accounts of humorous amusement.

[7] Tentatively, we suggest that superiority phenomena associated with humorous amusement may be as accidental to that state as are superiority phenomena sometimes co-occurring with other value-registering states in moral grandstanding, intellectual (epistemological) pomposity or aesthetic snobbery.

Relief theories are offered by Herbert Spencer (1911) and Sigmund Freud (1928) who attempt to explain humorous amusement by the ontology and ideology – the objects, concepts and doctrine (Quine 1951; Sider 2011: 12-15) – of late-modern era psychological theory. [8]

The focal claim is that each event of humorous laughter is a discharge of stored excess nervous energy. This claim may be worked back into an analysis of face-value humour ascriptions: the humorous is that which generates and releases the nervous energy discharged by humorous laughter. Here it is clear that the claim is not one of analysis in our sense. The theory is akin to 'lightning is electrical discharge', a claim not taken to imply the truth of 'electrical discharge is lightning'. The logical form of such claims is better represented as a universally quantified conditional $((\forall x)\,(Fx \supset Gx))$ than by the biconditional forms sought in analysis.

For this reason, counterexamples to sufficiency seem beside the point. That said, the relief theory does identify each event of humorous laughter with an event of stored nervous energy discharge. In response, patient arguments have been offered which conclude that relief theory can provide only strained and *ad hoc* explanations of humorous laughter and amusement at immediately graspable comedic scenes and daft poetry (Carroll 2014: 40; Morreall 2009: 20).

Our pointed concern is that any *prima facie* faith in the epistemic credentials of an attempt to assimilate humour phenomena into the ontology and ideology of a scientific theory evaporates when the theory is no longer considered live in active scientific inquiry. The latter holds of Spencerian and Freudian psychology and, in part, this is because of *ad hocism* concerns beyond its treatment of humour.[9] The unchecked positing of *ad hoc* hypotheses is a key source of scientific dissatisfaction with the methodology of that psychological practice (c.f. Popper 1959; Lakatos 1978). Further, philosophical theories are also beholden to abductive evaluation (see section 2 above). And, since *ad hoc* hypotheses are abductively viceful (cf. Daly 2010: 135), even if patched-up to match our intuitions about humorous amusement, the *ad hoc* explanatory practices noted by Carroll and Morreall and scientific detractors would warrant suspicion about the explanatoriness of the result.

Relief theories do manifest two interesting turns of thought. One is an explicit attempt to assimilate humour phenomena into some scientific theory. Second, there is a subtle emphasis on an ontology of temporally extended events and processes, rather than persons or states, as canonical bearers of humorous amusement.

4.3 Play Theories

Contemporary play theories are given pre-modern philosophical precedent in remarks due to Aristotle (1987: 14) and Thomas Aquinas (1972) on humour's role in activities of playful relaxation. Like relief theories, play theories emphasize temporally extended entities - *activities* of play - as their canonical objects. They also seek to illuminate these humour activities by appeal to the special sciences. However, they aim to adopt the concept resources of live special sciences, including evolutionary psychology, ethology and anthropology (see e.g. Morreall 2009: 33-40).

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[8] Thanks to Daniel O'Shiel for steering us away from some exegetical inaccuracies here.
[9] See O'Shiel (this volume) for a take on relief theories influenced by philosophical anthropology.

There is little reason to think that such theories give an analysis of what a humorous activity is. There are non-humorous forms of play - in games, sports and the arts - which promote their own non-humorous forms of amusement. Worse, there appear to be humorous kinds of activities whose status as play seems doubtful – those involved in satire, critique and marketing for example (see Carroll 2014: 42-43).

However, in parallel with relief theories, one suspects that the aim is to identify each humour activity with an activity of play of some form. Still, even this leaves doubt about whether the subject matter pertinent to (Q) is preserved. Play theories *might* explain humour activities or practices, but there is no obvious way of working back from such an account to an account of the mental state of humorous amusement, or of humour itself.[10]

The next two theories we consider are intended as squarely analytic in a traditional sense and we give them more thorough examination.

4.4 Levinson's Laughter-Dispositional Analysis

Jerrold Levinson's laughter-dispositional analysis of humorous amusement is conceptual-analytic in aim. However, Levinson does not attempt to specify the distinctive nature of states of humorous amusement - the features that distinguish it from, for example, non-humorous forms of amusement involved in games, puzzles and epistemological endeavours - by appeal to its internal nature.

We think that Levinson adopts a *Canberra Plan* approach to humorous amusement (cf. Jackson 1998, Lewis 1997). On this approach one specifies the (primary) conceptual content for HUMOROUS AMUSEMENT by assembling role-determining platitudes concerning it. One may then discern its (secondary) content by empirical investigation into what realises the role.
The result of his investigation is this:

> [a]n item x is humorous or funny iff x has the disposition to elicit, through mere cognition of it, and not for ulterior reasons, a certain kind of pleasurable reaction in appropriate - that is, informationally, attitudinally and emotionally prepared - subjects generally, where this pleasurable reaction, amusement, is identified by its own disposition to induce, at moderate or higher degrees, a further phenomenon, namely, laughter. By these lights, the funny cannot be detached from all felt inclination [...] toward [...] laughing' (Levinson 2006: 396).

Levinson's presentation is extremely dense, incorporating his response-dependence thesis within the specification of humorous amusement's cognitive role. Interpretative problems are engendered. The presentation might seem to give the inclination toward laughter an incredible role. Levinson explicitly heads off one such reading:

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[10] Here we think that objections to Moritz Weitz's (1956) anti-essentialist view about ART which point toward its equivocation between art-as-practice and art-as-object and the lack of obvious connection between the two and to Dickie's Institutional Theory of art are suggestive (cf. Gaut 2000; Abell 2012).

> What of the idea that amusement is not amusement unless it both arises in a certain way and has a certain intentionality? The present analysis acknowledges this in its own fashion, for it entails that a reaction to *x* is not amusement unless, in addition to being pleasurable, and leading characteristically to laughter, it comes about in virtue of *cognition* of *x*, and is also *directed* on *x* (2006: 396).

Here, Levinson offers the basis for a functional characterization - a gesture toward a conceptual role-specifying Ramsey or Carnap sentence for the state of humorous amusement about something (cf. Lewis 1970). This cites the subject's directedness upon that thing, the nature of the pleasurable enjoyment of that thing, and the disposition toward laughter.

Unfortunately, the claim that the funny 'cannot be detached' from inclination toward laughter was not explicitly qualified, and it has been taken to suggest that Levinson's analysis rules as metaphysically impossible cases of humorous amusement for any subjects lacking the inclination toward laughter (cf. Carroll 2003: 254 and 2014: 45-46). Levinson does not, however, intend that the 'cannot' be read with such metaphysical force. According to him, 'the mental state of amusement is largely identified by its disposition - universal, if ultimately *contingent* - to issue in laughter when sufficiently intense,' (2006: 396; our italics). He later adds:

> [t]he connection of amusement and the felt inclination to laugh is more that of a phenomenon and a *reference-fixer* to that phenomenon. It is not essential to the affect of amusement that it actually dispose creatures to laughter. Rather amusement is identified, but not defined, as that pleasurable affect, which, in humans, normally disposes to laughter (2006: 397).

More likely, Levinson's comment, if not merely a methodological prescription, reflects an epistemological 'necessity' or *a priori* introduced by reference-fixing (cf. Kripke 1980: 54-57; Lewis 1997: 353 n. 22).

However, on the one hand there appear to be extremely low-key sorts of humour (Carroll 2014: 45). While these might be permitted as inciting laughter only at low levels, there is a worry that non-humorous amusement - in solving a difficult crossword puzzle, or safely un-skewering a knight - also has such a propensity.

On the other hand, the empirical evidence suggests that humorous amusement's connection to laughter is more capricious than one's first-up intuitions might predict. As Robert Provine puts it:

> Laughter is an instinctive, contagious, stereotyped, unconsciously controlled, social play vocalisation that is unusual in solitary settings. Laughter punctuates speech and is not typically humour related.' (2004: 217.)

Carroll (2014: 48) too notes that most actual cases of laughter are 'phatic', playing the role of a social lubricant, rather than being humour directed. Indeed, on the face of it there appear to be cases which generate laughter and which also satisfy the internal architecture Levinson suggests - joyous laughter at the report of the marriage of two friends, for example (Carroll 2014: 48). Even as a

reference fixer rather than a necessary condition, the inclination toward laughter does not seem sufficiently discerning for states of humorous amusement.

We do not think such considerations are decisive against the functionalist orientation of Levinson's analysis of humorous amusement. Levinson's articulation of humorous amusement's cognitive architecture might be supplemented and revised. Perhaps the empirical data merely suggests that Levinson's appeals to laughter dispositions represents erroneous 'first-up', rather than *reflective*, intuitions about laughter, or that the interpretation content of HUMOROUS AMUSEMENT requires input beyond the sorts of intuitions statable by the folk   (cf. Lewis 1974; Williams 2019: ch.1). Nevertheless, although the correctness of *some* Canberra Plan-inspired option is more likely than Levinson's own, the general proposal is evaluable only as a program and *qua* program there are pointed concerns about the epistemological connection between conceptual roles and their realizers lurking for any development (cf. Daly 2010: 77-78; Jackson: 1998: 24-27; Soames 2005: 152-164).

4.5 Incongruity Theory

In its most modest contemporary formulation, the incongruity account holds that if x is a state of humorous amusement then the object of x is a perceived incongruity. A focus on incongruity can be found in Aristotle (Rhetoric III, 2), Hutcheson (1750), Kant (1790), Beattie (1779), Schopenhauer (1818), Hazlitt (1819), Kierkegaard (1846), Monro (1951), Koestler (1964), Clark (1987), and Carroll (2005; 2014). Indeed, it is widely accepted as the leading account of humorous amusement today. However, despite its distinguished history, the view faces serious challenges on two fronts.

Firstly, although there is good reason to take the necessity claim seriously, it seems false that x is a state of humorous amusement iff the object of x is a perceived incongruity. As Alexander Bain (1875: 282) observed:

> There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh [...] an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May [...]

This is the challenge of establishing *sufficiency*. Many perceived incongruities are insufficient for humorous amusement.

Secondly, the term used to express the central concept is baggy and vague, and the account has limited informativeness. As Levinson (2006: 391) notes:

> Incongruity, or non-fittingness of items or elements one to another, has been variously interpreted, and ranges from logical impossibility or paradoxicality, through absurdity and irrelevance, to unexpectedness and unaccustomedness, to general inappropriateness.

The approach therefore faces the challenge of *specification.* Incongruity theorists must offer a plausible specification of the core concept(s) that can underpin an *explanation* of why we find some objects amusing and some unamusing. The current umbrella concept fails to do this.

Clark (1987) triggered a modern wave of incongruity+ accounts (See Warren and McGraw 2021). Such accounts aim to supplement incongruity with further conditions tailored to exclude

unamusing cases of incongruity. Some of these accounts also aim to sharpen the core concept of incongruity (See Voltolini: this volume).

Clark tentatively explores the hypothesis that x is a state of humorous amusement iff the object of x is a perceived incongruity and the subject undergoing x enjoys perceiving the object at least partly for its own sake.
This additional enjoyment condition has been widely recognized since. For ease of reference, we will use *enjoyment.*

However, as Martin (1987: 176-77) observes, counterexamples can be found in our non-humorous *enjoyment of artistic depictions such as the deformed figures in *Guernica* and dramatic irony in tragedies. Clark's incongruity+ account therefore fails to offer a satisfactory analysis of humorous amusement.

Carroll (2014) makes a powerful case for the necessity of incongruity and offers a diverse range of insightful examples. Interestingly, he emphasizes the role of *norms* in specifying incongruity, arguing that (2014: 17):

> what is key to comic amusement is some deviation from a presupposed norm – that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be.

By construing norms in this liberal sense, Carroll's account is well positioned to accommodate the full spectrum of humour types, as well as respecting the categorial diversity of its objects. This is not the case with other specifications such as expectation-violation or logical paradox. This norm-driven approach also naturally enables us to understand the culturally variable aspect of humour (Cochrane 2017: 54). This partial specification therefore seems to be the most promising path towards a unification of the approach. Nonetheless, perceived norm-violation is little closer to providing a *sufficient* condition than the umbrella concept of incongruity. Consequently, Carroll sets out further conditions to preclude common counterexamples. He argues (2014: 49-50) that creatures like us are in a state of comic amusement if and only if:

> i) the object of one's mental state is a perceived incongruity which ii) one regards as non-threatening or otherwise anxiety producing and iii) not annoying and iv) towards which one does not enlist genuine problem-solving attitudes (v) but which gives rise to enjoyment of precisely the pertinent incongruity and vi) to an experience of levity. And humour then is the response-dependent object of comic amusement, characterised thus.

As we will see, this account integrates some of the most widely explored supplementary conditions in the contemporary literature and provides an authentic flavour of the broader field.

The restrictions on negative emotions offer a possible way of addressing certain aesthetic incongruities such as in *Guernica*, or with dramatic ironies in tragedies, as well as disturbing or unpleasant incongruities in daily life.

As Carroll acknowledges, however, we might enjoy the incongruity of a *puzzle* that is neither disturbing nor annoying yet experience no humorous amusement. The fourth condition excludes such cases. Carroll (2014: 36) claims:

> In the state of comic amusement, on the other hand, we are not concerned to discover legitimate resolutions to incongruities, but at best, as in the case of jokes, to marvel at the appearance of sense, or the appearance of congruity, in what is otherwise recognized as palpable nonsense.

By contrast, in legitimate problem-solving we take pleasure in making 'genuine sense' (ibid) of the incongruity. Carroll builds on this claim in formulating the sixth – affective – condition. He holds that when we realise that an incongruity requires no genuine resolution, we undergo a cognitive transition involving a sense of effortlessness and relaxation. Carroll describes this feeling as an experience of *levity* (2014: 49), suggesting that this is the most plausible way in which amusement may be said to involve relief. We can thereby see that this characterization of the affective component depends on the denial of genuine problem solving. We have doubts about these supplementary conditions, however.

Firstly, there are counterexamples to sufficiency. For example: our non-humorous *enjoyment of an exotic food recipe, an unusual sunset, or a novel dancing style. It is not clear how the additional conditions rule out such common incongruities.

Secondly, it is doubtful whether the supplementary conditions are *necessary* for humorous amusement. We will take them in turn, understanding each as an articulation of a wider theme in humour research.

The second and third conditions exclude certain negative emotions. A restriction of some form on negative emotions commands broad support in the literature (Beattie 1779; Bergson 1913; Rothbart 1973, 1976; Apter 1982; Morreal 1987; Ramachandran 1998; Carroll 1999, 2005; Hartz and Hunt 1991; and Warren and McGraw 2016).

However, evidence is strikingly thin on the ground for any strong claim here. Carroll's fuller (1996) discussion nods to empirical evidence (Rothbart 1973, 1976). Rothbart presents evidence that in some cases the same stimuli can induce either laughter or fear depending on whether it is perceived as threatening or not. More recently, McGraw and Warren (2010) and McGraw et al (2012) have highlighted different ways in which psychological distance can affect the likelihood of amusement being reported. For instance, substantial norm violations are more likely to be reported as amusing if they occur within a fictional context, or if there is social distance between the individual and the target of the humour.

We do not deny that there are cases in which negative emotions - in some sense – affect amusement. Yet we wish to make two observations. Firstly, it is not clear how these cases should be interpreted. Indeed, McGraw and Warren do not assert outright incompatibility. Rather, they suggest that the right *degree* of threat is conducive to humorous amusement (McGraw, Williams and Warren 2014). Moreover, the empirical evidence only concerns the statistical probability of report of amusement with many reported outlier cases that starkly undercut the proposal to build the exclusion of negative emotion into the *definition* of amusement.

We can also see that there are various ways to understand the group of cases that do involve the apparent inhibition of amusement. It may be that in some scenarios the negative emotion merely *masks* rather than *blocks* the instantiation of the state of amusement by reducing the attentional resources dedicated to the state and lowering its accessibility for introspection and report (See Strick et al 2009 for evidence of attentional conflict in the reverse direction). More generally, mutual causal modification seems to be a more plausible explanation of a loose inverse statistical relationship than the unmotivated hypothesis that the two kinds of mental states

cannot, by necessity, co-occur. Indeed, given the apparent regularity with which conflicting emotional states co-occur in an individual, this would represent a quite remarkable finding.

Secondly, whilst we are happy to grant the possibility of cases of blocking, there are also cases which, *prima facie*, appear to involve the coinstantiation of amusement and extremely strong negative emotion. *Gallows humour* regularly seems to involve the coinstantiation of amusement and the experience of profound personal harm. Individuals often express a blackly comic amusement at their own romantic disasters, personal character defects, failures in their careers, and, sometimes, even more grievous tragedies. Henman (2001) movingly describes the use of humour by prisoners of war as a coping mechanism, sometimes risking torture in order to make a joke.

Similarly, it is arguably common to simultaneously experience annoyance and humorous amusement (contra iii) – at a partner that snores like a warthog, the winding trail of mess behind a housemate, or a reliably late friend. Indeed, humour is widely used as an emotion regulation strategy by individuals within healthy romantic relationships during conflict resolution (Horn et. Al. 2019). It seems implausible that there is no temporal overlap whatsoever of amusement and strong negative emotion during a gradual, emotionally complex regulatory process of this kind. Those who wish to exclude negative emotions in the very definition of what humorous amusement *is* owe us a serious argument for this astonishingly bold necessity claim.

Carroll's fourth condition denies that we adopt a genuine problem-solving attitude to the incongruities that amuse us. This again, reflects a strong current in contemporary discussion (Voltolini: this volume). Yet this claim seems false and is perhaps the by-product of a disproportionate focus on scripted punchline jokes in humour research (for a more general critique of this tendency see Provine 2000). On the face of it, many types of humorous amusement involve the genuine resolution of a puzzling incongruity. Example: a woman arrives home and her husband is behaving with an incongruous level of consideration – taking her coat, offering to cook dinner and listening attentively to her complaints about work. Amused yet puzzled, the woman slips away into the kitchen and discovers a bin bag containing the remains of her favourite vase. She laughs as she infers the reason for his strange behaviour: he has accidentally smashed the vase and fears her possible fury.

In laughing instead, she is not simply amused at the fact that he has broken the vase *or* the fact that he is behaving considerately. Rather, she is amused at the fact that he is behaving considerately *because* he has broken the vase. That is, she is amused by the precise way that the evidence in the kitchen *explains* the incongruous behaviour. This represents a genuine insight through successful problem-solving.

The sixth condition proposes the affective component of levity. However, given that the only characterization offered is in terms of a realization that the incongruity does not require a genuine resolution, humorous problem-solving cases also undermine the informativeness and appeal of the sixth condition.

This kind of counterexample suggests an alternative direction for the incongruity+ approach however: an incongruity+resolution account. According to the strongest formulation of this view, x is a state of humorous amusement iff the object of x is a perceived resolution of an incongruity. Incongruity alone is not sufficient for amusement. We must also *make sense* of the incongruity in some respect, whether implicitly and automatically or otherwise. For instance, we might reinterpret a prior ambiguity in a way that resolves an apparent incongruity. Consider the following textbook example from Raskin (1985: 100):

'Is the doctor home?' the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.

'No', the doctor's young pretty wife whispered in reply. 'Come right in.'

In this joke, the apparent incongruity of the wife's invitation is immediately resolved by an instinctive reinterpretation of the ambiguous intent of the earlier question.

Warren and McGraw (2016: 410) describe resolution as '[the] most frequently discussed supplementary condition' and it has been explored in the work of Beattie (1779), Suls (1972, 1983), Schultz (1972), Pien and Rothbart (1976), Rothbart (1976), Minksy (1980), Paulos (1980) Raskin (1985), Attardo (1997), Ritchie (1999), Alden et al. (2000), Storey (2001), Woltman Elpers et al. (2004) and Kulka (2007).

The approach has many attractive features and is highly intuitive in relation to scripted punchline jokes yet still faces substantial problems. Firstly, the term expressing the core concept of 'resolution' appears to be as vague as 'incongruity'. This duplicates the traditional problem of specification. Secondly, various counterexamples have been offered involving *nonsensical* humour (Morreal 1987: 197-99; Carroll 1991: 288; Cochrane 2017: 57) where it is argued that resolution is not necessary for humorous amusement.

We can better grasp the import of these problems by more carefully distinguishing some of the different ways in which we might understand resolution. Let us say that a state of amusement affords *high resolution* if it involves successful problem-solving and offers a genuine explanatory insight into reality (as in the case of the smashed vase). Let us also say that a state of amusement affords *moderate resolution* if it involves gaining understanding of a logically coherent fictional narrative (such as in the case of the doctor's wife). Finally, let us say that a state of amusement affords *low resolution* if it involves gaining awareness of some aspect of the content as conforming to a norm governing the way that we think that something is or should be. These rough and ready distinctions are not exhaustive and warrant further refinement but they should serve our limited purposes here.

Much surrealist or absurdist humour appears to lack both high and moderate resolution. We can see this in nonsense verse, a form of humorous poetry that is often logically incoherent or employs made-up words that lack clear meaning (See Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Roald Dahl, for instance). Consider the following example:

'I see,' said the blind man
'You're a liar!' said the deaf man
'I agree!' said the mute.

We gain no genuine explanatory insight from this verse and it is logically incoherent. Yet as with most cases of nonsense verse, the content conforms to a number of poetic norms – such as rhyme (see/agree), repetition, the rule of three, and alliteration (see/said). The verse therefore affords low resolution. It makes sense poetically. Furthermore, this conformity to poetic norms is intuitively as much part of the object of amusement as the incongruities asserted. This can be seen by substituting key words in a way that maintains semantic similarity but reduces conformity to the respective norms. This decreases amusement.

Other forms of surrealist humour lack even this minimal level of apparent narrative structure or quasi-explanation. Modern internet memes thrive on the seemingly inexplicable combination of well-known images or phrases, and the musical comedy of stand-up artists such as Bill Bailey often 'mash up' unexpected styles of music and other elements from popular culture without explanation. These again appear to lack high and moderate resolution, yet it seems more plausible to think that even surrealist humour of this kind will trade at least partially on conformity to certain norms in the precise way that these absurd juxtapositions are presented and fused. Memes, for instance, are highly formulaic despite their irreverence. Carroll (2014: 54) argues that 'pinpointing the perceived incongruity in a specimen of humour enables one to dissect it, at its joints'. It appears, though, that, in many cases, low resolution tracks amusement too. In the nonsense verse above, for example, we can pinpoint some aspects of what makes it amusing by attending to the distinctive norms that it conforms to.

Critics of resolution are often inexplicit on the type of resolution being disputed but usually appear to be operating with a relatively demanding notion of resolution. See, for instance, Cochrane's (2017: 57) focus on whether the overall scenario is physically likely. We take it that a minimal form of resolution is more likely to withstand counterexamples to necessity and therefore that a norm-based incongruity+low resolution account is the most credible direction for incongruity research given the wider motivations for taking the role of both norms and resolution seriously. We are not aware of any account articulated in these terms however Veatch's (1998) multiple norms view seems broadly compatible with this approach and Kotzen (2015) grants a central role to norms though important details differ.

The problem, nevertheless, is that the following biconditional seems obviously false: x is a state of humorous amusement iff the object of x is the perceived low resolution of a violated norm. Whilst low resolution may be necessary for amusement, apparent conformity to norms, liberally construed, is far too cheap and readily available. The account regularly predicts humorous amusement where there is none. This is the case even if we restrict ourselves to scenarios where we *enjoy the perceived low resolution of a violated norm. In fact, counterexamples can be found in each of the areas identified as problematic for Clarke (1987) and Carroll (2014): artworks, dramatic narratives, puzzles, exotic food, unusual natural scenes, and novel dance styles. For instance, in the case of drama we might partly *enjoy an unusual twist in a plot due to the way the story simultaneously *makes sense* of the twist through its apparent conformity to other norms relating to human behaviour. Yet we need not be humorously amused.

We find ourselves in a familiar position then. The refined incongruity approach can offer a plausible pair of necessary conditions (violated norm + low resolution) but the pair is insufficient for humorous amusement and is still unable to explain why we find some objects amusing and some unamusing. The best option on the menu may carve humour at the joints - as Carroll noted of the more rudimentary incongruity package - but it also seems to carve everywhere else too. The challenge for incongruity theorists is to tell us exactly what it is about this norm structure that can explain when and why objects will be amusing. However, given the long history of these problems, it may well be that they are here to stay.

5. Primitivism

We've given somewhat opinionated grounds for dissatisfaction with extant analyses, but if our grounds are without merit, we think that our dissatisfaction is in harmony with the tenor of the literature. For this reason, we are surprised at the dearth of humour primitivist proposals.

The starkest primitivist proposals are the *absolute* primitivisms found in fundamental metaphysics. Candidates for absolutely primitive concepts include: IDENTITY (Hawthorne 2006); INSTANTIATION (Armstrong 1978); PERFECTLY NATURAL PROPERTY (Lewis 1983); COMPOSES (Markosian 1998); QUANTIFICATION (Sider 2011) or ABSTRACT (Cowling 2017).

We doubt that *absolute* humour primitivism is plausible, but recent work in epistemology and action theory suggests ways of formulating weaker, relativised primitivist claims. In her work on actions, Lucy O'Brien (2017) usefully distinguishes two senses of 'prime' that might be predicated of a phenomenon (2017: 272):

A phenomenon, *X*, is basic, for some group of phenomena iff X is not *factorizable* or *divisible* into those phenomena (without remainder). Basicness is much like the primeness of prime numbers.

A phenomenon, *X*, is primary relative to an explanatorily ordered group of phenomena, on condition that it is earlier in that ordering. Primacy is much like the primeness of a prime cut.[11]

Williamson (2000) argues that knowledge is basic relative to epistemological and psychological phenomena. O'Brien (2017) argues that action is basic relative to 'personal-level psychological phenomen[a]' (2017: 272-278).

Although it is not our aim to argue for humour primitivism, one of Williamson's tracts seems applicable to humour analysis. Correct philosophical analyses are rare and it seems that the burden of evidence is on the analysis advocate to indicate why her target phenomenon is likely to have one (Williamson 2000: 30). The burden is not discharged by noting some plausible necessary condition, (e.g. *incongruity*) and noting that its supplementations have yielded successively closer approximations to the target. Some properties, (e.g. *scarlet*) have necessary conditions (*being coloured*) which cannot be supplemented to yield a correct analysis. Further, some approximation-series never converge upon their target. Examples include non-converging mathematical approximations, attempted analyses of *parenthood* in terms of *ancestry* relations (Williamson 2000: 4, 30) or epicyclic approximations of planetary orbits. Williamson goes further, arguing that the repeated failure of putative analyses of a phenomenon provides inductive evidence against the assumption that success is pending (2000: 30). If our take on humour analyses is correct there would appear to be a parallel case for adopting some basicness thesis about humour.[12]

Williamson proceeds to develop an influential picture on which knowledge is not only a basic epistemological notion, but on which it is *the primary* epistemological notion, explaining, for example, evidence and norms of belief and assertion (2000: chs.9, 11).[13]

In the next section we present some humour primitivist theses. Our aims and doctrine do not transpose directly from those of Williamson and O'Brien. First, our aim is to present, rather than motivate our primitivist theses (see section 7). Second, O'Brien expresses her primitivist thesis as a relation between *phenomena* of certain classes. Williamson is more ecumenical about the relata (c.f.

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[11] In light of correspondence, we omit O'Brien's uniqueness condition on primacy.

[12] O'Brien's arguments from *multiple sources* (2017: 275) and *explanatory role* (2017: 277-278) may also have analogues pertinent to humour primitivism.

[13] O'Brien argues against accepting action primacy (O'Brien 2017: 280-285).

Ichikawa and Jenkins 2017: 117-118). Our rendering is in terms of generic entities – properties. However, our doubts about (RMI) are significant here. Still, if R-properties and M-properties are distinct, we think that each reading of our theses will be of some interest to some reader. Third, for any property, there are many arbitrary ways of specifying comparands relative to which it is basic or prime. However, unlike *knowledge* or *action*, *humour* and *humorous amusement* lack a consensual categorial home. We implicate certain comparands, but expect that fecund alternatives are available.

6. Humour Primitivism

We have rejected extant attempts at analysing the occurrence conditions for the generic state of humorous amusement. Perhaps that state is basic relative to the properties those theories appeal to, even when combined with any other familiar mental properties.

(BHT) *Humorous amusement* **is basic relative to the properties cited in extant theories combined with familiar mental properties.**

(BHT) can be developed for any extant theory, but we think that the anti-incongruity version, (BHI) is the most interesting. (BHI) is still compatible with *perceived incongruity* serving as a necessary condition for *humorous amusement*. It denies that *perceived incongruity* supplemented by any familiar mental properties gives a (non-redundant) condition in a satisfactory analysis of *humorous amusement*.

Since each failed analysis of humour supposes some response-dependence thesis, one might wonder if such theses are untrue:

(BHA) *Humour* **is basic relative to** *meriting* **or** *disposing toward humorous amusement***.**

(BHA) is compatible with humour-responses providing a Levinson-style reference-fixing connection to humour, thus permitting a corresponding *a priori* connection, but it lacks the metaphysical modal or explanatory implications of response-dependence theses (cf. Kripke 1980: 140 144).

Criticisms of instrumentalist and response-dependence views about artistic value, we think, suggest an axiological basicness thesis about the value of humour relative to the mental states it affords (Sharpe 2000, Shelley and Watkins 2012):

(BHE) The *humour value* **of an object is basic relative to the** *value of experiential states* **it affords.**

We also think that our realist might positively resist reducing humour value to that of its consequences, or to other values:

(BHV) The *humour value* **of an object is basic relative to** *any non-humour value* **it possesses or affords.**

Call the conjunction of (BHT)-(BHV) the humour 'basic package'. We think that the basic package is, for now, a live option and that it presents an interesting perspective on humour inquiry.

For one who accepts the basic package, trying to develop extant materials into a satisfactory analysis of humour would be irrational, but strands involved in that project might legitimately survive. The methods employed for the analytic aim might uncover useful facts about: individually necessary or individually sufficient conditions on humour; contingent universal generalisations; or reference-fixing supported *a priori* connections between humour and incongruity or humorous amusement (See also O'Brien 2017: 274-275.)

The basic package exposes fruitful avenues for humour research. First, (BHA) frees the inquiry from the psychologistic directions of inquiry driven by response-dependence theses. For example, from the perspective of BHA the popular hypothesis that, necessarily, funny objects lack features which dispose or merit negative emotions has only cursory motivation and requires re-examination. Second, some discussions intimate that humour is valuable merely as a means to hedonic, cognitive, epistemological, social or ethical ends (cf. Carroll 2014: ch.3, Levinson 2006: 398-399; Morreall 2009: ch.6). The humour basicness package, however, leans away from instrumentalism or consequentialism about humour value and toward the underexplored hypothesis that, independently of its axiological consequences, humour is valuable in itself.

There are also humour primacy theses. Our first primacy thesis concerns incongruity accounts, but it can be extended to other theories.

(PHI) *Humorous amusement* **is explanatorily prior to** *humorous perceived incongruity* **and familiar mental properties.**

If extant incongruity accounts of humorous amusement fail, there is a philosophically interesting state of *humorous perceived incongruity* which is left unanalysed (cf. Carroll 2014: 48-49). Our schematic suggestion takes the *humorousness* to which those states respond as primitive and takes that, along with other 'internal' conditions, to distinguish the comedic minority of such states.

Our second primacy thesis takes humour to be prior to the state of humorous amusement, along with theoretical supplements posited by standard response-dependence accounts.

(PHA) *Humour* **is explanatorily prior to** *humorous amusement* **(combined with** *merit* **or** *appropriate subject/condition* **pairs).**

PHA flat-footedly gives a 'categorical' basis underlying funny objects' disposition to amuse. It also allows one to understand normative notions of *meriting* a response, or of *propriety* conditions on those encountering humour phenomena in the familiar terms of veracity to the phenomena.

Sometimes, those criticizing instrumentalist views about artistic values suggest that an object's value is *primary* relative to the value of experiential states its encounter affords (cf. Sharpe 2000: 325). This might suggest a parallel primacy thesis about humour relative to humorous amusement:

(PHE) An object's *humour value* **is explanatorily prior to the** *experiential value* **of the amusement states it affords.**

On this view, humour has value which is prior to the value of states of, for example, pleasure that it affords those encountering its instances. Those states may have value in their own right, but the

humour value of the object is not exhausted by them and grasping the humour of the object is one source of such states' value.

Call the conjunction of (PHI)-(PHV) the humour 'primacy package'. The primacy package shares in some of the benefits of the basic package. However, it also has *humour* and *humour value* in primary position over other humour phenomena and assigns them priority in determining norms for *humorous amusement*, *humorous laughter* and, perhaps for the practical justification for *humour-interventions*.

7. Conclusion

We do not endorse any form of primitivism presented here. We do, however, think that they are potentially fruitful additions to the pool of candidate answers to (Q). They might not find advocates, but they do exert legitimate pressure on extant accounts and motivating their rejection might help explicate and advance the conceptual, metaphysical and methodological assumptions of humour inquiries. Further, the comparison of each primitivist thesis with its foil provides a uniform yardstick for the evaluation of contemporary rivals, theories which are complex and otherwise difficult to compare fairly.

Acknowledgements

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