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Dissensus and the Rhetorical Function of Humour

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ABSTRACT: An overlooked element in dealing with dissensus is *humour*. Humor has two vital *rhetorical* functions here: 1) it dilutes or diffuses volatility, and 2) it elucidates and constructs shared conditions of reasonableness. I will suggest that the rhetorical character of humour, as a productive, creative capacity, is an essential feature of its role in helping to generate and substantiate the 'common sense' needed for effective communication in general.

KEY WORDS: humour, dissensus, consensus, common sense, *sensus communis*, play, identity, recognition, rhetoric, communicability.

1. INTRODUCTION

This is not a humorous paper, or at least I hope not. If people do find it humorous in the sense of being quaint or even ridiculous then I am in trouble, at least with this particular audience. But even if some people do find my account to be quaint or ridiculous, then I would venture to say that this says as much or more about those particular persons as it does about the virtues of this paper. If a few audience members smile knowingly at one another, then this tells me that these people share something important in common, a kind of commonality that is reinforced by some kind of in-joke. If someone responds by poking fun at me or ridiculing me, then this may indicate that I have said something that requires that I and the view I am presenting have to be put back in their proper place as a means of reaffirming a sense of power, position or the status quo. And if someone else smiles knowingly, but with a gesture of insight or surprise, then I know that I have awakened them to something that they had not previously been attending to, some feature of their background assumptions, common sense or overlooked possibilities that has suddenly been brought to their attention. These varying responses each represent at least some of the many diverse kinds and functions of humour. Humour can and does play an important role in social life, and developing a better understanding of the functions of humour may shed some light on important social and political issues, including the general issues surrounding the question of dissensus.¹

I am not presenting or defending any particular theory of humour here. I am more interested, for the moment, in exploring some of the ways in which humour

¹I should note that in treating dissensus as a question I am not assuming that dissensus is necessarily a problem that should be solved, dissolved, or overcome. There may well be circumstances (e.g., political, epistemic, ontological) where it may be better to try and maintain, preserve or even encourage dissensus (as a means or mechanism of epistemic, political or moral advance, as a political or moral response to the value of those involved in the dissensus, etc.) rather than have it completely resolved or ironed out.

might relate to the general issue of dissensus. I hope to see what, if anything, such an exploration might tell us about the importance of humour, both in its particular functions and in what those functions reveal about the character of the human condition. To this end I will be working from and playing upon the following assumptions and claims, namely, 1) that humour is not essential or unique to human beings as such, 2) that humour is not merely reactive, but is productive or creative as well, and 3) that humour plays a vital role in the formation, reinforcement and proliferation of a sense of identity that is crucial to the politics of recognition.

With regard to the first point, I want to suggest that we should think of humour as a form of play in the broad, organic sense of that term. As such, humour is part of a larger fabric of activities and practices that involve play of some sort, and its effects and functions may in fact become ingredients in other forms of play. Of course, much humour may be distinguished from other forms of play by the fact that it plays upon meaning, and hence often has a semantic component. But I would not want to limit humour to this explicitly semantic realm (at least not without further convincing). We often play with infants and they laugh at our peek-a-boo jokes. Also, other animals such as dogs play, and sometimes their play can strike us as humorous, as a kind of joke that they are playing on us. Insofar as this may be plausible (and I realize that this is contentious), then I want to allow for the possibility that humour may not be limited to human social life, but may also cross traditional species boundaries. Thus, when I speak of social life, I leave open the possibility that the realm of social relations within which humour functions may extend beyond the specifically human sphere.

Secondly, I want to claim that humour is a creative capacity (or the expression of such a capacity) insofar as humour does not merely work or play upon pre-existing social or relational conditions, but may also be productive, constructive or constitutive of new social or relational conditions as well, specifically those conditions that relate to or turn upon the interplay between individual and social identity. In this regard, it may be possible to employ humour, not merely as a means of reinforcing already existing social realities, but to actually help create new or novel forms of social reality, including the conditions of communicability and reasonableness associated with them.

Lastly I want to claim that a major part of humour revolves around the important notion of identity. Humour plays a vital role in the formation, maintenance and propagation of a shared or common sense of identity. This combined with the ubiquitous presence of humour in so much of social life attests to the importance of identity as a pivotal notion or boundary condition in defining and negotiating relations between parties. If so, then attempts to understand, maintain and improve conditions of social life, particularly as they relate to issues of dissensus, should include an understanding of the various roles that humour can play both in creating, preserving and promoting conditions of dissensus and in attempts to overcome them.

2. THEORIES OF HUMOUR

Theories of humour are typically grouped according to three basic types: 1) Superiority Theory, 2) Relief Theory, and 3) Incongruity Theory (Critchley (2002), pp. 2-3). The *superiority theory* maintains that humour follows from the recognition or reinforcement of positions of power (or at least the perception of power) whereby the powerful laugh at the powerless. In essence it is the perception or sense of

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superiority itself that is said to give rise to the humourous attitude or response. The *relief theory* maintains that humour is the pleasure obtained from the release of tension, anxiety, discomfort, etc. Here it is the sheer release of tension itself that is said to give rise to the pleasure associated with the humourous response. Finally, the *incongruity theory* claims that humour is a response to fortunate surprises, unexpected boons, etc. Basically, the pleasure associated with humour is said to result from the shattering of some expectation, assumption, anticipation, presumption, etc. by the introduction of some unexpected contrast, comparison or conclusion. I will assume that there is some grain of truth in each of these theories, each one applying perhaps to different kinds of humour under differing kinds of conditions.

3. TYPES OF HUMOUR

We should begin by first noting that humour does not come in one size or shape, but takes many different forms, with each form tending to have a typical range of applications and functions. The many different kinds or modes of humour include such things as jokes, puns, limericks, whimsy and wit. Of the many descriptions or categories of humour there are: gallows humour, potty humour, dry humour, ethnic humour, stand-up comedy, physical comedy, black comedy, the comedy of the absurd, slapstick, satire, and so on. There are no doubt numerous ways in which humour can be named, classified and described. And while it is important to be aware of the many different types of humour and different ways of classifying humour's types, it is not the type of humour that is of particular importance for this paper, but the various functions of humour. Thus we will leave it an open question whether each type of humour has a particular function or multiple functions. What is most important for now is to clarify the different functions that humour, in all its various types, may have with particular respect to the general issue of dissensus.

4. FUNCTIONS OF HUMOUR

Just as there are many types of humour, so too there are many different functions or roles that humour plays in social life. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I want to focus upon certain functions of humour as they relate to the general question of dissensus. In particular I want to draw attention to the ways in which humour plays upon the vitally important social elements of *identity* and *recognition*. As discussions of the politics of identity and recognition attest, the identity of parties is a key element in any attempt to deal with real and potential dissensus (Taylor, 1994). I want to argue that humour plays a vital role in the politics of identity and recognition. Firstly, humour serves as a largely amicable, polite means of identification and recognition between parties, helping to disclose the conditions of communicability and reasonableness appropriate to particular relations. Secondly, humour serves to reinforce identity, both in positive and in negative ways. And thirdly, humour plays an important role in the formation of identity, serving as a vital rhetorical means for the analysis, evaluation, and progressive reform of social life. Understanding the different functions of humour with regard to questions of dissensus may enable us not only come to better appreciate how humour actually functions as an important rhetorical device in everyday life, but also to get a little clearer as to how humour ought to function. This may allow us to better distinguish benign and praiseworthy uses of humour from those that are more ethically, politically or otherwise problematic.

4.1. *Identification and Recognition*

Humour is a widely acceptable and highly effective means of identifying key elements in the constitutive background of concerned parties. Evidence of a *common sense of humour* (or lack thereof) can serve as an important sign or indicator of shared conditions of communicability and reasonableness (or, equally importantly, of the absence of such conditions). This is because the mere possibility of finding something humorous (in the manner in which it was intended or presented) presupposes and depends upon enabling, background conditions that are constitutively shared within or between parties at some common, vital level (e.g., culturally, politically, biologically, or transcendently). Much humour, for example, presupposes a complex, highly competent familiarity with the linguistic, cultural or other conditions upon which the humour plays. This includes, importantly, the existence of a shared or at least overlapping normative sense of what counts as appropriate and inappropriate forms of humour or humorous content. This normative dimension is of particular importance in cases of dissensus.

If a party's background is new or unfamiliar, for example, then humour can help establish the identities of the various parties (often through its failure). Similarly, if the given backgrounds of the concerned parties is already familiar but simply unidentified, then humour can help one recognize the identity of the other parties either as shared or as importantly distinct from one's own. When it works (i.e., when people "get it"), humour can serve as a means of identifying and recognizing similarities between parties by disclosing those background conditions and shared commonalities upon which the success of the humour depends. Of course, the degree or level of similarity disclosed will vary greatly across differing contexts. A humorous exchange with a person from another culture, for example, may indicate a similarity at a very sophisticated level of cultural and linguistic competence, while humorous play with an infant may disclose levels of constitutive similarity at a more biological, evolutionary or perhaps even transcendental level. In general, the kind and degree of similarity expressed through a humorous exchange can help determine the kind and degree of commonality or distinctness between parties, and thereby aid in selecting courses of action for dealing effectively with issues of dissensus. Thus, to continue our example, while complex arguments and subtle negotiations may work well to settle a dispute with a party from another culture, they will probably be of little use in trying to soothe a screaming infant. The level and kind humour shared in those cases will help highlight as well as rule out the kinds of strategies that will be effective in dealing with them.

As a means of identification and recognition, humour can thus be used to test and discover the extent to which another party shares or diverges from your position. By serving as a test of identity and recognition, the use of humour can help not only to ease or relax any tension that may exist between parties, but may also aid in identifying and defining the parameters or boundaries of future engagements. Thus, for example, in an uncomfortable or uncertain encounter between two parties it is often useful, rhetorically, to invoke humour to help "break the ice." A well-chosen joke or witty remark can go a long way in helping both to ease tensions as well as establishing or determining the identity of the parties by measuring the extent or degree to which they share a common sense of humour. As a rhetorical device, testing to see whether dissenting parties share a common sense of humour is, in effect, a

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means of fathoming the epistemic, aesthetic, normative and other conditions that may underlie what is both communicatively possible and normatively acceptable. To take an extreme example, evidence of a common sense of humour between natural kinds (e.g., different species) or even extraterrestrial kinds (aliens), no matter how basic or minimal it might be, would indicate some level of biological, evolutionary or even transcendental *sensus communis* between those parties that might serve as a possible basis for social interaction.

To take another example, in an uncertain or uncomfortable encounter with another party, it may be helpful, rhetorically, to try and break the ice by saying or doing something that might be accepted as humorous in a very broad or general sense, and if successful to gradually test the waters further by narrowing down the specificity of humour to varying degrees across differing types of topics or content as a means of mapping out the boundaries between what is possible and impossible, acceptable and offensive. This process can help clarify the degree of identity, commonality and general comradery shared by the parties involved and help set the range of plausible and effective negotiations. There is a risk here, of course, for failed attempts at humour can actually increase tension rather than ease it, but even if a failed remark increases dissensus one can still take some consolation in having better clarified the communicative boundaries for all.

To summarize, as a rhetorical device, humour can serve to disclose or bring to light commonalities between parties at various levels from the transcendental or evolutionary to the more culturally, politically or locally specific. The use of humour allows each party to better recognize the other as sharing in (or diverging from) some important sense of identity. If a humorous remark allows me to recognize another as a philosopher, a Canadian, a Newfoundlander, or a Townie, it helps clarify, often in a very quick and short-handed way, where we can and should go from there. Even when it fails, humour can also create sharper, more clearly perceived, appreciated and understood divisions between parties. This attention to commonalities and differences can also help provide a more secure, clearer basis for future relations. Evidence of a common sense of humour can help provide a substantial basis for some kind or degree of consensus (if that is what is desired and sought) by easing tensions between dissenting parties and providing some concrete basis for believing that negotiation and agreement are at least possible. And while the absence of a common sense of humour may actually sharpen differences of identity and hence increase tension between dissenting parties, this too can allow parties to better recognize their differences by sharpening the contrast between those parties, thereby serving to better clarify boundaries and narrow the range of effective communicative strategies.

Identification and Recognition are crucial aspects of the other functions of humour I will be discussing, and are presupposed by those other functions. The prominent role of identification and recognition in humour, and the importance of humour in social life in general would seem to lend greater credence to the importance of identity as an integral and pivotal feature of social, political life. This may be of particular importance in theories focussed on the politics of recognition. If identity is indeed a fundamental element in appreciating, understanding and dealing with dissensus between parties, as the politics of recognition suggests, then this would place even more importance on understanding the function of humour in social life. For if I am right, then humour is a powerful force in the formation, reinforcement and promotion of particular forms of social identity and the relations that exist between them.

4.2. *Reinforcement*

It is well noted that humour can serve to reinforce social consensus. Insofar as it does this, humour can be used to both pre-empt social dissensus as well as diffuse or overcome dissensus by helping to validate and restore the status quo. But while humour can be used to prevent or diffuse dissensus, it can also be used to reinforce or even create social dissensus as well. In this reinforcing function, humour will typically involve either laughing *with* or laughing *at* others.

In its most general sense, humour can function to reinforce social consensus by reaffirming the practices, norms and social relations that define or characterize a particular social group. This reinforcing function presupposes an already existing and recognized sense of identity (of oneself as well as any other parties) and plays upon this either positively or negatively by re-instilling the commonly accepted, normative sense of membership in some social group. In its most general sense, the reinforcement of consensus through humour can thus function in three different but related ways: 1) affirming or sustaining an already existing social consensus by arousing feelings of membership, comradeship and 'fitting in,' which we will call Sustaining or Validating Humour, 2) preserving or protecting a threatened social consensus by demeaning or ridiculing the threatening parties as a means of undermining their legitimacy and keeping them in their place, namely, Reactionary or Defensive Humour, and 3) preparing or conditioning parties for future actions or important changes in social life, i.e., Indoctrinating or Propagandizing Humour.

4.2a. *Sustaining or Validating Humour*

This often involves the use of humour in everyday contexts as a source of general entertainment. Such humour typically functions as a source of social amusement or pleasing diversion that plays upon the existing social relations in a way that confirms and affirms the status quo (for good or for bad). Common examples of this kind of humour include "denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humour, or... laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider" (Critchley 2002, pp. 11-12). This kind of humour is not a direct response to dissensus per se, but a pro-active, pleasurable means of pre-empting dissensus by reinforcing or validating a common, shared sense of the rightness or correctness of the current forms of social life.

4.2b. *Reactionary or Defensive Humour*

When dissensus reaches the point where the common or dominant forms of social life are threatened or assailed, humour is often employed as a means of defending and combatting the threatened social form. The most common strategy is to try to demean or ridicule the threatening parties, portraying them as flawed in some important, often essentialized or naturalized sense. Thus, for example, feminist challenges to traditional gender relations are often met by ridiculing forms of humour. Such ridicule works to undermine the legitimacy and authority of the challenge or the challengers by presenting them as unworthy of serious consideration (thereby keeping women in their traditional place). This also helps to reinforce a sense of comradeship among those whose shared identity and power has been challenged. Thus, while the authority of the challenging or dissenting party is undermined by such humour, at the same time the

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threatened form of social life is presented and reaffirmed as natural, inevitable, realistic, or some other normative claim to its superior and commonsensical rank.

4.2c. *Indoctrinating or Propagandizing Humour*

Here humour functions either as promotional and preparatory ideology, or as a kind of preemptive, self-authorizing strike. Viewed in this general sense, humour can be employed as a powerful rhetorical strategy for establishing and justifying future actions and changes in the general forms of social life. In its indoctrinating function, humour can help prepare or condition and even incite parties to accept and assent to norms, standards and general social conditions that will be required or needed to bring about some desired end. If the desired end is problematic, humour can be used to help soften the blow of the message. Used in a friendly sense, humour can help present bad or unwelcome news in a more congenial, more sympathetic light, while in its nastier, intimidating function, it can serve as a palatable warning or signal to existing parties that if they want to “fit in” then this is the new reality, the common sense to which they will be expected to adhere (if they want things to go easier for them). Humour can also be used as a means of justifying or rationalizing future actions by presenting the affected party in a humourously demeaning light. In this context, humour can be used to actually enhance dissensus as a means of justifying present or future courses of action. By presenting an already dissenting party in a demeaning light (e.g., as *less human* or as *mere* animals) the harm brought against the dissenting parties (e.g., through violence, warfare, legal segregation, etc.) can be presented not only as palatable or justifiable, but even as inevitable and progressive.

The moral acceptability of humour’s reinforcing functions will depend largely upon the legitimacy or moral worthiness of the social identities being reinforced, defended or promoted. Nevertheless, validating, defending or justifying, institutions, courses of action, or some other form of social life by portraying dissenting parties in a demeaning or ridiculing light is likely to be ethically and morally problematic regardless of how worthy or good the social identity being served may be. I would suggest that the excuse that one is merely joking only works if the dissenting party shares in that common sense of humour, not merely by responding in a humorous way (e.g., by laughing or smiling, etc.), but by responding in the same spirit in which the humour was intended or presented. If this *common spirit of humour* is absent, then the continued use of such humour is likely to be morally and ethically problematic.²

4.3. *Ironic or Reflective Humour*

The last and most intriguing function of humour is its power to awaken a reflective attitude and to open up or disclose novel horizons and alternative possibilities. This is the more *philosophical* aspect of humour, aptly described by Critchley as “forms of practical abstraction, socially embedded philosophizing” (Critchley 2004, p. 87). In many ways, this is humour at its best. It generally works by playing upon traditional norms and expectations in a way that foregrounds, often ironically, unattended and unquestioned characteristics of social life through the introduction of unexpected contrasts, incongruous moves, or unanticipated conclusions. The incongruous and

²For examples of how one might go about evaluating this use of humour, see the articles by Ronald de Sousa (de Sousa 2002, pp. 21-39) and David Benatar (Benatar 2002, pp 40-50).

unexpected nature of the humour shocks us out of our normal, everyday immersion within our particular form of social life by “pulling us out of common sense” as it were and giving rise to a kind of “*dissensus communis*” (Critchley 2004, pp. 18-19). It is this moment of ironic or reflective dissensus, of being suddenly awakened to strange and previously unnoticed features of one’s world that is most important here. In its ironic, reflective function, such humour provides us with a sudden and unexpected insight into some aspect of our everyday world, detaching or unhinging us from its normal operations and allowing us to view it from a novel, more revealing perspective.

And it is here that we find two key features of this kind of humour: revelation and perspective. In disclosing aspects of social life that were previously unnoticed, ironic or reflective humour reveals or unveils its *sensus communis* in a detached, critical light. This allows us to place our particular form of life *in perspective* as it were, presenting it in some proportional, often humbling relation to other alternative possibilities and horizons. By allowing us to put our own form of social life, our *sensus communis*, in reasonable, proportional perspective, reflective humour invites and encourages us to recognize the contingent character of our particular form of social life, both in its positive and in its negative contrasts. If the shock is momentary we seem to find pleasure in the brief disorientation experienced, but if it is longer lasting, that pleasure can quickly become tinged with anxiety, discomfort, or even angst.

The ironic, reflective or philosophical function of humour is of crucial importance in dealing with issues of identity and dissensus in general. By awakening us to the contingencies, absurdities and often the inadequacies of our particular form of social life, such humour can lead to the *formation* and *reformation* of a new, richer, critically aware and morally progressive *appreciation* of those limits, weaknesses and inadequacies. This can serve to remind or caution us against taking our own particular form of social life as self-evidently true or right, more civilized, or better in some previously assumed or presumed sense. It can also go a long way toward prompting and encouraging us to be more questioning and open to other perspectives or points of view. In some cases it may even move us to try and better *understand* the implications and consequences associated with our flawed form of life, leading us ultimately to explore and discover ways to improve or correct it (e.g., epistemically, aesthetically, morally, politically, etc.) and hence improve ourselves as individuals in the process. This is particularly important in cases of dissensus where what is often needed is a little humility, an attitude that is grounded in a greater appreciation of the limitations of one’s particular form of life, an increased appreciation (and understanding) of the forms of life of dissenting parties, and a willingness to engage critically and constructively with both dissenting parties and the inadequacies of one’s own perspective. The rhetorical use of ironic or reflective humour can go a long way in helping bring about those aims.

5. CONCLUSION

The rhetorical use of humour is a common and highly effective means of dealing with dissensus. By playing upon the politics of identity, humour can have both destructive and constructive effects. Humour would seem to play a vital role in the formation, reinforcement and transformation of identity, both at the individual and the social level (or, perhaps better, in the constitutive interplay between them). Appreciating the

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understanding the importance of humour in these processes is of crucial importance in the politics of identity and in dealing with cases of dissensus in particular.

Testing to see if dissenting parties share a common sense of humour can serve as an invaluable and effective means of identifying and establishing the conditions of communicability and reasonability between those parties, helping to disclose the boundary conditions both for what is possible in principle and what is normatively acceptable in practice. But while evidence of a common sense of humour can be important and revealing, of equal if not more importance is evidence of a common spirit of humour. For the things a party finds funny and, perhaps more importantly, the way or manner in which they find something humorous (e.g., philosophically, sadistically, etc.) can provide important insight into the character of that party and the kinds of persuasive strategies that may be effective in future relations. Thus, when trying to assess another party (or when trying to assess one's own particular form of life) through the rhetorical use of humour, there are at least two things one must consider: 1) the level, type and content of its *common sense of humour*, and 2) the attitude or disposition disclosed in its *common spirit of humour*. Together these two elements will speak volumes not only about what kinds of relations are possible and acceptable between dissenting parties, but they will also help in the assessment of the kinds of relations or reforms that are desirable or worthy in an ethical or moral sense. Whatever the result, we can be reasonably certain that the sense and spirit of humour that is encouraged and engendered within a particular form of social life will play a powerful role in shaping how individuals within that form of social life will engage with and relate to other forms of social life as well as its broader world or environment in general.

EPILOGUE

It doesn't seem right to have a discussion of humour without including at least one example of ironic humour. Here is mine, and it comes from a real life experience, one that I'm afraid to report only a few people present appeared to get.

I remember attending a presentation once where a prominent, well respected and deservedly renowned philosopher was highlighting the importance of sight as the dominant metaphor colouring all our descriptions, our explanations, our very language.

"I hear ya!", came the dissenting voice of the Chair.

[link to commentary](#)

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