

## LAUGHTER, PARADIGM OF GROWTH

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Perhaps the best known attempt to relieve the generally enigmatic status of the phenomenon of laughter resides in the Freudian interpretation of it as a release of impulses coming under cultural taboo. This interpretation is in accord with Freud's generally pessimistic view of human nature and its relation to culture. The position taken here, in contrast, is that laughter offers a paradigm of growth and a key to man's "personal enlargement potential" (7), a position which can be nicely elaborated by taking as a point of departure the frequent noting of incongruity as an aspect of laughter. Thus, Flugel, after enumerating a number of characteristics of laughter and humor, says, "on the more intellectual side they involve an element of incongruity as manifested in the juxtaposition of things, situations, or meanings which are not usually experienced together" (3, p. 710). Laughter, according to the present view, occurs in response to incongruity and represents a triumph over, rather than submission to, the unexpected.

### RECONCILIATION OF INCONGRUITIES

The mechanism underlying the relation between incongruity and laughter is postulated to be that of reconciliation.

This mechanism can be discerned in the story about the dog that ran across the surface of water to retrieve birds that its owner shot down. When the owner discovered this remarkable skill, he was, of course, alarmed and feared to tell anyone about seeing the dog run over the surface of a lake lest they think that he was hallucinating. He checked what seemed to be the evidence of his senses, concluded that he was not hallucinating, and devised the strategy of inviting the town banker, a highly respected citizen, to go hunting with him, his reasoning being that if the banker also saw what he saw, people would be more likely to listen to the banker. After rowing out on the lake with the banker, and following several occasions on which the dog had retrieved birds in the manner described, the dog's owner became impatient with the absence of any comment from the banker and asked if he had noticed anything unusual about the dog. The banker replied, "Yes, he can't swim worth a damn, can he?"

Certainly this reply is incongruous. Reconciliation of the expected with the unexpected—and it is the contradiction between the two that would seem to define incongruity—is achieved by the perspective that "it's all in the point of view." If this is the case, all things, in-

cluding the expected as well as the unexpected, are possible. If one finds the story funny, his laughter, according to the present way of thinking, signals the achievement of this perspective—whether the perspective is actually verbalized or not.

Adler supports the reconciliation interpretation pertinently in the following passage: “The essential part of the joke is this dual frame of reference. . . . But a joke is good only if the two frames of reference appear to have approximately equal general validity. If one frame is obviously invalid, the joke is no longer a good one” (1, p. 252).

Reconciliation is a mechanism that lifts to larger views. “It’s all in the point of view” is a larger perspective whereby we can reconcile what is expected with the unexpected response of the banker to the dog that ran across the water. “Outlandish as an act might be, its intent is not necessarily destructive” is a larger perspective whereby outlandish behavior might be reconciled with normal behavior.

Such larger perspective is perhaps achieved if one finds the story funny about the groom who threatened to shoot his bride. As this story goes, a groom in horse-and-buggy days was dissatisfied with the manner in which the horse pulled the buggy as he and his bride were leaving the wedding. He stopped the buggy once, got in front of the horse, pointed his finger at it, and said, “This is one!” The dissatisfaction continued. The third time he said, “This is three!” and shot the horse in the head. When his wife expressed outrage, he pointed his finger at her and said, “This is one!”

If one finds this story funny it seems possible that he does so because he can reconcile the behavior of the groom with that of a normal man in terms of their both being concerned with having things go right, outlandish as the groom’s mode of trying to insure this eventuality may be. The transition to such enlarged perspectives presumably signals personal growth (7). Laughter, accordingly, is, in the present exposition, held to be a paradigm of personal growth.

If the mechanism of laughter is reconciliation, Voltaire’s observation about it tends to follow. He said that laughter “always arises from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation.” Reconciliation transports to larger perspectives; the peak experience, to borrow a term from Maslow (6), that ensues is scarcely compatible with contempt and indignation. It might be objected, though, that humor is not necessarily so beautiful. If laughter is viewed as a release of antisocial impulses in accordance with the Freudian interpretation, it would seem to hold all kinds of potentialities for expression of cruelty, obscenity, ridicule, etc. Max Eastman

offers a persuasive refutation of this view in the comment, "To me, indeed, even when jokes are rankly sexual or sadistic, they frequently convey a pleasure in reality frankly spoken, rather than a specifically sexual or cruel pleasure. It happened so when I read of the harsh death of Reginald in Artemus Ward's *Mormon Romance*.

'And so farewell!' cried Reginald. 'Come to my arms, my own!' he said; 'that is, as many of you as can do it conveniently at once, for I must away.'

He folded several of them to his throbbing breast, and drove sadly away.

But he had not gone far when the trace of the off-hind mule became unhitched. Dismounting, he essayed to adjust the trace; but ere he had fairly commenced the task, the mule, a singularly refractory animal, snorted wildly, and kicked Reginald frightfully in the stomach. He arose with difficulty, and tottered feebly towards his mother's house, which was near by, falling dead in her yard, with the remark, 'Dear mother, I've come home to die.'

'So I see,' she said; 'where's the mules?'" (2, p. 274).

Eastman's view is by no means dissonant from Voltaire's nor from the conception of laughter as a paradigm of growth set forth here.

A notable instance of jokes that might be cited as at odds with these views is a kind of story that arises in relation to social problems and appears to have a quality of cynicism or contempt. This kind of story, also, though, can perhaps be understood as reflecting a strain toward reconciliation.

The integration crisis precipitated by the 1954 desegregation decision of the Supreme Court has given rise to a story about a man from Alabama visiting New York and being approached by a man-on-the-street reporter. When the reporter learned where the man was from, he inquired as to whether he believed in segregation. The man said that he did not, whereupon the reporter eagerly concluded that he must, then, believe in integration. The man said, "No," he did not believe in integration. Baffled, the reporter inquired, "What *do* you believe in?" and the man replied, "Slavery."

Slavery is a way of controlling segregation of Negroes and whites, as well as of bringing them together, and is a reconciliation of sorts, therefore, of the contradiction between integration and segregation. It is an unrealistic one, to be sure, but the story, nevertheless, might be interpreted as a strain toward reconciliation.

#### A TECHNOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

Assuming a strain toward reconciliation, as suggested above, reconciliation may, nevertheless, be thwarted by intensity of contradiction that is too great. The possibility of such thwarting affords one clue to a technology of laughter. Theodore Dreiser once said

when arrested on a charge of illegal cohabitation that he was not only not guilty but not physiologically able to be. Eastman (2, p. 253) says he suspects that Dreiser's remark afforded a considerable body of the population a release from the rigorous demands of the culture's control of sexuality. If Dreiser had put the matter somewhat less elegantly, such release would have been confined to a smaller proportion of the population according to the technological principle under consideration. The engineer of laughter must calculate the intensity of the contradiction precipitated. W. C. Fields put the matter nicely—and we are again indebted to Eastman as a source—when he said, "If you are going to smash anything in comedy—an automobile, for instance—don't take a new one. It isn't funny to smash a new car. They'll think, 'Well, what a shame; why didn't he give it to me?' If you are going to smash it, batter it up a little before you come on, so it doesn't matter so much" (2, p. 297).

A technology of laughter must not only provide for calculation of the intensity of a contradiction but also for calculation of intensity of the setting in which the contradiction is presented. A joke-maker can not be labored or strained if he is to succeed at his trade, because in this way he would establish a setting of concern or sobriety rather than one of freedom from care that is so conducive, if not essential, to laughter. This is not to say that the engineer of laughter can be irresponsible. "To be effortless may require twenty-five years of effort," to quote Eastman (2, p. 300) again. "This is none of the lawgiver's business," he goes on to say. "His business is with the style of the finished product. And the style must never be arduous even in a good sense."

#### RECONCILIATION OF THE POSSIBLE WITH THE IMPOSSIBLE

Reconciliation might be said to be the mechanism of free will. While bearing a greater burden of responsibility for his behavior, man is at the same time free in a way that animals are not, by virtue of release from instinctual determination of his behavior, as Erich Fromm (4) has pointed out. If man is free to regulate his behavior because it is not instinctually determined, then he must on his own reconcile many contradictions: hunger with excess, shelter which protects from the elements with shelter which also accommodates itself to the elements, conformity with individuality, dominance with submission, dependence with independence, heat with cold, innovation with standardization, and so on and so on. And, incidentally,

there is something pathetic while at the same time hilarious, it would seem, in man's perplexity over contradiction in the face of his capacity for rising above it—which may be the point to Chico Marx's line in *A Night at the Opera*, "I'd give you my seat but I'm sitting here." This line captures the spirit of reconciliation, certainly—reconciliation of the possible with the impossible. It is as though Chico had managed to sit there himself in grand style while also generously giving up his seat. The behavior lags, to be sure, and there is pathos in this, but the pathos, we believe, is absorbed by Chico's inspiration and we laugh because we are reconciled.

Unlike the lag in Chico's behavior, behavior that goes so well beyond competence that we speak of it as magnificent seems in actuality to incorporate a reconciliation of the possible with the impossible. It would approach the profane to speak of the oratory of a Winston Churchill as nothing more than competent. We see it with our own eyes and hear it with our own ears, but we scarcely believe it. Such behavior, moreover, appears to be imbued with a quality of delight as is laughter. It is perhaps no accident (nor inconsistent with the seriousness of what he had to say) that after his famous speech in which he said, "We will fight them on the beaches, we will fight them on the streets, etc.," Churchill is reported to have clasped his hands over the microphone and said, "And we will hit them over the head with beer bottles for that is all we have." He apparently took delight in what he was doing, serious as was the occasion. The effortless singing of Bing Crosby, while not as celestial as Winston Churchill's oratory, has similar qualities. Many experience it as a reconciliation of the possible with the impossible, and there seems to be little doubt that Bing enjoys himself. As a "delight phenomenon" comparable to laughter, the technology of laughter previously set forth should be useful in understanding how such behavior can be produced.

Our technology of laughter, it will be remembered, has two aspects, one having to do with the intensity of a contradiction, and the other with the intensity of the setting in which the contradiction is presented. The behavior of which we have been speaking exceeds competence so much as to take it for granted. It evolves, we suspect, through transition from one level of intensity of contradiction, between challenge and what the individual can do, to another level in such a way that the contradiction does not become too intense at any given time. There may be some "stretching" now and then, to be sure; but our guess is that, by and large, the individual is able to pro-

ceed within the framework of manageable contradictions between challenge and what he can do as masterful behavior evolves. But if this were all there were to it, the behavior would be nothing more than competent, it would seem. It could conceivably be very highly competent, indeed, but still lacking in majesty. Manageability of contradiction, then, we regard as a necessary but not a sufficient condition to the evolution of behavior that goes beyond competence.

We have specified the setting in which the contradiction is presented as the other variable relevant to laughter. It is also the further variable relevant to the evolution of behavior that goes beyond competence, we believe. Earlier we said that the joke-maker can not be labored or strained if he is to succeed at his trade, because he establishes a setting characterized by concern or sobriety rather than by the freedom that is so conducive to laughter. In similar vein the behavior of which we have been speaking that reconciles the possible with the impossible, requires freedom. It is characterized by sweep or flourish, and it seems nothing less than axiomatic to assert that freedom is basic to flourish. A likely instrumentality for accomplishing this purpose is another human being—if for no other reason than that another human being is someone to show off to, to say nothing of one's existence being "bound to the self-realization of 'the other one,'" as Goldstein (5) contends. Human beings vary in their ability to elicit show-off behavior, and those who have the best prospect of eliciting it, according to what we are saying, are alert to the possibilities of reconciliation of the possible with the impossible in any man's behavior.

Alertness to the possibility of reconciling the possible with the impossible, also according to what we are saying, defines a sense of humor at its best. It is less imperious than Clarence Day's father who was overheard praying, "Have mercy! I say have mercy, damn it!" but has a quality of commanding invitation, nevertheless, which inspires another to be his best.

#### SUMMARY

Laughter is said to offer a paradigm of growth and, as such, a key to man's "personal enlargement potential." Laughter occurs in response in incongruity. The mechanism underlying the relation between incongruity and laughter is postulated to be that of reconciliation. A proposed technology of laughter takes the form of regulating the intensity of contradictions as well as the intensity of the setting in

which the contradiction is presented, these intensities being conditions of reconciliation. This technology is also applicable to the production of magnificent behavior. Like laughter, such behavior appears to be imbued with a quality of delight and can be understood as a reconciliation of the possible with the impossible—much as Chico Marx seemed to sit there grandly while also generously giving up his seat when he said, "I'd give you my seat but I'm sitting here."

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