

A Critique of Humoristic Absurdism



A Critique of Humoristic Absurdism

*Problematizing the legitimacy of a humoristic
disposition toward the Absurd*

Thom Hamer

Student number: 3982815

Date: February 5th 2020

Word count: 32,397

A Critique of Humoristic Absurdism

Copyright © 2020 Thom Hamer

All rights reserved. No part of this thesis may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any way or by any means without the prior permission of the author or, when applicable, of the publishers of the scientific papers.

Image on previous page: Yue Minjun (2003), *Garbage Hill*

Graphic design: Mirelle van Tulder

Printed by Ipskamp Printing

Institution: Utrecht University
Study: Research Master Philosophy
Document: Final Thesis
Supervisor: prof. dr. Paul Ziche
Second Reader: dr. Hans van Stralen
Third Reader: prof. dr. Mauro Bonazzi

Contents

Summary	9
Foreword	10
Introduction	12
1. The Philosophy of Humor	21
1.1. A history of negligence and rejection	24
1.2. Important distinctions	33
1.3. Theories of humor	34
1.4. Defense of the Incongruity Theory	41
1.5. Relevance of relief and devaluation	52
1.6. Operational definition	54
2. The Notion of the Absurd	59
2.1. Camusian notion: meaninglessness	61
2.2. Tolstoyan notion: mortality	63
2.3. Nagelian notion: trivial commitments	67
2.4. Modified notion: dissolution of resolution	71
2.5. Justificatory guideline for a disposition toward the Absurd	78
3. Humoristic Absurdism	83
3.1. What is Humoristic Absurdism?	85
3.2. Cultural expressions of Humoristic Absurdism	87
3.3. Defense of Humoristic Absurdism	92
4. Objections against the humoristic disposition toward the Absurd	101
4.1. The Superiority Objection	103
4.2. The Irrationality Objection	112
4.3. The Irresponsibility Objection	125
4.4. The Frivolity Objection	131
5. Metamodern Absurdism	141
5.1. What is metamodernism?	143
5.2. What is Metamodern Absurdism?	148
5.3. Preliminary Defense of Metamodern Absurdism	152
6. Conclusion	157
Bibliography	163

Summary

To what extent can humorism be a legitimate disposition toward the Absurd? The Absurd is born from the insurmountable contradiction between one's ceaseless striving and the absence of an ultimate resolution – or, as I prefer to call it, the 'dissolution of resolution'. Humoristic Absurdism is the commitment to a pattern of humorous responses to the Absurd, which regard this absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a comical phenomenon. Although the humoristic disposition seems promising, by virtue of humor's recognition of incongruity and its denial of an ultimate resolution, and succeeds in countering three major objections, it falls prey to the claim that comprehensive humorism portrays as frivolous what is earnest, thereby renouncing the gravity of the *desire* for ultimate resolution, which is fundamental to the notion of the Absurd. In an attempt to explore alternative roles for humor in a legitimate disposition toward the Absurd, Metamodern Absurdism is suggested, which revolves around a post-ironic oscillation between humor and earnestness. In short, only in a role limited to one pole of an oscillatory pattern of responses can humor be integrated in a legitimate disposition toward the Absurd.

Foreword

Before you lies the thesis 'A Critique of Humoristic Absurdism'. It has been written as part of the final course (30 ECTS) of the Research Master's Program in Philosophy at Utrecht University. I was engaged in researching and writing this thesis from February 2019 to January 2020.

The process of writing this thesis has not been spotless. Not because I stumbled upon inexorable contradictions within the argument, nor because of some other problem immanent to this philosophical inquiry. Rather, the difficulty stemmed from medical hindrances. Due to workaholic tendencies, along with the fact that my main activities involve micromovements (writing, composing, drawing, painting), I got diagnosed with RSI (*repetitive strain injury*). This prevented me from progressing as much as I would have liked.

Luckily, I enjoyed widespread support during this struggle, for which I would like to thank study advisor Marloes Lammerts, my primary supervisor prof. dr. Paul Ziche and RMA coordinators dr. Joel Anderson and prof. dr. Mauro Bonazzi. I would also like to thank my supervisors for their substantive guidance. As my first supervisor, prof. dr. Paul Ziche has played a decisive role in the progression of this thesis, with his mind-boggling encyclopedic knowledge, lucid awareness of semantic and etymological subtleties and thorough analysis of my argumentation. My second reader dr. Hans van Stralen has helped me with the investigation of humorism in the face of the Absurd by fleshing out, from literary as well as philosophical texts, the notion of the Absurd, as well as possible responses to the absurd condition.

Outside of the academic domain, I thank my parents, for supporting me in my academic and literary endeavors. Although you might not at all understand what I am saying in this thesis, or in other philosophical

projects for that matter, you acknowledge my passion for philosophy, which is more than I could have hoped for.

In addition, I would like to thank my friend Eva Bernet Kempers for being the funniest critic of humor. Her extensive summation of counterarguments and examples in opposition to the Incongruity Theory of humor has had tremendous impact upon my account of humor, although I remain stubborn in my contention that humor essentially involves incongruity.

I cannot conclude this project without thanking the most important supporter of my writings in general and this project in particular: Marvik van Dijk. Our friendship has always been defined by a deep awareness of the Absurd with an eccentric sense of humor. Thank you for your emotional support, substantive discussions and your exemplary humorism in the face of the Absurd.

To my readers: thank you for taking the time to read this text. I hope you enjoy this philosophical inquiry, if not for its coherent argumentation, then for its risible incongruities.

Thom Hamer

Utrecht

February 5th, 2020

Introduction

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.¹

Contrary to the meaning of ‘Absurdism’ in everyday discourse, referring to a form of humor associated with, for example, Monty Python, very few writers in the philosophical tradition of Absurdism think of absurdity as a source of laughter and mirth. The above-quoted opening paragraph of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), arguably the most important essay in the history of Absurdism, leaves no room for doubt regarding the primary status of the Absurd: it is a tragedy. Indeed, the Absurd is so dreadfully tragic that one response seems natural at first sight: suicide. Yet, humorous responses to the absurd condition have not been absent from human history. Legend has it that one of the early Christian martyrs, Saint Lawrence, cheerfully shouted, after having been roasted on a gridiron for hours and hours: “I’m well done! Turn me over!” Recently, philosophers such as John Marmysz and Bob Plant have attempted to justify such a humoristic disposition in the face of the Absurd, portraying it as an effective kind of coping mechanism.²

To what extent can humorism be a legitimate disposition toward the Absurd? This paper purports to critically examine the status of what I call ‘Humoristic Absurdism’ (in other words: a disposition toward the Absurd

1 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien, 2013.

2 John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (SUNY Press, 2012); Bob Plant, “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter,” *Philosophy* 84, no. 1 (2009): 111–134.

that revolves around humor), by establishing a defensible and historically rooted account of humorism as a disposition toward the incongruity that makes up the Absurd and by challenging it with some objections that have been raised against humorism as a general behavioral pattern (i.e., humorism without a specified object such as the Absurd).³ Humoristic Absurdism is defined as the commitment to a pattern of humorous responses to the Absurd, which regard the absurd condition, as well as its manifestations in absurd situations, as a comical phenomenon.⁴ I call this commitment the ‘humoristic disposition’. Such a disposition should not be understood as a way to overcome the Absurd, for if one accepts the notion of the Absurd, one accordingly acknowledges its insuperability. Rather, the humoristic disposition should be understood as an Absurdist coping mechanism, that is, one that provides a way to deal with the absurd condition without manifesting one or another form of denial.

How ought we to understand the *legitimacy* of a disposition toward the Absurd? First, in order for it to be legitimate, the disposition should be *possible*, both theoretically and practically. Theoretical impossibility might be manifested, for instance, in a disposition that would literally prescribe the attainment of omnipotence in the face of the Absurd. The same holds for logical impossibilities: a disposition ought not to propagate both affirmation and denial, or promiscuity and chastity. Regarding the subsidiary condition of practical possibility, consider the hypothetical example of never-ending euphoria. This may be theoretically possible, but it is difficult to imagine within the constraints of the human psyche a euphoric state of mind that lasts for years and years, let alone a lifetime. In other words, advocating an impossible disposition toward the Absurd, such as omnipotence, the conjunction of opposites or everlasting euphoria, is considered illegitimate. Second, if one holds absurdity to be an insuperable condition of human

3 That is, humorism without a specific object such as the Absurd.

4 Thus understood, Humoristic Absurdism is a disposition, from which a pattern of responses follows. This is an important terminological distinction that is echoed throughout the entire argument: a *response* is momentary, and a *disposition* is the commitment to a pattern of responses.

existence, one's disposition should be *properly absurdist*. That is to say that one's disposition should not violate the premises of the Absurd, either by means of renouncing the desire that is constitutive of the Absurd or by postulating an escape from the disappointing nature of reality. For example, an ataraxist renunciation of desire would be a manifestation of the former, while the endorsement of orthodox Christianity amounts to the latter escapist move.⁵ Although these may be legitimate dispositions toward life, they cannot be legitimate dispositions toward the *Absurd*, for if one takes the Absurd as the fundamental fact of life, its constituents should be recognized through one's disposition. Third, there may be further objections, for example on ethical, existential or political grounds, which the advocated disposition must counter in order for it to be a legitimate disposition toward the Absurd.⁶

Put briefly, the answer to the main question of this paper will be as follows. Although humor may have an important role to play in a disposition toward the Absurd, full-blooded Humoristic Absurdism fails to do justice to the Absurd or, more specifically, to its subjective side, by nullifying the immediate seriousness with which we desire resolutions. In substitution of this failed Humoristic Absurdism, I bring forward a slight modification of Humoristic Absurdism, which I call 'Metamodern Absurdism'. In short, it revolves around an oscillatory pattern of responses to the Absurd, moving between a specific form of humor and earnestness, thereby recognizing both the frivolity of our striving in the absence of ultimate resolution and the seriousness with which we strive.

5 These examples, and the categories to which they belong, are worked out more extensively in Chapter 2.

6 The most important objections against the Absurdist theory at hand – Humoristic Absurdism – will be raised in Chapter 4. There, I counter the three dominant objections from the literature. The fourth objection, developed by me, cannot be countered, and thus Humoristic Absurdism is rejected and transformed into what I call 'Metamodern Absurdism', a novel variety of Absurdism that maintains the veracity of the Absurd, is able to deal with all objections and can thus be considered legitimate as a disposition in the face of the absurd condition.

The argument proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 deals with the philosophy of humor. This contains a historical dimension, which exposes a long period of relative neglect and contempt, yet recently proliferating exploration, of humor in the Western tradition, thus justifying further inquiry into the phenomenon at hand. Principally, however, the chapter is devoted to the question: what is humor? Three theories make up the canon. Despite their historical opposition, I argue that they are actually complementary in their explanation of humor. The first, which is called the Superiority Theory, explains (in a slightly modified form) the *effect* that humor has on the underperforming violator of a norm or, alternatively, on the norm that is violated through overperformance; humor devalues them. Relief theory, on the other hand, explicates the psychophysiological effect upon the *subject* of humor, by which I mean the person finding it comical. The final member of the canon, the Incongruity Theory, sheds light on the *cause* of humor: incongruity. This incongruity is conceptualized as the contradiction of a norm. Unfortunately, a comprehensive theory of the formal structure of humor, illuminating all necessary and sufficient conditions, does not yet exist; still, a modest attempt at making the theory more complete is undertaken.

Chapter 2 fleshes out the notion of the Absurd. Central figures in the history and theoretical discussion of Absurdism, such as Albert Camus and Thomas Nagel, are discussed. Inspired by Camus, the Absurd is construed as the 'dissolution of resolution'. More specifically, it is the incongruity between on the one hand one's indefinite strivings toward resolution and on the other hand the absence of a definitive resolution. From this conceptualization of the absurd condition, I derive criteria for the evaluation of further dispositions toward the Absurd, such as a humoristic one. The principal criterion for a disposition toward the Absurd will be to recognize, rather than renounce, deny or conjure away, the absurdity of existence in its twofold constitution.

Chapter 3 investigates what a humoristic disposition toward the Absurd would consist in. Following up on the nature of humor identified

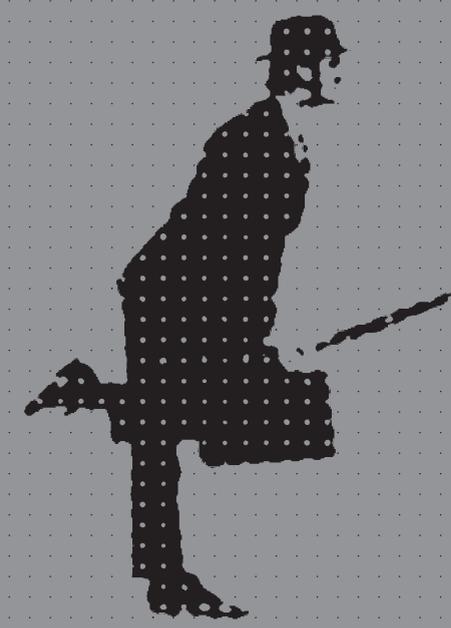
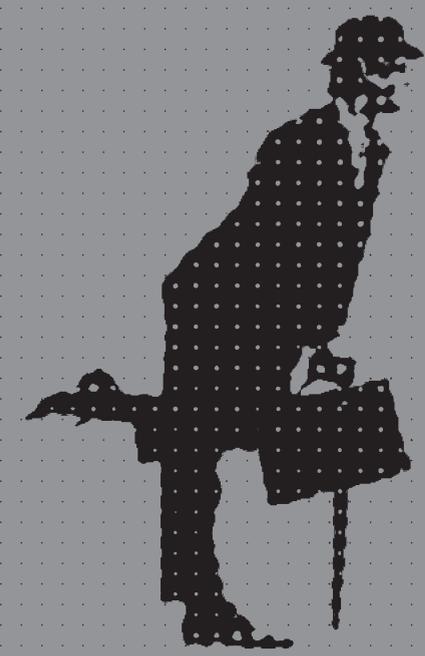
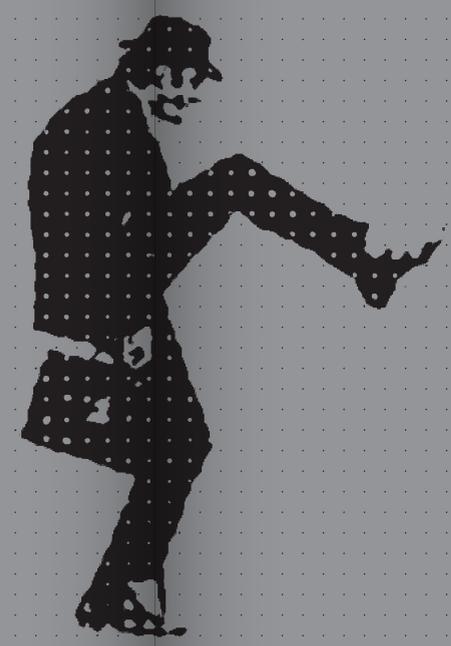
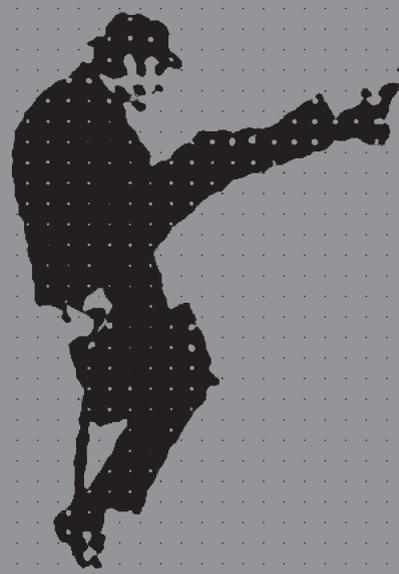
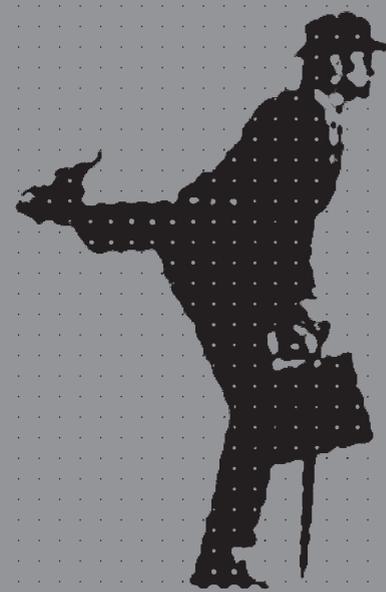
in the first chapter and the notion of the Absurd in the second chapter, the two projects are conjoined in the third chapter. Specific instances of Humoristic Absurdism are sought in literary and philosophical predecessors. *Prima facie* reasons for endorsing Humoristic Absurdism are formulated before a comprehensive defense of Humoristic Absurdism, as a legitimate form of Absurdism, is given. Humoristic Absurdism lives up to the principal Absurdist criterion by acknowledging the incongruity of the Absurd, as the contradiction of a norm, by facilitating expression and awareness of the fundamental desire for resolution and by rejecting the availability of an ultimate resolution.

Chapter 4 presents objections, stemming from the philosophical literature on humor, against humorism as such. These objections are then extrapolated to the specific disposition at hand: humorism in the face of the Absurd. The three main objections are the Superiority Objection, the Irrationality Objection and the Irresponsibility Objection. After refuting these objections, I present a novel objection against Humoristic Absurdism: the Frivolity Objection. Essentially, it frames Humoristic Absurdism as a renunciation of the earnest desire for resolution, by reducing absurdity to a mere frivolity. The strength of this objection forces us to give up an all-encompassing humorism toward the Absurd in favor of a slight modification of Humoristic Absurdism.

This modification, or at least a suggestion toward the needed modification, is developed in Chapter 5. Rooted in the Frivolity Objection, the modified disposition is called 'Metamodern Absurdism'. It retains a significant role for humor, while also facilitating the earnest desire for resolution, by incorporating an oscillatory movement between humorous detachment and earnest engagement. Thus, contrary to Humoristic Absurdism, Metamodern Absurdism contains a stark recognition of the Absurd.

Chapter 6 summarizes the insights from the previous chapters and concludes by answering, in utmost concision, the main question of this inquiry. Subsequently, I give an equally concise critical reflection upon the

research approach and the insights that result from it. This then brings the evaluation of this research to its prognostic dimension: suggestions for future research.



The Philosophy of Humor

This chapter presents a brief history of (the main lines in) the philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of humor. It discusses the extent to which humor has been a topic of philosophical investigation, the variety of descriptive as well as explanatory theories concerning the phenomenon of humor and a brief overview of the historical assortment of normative stances toward humor, including justifications of such evaluations. The central purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how my argument is embedded in the literature and how it may add novel insights to the vast legacy that I, as a philosopher in the twenty-first century, have inherited. The inherited tradition that concerns us here comprises the widespread lack of attention, if not outright aversion, to humor in the history of philosophy. Despite this tradition of derision

and neglect, one may discern three canonical theories in the philosophy of humor: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory. Special attention is given to the Incongruity Theory, the most prevalent theory in psychology and philosophy of humor and, at least at first sight, the most promising player in the game.

If one decides to explore the possibility of any humoristic disposition whatsoever, it is important to avoid the danger of overanalyzing, which can jeopardize the effectivity of humor. “Humor can be dissected as a frog can,” writer and essayist E.B. White notes, “but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”¹ There is, however, a distinction between the dissection of humorous instances (jokes) and the dissection of humor per se (joking). My primary aim is not to explain specific instances, for the analysis would to some degree annihilate their mirth and thereby the possibility of such humorous instances as vehicles for a humoristic disposition. Rather, I analyze humor as such, in order to enable ourselves to consider the possibility of a humoristic disposition, from which humorous instances may emerge, in spite of their deficient effect within the context of this philosophical analysis. Therefore, the analysis of humorous instances is of secondary importance, a necessary evil if you will, for the purpose of illustrating the theory of humor as such.

1 Elwyn Brooks White, “Some Remarks on Humor,” *The Second Tree from the Corner*, 1954, 173–181.

1.1. A history of negligence and rejection

It is surprising to see how little has been written about humor throughout the Western history of philosophy.² Before Henri Bergson's *Laughter*, influential philosophers have only philosophized about the phenomenon as a side note.³ As contemporary scholar John Morreall, one of the most zealous writers concerned with the philosophy of humor, has concluded: "Martian anthropologists comparing the amount of philosophical writing on humor with what has been written on, say, justice, or even on Rawls' Veil of Ignorance, might well conclude that humor could be left out of human life without much loss."⁴ With a large tradition of negligence, the philosophy of humor has only recently become a serious area of philosophical inquiry, one which has even acquired its own entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.⁵

This view of the philosophical tradition disregards the influence of non-Western thinkers, due to a very Eurocentric perspective; and even within the Western tradition, this portrayal is very selective, highlighting mostly analytic philosophers. John Morreall, in the 'Philosophy of Humor' entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, omits influential figures like Laozi and Friedrich Nietzsche, though they should deserve to be referenced, according to the textual and systematic evidence given below.

In the sparse passages in which Western philosophers did discuss the phenomenon of humor, they have been largely critical. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Morreall gives an extensive overview of the negativity toward the phenomenon throughout the history of Western philosophy. The list of authors critical of humor include Plato, Thomas

2 John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/>.

3 Morreall's history of negligence and rejection is nuanced later in this section. Exceptions to this tendency do exist, for example in: Desiderius Erasmus, *De lof der zotheid* (By Jan van Heekeren, 1719).

4 Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor."

5 Morreall.

Hobbes, René Descartes and George Santayana in his early years.⁶ According to Santayana, for example, the problem with humor is that, in the humorous experience, "we are in the presence of an absurdity, and man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold."⁷

In non-Western philosophy of humor, the range of evaluations of the phenomenon has been more diverse, although critical views constitute more than an insignificant minority. Confucianism is in relative unison with Western philosophy, for instance in its valuation of reverence, which Confucian thinkers often consider to be antithetical to laughter.⁸ According to this view, curtailing laughter is constitutive of a proper relationship between people – and this holds for both parties. Explicating the proper appearance of a *junzi* (someone embodying the moral, as well as social, ideal in terms of faithfulness to the norms of Confucian reverence), Weihe Xu observes that "in order to dignify and empower his public appearance, he had to curb his mirth, because a smiling face was (and still is) seldom deemed reverent or awe-inspiring."⁹ This "smiling face", Xu notes, is a sign of humorous mirth. An additional justificatory source for the rejection of humor is the Confucian value of moderation, of which a humorous outburst of laughter is a grave violation.¹⁰ In this anti-humoristic tradition stands Xunzi, often regarded as the third of the three great classical Confucians

6 John Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3 (1989): 243–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399447>.

7 George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (Courier Corporation, 2012), 152.

Notwithstanding this unambiguous citation, the status of humor in Santayana's philosophy remains a subject of controversy. Cf. Jessica Wahman, "'We Are All Mad Here': Santayana and the Significance of Humor," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 2, no. 2 (April 21, 2005): 73–83, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000019>.

8 Weihe Xu, "The Confucian Politics of Appearance: And Its Impact on Chinese Humor," *Philosophy East and West* 54, no. 4 (2004): 514. Cf. David R. Knechtges, "Wit, Humor, and Satire in Early Chinese Literature (to AD 220)," *Monumenta Serica* 29, no. 1 (1970): 81: "Part of the blame for the absence of humorous writing in the pre-Han periods has been placed on Confucian puritanism."

9 Xu, "The Confucian Politics of Appearance," 527.

10 Xiao Dong Yue, *Exploration of Chinese Humor: Historical Review, Empirical Findings, and Critical Reflections* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2010), 412.

(the others being Confucius and Mencius).¹¹ Beyond being utterly devoid of humor, Xunzi's work is antithetical to the very idea of humor, which follows from its emphasis on restraint of emotions, the blind pursuit of which leads to social chaos and "animalistic degeneration."¹² However, Paul Goldin, one of the most celebrated contemporary scholars specialized in Xunzi, mentions that Xunzi has not impressed many thinkers throughout the Chinese history of philosophy:

For most of imperial Chinese history [...] Xunzi was a *bête noire* who was typically cited as an example of a Confucian who went astray by rejecting Mencian convictions. Only in the last few decades has Xunzi been widely recognized as one of China's greatest thinkers.¹³

Thus, Xunzi may not be the most ideal philosopher to cite as a historical figure in the Chinese history of the philosophy of humor. Although it is clear that there exists a critical stance toward humor that may be considered inherent to Confucianism, some nuance is appropriate here. As Christoph Harbsmeier has demonstrated by referring for example to unambiguously funny sections of Confucius' *Analects* and Mencius' *Meng Zi*, there can surely be found various manifestations of wit, sarcasm and irony in Confucian writings.¹⁴ Still, the reception of Confucian thought has typically emphasized the negative stance by reference to reverence and moderation, thereby making it reasonable to conceive the archetypical Confucian attitude toward humor as largely negative. Given that contemporary

11 Paul R. Goldin, "Xunzi," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/xunzi/>.

12 Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey, *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 49–59; cf. Christoph Harbsmeier, "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3 (1989): 294, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399450>. Cf. Knechtges, "Wit, Humor, and Satire in Early Chinese Literature (to AD 220)," 81: "Part of the blame for the absence of humorous writing in the pre-Han periods has been placed on Confucian puritanism."

13 Goldin, "Xunzi."

14 Harbsmeier, "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy," 291–99.

China is still to some extent embedded in the Confucian legacy, it is no coincidence that Chinese culture has difficulties with the expression of humor and laughter.¹⁵ Xiao Dong Yue traces these difficulties back to the Confucian influence: "Humor has been traditionally given little respect in Chinese culture mainly due to the Confucian emphasis on keeping proper manners of social interactions."¹⁶ To conclude, there is plenty of exegetical and systematic evidence in the Confucian tradition (which arguably constitutes one of the foremost pillars of contemporary Chinese culture) that reinvokes the contempt toward humor that we observed in the Western tradition.¹⁷ Therefore, Humoristic Absurdism may find little resonance in the Confucian tradition, by virtue of the prefix 'Humoristic' alone.¹⁸

A non-Western tradition that seems to deviate from the Western negativity is Taoism. Laozi and Zhuangzi are among the most notable and influential Taoists, both of whom can be ascribed some kind of humorism in their respective philosophies and writing styles.¹⁹ George Kao summarizes:

Laozi, the antagonist of Confucius, must be regarded as the true comic spirit of China, and Zhuangzi, his follower and inventor of a great many libelous stories about Confucius, may be regarded as the most intelligent humorist of China. Laozi's laughter was dry small, sounding low through his thin beard, while Zhuangzi, often broke out into boisterous laughter.²⁰

15 Yue, *Exploration of Chinese Humor*, 414–15; Xiao Dong Yue et al., "Humor and Youth Empowerment: A Self-Cultivation Approach," in *2nd International Conference on Youth Empowerment*, Pok Fu Lam: City University of Hong Kong, 2006.

16 Yue, *Exploration of Chinese Humor*, 403.

17 For an overview of applications of and stances toward humor in ancient Chinese texts, see: Harbsmeier, "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy."

18 In 4.1, Confucian skepticism toward humor returns when the Superiority Objection is discussed.

19 Xiaodong Yue, *Humor and Chinese Culture: A Psychological Perspective* (Routledge, 2017), 9–10.

20 George Kao, *Chinese Wit And Humor*, 1948, xxxiii, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.48556>.

The Taoist school and its most influential co-founders Laozi and Zhuangzi are often considered the ancestors of Chinese humorism.²¹ Thus, Taoism lays the cultural foundation of humorism in the Chinese legacy, as Confucianism may be more responsible for the pejoration of the phenomenon in China.²²

In Buddhism, humor is often praised. It is considered an important part of the path toward enlightenment, as is summarized by Xiao Dong Yue: “In Buddhism, enlightenment has been described as the core spirit, and there are times along every pilgrim’s path when he or she suspects the whole deal is one big joke [...], therefore laughing is served as getting closer to enlightened.”²³ The widespread representation of the so-called “Laughing Buddha” corroborates this positive valuation of humor and laughter in (at least some forms of) Buddhism.

In Hinduist philosophy, some have argued that there exists not only an acceptant stance toward humor, but even outright humorism. Koenraad Elst, for example, notes that the Hinduist humorism is twofold, including both a “tradition of tolerance regarding laughter” and “a tradition of humour as rich and variegated as its pantheon.”²⁴

In short, throughout the global history of philosophy, evaluative stances toward humor have not been so sparse as Morreall thinks. Moreover, the evaluations range from extremely critical (e.g., Confucius, Hobbes and Santayana) to embracing (e.g., Hinduism, the Laughing Buddha, Laozi), with more moderate views in-between (e.g., al-Farabi).²⁵ The widespread disagreement over the value of humor constitutes an

21 Zhaozhi Liao, *Taiwanese Perceptions of Humor: A Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Crane Publishing, 2001), 88.

22 Yue, *Humor and Chinese Culture*, 8–10; cf. Qian Suoqiao, “Translating ‘Humor’ into Chinese Culture,” *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 20, no. 3 (2007): 277–295, <https://doi.org/10.1515/HUMOR.2007.014>.

23 Yue, *Exploration of Chinese Humor*, 410.

24 Koenraad Elst, “Humour in Hinduism,” *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities.*, 2011, 51–52.

25 Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Hackett Publishing, 2007), 110.

important historical foundation for the present inquiry into Humoristic Absurdism, given the latter’s predicate of humorism. This historical dimension sheds light upon the contingent traditions according to which Humoristic Absurdism may be defended or rejected.

The negative portrayal of the history of the philosophy of humor, as a combination of neglect and cynicism, has been established most considerably by John Morreall, who has bequeathed a similarly negative legacy in the inquiries that cite his work. Thus, from this perspective, the contemporary philosophy of humor distances itself from the tradition by introducing a novel sense of positivity toward the phenomenon of humor.

However, the novelty of this positivity toward humor ought to be given further nuance, even in the Western tradition. According to Søren Kierkegaard, for example, humor comprises “the last stage of existential awareness before faith”.²⁶ According to one of Kierkegaard’s most distinguished interpreters, Gregor Malantschuk, this is because humor facilitates the leap from the realm of ethical duties toward faith, by highlighting the contradiction between “the eternal qualifications of [one’s] essence” and one’s “phenomenal actuality”.²⁷ The importance of irony, humor and the comical in Kierkegaard’s philosophy receives widespread recognition among scholars specialized in Kierkegaard.²⁸ Similarly, laughter and humor are far from being bagatelles in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche exclaims through the book’s protagonist Zarathustra:

[L]earn to laugh over and past yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you good dancers, high! higher! And don’t forget good laughter either!

26 Søren Kierkegaard, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” *A Kierkegaard Anthology* 1 (1946): 259; Lloyd Ellison Parrill, “The Concept of Humor in the Pseudonymous Works of Soeren Kierkegaard” (PhD Thesis, Drew University, 1975).

27 Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 202.

28 T. F. Morris, “‘Humour’ in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” *The Heythrop Journal* 29, no. 3 (1988): 300–312, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.1988.tb00858.x>; John Lippitt, “A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Salvation: Climacus as Humorist in Kierkegaard’s ‘Concluding Unscientific Postscript,’” *Religious Studies* 33, no. 2 (1997): 181–202.

This crown of the laughing one, this rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown! I pronounced laughter holy; you higher men, *learn – to laugh!*²⁹

Thus, it becomes evident that Nietzsche holds laughter very dearly, as is underscored by Lawrence J. Hatab, who distils from this appraisal, as well as other sections, Nietzsche's general attitude toward laughter: "Laughter would then be part of wisdom".³⁰ On a side note, these insights into the ameliorative notion of humor in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who undoubtedly have affinity with the Absurd, further legitimates my attempt to investigate the possibility of a humoristic disposition toward the Absurd.³¹

Moreover, whereas Morreall puts emphasis on laughter being an expression of scorn and ridicule in Descartes' philosophy of humor, Descartes admits that some forms of humor can be appropriate in some situations, even derisive laughter, which can serve as a social corrective.³² And even one of the most widely cited example of the disregard toward humor, Plato, can be interpreted in such a light that his views on humor are more nuanced than Morreall's legacy may suggest.³³ Indeed, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates often emerges as a thoroughly humoristic figure with a remarkable feeling for irony, which is one of the key features of the Socratic method.³⁴ Besides, the emphasis on Western philosophy downplays the share that non-Western thinkers have in the history of philosophy and paints the picture disproportionately bleak. For, as we have seen, there is

29 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 240.

30 Lawrence J. Hatab, "Laughter in Nietzsche's Thought: A Philosophical Tragicomedy," 1988, 76.

31 Mordechai Gordon, "Camus, Nietzsche, and the Absurd: Rebellion and Scorn versus Humor and Laughter," *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 2 (2015): 364–378; Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 56.

32 Aaron Smuts, "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-009-9203-5>.

33 Cameron Shelley, "Plato on the Psychology of Humor.," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2003.

34 Harbsmeier, "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy," 289.

ample evidence of embracement toward humor in Hinduist, Buddhist and Taoist philosophy.³⁵ In terms of philosophical argumentation, some Zen Buddhists have argued, for example, that humor is an important medium in the path toward enlightenment, by virtue of its power to deconstruct the self (through laughing at oneself), its reflection of the cosmic joke of being, and the irrationality of forms of humor like oxymoron and paradox.³⁶ In conclusion, the history of derogation should be met with some nuance. Still, the extensive collection of disregarding remarks on humor in the history of philosophy cannot be ignored, and thus Morreall's historical analysis is still valuable to a great extent.

Philosophical explanation (in addition to normative evaluation) of the phenomenon of humor remains sparse however. In many cases, as in the Confucian emphasis upon reverence and Santayana's philosophical anthropology of the human being as the rational animal, the rejection of humor was somehow deduced from other aspects of the overarching philosophical theory, without exerting substantive analysis upon the phenomenon of humor as such, with regard to its *formal structure*. This 'formal structure' refers to the inner workings of all instances of humor, regardless of their specific *content*. Thanks to fairly recent philosophers such as Morreall, humor is now a serious and sizable area of philosophical inquiry, getting significantly more attention in virtue of its formal structure. The structure of what we call 'humor' is, of course, of vital importance to the evaluation of humorism as a disposition toward the Absurd.

35 In 2.4, the link between Buddhism and the notion of the Absurd is explicated.

36 Dennis Sibley, "The Laughing Buddha Humour and the Spiritual Life," *Buddhism Now* (blog), May 31, 2014, <https://buddhismnow.com/2014/05/31/the-laughing-buddha-humour-and-the-spiritual-life-by-dennis-sibley/>; Conrad Hyers, *The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004); Michel Clasquin, "Real Buddhas Don't Laugh: Attitudes towards Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China," *Social Identities* 7, no. 1 (March 2001): 97–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630120043549>; Julie Matthews and Robert Hattam, "Did Buddha Laugh? Zen, Humour and Pedagogy," 2004.

The widespread neglect of and contempt toward humor among philosophers is remarkably out of sync with the value that people generally place upon humor across time and space. Behavioral scientists and psychologists have repeatedly shown that humor is of significant importance in child development,³⁷ attraction within the context of sexual selection, as well as within *non-sexual* bonding, and team-building in the workplace.³⁸ With regard to the romantic sphere, a survey among college students, conducted as early as 1958, concluded that 81% of women and 90% of men report that a sense of humor is a crucial characteristic in the search for a partner.³⁹ Following this pioneering research, other scholars have demonstrated that a humoristic character is highly preferential in both friends and relationship partners.⁴⁰ Furthermore, research has shown that the majority of people would like to have a good sense of humor.⁴¹ It is clear that, despite the contemptuous and negligent view of humor in the history of philosophy, humor is a highly valued trait in social life. In light

37 Margaret Semrud-Clikeman and Kimberly Glass, "The Relation of Humor and Child Development: Social, Adaptive, and Emotional Aspects," *Journal of Child Neurology* 25, no. 10 (October 2010): 1248–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0883073810373144>.

38 Sharon C. Bolton and Maeve Houlihan, "Are We Having Fun yet? A Consideration of Workplace Fun and Engagement," *Employee Relations* 31, no. 6 (2009): 556–568; Barbara Plester, "Healthy Humour: Using Humour to Cope at Work," *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 89–102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2009.9522446>.

39 Lester E. Hewitt, "Student Perceptions of Traits Desired in Themselves as Dating and Marriage Partners," *Marriage and Family Living* 20, no. 4 (1958): 344–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/348256>.

40 Robin Goodwin, "Sex Differences among Partner Preferences: Are the Sexes Really Very Similar?," *Sex Roles* 23, no. 9–10 (1990): 501–513; Sally L. Hansen, "Dating Choices of High School Students," *Family Coordinator*, 1977, 133–138; Hewitt, "Student Perceptions of Traits Desired in Themselves as Dating and Marriage Partners"; Bojan Todosijević, Snežana Ljubinković, and Aleksandra Arančić, "Mate Selection Criteria: A Trait Desirability Assessment Study of Sex Differences in Serbia," *Evolutionary Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2003): 147470490300100100; Susan Sprecher and Pamela C. Regan, "Liking Some Things (in Some People) More than Others: Partner Preferences in Romantic Relationships and Friendships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19, no. 4 (2002): 463–481; Jane E. Smith, V. Ann Waldorf, and David L. Trembath, "Single White Male Looking for Thin, Very Attractive....," *Sex Roles* 23, no. 11–12 (1990): 675–685; Douglas T. Kenrick et al., "Evolution, Traits, and the Stages of Human Courtship: Qualifying the Parental Investment Model," *Journal of Personality* 58, no. 1 (1990): 97–116.

41 Mahadev L. Apte, "Ethnic Humor Versus 'Sense of Humor' An American Sociocultural Dilemma," *American Behavioral Scientist* 30, no. 3 (1987): 27–41.

of this high estimation, Martians had better include the phenomenon of humor in their anthropological report.

1.2. Important distinctions

What, then, is this phenomenon under the magnifying glass of the Martian anthropologists? First, humor should not be confused with the comical, despite their intimate relation. The distinction is one of stimulus versus response. One responds to something comical, which is humor's stimulus. Humor, then, amounts to the experience of the comical.

An additional distinction must be made between laughter and humor. Prior to recent research, laughter and humor have often been equivocated, but this equivocation is at most seemingly, if not obviously wrong. One can imagine, for the sake of counter-example, a kind of chemical stimulation of the gelotological regions of the brain, for example due to psilocybin mushrooms or LSD, that results in hysterical laughter. We would, however, be hesitant, to say the least, to speak of humor in this case. What is more, Diana Szameitat, among others, has conducted empirical research on the relation between laughter and humor, which showed that laughter does not strictly correlate with humor.⁴² Indeed, we occasionally find something humorous without laughing (e.g., while reading a comical passage in a book); and sometimes we laugh in spite of the fact that there is nothing humorous about the situation (e.g., during tickle torture).

A final distinction is needed. 'Humor', as I use the term in this research project, is not equivalent to a 'sense of humor'. In ordinary language usage, people sometimes say that *this woman has humor* or that *that man is a humorous person*, but what is usually meant here differs from my usage of the term. Humor is not a character trait; neither is it an ability or capability. Nevertheless, 'humor' in the above examples of ordinary language usage may still convey a significant meaning, even in

42 Diana P. Szameitat et al., "Differentiation of Emotions in Laughter at the Behavioral Level," *Emotion* 9, no. 3 (2009): 397–405, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015692>.

the present project, which is why the distinction is paramount. When I refer to the ability, capability or character trait that tends to bring forth humorous instances (e.g., jokes), I apply the term ‘sense of humor’, while ‘humor’ as such will bear the exclusive connotation that is explicated in the following paragraphs.

1.3. Theories of humor

Following these negative definitions of humor, regarding what it is *not*, we should finally consider what humor is, in its positive formulation. Humor comprises a variety of related phenomena, which makes it difficult to find a reductionist theory of humor in addition to a mere fragmented taxonomy.⁴³ Among the many types of humor are word-play and puns, irony, mockery, oxymoron, non sequitur, parody and imitation, caricature, zeugma, deadpan or dry wit, one-line joke, understatement and hyperbole, slapstick, facial expressions, practical joke, gallows humor, self-deprecation, antihumor, satire, off-color humor, toilet humor and overgesticulation. Again, the explanation of humor put forward in this paper is in no way meant to neatly and comprehensively fit all real-life applications of the term “humor” in common language-use. Besides, it should not be taken as a *thick* explanatory theory. Instead, it purports to provide a general formal structure that most readers will recognize in humorous instances, at least as the thin foundation of humor.⁴⁴

Regarding one of its most indispensable dimensions, humor is typically associated with the experience of *amusement*.⁴⁵ If someone

43 Alternatively, a rich phenomenological description might also be possible. Still, as is shown in 1.4, essential features of humor can be found and thus I resort not to phenomenology, but to a more reductionist theory of humor, namely the Incongruity Theory.

44 Jennifer Hay, *Gender and Humour: Beyond a Joke*, 1995, 63–89.

Again, the ‘formal structure’ refers to the inner workings of any instance of humor, regardless of its specific content.

45 Morreall, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought,” 243–49.

regards a perceived phenomenon as funny, she enjoys its comical aspect.⁴⁶ The experience of a humorous situation does not have to be altogether pleasurable; for one may find it simultaneously funny and poignant. This is especially evident in gallows humor, when one jokes about one’s tragic fate. Still, some degree of amusement is indispensable for something to be found humorous. In other words, the subject’s experience of amusement is a necessary condition for the experience of humor.

Of course, amusement is not a sufficient condition for humor. A football player may experience amusement during the game, while finding it scarcely humorous. Hence, we must continue the quest for more essential conditions. What is at the heart of humor? Since the publication of D.H. Monro’s *Argument of Laughter*,⁴⁷ three theories have become canonical in the philosophy of humor: the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory.⁴⁸ Each tries to explain humor by highlighting its supposedly primary characteristic.

Superiority Theory

Concisely put, the Superiority Theory holds that humor (expressed in laughter) indicates a feeling of superiority over the comical object. The emphasis may be on one’s own superiority or on the object’s inferiority, as Thomas Hobbes states in one of the earliest philosophical formulations of the Superiority Theory:

Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.⁴⁹

46 In my usage of the word, ‘funny’ bears the same meaning as ‘humorous’, although the former may specify the degree to which one enjoys the comical aspect of the object of humor.

47 David Hector Monro, “Argument of Laughter,” *Philosophy* 27, no. 103 (1952): 372–73.

48 Joshua Shaw, “Philosophy of Humor,” *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 2 (2010): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00281.x>.

49 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, Part I, chap. 6.

Less-developed yet notable versions of the Superiority Theory occur in the Bible, in Plato and in Descartes;⁵⁰ and even in contemporary academics and popular philosophy, humor is still occasionally associated with an attitude of superiority. According to Roger Scruton, for example, humor lowers its object and humorous amusement can be seen as “attentive demolition”. In line with Scruton, this school within the philosophy of humor might put more emphasis on the disparagement of the object than the exaltation of the subject.⁵¹ Thus, the philosophical family of the Superiority Theory also includes what may be called the ‘Devaluation Theory’, which maintains that humor amounts to the amusement that one experiences in the devaluation or low estimation of an object, regardless of whether such devaluation simultaneously aggrandizes the subject.

Incongruity Theory

Proponents of the Incongruity Theory argue that the perception of an incongruity, a contradiction of our expectations or mental patterns, causes something to be funny. That is to say that incongruity is a necessary condition for any instance of humor. It is currently the most dominant explanatory theory in the philosophy and psychology of humor, and it has a long (though, as we have seen, not too dense) history, including the thoughts of Aristotle, James Beattie, Frances Hutcheson, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard.⁵² Kant, for instance, thought of humor as the violation of expectations: “In everything that is to excite

50 Morreall, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought,” 245; René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (Hackett Publishing, 1989), paras. 178–179; Plato, *Philebus* (Penguin Books Ltd, 1982), 48–50; C. D. C. Reeve, “Plato: Republic,” Hackett, Indianapolis, 2004, para. 5.452.

51 Roger Scruton and Peter Jones, “Laughter,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 56 (1982): 197–228.

52 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), pts. 2, 3; Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon [Mandeville’s] The Fable of the Bees: Carefully Corrected* (Baxter, 1750); James Beattie, “An Essay on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition,” *Essays*. William Creech, Edinburgh, 1776, 414–456; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Hackett Publishing, 1790), para. 54; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Idea*, ed. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 7th Edition (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), bk. I, sec. 13; Kierkegaard, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” 459–68.

a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”⁵³ Humor, the source of this laughter, that which “is to excite a lively convulsive laugh”, is thus constituted by contradicted expectations. Likewise, Kierkegaard conceptualizes the essence of humor, “the comical”, as the contradiction of an expectation. Throughout the history of the Incongruity Theory, various modifications have been suggested. Summing up this history, John Morreall contends that the thin version of the Incongruity Theory holds that “some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our standard mental patterns and normal expectations.”⁵⁴ Before I discuss and defend this theory in detail, let us first introduce the third of the canonical theories.

Release Theory

The exposition of the most prominent theories of humor would not be complete without the so-called ‘Release Theory’ (sometimes called the ‘Relief Theory’), which goes back to Lord Shaftesbury’s ‘An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor’ (1709):

[T]he natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and, whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers.⁵⁵

To put it in more modern words, the Relief Theory explains humor, and especially its physiological superstrate *laughter*, as a form of relief, releasing built-up tension from the human psyche. Thus, laughter is included in the

53 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, First Part, sec. 54.

54 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

55 Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, With a Collection of Letters*, 1790, 59.

same category as screaming, as a result of fear, and punching someone in the face, as a result of anger; such behavior is supposed to provide a degree of relief.⁵⁶

According to Dewey, suspense in comedy is of central importance. The common reaction to jokes (laughter) amounts to a cathartic response to the suspense upon which many jokes rely. Considering the typical beginning of a joke in stand-up comedy, namely the creation of expectations, laughter ensues at the conception of the punchline, when the suspenseful energy put into these expectations turns out to be misguided and is directed instead toward laughter. Laughter, hence, “marks the ending ... of a period of suspense, or expectation.”⁵⁷ With the dimension of misguided expectations, this theory may fit well within the Kantian Incongruity Theory.

Herbert Spencer, on the other hand, sees laughter as the relief of emotional energy that has been deemed inappropriate. Consider the following poem, by Harry Graham:

I had written to Aunt Maud
Who was on a trip abroad
When I heard she'd died of cramp,
Just too late to save the stamp.⁵⁸

One expects to respond to the poem with pity or a similar emotion, but this expectation turns out to be misguided. The superfluous energy of this emotion is then redirected toward laughter. Again, this emphasis

56 Although the contention that screaming relieves tension is commonly held in folk psychology and early psychotherapy, contemporary psychologists seriously doubt that this is the case. A. Furnham, E. Pereira, and R. Rawles, “Lay Theories of Psychotherapy: Perceptions of the Efficacy of Different ‘cures’ for Specific Disorders,” *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 2001): 77–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548500125641>.

57 John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion: I: Emotional Attitudes,” *Psychological Review* 1, no. 6 (November 1894): 558–59.

58 Harry Graham, *When Grandmama Fell Off the Boat: The Best of Harry Graham*, 2 edition (London: Sheldrake Press, 2009) (cited in Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”).

on misguided expectations sits well with the previously mentioned Incongruity Theory.

Perhaps the most well-known account in this tradition is the Freudian theory of humor, which emphasizes the dynamics between relief and repression. John Morreall exemplifies:

In telling a sexual joke or listening to one, we bypass our internal censor and give vent to our libido. In telling or listening to a joke that puts down an individual or group we dislike, similarly, we let out the hostility we usually repress. In both cases, the psychic energy normally used to do the repressing becomes superfluous, and is released in laughter.⁵⁹

What is meant by this ‘superfluity’ of energy is that the sudden release of repression leaves the repressive energy unused. This energy is then channeled toward the physiological media that facilitate laughter, such as the facial muscles and the vocal chords. Moreover, ‘repression’ – a key-concept in Freudian psychology or psychoanalysis – is the psychic force that prevents desires from becoming conscious and compels them to remain unconscious, for example due to trauma. Consequently, it follows that humor enables us to vent and make conscious our repressed desires.⁶⁰

Given the obsolescence of the mechanical and hydraulic psychology supporting this picture, as a result of which contemporary scholars reject the Release Theory, the picture can only be taken seriously if it is stripped from its far-fetched and faulty assumptions.⁶¹ Hence, the modest version of the Release Theory is defined accordingly: through laughter, humor releases built-up tension resulting from the frustration of a desire by (temporarily) stopping the repression of this desire.

59 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

60 Cf. Yue, *Exploration of Chinese Humor*, 410: “Humor [in Taoism] helps to promote emotional tranquility.”

61 For an overview of the numerous objections against the traditional Relief Theory, see: Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

Play Theory

In addition to the three canonical theories, John Morreall has put forward a fourth explanatory theory of the phenomenon of humor. This is the Play Theory. It draws on scientific insights into the evolutionary purpose of humor in primates and the role that humor takes in the development of a child's psyche and behavior. It is hypothesized that the primary function of humor in human beings is to create a safe space for play. Here, children can experiment with mechanisms involved in conflict situations in a quasi-aggressive yet friendly context; trust-building and social bonding can take place; and it enhances creative problem-solving. By showing signs of amusement through laughter (one particularly important play signal), the safe and harmless nature of the quasi-aggressive behavior is affirmed. Although Morreall's Play Theory serves as an intricate elaboration upon the evolutionary function and purpose of humor and laughter in development psychology, it is just that. It does not explicate the mechanism of humor itself in a philosophical way, that is, through the illumination of the necessary condition(s) for humorous manifestations. With regard to these necessary conditions, the Incongruity Theory remains superior in its explanatory force of the formal structure of humor.

1.4. Defense of the Incongruity Theory

If we wish to say what is at the heart of humor, illuminating its formal structure, the emphasis should be on the Incongruity Theory. For the sake of illustration, as a method for verifying the Incongruity Theory, let us consider some examples of incongruity in what is considered humorous, as well as some counterexamples supposedly devoid of incongruity. These examples need not be conceived as universally comical, since sense of humor is relative; a child may fail to find an old man's gallows humor funny while appreciating slapstick, which the old man may detest.⁶² This reinforces the supposition that the encounter with incongruity is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for finding something humorous.

Locating incongruity in humorous examples

In puns, incongruity manifests itself in the ambiguity of words. The comical dimension becomes apparent when we see that the intended meaning of the word in the given context diverges from the usual or *prima facie* meaning of the word. For example, the ambiguity of the following pun may be considered comical: "My ex still misses me. But her aim is steadily improving." The double meaning of the verb 'to miss' constitutes an incongruity between the initial reading of the first line (missing as feeling sadness toward no longer being able to enjoy the presence of someone) and the second reading of it with knowledge of the context of the second line (missing as failing to hit). Another form of humor, slapstick, manifests itself through the incongruity of senseless violence, defying social norms and expectations regarding respect, non-violence and general appropriate behavior. A pie thrown in another's face may be considered comical due to its opposition to norms of social behavior. Verbal irony consists in an incongruity between what an utterance appears to mean on a surface-level and what is actually meant, usually combined with the incongruity between

62 For the following examples, however, it should suffice to see how anyone can find the examples humorous.

the communicative behavior of the speaker and the basic axiom of linguistic communication prescribing that speakers (unambiguously) state what they mean.⁶³ The motoric movements of a clown are incongruous because they diverge from the normal motoric behavior of people. Given the numerous forms of humor, it is difficult to discuss at length the incongruity inherent to each form, but the same incongruity may be discerned in other forms, such as hyperbole, oxymoron, sarcasm, caricature, satire and gallows humor. Even anti-humor still preserves the dimension of incongruity in its defiance of common norms and conventions surrounding the practice of humor. These examples strongly suggest that humor is an experience of incongruity.

For potentially falsificatory (i.e., corroborative) purposes, consider some comical instances supposedly devoid of incongruity. An office worker suddenly exclaims: "I'm going to do a handstand one minute from now." This exclamation is unexpected and may have a humorous effect, but this is not the only instance of humor, for in sixty seconds she will do a handstand, completely in sync with her colleagues' expectations, and it will still be funny. How is this incongruous, if it does not break with expectations? Surely, this demonstrates, in opposition of Incongruity Theorists such as Immanuel Kant, that humor does not necessarily presuppose a contradiction of expectations;⁶⁴ yet it does presuppose another contradiction, in this case a contradiction of the norms dominating appropriate behavior within the office sphere.⁶⁵ Indeed, if the job involved

63 As a subcategory of humor, irony will not be given special attention, despite its centrality in the history of thought in general, especially in literature, and in postmodernity in particular. Still, I briefly touch upon the phenomenon of irony in Chapter 2, in the discussion of the Nagelian notion of the Absurd, and in Chapter 3, during the summation of examples of Humoristic Absurdism. In Chapter 5, the metamodern critique of irony and the post-ironic disposition are given attention. H. Paul Grice, Peter Cole, and Jerry Morgan, "Logic and Conversation," *Speech Acts*, 1975, 41–58.

64 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §54.

65 This also holds for jokes retold. The fact that we already know what is coming, with the punchline already in our anticipating mind, does not take away the incongruous nature of the joke. Despite the congruity between the mind's anticipation and the eventual punchline, the incongruity, manifested for example in the use of ambiguity or in the joke's violation of certain norms, remains intact.

(for some reason) doing handstands on a structural basis, and if this were part of the appropriate behavior in offices throughout the world, we would hardly consider a sudden handstand funny, let alone the announcement of it.

Another strategy for formulating counterexamples accentuates relatable humor. The associated hashtags, which we can find on many social media today, immediately spring to mind: #relatable, #accurate, #sotrue, #facts. Cited in Tim Fransen's recent book on the tragicomic nature of life, Jerry Seinfeld is taken to present a counterexample in this vein:

I will never understand why they cook on TV. I can't smell it. Can't eat it. Can't taste it. The end of the show they hold it up to the camera, 'Well, here it is. You can't have any. Thanks for watching. Goodbye.'⁶⁶

Other examples of so-called observational comedy (often accompanied by the cliché 'Have you ever noticed?') may serve the same purpose of debunking the Incongruity Theory. They are often perceived as *striking* and *accurate*, thus evoking a sense of recognition and relatability. According to Fransen, recognition may equally be a source of humor, as evidenced by such observational jokes; it follows that incongruity is not the sovereign origin of humor. In other words, incongruity is not a necessary condition for humor – or so it is concluded.⁶⁷

How does Incongruity Theory account for such relatable humor? There is an incongruity present in this kind of relatable humor after all. Indeed, the observation is funny due to the inherent absurdity of cooking shows, the incongruity manifested in the combination of the central purpose of gastronomy (to evoke a pleasurable experience of smell and taste) with a medium that omits these very senses. A similarly relatable observation without the incongruity would not be funny. Consider this

66 Jerry Seinfeld, *Seinlanguage*, 1st ptg. edition (New York; Toronto: Bantam, 1995).

67 Tim Fransen, *Het leven als tragikomedie: over humor, kwetsbaarheid en solidariteit* (Lemniscaat, 2019), 96–97.

observation: ‘Have you ever noticed how people in the office go to the coffee machine, put their cup under the machine, push whichever button corresponds to their desired type of coffee and, as soon as their cup is filled, walk back to their desk and drink their coffee?’ In response, the reader of this paper must either think that I am making a horrible attempt at trying to be funny or conclude that there is something deliberately missing for the observation to be humorous – *incongruity*.⁶⁸ In defense of my self-esteem as a comedian, I am advocating the latter conclusion. (And even if one dares to say that this is indeed funny, it is only so because it is read as a form of antihumor, breaking with the conventions of humor itself.)

The list of affirmative examples and counterexamples and according localizations of incongruity is virtually inexhaustible. The amount of time, energy and words that I can put into this paper, in contrast, is exhaustible.⁶⁹ Because I cannot continue discussing possible counterexamples endlessly, I consider the burden of proof shifted to opponents of the Incongruity Theory. Beyond the simple advice to go and crack a variety of jokes as a form of fieldwork on the reader’s part, I recommend the entry on humor in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, as well as the sources mentioned in the chapter on Incongruity Theory, for more examples of (the presence or lack of) incongruity in humor.⁷⁰

Still, highlighting the cognitive dimension of humor, this theory has difficulties distinguishing amusement in the face of incongruity from other experiences of incongruity. Why, when our expectations are contradicted, are we sometimes amused and sometimes saddened or horrified? The

68 Admittedly, contrary to the above formulation, the disjunction is not exclusive. One may draw the relevant conclusion while upholding one’s adverse opinion about my comedian skills.

69 This contrast between on the one hand the exhaustibility of time, energy and words at my disposal and on the other hand the endless list of possible counterexamples is in itself a striking example of the dissolution of ultimate resolution that marks the Absurd. No matter how many counterexamples I debunk, the possibility of alternatives persists. Consequently, it would be a mistake to envisage the proper defense of an account of humor as ultimately conclusive, for *there is no ultimate resolution*. This Absurdist insight will become especially clear in the second chapter, when I explicate the notion of the Absurd.

70 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

affective side of the coin remains beyond the grasp of Incongruity Theorists. It is important to note, however, that affective explanation of the humorous experience is not only beyond the grasp of Incongruity Theorists, but beyond the grasp of *any* humor theorist. Neither superiority nor relief explains why we experience mirth instead of something else (e.g., disgust, sadness). Later on, I return to the question of distinguishing between humorous and non-humorous amusement.

Poles of humorous incongruity

Those who accept the precedent argumentation may, as a result, accept the Incongruity Theory, yet still demand further clarification regarding the poles of the incongruity. Between which kinds of things does humor presuppose an incongruity? As I have noted earlier, Incongruity Theorists have characterized the humorous incongruity as a contradictory duality of expectation and outcome. This characterization works especially well for stand-up comedy, in which comedians often make use of a technique that starts with a set-up, which provides the audience with expectations, whereupon the comedian finishes off with a punchline, thereby breaking with the audience’s expectations. Such examples of comedy are then universalized into a theory that highlights the incongruity between *expectation* and *outcome*. As we have seen in a couple of examples, this characterization is mistaken. Some things are funny in spite of their being expected; and jokes retold may count on an equal amount of laughter – and this is not always a matter of forgetfulness on the audience’s part.

In substitution of this obsolete duality, I frame the incongruity as somewhat broader than expectation and outcome. A more accurate description, in my view, is this: humor springs from the contradiction of a *norm*. That is to say that some kind of norm (e.g., social, grammatical, logical) is violated whenever humor occurs. Being a normative notion, ‘expectation’ can even be subsumed under the notion of ‘norm’, thereby explaining the structure of stand-up comedy in a manner that barely deviates from the expectation–outcome theory.

In spite of the vastness of the scholarly literature on the intricacies involving the notion of a ‘norm’, brevity is paramount here. In most abstract terms, ‘norm’ refers to what ought to be. This “ought” is central to the formal structure of humor. Consider the definition of ‘norm’ laid down in the Oxford Dictionary:

A norm is a rule for behaviour, or a definite pattern of behaviour, departure from which renders a person liable to some kind of censure. In this sense there are grammatical norms, and norms of etiquette, as well as moral norms.⁷¹

As stated above, the contradicted norm in humor can be grammatical (e.g., in deliberate gibberish), but there are also norms of logic that are prone to violation in humor (e.g., in non sequiturs). In puns and word-play, semantic norms may be also contradicted, through the violation of what a word normally means in a particular instance (e.g., in puns and word-play).⁷² What is more, social conventions such as etiquette may just as well be the victim in humor (e.g., in a scene of a messy feast at a Michelin restaurant). People and things may appear to be funny through the contradiction of their defining functions or roles (e.g., a clown lacking the capability to be funny, or Duchamp’s dysfunctional urinal). And again, even the norms of humor itself can be violated to a humorous effect (e.g., omitting a punchline to a joke). Finally, although many might consider it abject and not funny in the least, the violation of moral norms may also be considered humorous, as demonstrated by the notorious dead-baby jokes.⁷³ This summation is inevitably incomplete, but I hope that the basic meaning of ‘norm’ as an inexorable part of humor’s incongruity is sufficiently clear. Those with more expertise regarding the notion of ‘norm’ may embark upon further explication of the notion elsewhere, but there is no room for such anatomy beyond the basic chassis of humor.

71 Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, UK, 2005), 255.

72 Recall the joke relying on the ambiguity of the verb ‘to miss’.

73 Alan Dundes, “The Dead Baby Joke Cycle,” *Western Folklore* 38, no. 3 (1979): 145–157.

The object of the humorous contradiction is clear now, whereas the *subject* is not. What is it that contradicts a norm? At the other end of the duality, it is unclear what constitutes the incongruity. The contradiction of a norm may occur in an event, but also in a speech act or in a hypothetical situation. As in previously discussed dualities, we may reduce this side of the duality to “reality” or “outcome”. The most abstract of thinkers may even contend that it is an “is” (including hypotheticals) that contradicts an “ought”, but I do not wish to base the pivotal argument of this paper upon such abstruseness.⁷⁴ By lack of an ultimately satisfying notion, I present an imperfect working definition of the condition of incongruity, based upon previous accounts of incongruity: humor is constituted by an incongruity, such that the presentation of (a hypothetical) reality contradicts a norm.

The insufficiency of incongruity

It has already become evident from the widespread revulsion against dead-baby jokes that one need not find the contradiction of a norm humorous; on the contrary, violation of a norm can sometimes count on emotional reactions quite contrary to the sensation of mirth. How do we distinguish amusement from other experiences of incongruity?

Regarding the insufficiency of incongruity, James Beattie, arguably the first scholar to analyze humor as a response to incongruity, pointed out that incongruity can be met with humorous amusement, but not necessarily so. Humor is only one way of responding to incongruity. One may only come up with the most commonplace instances of disappointment, recognize the incongruity between anticipation and outcome that is an indispensable component of disappointment and see how incongruity in itself cannot suffice for something to be comical. Contrary to disappointment, the

74 Cf. William Hazlitt, “On Wit and Humour,” *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, 1819, 1: “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps: for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.”

incongruity encountered in humorous cases arouses, as we have already stated, some kind of amusement.⁷⁵

Since Beattie's emphasis on the insufficiency of incongruity, many philosophers have presented (often almost tautological) appendices to the incongruous condition constitutive of humor, including Beattie himself:

[T]hat pleasing emotion or sentiment whereof Laughter is the external sign [...] is an uncommon mixture of relation and contrariety, exhibited, or supposed to be united, in the same assemblage. If again it be asked, whether such a mixture will always provoke laughter [...], my answer is [that it] will always, or for the most part, excite the Risible Emotion, *unless when the perception of it is attended with some other emotion of greater authority.*⁷⁶ (my italicization)

In other words, incongruity is perceived as humorous only if the risible sensation (i.e., mirth) is not overshadowed by other emotions. A similar account is given by William Hazlitt:

Tears may be considered as the natural and involuntary resource of the mind overcome by some sudden and violent emotion, before it has had time to reconcile its feelings to the change of circumstances: while laughter may be defined to be the same sort of convulsive and involuntary movement, occasioned by mere surprise or contrast (*in the absence of any more serious emotion*), before it has time to reconcile its belief to contrary appearances.⁷⁷ (my italicization)

While this strategy may turn out to be the best that we have, it is scarcely helpful as a criterion for distinguishing humor from other perceptions of incongruity. For the question remains: when and why is the risible sensation driven out of the experience of incongruity? Why are serious emotions absent in the humorous experience? We continue to be in need of

75 Beattie, "An Essay on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition."

76 Beattie, 682.

77 Hazlitt, "On Wit and Humour," 1.

a criterion in order to provide a satisfactory answer to these questions. Are there more fruitful criteria that we can distil from the scholarly literature on humor?

The resolutionary condition

Relatively recently, less trivial additions have been suggested by some Incongruity Theorists who argue that humor needs the *resolution* of incongruity, not just incongruity.⁷⁸ Thomas Schultz (1976) and Jerry Suls (1972, 1983), for instance, argue that humor consists in the amusement that is inherent to a kind of puzzle-solving in which an apparent incongruity is resolved.⁷⁹ This is what it means to "get" a joke. For instance, get this:

Calibri and Comic Sans walk into a bar.

"Get out of here!" shouts the bartender. "We don't serve your type!"

When we get this joke, it makes sense to us. The recognition of the double meaning of the word 'type' makes it fit into a conceptual schema, resulting in some kind of congruity after all. After all, the joke would not work if we replaced 'type' with a non-ambiguous synonym:

Calibri and Comic Sans walk into a bar.

"Get out of here!" shouts the bartender. "We don't serve your font!"

78 Cf. "Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript by Soren Kierkegaard, 1941 | Online Research Library: Questia," 67: "The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction... The comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by *having in mind the way out*, which is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic apprehension sees the contradiction and *despairs of a way out.*" (my italicization) In this passage, Kierkegaard may be read as an early proponent of the additional criterion of resolution into the picture of incongruity.

79 T. Schultz, "A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humor," in *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*. (New York: Wiley, 1976); Jerry M. Suls, "A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis," *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* 1 (1972): 81-100; Diana Pien and Mary K. Rothbart, "Incongruity and Resolution in Children's Humor: A Reexamination," *Child Development* 47, no. 4 (1976): 966-71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1128432>.

Of course, one may find this example funny, but that is only because one understands the use of the word 'font' in a conceptual schema that includes the previous version of the joke. Thus, the incongruity can be solved after all, with the synonymous relation between 'font' and 'type' in mind.

Although resolution may add a specific touch to the joke, perhaps in terms of additional amusement in recognition of the ingenuity of its architectural structure, it is not crucial to humor. In order to call the essentiality of resolution into question, consider the following examples, demonstrating the possibility of *humor as mere incongruity*, that is to say, without the resolutionary dimension.

Many of my readers may vividly recall the 'Ministry of Silly Walks', a famous sketch by Monty Python. In this imagined ministry, all employees walk in a silly, if not hilarious, fashion. Surely, the incongruity of the Ministry of Silly Walks may be placed in a conceptual scheme in which the Ministry highlights the supposedly kafkaesque nature of modern state bureaucracy, but this does not resolve the incongruity. It is, in the first and foremost place, the nonsensical nature and the motoric anomaly of such silly walks – the *absurdity* of them – that makes the episode so risible.

Another example of humor as mere incongruity is an actor's sudden break of character. Imagine a character who appears, throughout the movie, as the typical idiot, with the associated physiognomy and pose, dropping dumb remarks and undertaking certain actions without the proper deliberation. All of a sudden, mid-movie, this character manifests a salient anomaly. With a lucid look on his face, he makes a brilliant observation, using the most sophisticated vocabulary, only to return to his default state of idiocy. In returning to this state, it is clear that his idiocy has not been a façade, behind which he hides his intelligence. His sudden brilliance is simply inexplicable. Despite the absence of an explanatory resolution, many would regard such an incongruity as funny.

The final example deals, once again, with antihumor. A proponent of the resolutionary dimension may claim that it is exactly the point of antihumor that its jokes do not make sense. To put it oxymoronically, it is

in not making sense that it makes sense. This analysis, however, confuses two domains, the confusion of which is summed up in the oxymoron. Indeed, antihumor violates the conventions in comedy, and in doing so, it affirms the most fundamental norm of comedy, namely to violate norms. By violating humor's conventions, antihumor upholds humor's central criterion. But how can this be called a resolution of incongruity? Clearly, the incongruity is not resolved, because the contradiction of the specific norm is not resolved by the resolution, for the latter is only meta-resolution. One cannot recognize the humor in antihumor without maintaining the incongruity, for if someone attempts to resolve the incongruity in antihumor, the joke goes right over her head.⁸⁰ In conclusion, the resolutionary dimension does not appear to be a necessary condition for humor, although it may be widely appreciated as a special ingredient to top off a joke.⁸¹

Still, the demand for extra criteria remains pressing, for we need to have the conditions for the possibility of humor in order to see whether the phenomenon of the Absurd is adequately prone to humoristic apprehension. Unfortunately, I cannot provide these conditions here, for it is too complex and still too obscure a subject for philosophers and psychologists today. Hopefully, future research will illuminate what is now obscure. For now, I contend, in a rather Beattian fashion, by lack of informative alternatives, that humor consists in *the amusing experience of incongruity*.

80 A similar argument may be given with respect to non sequiturs, which by definition lack resolution, since the conclusion of this kind of joke *does not follow*.

81 Cf. Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 14: "If resolution means finding the correct solution to a problem, incongruity is never completely resolved. To perceive humor is to perceive an oxymoron. A tension between the incongruous domains always remains because the "resolution" is always spurious – never legitimate. [...] [T]here can be no resolution of the kind one expects in a problem of algebra, geometry, or even physical science."

1.5. Relevance of relief and devaluation

If we wish to integrate other theories into a more complex picture of humor, Relief Theory may be said to explain a significant portion of the psychophysiological effect of humor. It is a commonplace reason for people to go to a comedy night: laughter, they say, relieves tension. There is, however, no obvious reason to think of relief as a formal characteristic of humor; it appears to be more an effect than a cause. Relief Theory describes the wrong end of the mechanism, namely the psychophysiological effect of humor, or perhaps even the effect of its unfaithful partner, *laughter*, instead of providing an explanation of the formal structure that precedes and brings about the relieving affect.

Returning to the relevance of the Superiority Theory, the notion of superiority may serve as an explanation for some forms of humor, but not all. Think for example of puns. It is hard to imagine how a pun exhibits feelings of superiority toward words, meanings or language in general. To assert, alternatively, that puns are born from a superiority over others in terms of linguistic ingenuity would be circular, since it presupposes that one gets the joke, the getting of which is the source of one's feeling of superiority. What is more, feelings of superiority may even be accounted for by the Incongruity Theory, by reference to the ascription of incongruity to the object in relation to certain norms, standards or expectations. One mocks another's moronic misunderstanding of logic because it is incongruous with logocentric ideals that are supposedly more emanated in oneself. Still, as humor has an important social function, Superiority Theory may highlight parts of the social mechanisms involved in humor, but it has no place in the formal structure of humor.

Superiority Theory, or rather a slightly modified version of it, explains in part what humor does with the *object* of humor. The modification is motivated by the recognition that Superiority Theory focuses too much on effect of humor on its *subject*, instead of the effect on its *object*. Indeed, the emphasis ought to be on the devaluation of the object rather

than the exaltation of the subject. There is always a victim in humor. Of course, the object meant here is not the incongruity, for it is by exposing an incongruity that one devalues something and therefore it cannot be the incongruity that is devalued. Rather, the devalued object of humor is the entity that violates a norm. To sum up, the *violation* constitutes the incongruity, which is the object of humor, while the devaluation applies to the *violation* of the norm.

But what about exceeded expectations? Is it not funny when someone or something violates an expectation by being far superior to the norm? Consider an athlete who is expected to finish first on the 100m. He is the absolute favorite. To no one's surprise, he wins the race, but, beyond winning the race, he crosses the finish line in exactly five seconds, thereby nearly halving the world record. Surely, my astonishment, as a spectator, induces the experience of humor; I find it comical that this athlete so radically violates my expectations. The incongruity between norm and reality is evident, but where is the devaluation in this case? Do we regard the athlete as inferior? Quite the contrary, it seems. Hence, I see no other option than to modify the already modified version of the Superiority Theory – i.e., the Devaluation Theory – into an account that remains hardly informative as an explanatory theory of humor: humor may result in object devaluation, when the object underperforms according to a standard; conversely, object provaluation may occur as a result of humor, when the object overperforms according to a standard, which itself then devalues accordingly.⁸²

82 Notice, however, how the concepts of 'underperformance' and 'overperformance' bear a structure of incongruity, between performance and the associated standard. This reinforces the Incongruity Theory once again.

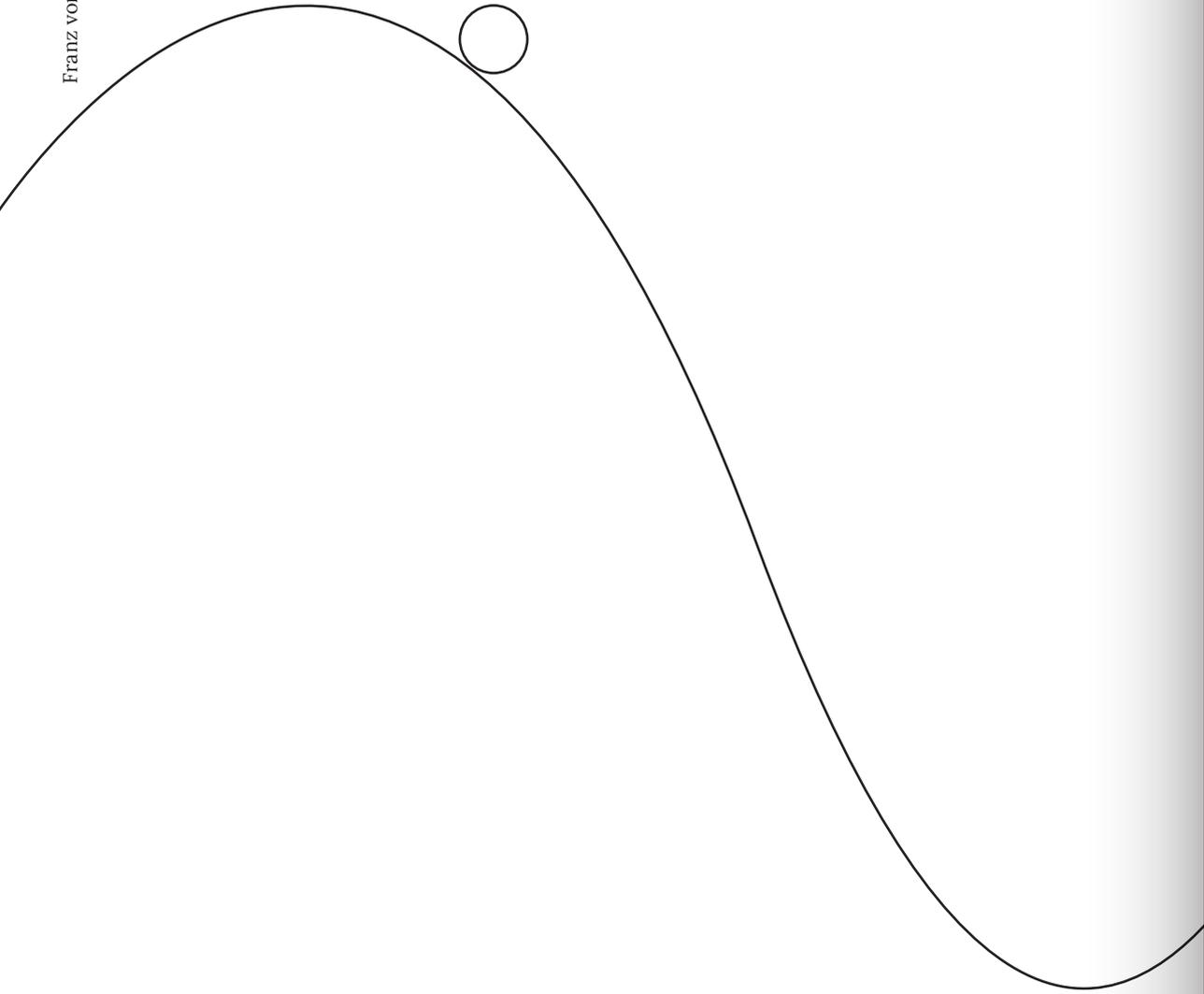
1.6. Operational definition

Still, it should be acknowledged that there remains widespread disagreement within the philosophy of humor. The most pervasive consensus is that, after centuries of philosophical and psychological investigation, there is still no consensus regarding the question: what is humor? Humor remains an enigmatic phenomenon, insubordinate to our theoretical definitions. However, as we have seen in the previous argumentation, these definitions remain useful – and I have tried to utilize the different theories in the best way possible, in order to make the main argument tenable from what we know to be true in the philosophy of humor.

In conclusion, we have arrived at a working definition of humor, including its most essential conditions. Humor is the amusing experience of incongruity between norm and (the presentation of) reality, which may devalue the underperforming subject of violation (reality) or the overperformed object of violation (norm), and may provide some degree of tension-relief to the experiencer of humorous amusement by lifting related desires from repression.



Franz von Stuck (1920), *Sisyphus*



The Notion of the Absurd

What is the Absurd? This chapter explores, in an evaluatively neutral sense, the meaning of the notion of the Absurd, largely in the sense that has been put forward by Albert Camus, whom we may call the ‘Father of Absurdism’. This does not necessarily mean that the Absurd can be experienced as an evaluatively neutral phenomenon, but at least it can be described as such, because, as Camus says, the “feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd.”¹ Accordingly, the issue of Humoristic Absurdism, as the commitment to a pattern of humorous responses to the absurd condition, is postponed until we have a firm grasp of the condition itself. This is paramount to the argument as a whole, because – quite obviously – we should know what

1 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 32.

the object of our responses is if we are to propose a pattern of responses at all. So, before explicating the horror or delight that we may experience in the face of the Absurd, we should ask what constitutes the Absurd.

2.1. Camusian notion: meaninglessness

Like in logic, absurdity refers to a relational phenomenon.² That is to say that the Absurd cannot consist in an atomic proposition, but must rely upon a conjunction of propositions. More specifically, it is a *confrontation* of facts. Camus explains the notion of absurdity:

There are absurd marriages, challenges, rancours, silences, wars and even peace-treaties. For each of them the absurdity springs from a comparison. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.³

In other words, the relational structure that is characteristic of the Absurd is one of *incongruity*. The conjunction of facts manifested in the Absurd is mutually contradictory; they are irreconcilably at odds. In spite of both facts being true, there is no way out of this absurdity. We cannot escape the absurd conundrum, nor can we apply a logical inference from this

2 With regard to absurdity in logic, think for example of the method of *reductio ad absurdum*.

3 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 33.

contradiction in order to demonstrate that either of the premises must be false.

Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus investigates the notion of the Absurd. For him, the Absurd consists in the irreconcilable conflict between the innate desire for ultimate meaning and the absence of ultimate meaning in a universe that is indifferent to our existence. More specifically, the Absurd resides, according to Camus, in the fact that without an Afterlife death renders our existence ultimately meaningless. Because of the necessity of death, the question of the possibility of a chosen death is raised, at the very beginning of his 1942 essay: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”⁴ The pressing question of the possibility, or more precisely the option, of death can be rephrased: if existence is ultimately meaningless, why bother existing? Perhaps suicide is the only logical consequence of this bare fact of existence.

Which facts stand in contradiction with each other in the Absurd? Although the Absurd is at the heart of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus refrains from providing an extensive explanation of the notion in an argumentative manner. Many examples come to the fore, which demonstrate the absurdity of human existence, not only in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but also in his literary works. In spite of all his efforts to illustrate the Absurd, his conceptualization of the Absurd gets scarcely further than the following definition: “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need [*appel humain*] and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁵ Put differently, the Absurd is constituted by an incongruity between an insuperable desire, need or appeal in human beings and a reality that inevitably frustrates this *appel humain*.

4 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

5 Camus, 31–32; cf. Camus, 50: “It is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.”

Possible reasons for his resistance against further explication may involve the obvious nature of the notion or the inexplicability of the human condition itself. The hypothesis of self-evidentiality is easily falsified with a short glance over the vast disagreement over the notion among scholars.⁶ Nor is it plausible that the inexplicability inherent in the human condition renders the notion insubordinate to philosophical analysis, for the meta-existential is not identical to the existential. Indeed, if the notion of inexplicability were inexplicable, and if absurdity were an idea that cannot be apprehended, the very concept of contradiction would be incoherent and unintelligible. Concluding that there is room for further explanation, the question arises: what is the most tenable explanation of the notion of the Absurd? What is insuperably desired, and how is this desire frustrated?

2.2. Tolstoyan notion: mortality

One way to interpret the absurdity of which Camus speaks in *The Myth of Sisyphus* can be referred to as the ‘Tolstoyan understanding of the Absurd’. In his autobiographical *Confession*, Leo Tolstoy reflects on the existential condition as rendered absurd by our inevitable mortality:

If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything?⁷

Similarly, in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the central question with which the dying Ivan wrestles concerns the ultimate meaninglessness of his life in virtue of his impending death, which supposedly nullifies every worldly

6 Steven Crowell, “Existentialism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/existentialism/>.

7 Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans. David Patterson, 1983, 30.

meaning. With the prospect of non-existence, existence is deprived of its meaningful character, if we demand that there needs to be some kind of ultimacy to this meaning.⁸ This has less to do with the brevity of our existence, for a lifespan of a million years still holsters an impending death, than with the lifespan's inexorable limit.⁹ It is the fact *that* we die, not *when* or *where* or *how*, which renders life meaningless according to Absurdists in the Tolstoyan tradition, under which Albert Camus is sometimes categorized.¹⁰ But how exactly does death annul the meaning of life?

In a more philosophically profound analysis, Thomas Nagel expands upon (what I call) the Tolstoyan philosophy of the Absurd, investigating the supposed nullification of meaning through the fact of finitude. Let us call his version of the Tolstoyan argument the 'argument from the incompleteness of justificatory chains'. According to Absurdists in this vein, every justification of a particular act is incomplete, because further justification for any given reason can be demanded. If someone eats a healthy meal, she may contend that it is because she wants to be in good shape; if we ask why she wants to be in good shape, she might reply that she wants to develop into a better athlete; if we continue to ask why, she might say that she aims to win a tournament. The chain of reasons may continue forever, until she is left without further reasons, sighing: "I don't know. Just because..." Nagel summarizes dramatically:

[B]ecause we are going to die, all chains of justification must leave off in mid-air: one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career – but to what final end? All of it is an elaborate journey leading nowhere. (One will also

8 Cf. Tolstoy, 34–35: "What will come of what I do today and tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?"

Expressed differently, the question may be: Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything or do anything? Or to put it still differently: Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?"

9 Cf. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716–17.

10 Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

have some effect on other people's lives, but that simply reproduces the problem, for they will die too.)¹¹

For a justificatory chain to be conclusive, it should come to an end somewhere, yet for every single purpose one may ask: but why pursue *that*? All additional reasons may face further questioning; and extending the justificatory demand beyond the limits of our lifespan, no chain of justification can be complete. Thus, each and every justification is annulled by the absence of finality in its justificatory chain.

In opposition to this argument, it may be said that not every justification demands further justification.

[L]ife does not consist of a sequence of activities each of which has as its purpose some later member of the sequence. Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life, and whether the process as a whole can be justified has no bearing on the finality of these end-points.¹²

Take the example of one's unconditional love for another human being. Why does a mother bring her son to school? Because she cares about his intellectual development. This concern is grounded in a care for his well-being. Why does she care about his well-being? Because she loves him. If we asked why she should love him, the question itself would sound absurd in the ears of a loving mother. Love is self-justifying. Hence, the justificatory chain for bringing one's child to school comes to an end when one supplies the reason of love.

If the Tolstoyan Absurdist insists on the supplementation of reasons, his argument still runs into fundamental errors. The recurring demand

11 Nagel, "The Absurd," 717.

Notice how Tolstoy and Nagel make strikingly parallel remarks on the equally decaying impact that one has on other people. Of course, the extension of purposes toward future generations' lives only delays the nullification; it does not nullify the essential nullification. Eventually, everything upon which one may have an impact will be no more.

12 Nagel, 717.

for further justification results in an infinite regress, ironically rendering not only *mortal* life absurd, but *immortal* life equally so:

Even if someone wished to supply a further justification for pursuing all the things in life that are commonly regarded as self-justifying, that justification would have to end somewhere too. If *nothing* can justify unless it is justified in terms of something outside itself, which is also justified, then an infinite regress results, and no chain of justification can be complete. Moreover, if a finite chain of reasons cannot justify anything, what could be accomplished by an infinite chain, each link of which must be justified by something outside itself?¹³

If we repeat within the context of immortality the Tolstoyan cry – *to what final end?* – we ought to admit that purposive finality is something that lies no more in immortal lives than in mortal lives. With the infinite regress of extrinsic justification, our ultimate end would remain at an infinite distance, never really attainable. Since the antithesis of a *finite* justificatory chain (connected to *mortality*), that is, an *infinite* justificatory chain (connected to *immortality*), would not solve the problem of justification and eradicate life's absurdity, mortality cannot be the foundation of the Absurd.

Besides, if life were absurd due to its finitude, then why would Camus take the *eternal* condemnation of Sisyphus as allegorical to the human condition? As an allegory of the Absurd, the myth of Sisyphus makes no sense when the Absurd is linked to human finitude, for Sisyphus had famously been condemned to a task *repeated through eternity*: to roll a rock toward the Tartaric summit, only to see it roll back down, which ushers in the repetition of his task. In this sense, Sisyphus is inextricably linked to eternity and endlessness, indeed manifesting the property of

13 Nagel, 717–18.

immortality through the ceaselessness of his striving. In other words, there is no prospect of non-existence that renders Sisyphus' task pointless.

Keeping in mind the overwhelming evidence against the relevance of finitude to the absurdity of life, how is it that Camus still claims that death is “the most obvious absurdity”? Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is continually implied that the prospect of death is at least not wholly irrelevant for the absurd condition.¹⁴ What is more, this is not merely a characteristic of this particular publication, fluctuating in the wider span of his oeuvre; quite the contrary, death has remained a predominant motif both in his other philosophical essays, such as *Nuptials* (1938), *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (1960) and *A Happy Death* (1971), and in his major literary works, *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947) and *The Fall* (1956).¹⁵ As we will see later, this emphasis on death has nothing to do with mortality per se, but with the absence of an Afterlife.

2.3. Nagelian notion: trivial commitments

Let us turn to a more promising account, a more recent characterization of the absurd human condition, put forward by Thomas Nagel in ‘The Absurd’ (1971). After refuting a few embryonic accounts such as the Tolstoyanism discussed in 2.2, Nagel continues to draw up a more mature picture of absurdity, locating it in the incongruity between on the one hand our serious engagement with life and our commitments and on the other hand the possible perspective from nowhere in particular which calls into question the grounds for this engagement. In more detailed exposition, Nagel explains:

14 E.g. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 108.: “[Sisyphus] hatred of death”.

15 Albert Camus, “Nuptials,” *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 1968, 90; Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012); Albert Camus, *Happy Death* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012); Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (Vintage, 2012), 29; Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012); Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012); Albert Camus, *The Fall* (Penguin UK, 2013).

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.¹⁶

Thus understood, the human condition is absurd due to the juxtaposition of subjective seriousness toward our commitments and the objective triviality of those commitments. While we cannot help but value the things that we value, that valuation is utterly frivolous from an objective point of view. In other words, the Absurd is born, according to the Nagelian school of Absurdism, from “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.”¹⁷

Nagel’s account of the Absurd has recently been refined by Bob Plant. The latter places special emphasis on the Absurd as an *incongruity*, terminologically linked to the Incongruity Theory, thereby paving the way for his own attempt at justifying a humoristic disposition to the Absurd.¹⁸ Citing Nagel with utmost carefulness, Plant expands upon the way in which the subjective engagement and the objective scrutiny are simultaneously manifested in the experience of the Absurd:

[W]hen we (objectively) ‘see ourselves from outside’, we do not completely abandon the subjective view. Seeing one’s own life in the context of (e.g.) human evolution or the history of Europe will foreground the contingency, relative insignificance and arbitrariness of one’s personal loves and likes, pleasures, pains and deepest

16 Nagel, “The Absurd,” 719.

17 Nagel, 718.

18 This attempt recurs in greater detail in the following chapter, in which I lay down a basic understanding of Humoristic Absurdism.

desires. That is, we will here perceive ourselves as ‘arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life’ [...] But taking this imaginative leap does not fundamentally ‘disengage us from [subjective] life’.¹⁹

That is to say that there would be no collision, no absurdity, if the objective perspective disengaged us from subjective life. Such radical disengagement would lead to indifference, thus annihilating the engagement that is constitutive of the Absurd. Conversely, our condition would not be absurd if we never took the backward step, always fully absorbed by our engagement. Therefore, both viewpoints are needed. For Nagelian Absurdists, both serious engagement and the backward step are present in the experience of the Absurd.²⁰

How, though, can there be irresolvable doubt, which “we know cannot be settled”, in the apprehension of the projects and actions to which we are committed, if justificatory chains “come repeatedly to an end within life”?²¹ It seems inconsistent, even hypocritical. As we have deduced from Nagel’s earlier arguments against Tolstoyan Absurdism, finality of justificatory end-points is possible within the finite domain of our mortal lives; there are reasons, such as the demands of love and the agonizing feeling of hunger, that we take to be sufficient for acting. This fact, acknowledged by Nagel, stands in stark contrast with the fundamental doubt regarding, from the backward positionality, the (apparently not-so-justified) ground upon which our serious commitments are built.

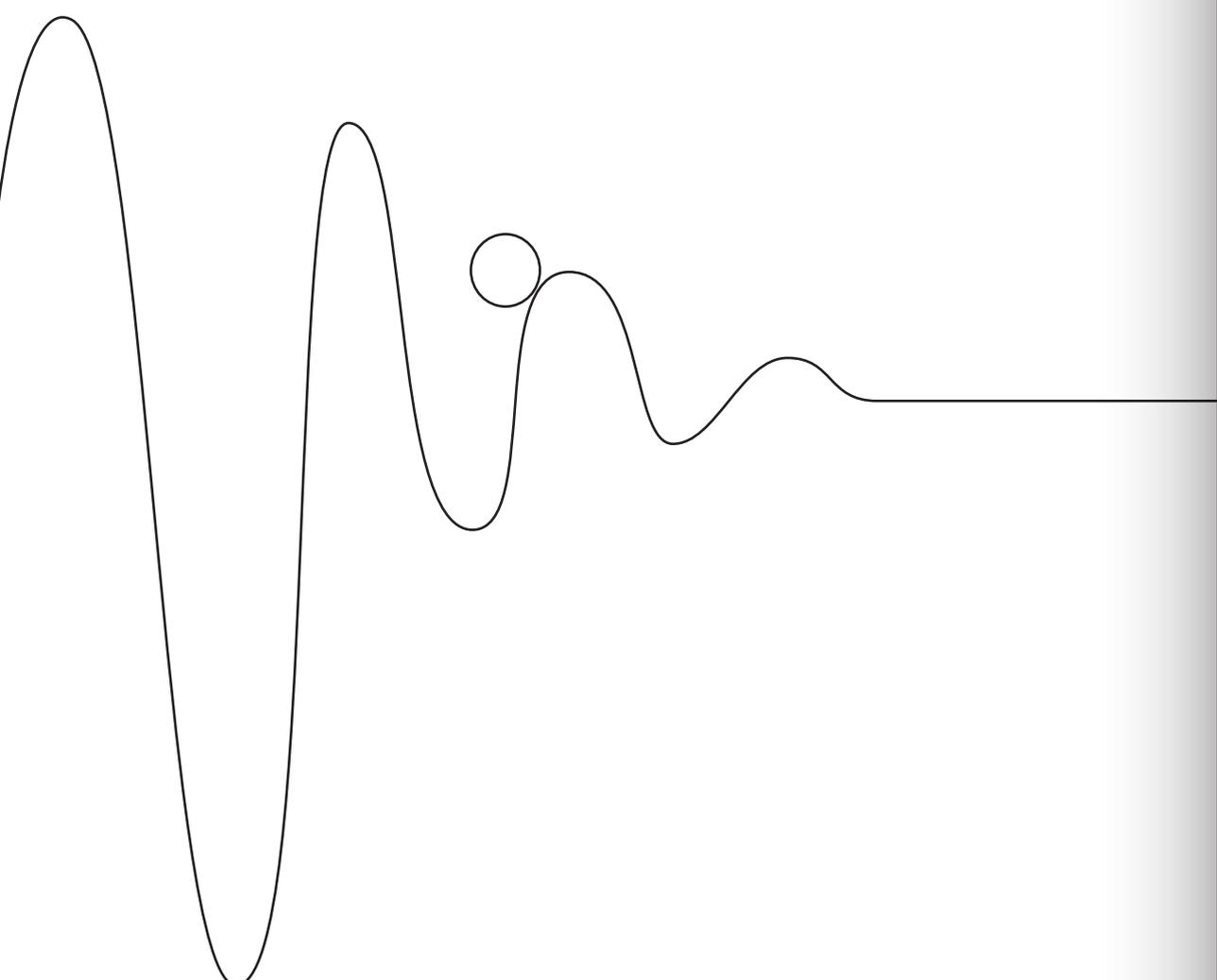
In addition to the full-blooded justification of commitments within life, it is important to note that justification does not operate in the realm of ‘nowhere in particular’, but from within the perspective of our individual constitution. After all, practical reasons and associated motivations emanate from desires, pro-attitudes, beliefs, dispositions or whatever one may discern within the realm of *subjectivity*. The view from nowhere in

19 Plant, “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter,” 121.

20 Plant, 128–29.

21 Nagel, “The Absurd,” 717, 719.

particular, the objective positionality that Nagel takes to be the wellspring of doubt, has no weight in these justificatory matters. Thus, the Nagelian account of the Absurd is inadequate. Even before he attempts to defend an ironic disposition to the Absurd, Nagel already fails to provide a convincing account of the absurd condition. In conclusion, the true irony is in the collision between the seriousness with which Nagel draws up this picture of absurdity and the insuperable possibility of refutation.



2.4. Modified notion: dissolution of resolution

We are in desperate need of an alternative account. In substitution of these accounts, I present a novel conceptualization of the Absurd, which revolves around what I call the ‘dissolution of resolution’.²² This idea is twofold. The first concerns the dissipation of an ultimate resolution, whether religious or secular, to our strivings. The second is intimately related to this dissipation, denoting the way in which resolutions possess an innate tendency to dissolve, continually ushering in the renewal of striving, both in the ubiquitous physiological strivings and in projects. In what follows, I elaborate upon my twofold account of the Absurd as the dissolution of resolution.

Existentialism and Absurdism, as well as other philosophies that include some element of existential absurdity, are deeply rooted in the modern uprooting of humanity out of the religious dogma of an Afterlife.²³ The dissipation of hope for post-life redemption is echoed by Camus, already in his early work, when he says that he does not “want to believe that death is the gateway to another life.” For him, death is “a closed door.”²⁴ Hence, he preaches a “conscious certainty of a death without hope.”²⁵ This lack of hope is founded upon the evidence of death as an end-point, given that all our living loved ones somehow seem radically absent after their death, and the absolute lack of reason to believe that existence continues after death, let alone one that provides an ultimate resolution to our strivings or those of our loved ones.

.....
 22 Notice the etymological link between ‘dissolution’ and ‘resolution’. Despite the fact that resolutions can be attained within the human condition, they tend to dissolve and we yearn for new resolutions. Thus, life seems to alternate being resolving and dissolving or, in other words, satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

23 Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan, “Neuroexistentialism: Third-Wave Existentialism,” in *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, ed. Gregg D. Caruso Owen Flanagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Crowell, “Existentialism.”

24 Camus, “Nuptials,” 76.

25 Camus, 90.

Revisiting the significance of death, which left us puzzled after the rejection of Tolstoyan Absurdism and the Camusian emphasis on death as “the most obvious absurdity”, the absurd dimension of our finitude must be understood in contrast to an Afterlife (life *after* death), not in contrast to the idea of an infinite continuation of this life (life *without* death) or to some doctrine of cyclical reincarnation for that matter. There is, in the eyes of Absurdists, no reason to believe in the transversion of an immortal soul into a life *after* death, let alone a life that bears salvation. Without the promise of heaven, there is no ultimate resolution to our strivings, no paradisiacal salvation awaiting us.

Admittedly, a great number of people continue to have a strong conviction that our earthly existence is a mere prologue to the eternal life. Indeed, Christians and Muslims together constitute a majority worldwide; and although not every single adherent of Christianity or Islam believes in Heaven and Hell, many certainly do. Secularization, in other words, should not be overstated. Besides, not even in within the philosophical tradition of Absurdism has there been consensus with regard to the ontological status of an Afterlife. Søren Kierkegaard, for example, arguably the pioneer of the idea of ‘the Absurd’, concluded from the irrational nature of existence – that is, the absence of ultimate ground – the imperative of a leap of faith, toward God and His paradisiacal kingdom, regardless of the absurdity of such a leap.²⁶

Nonetheless, the number of non-believers has become unparalleled in the last two centuries. It is in this development of secularization far from coincidental that existentialism, a movement intimately related to Absurdism, arose in the nineteenth century, no more than a few decades after the Age of Enlightenment, with its critical demand for conclusive

26 Søren Kierkegaard, *Gesammelte Werke*; 1 (Verlag nicht ermittelbar, 1933), 78–80; Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter: Kommentarbånd Til Gjentagelsen, Frygt Og B\æven, Philosophiske Smuler, Begrebet Angst, Forord*, vol. 4 (Gad, 1998), 384–96; Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII, Volume 8: Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 91–93.

foundations. This so-called ‘first-wave existentialism’, calling into question religious foundations that posit all kinds of ultimacies, includes Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.²⁷ This historiography, admittedly simplified, describes the development of the growing untenability of the religious dogma of a definitive Judgment, which determines whether one receives infinite bliss or infinite torment. Needless to say, this dogma belongs to the genus of belief in an ultimate resolution.

With regard to Kierkegaard, it should be noted that the prescribed leap of faith contradicts the very point of departure of Absurdism, by deifying the Absurd, equating it to God, the lack of Whom is essential to the absurdity of life. Camus deconstructs the way in which Kierkegaard renounces the Absurd:

Between the irrational of the world and the insurgent nostalgia of the absurd, he does not maintain the equilibrium. He does not respect the relationship that constitutes properly speaking the feeling of absurdity. Sure of being unable to escape the irrational, he wants at least to save himself from that desperate nostalgia that seems to him sterile and devoid of implication. But if he may be right on this point in his judgement, he could not be in his negation. If he substitutes for his cry of revolt a frantic adherence, at once he is led to blind himself to the absurd which hitherto enlightened him and to deify the only certainty he henceforth possesses, the irrational.²⁸

In spite of the staggering complexity and thought-provoking content of the Kierkegaardian disposition, the scope of this chapter prevents me from fleshing it out in detail. This includes the self-contradictory character of the leap of faith. The legitimacy of a disposition toward the Absurd is of later concern; it is the antecedent of any such disposition, namely the *notion* of the Absurd, that is epicentral in the present context. Thus, I concentrate on the fact that Kierkegaard’s notion of the Absurd includes

27 Caruso and Flanagan, “Neuroexistentialism.”

28 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 40.

the dissolution of ultimate resolution, whereas the subject of his imperative of faith in response to the Absurd is averted as a subsequent matter.

The dissolving process with regard to an ultimate resolution is not necessarily *historical*, transcending the feasible lifespan of any person in the history of mankind, nor is it necessarily a dissolution of a *religious* dogma. One may, for example, experience similar disenchantment as a result of the realization that there exists no ultimate resolution even within the domain of earthly existence. Thus, it is discovered, regardless of all the momentary resolutions that may, and not seldomly do, occur during a lifetime, that there is no prospect of a state in which one's striving has completely resolved, giving way to complete tranquility. The same holds for the promises of redemption given by commercial organizations, political ideologies, scientific disciplines and other institutions. Such institutions have been categorized under the primary antagonists of second-wave existentialism, which includes, according to many critics, Camus (as well as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir).²⁹ In short, the consciousness of Heaven's untenability does not constitute the sole domain in which the dissolution of ultimate resolution manifests itself, for the rejection of a "Heaven on Earth", to put it poetically, should be subsumed under the same idea.

The 'dissolution of resolution', on a more mundane scale, denotes the transience of resolutions. Every resolution, however meaningful and blissful, tends to dissolve over time, resulting in renewed striving. Physiological satiation forms one area in which resolution tends to dissolve. In moments of hunger, one desires food; and in the consumption of food, one's gustative striving resolves. Regardless of how much one manages to eat, however, it is only a matter of hours before the feeling of satiation gives way to a renewed feeling of hunger. Similarly, human beings are sometimes confronted with erotic inclinations, directed toward sex of one or another sort. After the act, one typically experiences a degree of sexual

29 Caruso and Flanagan, "Neuroexistentialism."

satisfaction; yet, it would be quite naïve to think that that would be the end of it. This type of desire, like hunger, re-enters the scene after a period of satiation. Because of this biological constitution, as human beings, we are stuck in a cycle of physiological striving without the prospect of ultimate satiation.

Of course, we do not lack reasons to indulge ourselves in sex and food from time to time. Such activities, to repeat Nagel's line of reasoning, belong to the genus of "things in life that are commonly regarded as self-justifying".³⁰ Hunger, in its subjective experience, is in itself sufficient for the subject to take away his feeling of starvation. Moreover, with regard to both gustative and sexual striving, it is an indisputable fact that the rejection of satiation deteriorates one's condition, resulting for instance in sexual frustration and in the kind of agony that accompanies starvation. However, the absurd nature of arousal and hunger resides in the fact that their respective aims (sexual satisfaction and gustative satiation) tend to dissolve and are substituted by new hunger and new arousal. They lack, in short, ultimate satiation.

This cycle is visible not only in the domain of physiological satiation, but also in the domain of more meaningful projects. Human beings set goals for themselves. During a graduate study, one eagerly strives toward its final aim: graduation. This aim is divided into subsidiary goals – courses, which make up the academic curriculum. Upon completing the first course, one experiences a satisfactory feeling of success, which soon makes place for renewed zeal, which takes the second course as its focal point. Completion of this course in turn clears the floor for renewed striving, which is, like previous and subsequent strivings, subsidiary to this ultimate goal: graduation. Until graduation, the student is kept busy with this cyclical progression. The moment of graduation may be truly blissful and may continue to be meaningful throughout one's life. Still, one cannot help but think: "Now what?" Existential despair lurks in the post-graduation

30 Nagel, "The Absurd," 717.

void. During so-called *quarter-life crises*, fresh graduates yearn for new projects. It is hauntingly paradoxical that, like hunger, even the absence of striving constitutes a deprivation. With ennui lurking, most people would not be able to maintain a sense of happiness without meaningful striving. One's purposes may then fail to be ultimate, for example in the withering euphoria that follows graduation; alternately, the ultimate purpose remains out of reach, as is the case, for example, with the inexhaustible demands of love. Either way, the Absurd manifests itself through our purposive strivings by dissolving all resolutions that we may achieve, leaving us ultimately insatiable.³¹

This notion of the Absurd ought not to be equivocated with the Buddhist or Schopenhauerian doctrine of insatiability as the existential condition, in spite of similarities. Not only do concepts like nirvana and ataraxia seem to offer a way out of the existential conundrum, thereby deviating from the idea of inescapability inherent to Absurdism;³² but the possibility of attaining satisfaction, however temporary, also renders the suggested characterization of the existential less pessimistic than its Buddhist and Schopenhauerian rivals. Thus, the Absurdist philosophy of the 'dissolution of resolution' is more pessimistic in its emphasis upon insurmountability, yet more optimistic in its accommodation of satisfaction and therefore in its relatively welcoming attitude toward striving.

31 Cf. John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (SUNY Press, 2012), 156: "the ever-present rift between the "real" experience of despairing failure and the "ideal" aspiration toward perfect communion with Being, Truth, Justice, and Goodness."

32 I justify the somewhat simplified conjunction of Buddhism and Schopenhauer's doctrine of the insatiable will by reference to the scholarly tradition of comparative analysis between the two, including Janaway's extensive remarks on the correspondence between these doctrines: "There is a remarkable correspondence, at least in broad terms, between some of the central Schopenhauerian doctrines and Buddhism: notably in the views that empirical existence is suffering, that suffering originates in desires, and that salvation can be attained by the extinction of desires. These three 'truths of the Buddha' are mirrored closely in the essential structure of the doctrine of the will." Christopher Janaway, "Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy," 1989, 28; cf. Bryan Magee, "The Philosophy of Schopenhauer," 1997, 14–15, 316–21; cf. Dorothea W. Dauer, "Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas," 1969.

Through this elaboration upon the dissolution of resolution, it becomes evident what the allegorical meaning of the myth of Sisyphus is. Indeed, my account is most obviously preferable to the previously discussed accounts when it comes to the Sisyphean dimension. In my reading, the myth of Sisyphus does make sense. The myth of Sisyphus signifies the eternal repetition of the same striving without ultimate resolution, which renders his task ultimately senseless.³³ If we wish to echo Camus in his imagination of Sisyphus as a happy human being, the reformulation should be as follows. Moving between striving and resolution, his condition is as happy as it can be. As Camus concludes his essay: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."³⁴

Needless to say, the present application of crucial terminology from the philosophy of humor, most notably *incongruity* and *resolution*, is a preparation for the next chapter, in which the theory of humor and the philosophy of the Absurd conjoin into a formulation of Humoristic Absurdism. As I have said at the beginning of this chapter, the Absurd is an incongruous relation between two insuperable facts of human existence. Which facts are at odds with each other here? Where is the incongruity? Essentially, the incongruity is in the conflict between the subject's indefinite strivings toward resolution and the absence of a definitive resolution.

The first and foremost question of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, confronting the reader with the option of suicide, can be answered along the same lines, without substantially diverting from Camus' approach. In response to the Absurd, suicide illegitimately poses an ultimate resolution. In so doing, it renounces one of the poles of the Absurd, by anticipating suicide as a resolution to the problem of meaninglessness at hand. One paradoxically aims to fulfil the desire for resolution by means of the eradication of its

33 The emphasis on the repetitive dimension of the allegory is also mentioned by Plant: Plant, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter," 118–19.

34 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 111.

source (i.e. one's mere being). In short, the reader of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and anyone at all who is confronted with the possibility of death from the premise of absurd existence, ought to reject suicide, on the grounds that it fabricates an escapist move toward a supposed ultimate resolution, thereby renouncing the basic veridicality of the Absurd.³⁵

2.5. Justificatory guideline for a disposition toward the Absurd

Generalized into a principal guideline for justifying a disposition toward the Absurd, this means that in order for an Absurdist disposition to be legitimate, it must contain an acknowledgement of the absurd human condition, including each of the elements that constitute this condition. In Camus' words, Absurdist should be "carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion".³⁶ Accordingly, it follows that they ought to recognize the *irreconcilability* as well as the *insurmountability* of the Absurd. Regarding the former, the incongruity manifested in the Absurd is an *irreconcilable* incongruity; life would not be absurd if there were a solution to the absurd condition. In addition to irreconcilability, both poles of the duality are *insurmountable*. As human beings, we are unable to shed the desire for ultimate resolution. If we were capable of doing away with such a desire, we would probably be *ataraxists*, for instance in the form of Pyrrhonists or Buddhists, but surely no Absurdist.³⁷ Likewise, the other side of the pole,

35 Although this formulation of the Absurd describes the way in which I understand the Absurd, at least within the context of this paper, the arguments for and against Humorous Absurdism, which I postulate in the following chapter, may also be applicable if one holds another conception of the Absurd, because the Absurd amounts, in all conceptions, to an *incongruity* between norm and reality, like the object of humor. One may hold another conception or even a plurality of conceptions. Still, the conceptualization of the Absurd as the dissolution of resolution remains the main target of the disposition inherent to Humorous Absurdism. Cf. Thom Hamer, "The Dissolution of Resolution. An Alternative to Nagelian Absurdism," *Unpublished*, 2019.

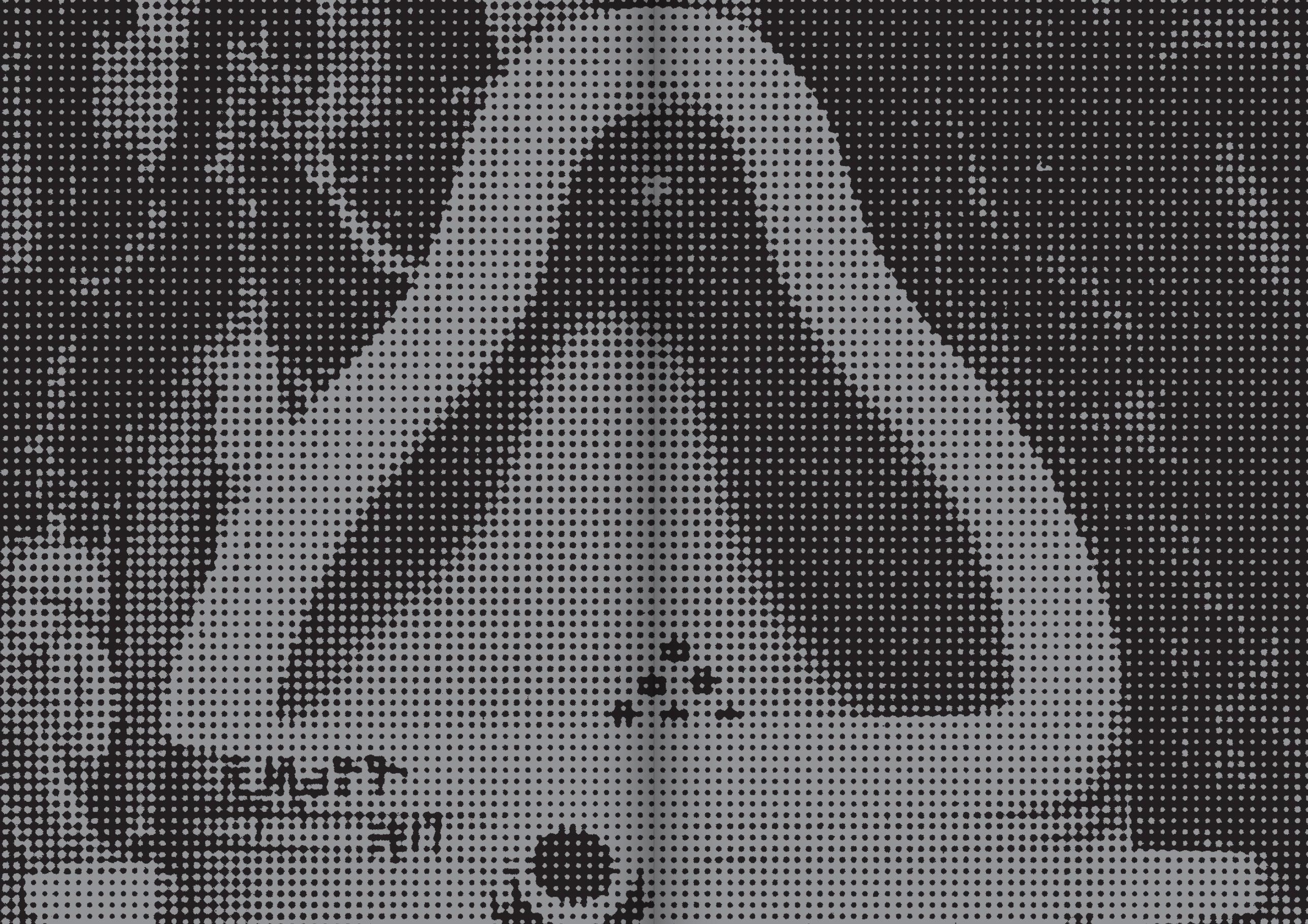
36 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

37 The implied definition of Absurdism, almost tautologically described as "the philosophy that recognizes the veracity of the absurd condition", is repeated at the beginning of the following chapter on Humorous Absurdism.

the absence of an ultimate resolution, is equally ineradicable. If we deemed ourselves capable of attaining the object of the aforementioned desire – ultimate resolution – we would be neither ataraxists nor Absurdist, for we would anticipate a final reconciliation between our desire for resolution and the outcome of reality, in this life or in the Afterlife, thus postulating a congruity in opposition to the incongruity inherent to the Absurd. Hence, if an Absurdist disposition is to be legitimate, it should not amount to a denial of or opposition to either of the poles constitutive of the Absurd; it should contain a stark recognition of the inescapable desire for ultimate resolution as well as the ineradicable absence of an ultimate resolution.³⁸ We ought to make sure, in short, that one "remains faithful to the commandments of the absurd."³⁹

38 Cf. Camus and O'Brien, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 34–35: "And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). Everything that destroys, conjures away, or exercises these requirements (and, to begin with, consent which overthrows divorce) ruins the absurd and devaluates the attitude that may then be proposed."

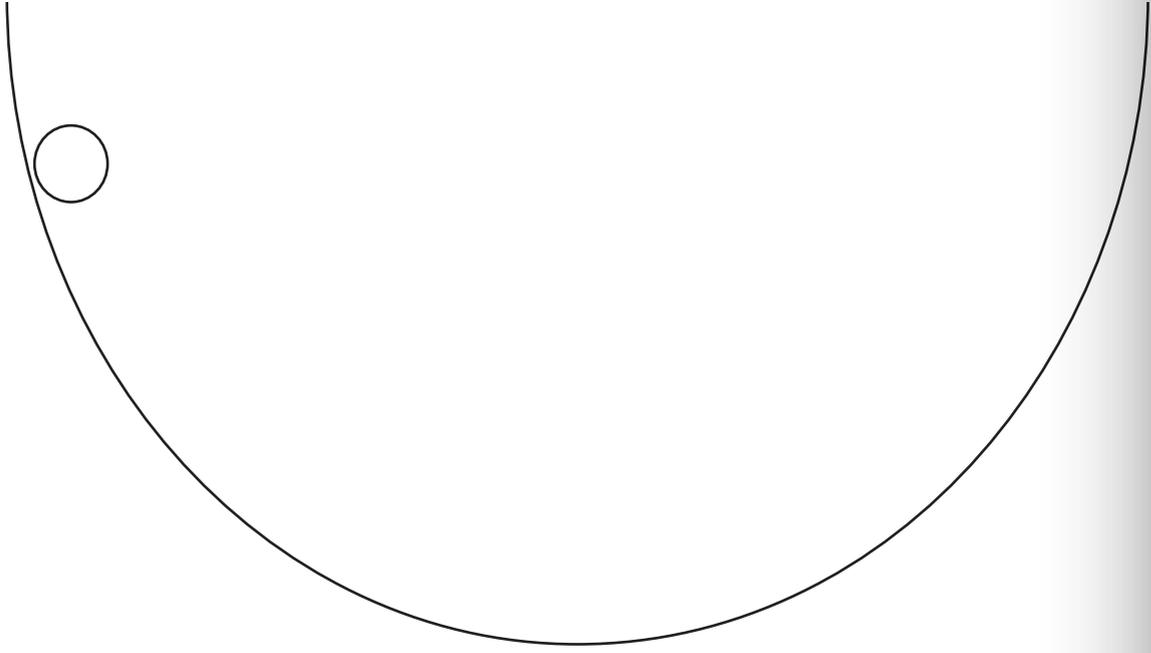
39 Camus, 37.



1971年
12月

1971年
12月

1971年
12月



Humoristic Absurdism

This chapter is devoted to the basic idea of a humoristic disposition toward the Absurd. I call this Humoristic Absurdism (HA). As I define it in 3.1, Humoristic Absurdism is the commitment to a pattern of humorous responses (i.e., a humorous disposition) to the Absurd, which regard the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a comical phenomenon.¹ For the sake of illustration of this theory and its historical context, section 3.2 highlights a few cultural expressions of Humoristic Absurdism in artistic, literary and scholarly works. In 3.3, Humoristic Absurdism is defended as a legitimate disposition toward the Absurd.

1 As a defense of Humoristic Absurdism *in its own right*, this chapter does not attempt to disparage other dispositions toward the Absurd. Indeed, the absurdity of life may still be perceived as tragic, rather than comic, but this paper focuses on the legitimacy of seeing the comical side of absurdity through the endorsement of Humoristic Absurdism.

3.1. What is Humoristic Absurdism?

Before we embark upon an elucidation of the humoristic dimension of Humoristic Absurdism, it is important to repeat what the relation is between the Absurd and Absurdism, regardless of any humorism. Without the prefix of an adjective (e.g., ‘Humoristic’, ‘Tragic’, ‘Romantic’, ‘Postmodern’), ‘Absurdism’ refers to the philosophical theory that recognizes that the human condition is absurd, *inescapably* absurd, in the sense expounded in the previous chapter. As such, Absurdists wish to stay true to the veracity of the Absurd – as Camus says, “carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion”.² The prefix, in this chapter ‘Humoristic’, then includes a particular disposition that is advocated in the face of this absurd condition beyond its mere recognition.

In line with this distinction between the recognition of and the disposition toward the Absurd, Thomas Pölzler draws a distinction, borrowed from Albert Camus, between the “notion of the Absurd”, explicated in the previous chapter, and the “feeling of the Absurd.” Now that we have fleshed out the *notion*, it is time to elucidate a possible way in which we can experience the Absurd. This may constitute a strategy for dealing with the Absurd. Regarding this ‘absurd feeling’, Pölzler explains that “the feeling of the absurd is not, strictly speaking, a feeling.” Indeed, the term ‘feeling’ suggests that we are concerned with something momentary, transitory, superficial, while our primary focus here is the formulation of a *disposition*, in its structural meaning, or, as Pölzler calls it, a *mood*: “It is rather a conjunction of a mood and of emotions that this mood tends to give rise to.”³ Thus, this chapter is concerned with a specific pattern of affective responses to the Absurd, to which we can justifiably be committed.

2 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

3 Thomas Pölzler, “Camus’ Feeling of the Absurd,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 477–90, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-018-9633-1>.

As has already been implicit in the discussion of the Incongruity Theory in the first chapter, there exists a multiplicity of possible responses in the face of incongruity. The encounter with incongruity may be met by the experience of disgust, indignation, sadness, horror, anger or fear. Incongruity may present itself as grotesque, macabre, horrible, bizarre or fantastic.⁴ Accordingly, one may come up with associated systems of responses, such as Revulsionistic, Melancholistic or Fantastic Absurdism. The list of affective responses to incongruity is virtually endless. Significantly, this list includes, as we have seen, *amusement*, through the comical appearance of incongruity. This opens up the possibility of the humoristic disposition toward the incongruity that constitutes the Absurd.

What does it mean to take a humorous disposition toward the Absurd? It has two dimensions: the concrete and the abstract. First, Humoristic Absurdism views manifestations of the Absurd as comical. As an example of such a manifestation, someone may respond with humorous laughter when she discovers that what she considered to be her dream job was in fact not so rosy. Similarly, an old man may consider it funny when, after having longed for his retirement for decades, he feels a strong desire to return to work in the very first week of his retirement. Returning to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, we should imagine Sisyphus not just “happy”, but *laughing*, at the sight of the rock rolling down after his zealous endeavor to push it to the top.⁵ These are *concrete* absurdities considered risible.

Second, Humoristic Absurdism includes the humorous response to *abstract* absurdity, i.e. regarding the Absurd in itself as comical. Contemplating the endless dissolution of resolution, we may find ourselves diverted by this absurd condition of existence. This division of Humoristic Absurdism into the humorous enjoyment of concrete manifestations and that of abstract absurdity finds resonance in John Morreall’s striking remark that “a sense of humour doesn’t simply provide us with occasional moments of refreshment in life’s struggles”, for it also “gives us an approach

4 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

5 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 111.

to life as a whole.”⁶ This humorous approach to life as a whole is the cornerstone of Humoristic Absurdism.

With these insights in mind, we can postulate a definition: Humoristic Absurdism consists in the commitment to a humorous disposition (that is, a pattern of humorous responses) to the Absurd, which regards the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a comical phenomenon.

3.2. Cultural expressions of Humoristic Absurdism

What are specific philosophical, literary or cultural expressions of Humoristic Absurdism? Of course, these examples of Humoristic Absurdism need not conform neatly to the ideal-type of Humoristic Absurdism, for there may always exist deviations from the humoristic or Absurdist principle. Therefore, the significance of these instances lies in their humoristic principle as a disposition toward the Absurd, regardless of concrete anomalies. Unfortunately, this summation of examples can be no more than a mere glance over the precursors of this type of Absurdism, inevitably falling short of the nuanced complexity of the examples, because of the limited space available for a kind of exemplification that is relatively peripheral to the central issue: the justification of Humoristic Absurdism. Despite its peripheral function, this brief exemplification helps to visualize what it means to endorse Humoristic Absurdism.

An early precursor of Humoristic Absurdism is Søren Kierkegaard. William McDonald adequately summates what belongs to the key features of Kierkegaard’s literary style: “irony, parody, satire [and] humor”⁷ One of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, for instance, is often considered an ironist: Constantine Constantius; and similar humorous tendencies may be

6 John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (SUNY Press, 1983), 121.

7 William McDonald, “Søren Kierkegaard,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/kierkegaard/>.

assigned to other pseudonyms.⁸ In his overview of the history of the philosophy of humor, John Morreall repeats the humoristic disposition inherent not only to his style of writing, but also to his philosophy: “The person with a religious view of life is likely to cultivate humor, he says, and Christianity is the most humorous view of life in world history.”⁹

In response to the Absurd as defined in 2.3, Thomas Nagel prescribes an ironic disposition. In his mind, the Absurd does not call for a tragic experience or some kind of “dramatics”, contrary to what Camus’ philosophy may profess, but a kind of ironic laughter at the absurdity of it all:

It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.¹⁰

Thus, in the ironic experience of the Absurd, the Nagelian Absurdist conceives the Absurd as a comical phenomenon. Indeed, it seems to be the case, especially according to Bob Plant’s reconstruction of the Nagelian disposition toward the Absurd, that the professed irony can be subsumed under the concept of humor. In his defense of humorous laughter as “an appropriate response to the ‘absurd’ tension between human aspiration and disappointment”, inspired by Nagel’s approach, Bob Plant argues that we can legitimately experience the Absurd as comical:

8 John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought* (Springer, 2000); Søren Kierkegaard, *The Humor of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton University Press, 2004); Lippitt, “A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Salvation”; Lydia B. Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* (SUNY Press, 2014).

9 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

10 Nagel, “The Absurd,” 727.

We should not forget that this predicament can *itself* be viewed from a more objective, disinterested point of view. From this latter perspective then, the fact that questions such as ‘What is the meaning of life?’ and ‘Does life matter?’ are both irresistible *and* futile can legitimately be met with comic laughter rather than existential bemoaning or revolt. Recalling Kant’s formulation that ‘*Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing*’, we might therefore say that we here have explanatory ‘expectations’ that are constantly ‘reduced to nothing’, and this is enough to provoke laughter. Indeed, that we continue to have such explanatory expectations, and yet also continue to be disappointed by our failure, is even more cause for a humorous response.¹¹

Another scholarly example of Humoristic Absurdism is found in Mikkel Borch-Jacobson’s ‘The Laughter of Being’ (1987), when he reflects upon Woody Allen’s filmography:

[I]f my existence is nothing more than an unspeakable farce, an improbable gag lost in the immensity of the universe, why not laugh at it[?] Since we cannot escape pain and anguish, let’s at least learn to relativize them, by observing ourselves from without, or, more properly, from above. [...] Let’s act, in other words, as if we could raise ourselves above our precious self, as if we could, just for the time of an improbable grace period, make fun of this shabby finitude[.]¹²

The risibility of absurd existence is echoed throughout his argument, in almost every paragraph. Borch-Jacobson repeats: “If nothing makes sense, isn’t everything fundamentally risible, frivolous?”¹³ In line with the definition of Humoristic Absurdism as a commitment to the humorous enjoyment of both *concrete* absurdities and *abstract* absurdity, he argues

11 Plant, “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter,” 133.

12 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Laughter of Being,” *MLN* 102, no. 4 (1987): 738, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2905788>.

13 Borch-Jacobsen, 738.

on the one hand for the risibility of existence as such (e.g., “why not laugh at it?” and “make fun of this shabby finitude”) and on the other hand for the risibility of concrete absurdities (“let’s at least learn to relativize them”).

Perhaps the most comprehensive defense of Humoristic Absurdism has been given in *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*, in which John Marmysz defends humorism in response to the absurd condition, which he defines as the conjunction of three facts: “(1) humans are alienated from the highest, most absolute perfections; (2) this situation is not as it should be; and (3) there is nothing that can be done to change this situation.” How should we deal with this absurdity? Marmysz suggests a more humoristic disposition:

If the nihilist is correct, then there is nothing to be done about our situation, and it is in the very nature of human beings to be imperfect, yet to strive for perfection. But perhaps it is not only an occasion for sadness to understand that our highest ideals are mere pipe-dreams that will never be made real. Rather, perhaps it is also an occasion for wondrous amusement. To adopt a humorous attitude is not to deny that human life is full of suffering, despair and failure. However it refuses to be dominated or crushed by this reality. With humor, the dangers of life become smaller, and the humorist, in laughing at the world, laughs at him or herself as a part of that world.¹⁴

Other instances of Humoristic Absurdism may be discerned, but the limitations of this paper prevent me from providing further examples. Additional expressions of the humoristic disposition may be found in the works of Milan Kundera and Eugène Ionesco; the cartoons of *Family Guy* and *South Park*; Jeff Koons’ *Ushering in Banality*; Yue Minjun’s painting *Executions*; or the bulk of Dadaist art (such as Duchamp’s *Fountain*).

¹⁴ Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 165.

3.3. Defense of Humoristic Absurdism

Why respond with humor? In this paragraph, I summate the prima facie reasons for Humoristic Absurdism. First, the encounter of the Absurd, as a divorce, fulfils one of the necessary conditions for humor: incongruity. This speaks, though not conclusively, in favor of the possibility of the humorous disposition toward the Absurd, thus legitimizing further inquiry into the legitimacy of Humoristic Absurdism. Second, given the disappointing nature of the Absurd, we may search for relief from the experience of frustration, anxiety and stress resulting from this disappointment; the Relief Theory of humor holds that humor provides such relief. If we do not wish to endorse the possibility of death, that is, suicide, we had better search for coping mechanisms. (After all, we are still bodies, with a physiology over which our cognitive capacities have no total control.) Humor, in its relieving effects, may provide such a coping mechanism, apparently without renouncing the veracity of the Absurd, thanks to its indispensable dimension of incongruity. Through such relief, humorism may even turn out to be a more effective coping mechanism, compared, for example, to Emil Cioran's theory of catharsis through the contemplation of suicide or to other theories that emphasize the emotional gravity of the Absurd.¹⁵ In support of this, research has shown that rumination, which may be linked to this emphasis on emotional gravity, is rarely beneficial to one's health.¹⁶ Third, both psychological and sociological research have established a wide range of benefits associated with humor. Regarding

15 E. M. Cioran, *The New Gods* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 49–68.

16 Sonja Lyubomirsky and Chris Tkach, *The Consequences of Dysphoric Rumination*, 2008; Sonja Lyubomirsky and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Self-Perpetuating Properties of Dysphoric Rumination," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 2 (1993): 339; Wendy Treynor, Richard Gonzalez, and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Rumination Reconsidered: A Psychometric Analysis," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 27, no. 3 (2003): 247–259; Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Blair E. Wisco, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Rethinking Rumination," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 5 (2008): 400–424; K. Lira Yoon and Jutta Joermann, "Is Timing Everything? Sequential Effects of Rumination and Distraction on Interpersonal Problem Solving," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 36, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 165–72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-010-9330-2>.

the psychological benefits, Lydia Amir summarizes: "One of its major functions is to provoke thought, and it is good in countering pain."¹⁷ In addition to pain relief, feelings of mirth, which typically accompany the experience of humor, may not only counter negativity, but also enhance positive feelings of well-being. Sociological effects include cohesion and reduction of interpersonal tension.¹⁸ Through the reduction of conflict, the cohesive effect of humor may in turn result in health benefits for the individual, such as feelings of belonging, friendship and other benefits that one may experience as a result of social cohesion.¹⁹ Still, a great deal remains obscure or ambivalent, but the psychological and sociological opportunities of humor, and therefore of a humoristic disposition, remain numerous and significant. Fourth, this inquiry into the possibility of Humoristic Absurdism has a historical background. With the humoristic, and more specifically *ironic*, disposition toward life that is crucial to postmodernity, Humoristic Absurdism is rooted in the legacy of postmodernity, under which we may still live or which is part of our recent ideological history.²⁰ Fifth, as the philosophy of humor has grown throughout the last couple of decades, humor has become a significant domain of philosophical investigation. This shows that the humorous disposition is increasingly being explored not only in popular territory, but also in academic philosophy.²¹ Sixth and finally, at the most recent end of this history, there have been significant attempts to sketch a humoristic disposition toward the Absurd, for example by Bob Plant in his fairly recent paper 'Absurdity, Incongruity, and Laughter' (2009), which purports to "explore how a comedic response to the absurdity of the human condition

17 Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy*, 237.

18 Amir, 237–40.

19 Sheldon Cohen and Thomas A. Wills, "Stress, Social Support, and the Buffering Hypothesis," *Psychological Bulletin* 98, no. 2 (1985): 310.

20 Gillian Pye, "Comedy Theory and the Postmodern," *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 19, no. 1 (2006): 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.1515/HUMOR.2006.003>; Barry Lewis, "Postmodernism and Literature," *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2001.

21 Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor."

might be justified.”²² These attempts have not been too comprehensive, and my present project purports to expand upon this direction in a more all-encompassing manner. To conclude on the *prima facie* justification of Humoristic Absurdism, the reasons are plentiful.

Now, a more comprehensive conceptualization of Humoristic Absurdism is needed. In order to formulate this adequately, we need to recall the working theory of humor, which has been given extensive attention in Chapter 1. There, it was concluded that humor consists in the amusing experience of the contradiction of a norm. Applied to the confrontation with the Absurd, this means that the contradiction of the so-called *appel humain*, i.e. the desire for resolution, by the absence of ultimacy in any resolution that may be apprehended, is experienced as amusing. As stated before, this experience, is applicable to both the abstraction that is known as ‘the Absurd’ and the concrete absurdities that correspond to the structure of the Absurd.

How is this *appel humain* a *norm* in the relevant sense? For the sake of establishing a valid parallel between the humorous incongruity and the absurd incongruity, additional inquiry into the normativity of this appeal is paramount. As has been argued in Chapter 2, the *appel humain* is not merely one among many desires, but a strong and fundamental *need*. We cannot help but strive in the anticipation of a resolution to this striving. Thus, from demanding such a resolution, demanding that reality be such that our striving resolves, it follows that we experience that such a resolution is imperative, if only in terms of the prudence involved in committed striving.²³ Put differently, if we are committed to our purposes

.....
 22 Plant, “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter,” 123.

23 I owe this inference to the Kantian notion of the “hypothetical imperative”, prescribing that one ought to will the means to one’s willed goal, not by means of a moral claim, but by means of the *prudence* that is inherent to rational agency. It is by virtue of such prudence that we ought to will a reality that provides resolution, if are inevitably striving toward resolution; cf. Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, “Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/kant-moral/>.

at all, then these purposes have normative value for us. In other words, striving *ought* to be resolved from the perspective of the fundamental desire for resolution. This ‘ought’ conforms to the narrow notion of a ‘norm’, as defined in 1.4. Thus, the contradiction of the norm in the experience of the dissolution of resolution is what is perceived as humorous by the disciples of Humoristic Absurdism.

How is the lack of an ultimate resolution adequately mirrored in humor? Essential to this question is the scholarly debate around the resolutionary dimension of humor.²⁴ For, to imagine a resolution to the incongruity that makes up the Absurd is to violate the basic criterion of Absurdism. However, even if it is true that a degree of resolution is needed in order for the incongruity to be humorous, there is no resolution to the fullest degree. Consider the following illustration by John Morreall, which is supposed to illustrate the core strategy employed by the advocates of the resolutionary theory:

The examples cited are typically jokes in which the punch line is momentarily confusing, but then the hearer reinterprets the first part so that it makes a kind of sense. When, for instance, Mae West said, “Marriage is a great institution, but I’m not ready for an institution,” the shift in meanings of “institution” is the incongruity, but it takes a moment to follow that shift, and the pleasure is in figuring out that the word has two meanings.²⁵

To be sure, the incongruity may be explainable by reference to some conceptual schema that includes the ambiguity of the word ‘institution’, but to the extent that there is a resolution to the incongruity, it is illegitimate. If a politician argued in a similar way that marriage should be abolished because she believes that we should not put the majority of people in an institution, we would obviously object. Therefore, I argue that the incongruity is never completely resolved. Likewise, with the desire for

.....
 24 See Chapter 1 for more on the resolutionary dimension of humor.

25 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

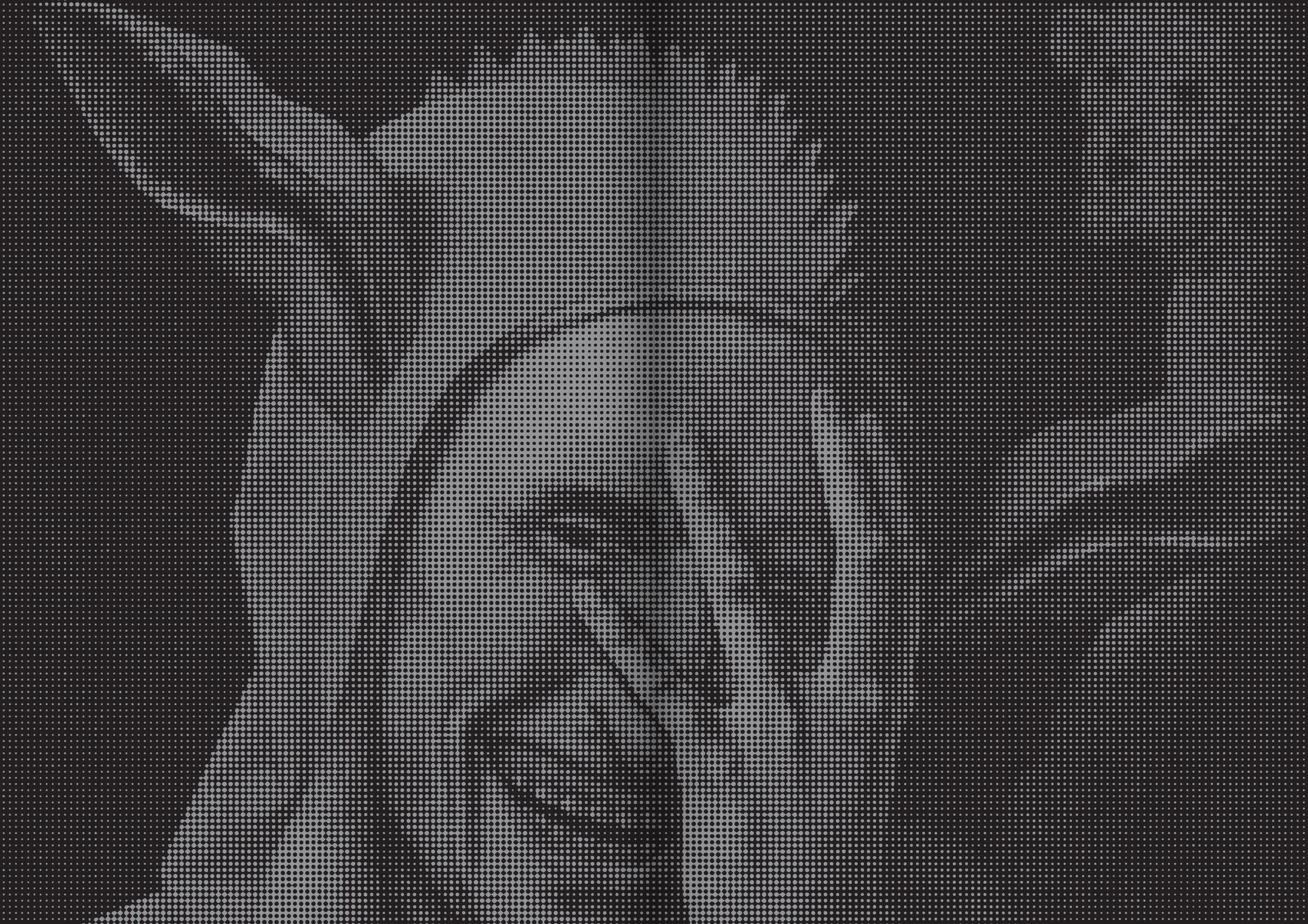
resolution never fully actualized, humor acknowledges the absence of an ultimate resolution.

What is more, if the Relief Theory is of any use, Humoristic Absurdism furthers one's awareness of the frustrated desire for resolution and expresses this desire, by emancipating the *appel humain* from repression. As we have seen in the modest Freudian theory of humor (Chapter 1), repression is inherently directed toward making a desire unconscious. Moreover, humor enables one to vent specific desires by lifting their repression. Consequently, by releasing one or another desire from repression, humor helps to make this desire conscious, while also providing for its ventilation. Viewing the Absurd as comical therefore furthers both awareness and discharge of the *appel humain*, the desire for resolution, thereby manifesting a lucid sense of recognition toward one of the constituents of the Absurd.

In brief, how does Humoristic Absurdism meet the standard laid down at the end of the previous chapter? There, it was concluded that a disposition toward the Absurd needs to contain a recognition of the Absurd if it is to be a form of absurdism at all. That is to say that one needs to remain true to one's starting point (the acknowledgement that life is fundamentally absurd) in the disposition that one takes toward this, on pain of inconsistency. First, Humoristic Absurdism upholds the incongruous nature of the Absurd through the recognition of incongruity in the experience of humor. Second, it acknowledges the absurd incongruity as the contradiction of a norm. Third, the desire for resolution is both vented and potentially pried from the unconscious. Fourth, given the incompleteness of resolutions in the phenomenon of humor, Humoristic Absurdism grants that there is never an ultimate resolution.

In conclusion, Humoristic Absurdism lives up to the Absurdist criterion which demands recognition of the absurd in its dual and incongruous nature. Beyond the satisfaction of this basic Absurdist criterion, further objections may present themselves – and they will,

in the next chapter, which is devoted to four notable objections against Humoristic Absurdism.



Objections against the humoristic disposition toward the Absurd

In this chapter, I discuss the force of three objections against humorism in general, apply them to humorism as a disposition toward the Absurd, and present my own objection against Humoristic Absurdism. Notably, while these objections have often been framed as objections against *humor*, for example by John Morreall, this is not the most charitable reading of the objections.¹ The stronger version of each of the objections is that it does not attack *humor*, as a momentary phenomenon, but *humorism*, which is an all-encompassing behavioral pattern that is disposed to humorous enjoyment. Indeed, many opponents of humorism may see no reason to not enjoy a joke every once in a while, but, ultimately, they still reject full-blooded humorism.

1 Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought."

4.1. The Superiority Objection

The Superiority Objection against humorism is based upon the Superiority Theory, one of the three theories of humor introduced in the first chapter. It rejects humorism as unethical, vicious, counterproductive to social cohesion or otherwise inappropriate due to the superior position that one assumed over the object of ridicule. While the 'object of ridicule' oftentimes refers to a *person* who violates a norm, in the present context of Humoristic Absurdism it is not a person which violates a norm, but *reality*, by failing to meet our demand for resolution. It is in this sense, according to this applied version of the Superiority Objection, that one assumes superiority over reality in its fundamentally disappointing nature.

An early example of the Superiority Objection can be found in the works of Plato, who observed that the derision inherent to humorous laughter inflicts a "pain in the soul".² In similar opposition, Aristotle even proposed a political measure in relation to the derisive nature of humor. A joke, Aristotle says, "is a kind of mockery, and lawgivers forbid some kinds of mockery – perhaps they should have forbidden some kinds of jokes."³ From a Confucian tradition, a similar objection can be made with reference to reverence: humor may destabilize social harmony given its tendency to exalt the humorist and, consequently, to humiliate the object of such humorous derision, thus lacking proper reverence with regard to the societal hierarchy.⁴

These instances of the Superiority Objection can hardly be called comprehensive attempts to evaluate humor in light of the associated derision and superiority. Humanity had to wait for two more millennia for more extensive attempts, until Thomas Hobbes formulated a relatively well-developed exposition of the Superiority Objection. According to him, humorous laughter expresses "sudden glory arising from some conception

2 Plato, *Philebus*, 48–50; Reeve, "Plato," V.452.

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.8.

4 Cf. Yue, *Humor and Chinese Culture*; Xu, "The Confucian Politics of Appearance."

of some eminency in ourselves, comparison with the infirmity others, or with our own formerly.” He elaborates on the pusillanimous nature of the feeling of such sudden glory:

Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and to compare themselves only with the most able.⁵

It is of vital importance to see this analysis in the context of Hobbes’ view of the human condition as constant struggle, based on an anthropology of natural competitiveness and egotism. The tendency to be diverted by instances of one’s own superiority is thus an expression of the glorious feeling associated with winning in this competitive game. But it is more than a mere observation regarding the human condition and the expressions relating to this condition; otherwise, it would not be an *objection*. The crux of the Hobbesian critique of humor is the ascription of pusillanimity: laughing at people contains an emphasis upon the inferiority of other people and therefore fails to give sufficient room to the desire to fully actualize oneself and improve oneself. Indeed, one cowardly settles for superiority relative to the defects in others, rather than excellence with regard to one’s own capabilities and merits in their own right. In order to actualize one’s potential to the fullest, one should not compare oneself with inferior people, but with admirable fellows.

5 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, chap. 6.

The core of the Superiority Objection is this. As humor is inextricably connected to an asymmetrical relation of assigned worth, conceiving the comical object as inferior and the diverted subject as superior, humorism is tied to a variety of vices. In the most charitable interpretation of humorists, we should assign *vanity* to the humorist; from the most critical standpoint, it is not mere vanity, but malice or even cruelty. Indeed, scholars pleading the latter verdict can point to the way in which jokes tend to undermine people’s worth, both in the eyes of others and in self-perception. From a Kantian point of view, this may be seen as a violation of a human being’s fundamental worth, or as the instrumentalization of another person as a mere means to elevate one’s sense of self-worth.⁶ From an utilitarian stance, it may be argued that the inferiorization of the comical other does serious harm – and it is at least dubitable whether humoristic self-exaltation really outweighs the harm inflicted upon the other, especially considering the supposedly inferior position of the comical object that is already assumed as part of the source of risibility.⁷ With regard to virtue ethics, the predicate of vanity, resulting from self-exaltation, is enough to make a good Aristotelian shudder.

One need not let go of the Incongruity Theory of humor in favor of the Superiority Theory in order to endorse the Superiority Objection. Indeed, feelings of superiority are perfectly explainable from the former’s point of view. When we laugh because of some eminency in ourselves, it is either due to our own positive violation of the norm (i.e., our overperformance) or because of another’s negative violation of the norm (i.e., her underperformance). Thus, our self-exaltation is based upon one or another violation of the norm. As we have seen in the first chapter, such violation constitutes an incongruity.

6 Kant Immanuel, “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,” 1785, 4:429: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.”

7 Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

With regard to sexist and racist jokes, the Superiority Objection appears to be most effective. Many people must have heard the punchline at least one time in their lives, for instance when a woman's intellectual authority was being questioned: "Go back to the kitchen, woman!" Humor premised upon such stereotypes is clearly harmful, both structurally and personally, thus demonstrating how humor can have a hostile dimension and an assumption of superiority relative to the other's inferiority. In studies on what is called "aggressive humor", this maladaptive type of humor has been found to be detrimental to social relationships, due to its derisive nature and its hurtful consequences.⁸ In conclusion, the sexist punchline is an attempt to emphasize the inferiority of a group or an individual's adherence to a group, by virtue of which one assumes superiority.

Now that we have a basic sense of the Superiority Objection raised in the philosophy of humor per se, let us turn to its application to humorism as a disposition toward the Absurd. How is the predicate of superiority a problem for Humoristic Absurdism? Of course, rejecting humorism in the face of the Absurd for its being *unethical* makes no sense, given the impersonal nature of the present violator. Perhaps an argument could be construed emphasizing HA's *counterproductivity to social cohesion*, based upon the detrimental social effects of aggressive humor or perhaps upon the general indifference that is sometimes associated with both humorism and Absurdism, but this is too indirect; I wish to know what Humoristic Absurdism, from the critical standpoint of the Superiority Objection, does to one's relation to the Absurd. Rather than warning for risks on an interpersonal level, the Superiority Objection against Humoristic Absurdism portrays the humoristic disposition toward the Absurd as

8 Rod A. Martin et al., "Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire," *Journal of Research in Personality* 37, no. 1 (February 2003): 48-75, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00534-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2); Sara Caird and Rod Martin, "Relationship-Focused Humor Styles and Relationship Satisfaction in Dating Couples: A Repeated-Measures Design," *HUMOR* 27 (May 1, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2014-0015>.

detrimental to one's own engagement with the absurd reality. Viewing the absurd incongruity inherent to the dissolution of resolution as a comical phenomenon amounts to placing oneself above one's inability to attain a tenable resolution; accordingly, one's struggles are viewed as insignificant trifles. This is a pernicious tendency, because it contains a rejection of the very absurd reality toward which the Absurdist criterion demands recognition. Or so the Superiority Objection goes.

Superiority does not seem to be a pejorative notion for Albert Camus. The father of Absurdism even praises the superiority of Sisyphus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is *superior to his fate*. He is stronger than his rock."⁹ 'His fate', of course, refers to the absurdity of his condemnation and thus, by extrapolation of the allegory toward its referent in the human condition, to the absurdity of human existence. Modelling the ideal disposition to the image of Sisyphus, Camus seems to prescribe the same assumption of superiority.

Echoing the critique of the Superiority Theory in the first chapter, we may ask: do puns evoke a sense of superiority? Admittedly, many human beings consider themselves superior in the hierarchy of beings, in relation to hedgehogs, dogs and cows for example, and this superior feeling may be extended toward the realm of inanimate entities such as syntax, but to contend that puns necessarily admit of one's superiority over these syntactical structures would be quite farfetched. Still, grammar, syntax and ordinary semantics do seem to fall victim to puns, regardless of whether any conception of our own eminency is implied by this. As a result, it may be questionable whether Humoristic Absurdism truly places itself above the absurd reality, especially given that the object of ridicule in this humorism is inanimate. After all, deeming oneself superior to a rock or to the Third Law of Thermodynamics would itself be a proper

9 (my italicization) Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 109.

object of ridicule. Therefore, we are in need of a more modest version of the Superiority Objection.

Some critics have framed the present objection in more modest vocabulary, calling it the “Hostility Objection”.¹⁰ In ‘The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought’, John Morreall argues:

We can put the objection like this. Hostility between people is a prima facie evil to be avoided when no greater evil will result. To get into fist fights just for the pleasure of breaking people’s bones and drawing their blood, for example, is clearly abhorrent. Similarly, to ridicule and humiliate another person just because doing so makes you feel better about yourself, is antisocial at best and cruel at worst.¹¹

Although a superior position is implied by the reason given for humiliation (i.e., “doing so makes you feel better about yourself”), the emphasis is, and should be, on the harmful and hostile nature of humor rather than the reasons for such hostility. For instance, the reason for cracking a joke at another’s expense may also be spiteful rather than haughty, thereby demonstrating the possibility of hostility without feelings of superiority.

As formulated above, the criticism clearly does not stand its ground when applied to Humoristic Absurdism. After all, the ‘antisocial’ predicate has no force given that the humor in HA is not interpersonal – and neither has the ascription of cruelty. How, then, should we understand the Hostility Objection? Given that the object of humorous laughter in Humoristic Absurdism is one’s own predicament, the hostility is supposed to be aimed at this predicament. The hostility is not interpersonal, but intrapersonal.¹² Humoristic Absurdists laugh at something in which they are very much invested. Thus, Humoristic Absurdism may at best be characterized as some sort of self-cruelty, which harms oneself in one’s need for resolution.

10 Morreall, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought.”

11 Morreall, 245.

12 Martin et al., “Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being.”

The self-directed hostility corresponds to observations from research into the relation between humor and psychological well-being. In particular, it is closely related to the phenomenon of “self-defeating” humor. Self-defeating humor is characterized by excessive self-disparagement or, put more simply, “doing or saying funny things at one’s own expense”.¹³ This style of humor positively correlates with aggression, hostility, bad mood, anxiety and depression, among other things. Negative correlates include self-esteem, intimacy, satisfaction with social supports and overall psychological well-being.¹⁴ The pernicious tendency of humor toward one’s own psychological health, the self-cruelty that can be manifested in a humoristic style, thus becomes evident from this psychological research.

However, humor need not be maladaptive. Psychological research shows that there exist adaptive styles of humor, which are associated with a beneficial impact on well-being. The benign counterpart of the self-defeating style of humor is called “self-enhancing” humor. This style involves a “tendency to be frequently amused by the incongruities of life” and functions “as a coping mechanism”.¹⁵ Positive correlates include psychological well-being, cheerfulness, self-esteem, optimism and satisfaction with social support. Negative correlates, on the other hand, are depression, anxiety and bad mood.¹⁶ A salient detail in this research is the collection of utterances associated with this style of humor, emphasizing the function of a coping mechanism to deal with absurdities: “If I am feeling upset or unhappy I usually try to think of something funny about the situation to make myself feel better”; and “Even when I’m by myself, I’m often amused by the absurdities of life.”¹⁷ The possibility of self-enhancing humorism thus contradicts the necessity of hostility toward

13 Martin et al., 54.

14 Martin et al., “Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being.”

15 Martin et al., 53, 71.

16 Martin et al., “Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being.”

17 Martin et al.

one's predicament in Humoristic Absurdism. Indeed, humor regarding the Absurd is not necessarily self-defeating and can even enhance oneself by presenting a constructive coping mechanism for adversity.

A final modification of the Superiority Objection may be considered. In line with the modified version of the Superiority Theory brought forward in the first chapter, let us call this the "Devaluation Objection". Not hostility toward the risible, but devaluation of the risible, is at the heart of the problem. Applied to humorism in general, disregarding the topic of the Absurd for a moment, humor devalues its object. When people are the object of humor, such devaluation contradicts the innate value of others. Especially when one jokes about another person as a means to impress other people, that person is not recognized as valuable in itself. Especially from a Kantian point of view, this devaluation constitutes a moral violation, in the sense that it reduces ends-in-themselves to mere means. According to traditions that emphasize social harmony and filial piety, such as Confucianism, humor's devaluating tendency supposedly undermines respect for people's value in society.

Although devaluation of the object may not necessarily be the result of humor, because, as we have seen in the first chapter, the object may be recognized as superior to the norms and still (or, rather, *because of this recognition*) be considered funny, this does not hold for Humoristic Absurdism.¹⁸ Indeed, reality does not outperform the norm in the absurd condition; on the contrary, the Absurd amounts to the underperformance of outcome in relation to our desire. Thus, it may be claimed that, due to the disappointing nature of reality, a humoristic disposition toward the Absurd and its concrete instances disparages the reality at hand, portraying our actual ability to find ultimate resolution (subsumed under the notion of 'reality' or 'what is') as worthless in the sense that it falls short of our most fundamental desires. This notion of *worthlessness* thus

.....
 18 The contingency (as opposed to necessity) of devaluation in the phenomenon of humor is discussed in the first chapter.

summarizes the sense in which devaluation ought to be understood in the case of Humoristic Absurdism.

The self-ascription of worthlessness is *prima facie* pathological. Seeing one's exertions as worthless may be described as a sign of depression or inordinate resignation. Again, the psychological research into the phenomenon of self-defeating humor supports the critique of this self-ascription as pathological. Moreover, it does not only present a psychological problem, but also a problem for the integrity of HA as a form of Absurdism. Indeed, if the humoristic devaluation of our ability to find ultimate resolution consists in a rejection of the initial value of that ability that is part of the so-called notion of the Absurd, described in the second chapter, then HA fails to respect the notion of the Absurd. In short, it would be in contradiction with itself.

However, it is not exactly *devaluation* that is the result of the humoristic disposition toward the Absurd, but rather *proper valuation*. The way in which a humorist disparages the object of risibility usually contradicts the value of that object – or so the general Devaluation Objection goes. Being diverted by people devalues them, in stark contrast to their innate value as equal human beings. Our actual ability to find ultimate resolution, however, is not of higher value than a humorist makes it seem. It is *actually* worthless, for we cannot find ultimate resolution. Thus, Humoristic Absurdism does not wrongfully disparage the value of the ability to find ultimate resolution, but sheds light on our inability to find such resolution, thus urging its proper valuation.

Allow me to expand upon this point with an example. When one is confronted with a concrete absurdity – e.g., being disappointed by what she took to be her dream job – she may respond with humorous laughter. As a result, her ability to find an ultimate resolution appears worthless. If someone responded with condemnation, saying that she should not discredit her exertions, we would object. From the Absurdist point of view, her exertions toward her dream job were not discredited; they were misguided in the first place. Surely, she should strive regardless

of the innate futility in order to do justice to the desire for resolution, but she should not bear any illusions about her exertions; her striving should be recognized as ultimately worthless. In conclusion, the ascription of worthlessness, if there is such a tendency present in HA, was already part of the Absurdist framework in the first place.

In short, the Superiority Objection fails in all its different applications to Humoristic Absurdism. One need not manifest a superior or hostile position toward the Absurd or its components, thus maintaining due recognition of the Absurd. Although there is a sense in which devaluation takes place in Humoristic Absurdism, it does not contradict the actual value of the object of risibility, namely the capability for resolving our striving. Thus, it ought to be understood as the *proper valuation*, rather than the devaluation, of the human ability to attain ultimate resolution.

4.2. The Irrationality Objection

Those bringing forth the ‘Irrationality Objection’ criticize humorism for being irrational. Like in this argument, it endorses the Incongruity Theory as the primary explanation of the formal structure of humor. As the amusing experience of incongruity, humor either misconceives reality or lacks psychological integrity to what is inherently disturbing. Applied to Humoristic Absurdism, this means that the Absurd, *being an incongruity*, cannot be enjoyable, thus excluding the possibility of humorous mirth in the face of the Absurd.

Historical precursors of this objection are plentiful. In his explanation of humor as the incongruity between expectation and outcome, Immanuel Kant is keen on underscoring the supposition that humor is not enjoyable to the understanding, but finds its delight in bodily movements:¹⁹

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (*in which the understanding, therefore, can*

19 See Chapter 1 for the earlier usage of this quote, in the context of the Incongruity Theory.

find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, *which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding*, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind.²⁰

In its isolated form, the analysis need not be an objection to humorism. One may propose values equivalent or even superior to rational understanding, such as physical health. Seen in the larger context of Kant’s rationalism, however, Kant appears to be at least critical toward the structural enjoyment of incongruity, with the emphasis upon the irrational nature of humorous satisfaction. Indeed, in its all-encompassing form, humorism distracts us from our rationalistic aims and perhaps even frustrates our desire for rational understanding.

George Santayana puts a more radical spin to the Irrationality Objection, stating that humorous amusement is more than distracting or frustrating; it is inconceivable. The enjoyment of incongruity is a *contradictio in terminis*:

We have a prosaic background of common sense and everyday reality; upon this background an unexpected idea suddenly impinges. But the thing is a futility. The comic accident falsifies the nature before us, starts a wrong analogy in the mind, a suggestion that cannot be carried out. In a word, we are in the presence of an absurdity, and man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold.²¹

According to Santayana, humor is utterly impossible. One cannot enjoy humor, because one cannot enjoy incongruity. Comical absurdity is essentially antithetical to the rational drive that is inherent to human beings.

20 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, First Part, sec. 54.

21 Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, 152.

Irrationality would not be a problem if there were no supreme value of rationality to which irrationality may be opposed. This is why the Irrationality Objection against humor is rooted not only in the Incongruity Theory, but also in a rationalistic assumption. Rationalism, roughly understood as the doctrine that regards reason as the chief source of knowledge, prescribes the pursuit of rationality, in science, metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy and/or the quest for happiness, as the sovereign norm guiding humanity. Some of these rationalists insist that reality has an inherently logical structure, accessible by rational means. Others argue more modestly that there exists in human beings an innate striving toward rationality, the frustration of which is categorically reprehensible. From either of these standpoints, humorism may be rejected by simply pointing toward the irrational nature of the source of humorous amusement: incongruity.

While such overly rationalistic antipathy against humorism may seem to some readers like something of the distant past, this is not so. Contemporary resonance of the categorical rejection of incongruity does exist. Quoted in John Morreall's 'The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought', Barry Barnes postulates the disturbing character of anomaly in scientific systems of thought and explicates the rationalist tendency to reduce it: "Anomaly is inherently disturbing and automatically generates pressure for its reduction."²² Similarly, Leon Festinger takes a rationalistic stance by asserting at the very beginning of *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* that "the individual strives toward consistency within himself."²³ When discussing cognitive dissonance, defined as "the existence of nonfitting relations among cognitions", Festinger argues that dissonance in itself motivates present reduction and future avoidance of the dissonance:

22 Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton, *Modes of Thought in Western and Non-Western Societies* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 190.

23 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1962), 1.

The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance. [...] When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.²⁴

The parallel between dissonance and incongruity is evident. Thus, the rationalistic animosity toward incongruity, which serves as a basic premise of the Irrationality Objection, is not a stance of the distant past, but very much alive in contemporary philosophy and psychology.

The crux of the objection can be phrased as follows: because humor essentially involves the recognition of incongruity, and since incongruity is contradictory to the rational approach to reality as congruous, humor consists in the frustration of rational aims; therefore, humorism is considered a vice.

Applied to HA, the weakest form of this objection is that humorism in the face of the Absurd structurally fails to appreciate the rational unity of the human condition. In misjudging the human condition, HA would then be fundamentally mistaken. In *Comic Relief* (2011), John Morreall concludes:

Everything, in short, is theoretically explainable. What seems puzzling or mysterious is not inherently so – it's just that the rational animals have not yet investigated it carefully enough. When they do, the mystery will evaporate. To an omniscient mind, everything would fit into rational patterns, so that nothing is more than *apparently* anomalous. There is nothing objectively incongruous or comic about the universe or the human condition, then, and so amusement is possible only for those who are ignorant or confused.²⁵

24 Festinger, 3.

25 (original italicization) John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 14–15.

Thus, seeing the comical side of life is erroneous. Every time you let life crack you up, reality itself cracks up as well – and the errorists win.²⁶

This expostulation can easily be dismissed with reference to Chapter 2, the whole point of which has been to show how the human condition is fundamentally incongruous: our desire for resolution is in contradiction with the lack of ultimate resolution. In spite of all possible congruities, the absurdity of life is ineradicable and, therefore, not a mistake in the mind of the humorist.

In a first revision of this weak criticism, the emphasis in the Irrationality Objection may be put on the lack of psychological integrity in being amused by what is ‘psychologically uncomfortable’. Arguing with Santayana, one cannot like absurdity; and seeing the comical in the Absurd would be a renunciation of our rational impulse toward congruity, including the pressure toward reduction as well as avoidance of anomalies, dissonance and incongruities. The pursuit of additional dissonance would even be masochistic in its deliberate frustration of our psychological need for consonance.

In order to fully comprehend how it could be irrational to be diverted by the Absurd, consider the following case of *concrete absurdity* and its humorous apprehension. As opposed to so-called “oddly satisfying videos”, in which, for instance, fruit is being cut in absolutely symmetrical pieces, there exist videos which violate norms of symmetry, patterns and other forms of congruity – to a frustrating degree. Oftentimes, the images are close-too-perfect, but not quite. For example, a pie is cut in eight pieces, but the final symmetry line in order to complete the process of cutting is slightly off, thereby missing the center in which all other symmetry lines meet. One may also find oneself in the situation in which one attempts to perform such a mundane task to utmost perfection, but to no avail. Although psychological research into the perception of such visual incongruities is still scarce, the commonplace response to

26 Cf. Benjamin A.G. Fuller, “Is Reality Really Comic?,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 22 (1946): 589–598.

such incongruities is rife with frustration. What has been postulated, however, is that videos of the satisfactory genus meet a certain human need for order, such as symmetry.²⁷ Although these cases are clearly not a matter of life and death, they do present themselves as discomforting, if not distressing.²⁸ If, in response to the violation of this human need, we burst out in laughter, we thereby renounce our rational impulse toward congruity, paradoxically amused by what is inherently uncomfortable. If we continue, after having failed to cut a pie into eight equal parts, to cut pies with similar negligence, then the predicate of masochism seems appropriate, for we fail not only to *reduce* present dissonance, but to *avoid* future dissonance as well.

It is important to emphasize that the psychological integrity of which I speak here does not focus on the earnestness of the desire that makes up the Absurd or of our engagement with reality.²⁹ The constituents of the Absurd are not at stake here. Rather, it is the humorous apprehension of *incongruity as such* that is deemed irrational. Indeed, it is argued in the present formulation of the Irrationality Objection that incongruity is inherently disturbing, as a result of which the humorous experience of the Absurd violates the psychological need for congruity. This is why I deliberately foreground the above family of examples, which lacks gravity yet manifests the property of incongruity in an unequivocal manner.

The first counterargumentative strategy against this modified objection focuses on the supposed irrationality of the humorous experience of incongruity. In a sense, the humorous approach to an incongruity

27 “Why Do We Get So Much Pleasure From Symmetry?,” HowStuffWorks, November 6, 2017, <https://science.howstuffworks.com/why-do-get-so-much-pleasure-from-symmetry.html>.

28 This dimension is crucial, for the objection does not rest upon the ascription of an irrational frivolity with which one responds to incongruities. It is not a lack of earnestness regarding the humorous object that is central here, but the sheer irrationality of enjoying *incongruity as such*. The objection relating to a lack of earnestness regarding the humorous object is brought up in 4.4, where I introduce the “Metamodern Objection.”

29 In 4.4 I raise the objection relating to the lack of psychological integrity in the frivolity, as opposed to earnestness, that is inherent to humorism.

seems more rational and objective, given the suspension of our subjective standpoint. Morreall remarks:

[W]e suspend the personal, practical concerns that lead to negative emotions, and enjoy the oddness of what is occurring. If the incongruous situation is our own failure or mistake, we view it in the way we view the failures and mistakes of other people. This perspective is more abstract, objective, and rational than an emotional perspective.³⁰

In addition, there exists ample psychological and neurological research suggesting that there is a positive link between humor and rational faculties. One study found a staggering .91-correlation between intelligence and the capacity for humor.³¹ In another study, it was concluded that intellectually gifted students have an advanced sense of humor, enabling them to understand the comical nature of certain appearances.³² Recently, scholars have reaffirmed these previous insights, claiming on the basis of their data that high scores on verbal intelligence and abstract reasoning correlates with the ability to recognize as well as produce humor.³³ Of course, this collection of evidence cannot be elevated to the status of conclusiveness, for the establishment of such correlations cannot of its own accord decide upon the rationally delightful, rather than disturbing, nature of incongruity. Still, it points consistently in the direction of an intimate link between faculty of reason and the faculty of humor.³⁴

30 Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor."

31 William E. Hauck and John W. Thomas, "The Relationship of Humor to Intelligence, Creativity, and Intentional and Incidental Learning," *The Journal of Experimental Education* 40, no. 4 (1972): 52–55.

32 Dan G. Holt and Colleen Willard-Holt, "An Exploration of the Relationship between Humor and Giftedness in Students," *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 8, no. 3 (2009): 257–272, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1995.8.3.257>.

33 Gil Greengross and Geoffrey Miller, "Humor Ability Reveals Intelligence, Predicts Mating Success, and Is Higher in Males," *Intelligence* 39, no. 4 (July 2011): 188–92, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2011.03.006>.

34 Cf. Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," 249–55.

However, the link between humor and rationality in the available studies may be explained by the ability to recognize incongruity at all, and thereby the frustration of the rational impulse, rather than the ability to recognize the comical dimension of what is already perceived to be an incongruity. In other words, it may be explained in the same way as one would explain the aerospace engineer's excellence in finding defects in aircraft or the chess grandmaster's ability to recognize stupid moves; it is due to their respective excellences that they are able to see deficiencies. Therefore, further psychological and neurological research is paramount in order to distinguish between the two abilities and to make out whether it is truly the ability to recognize incongruity as comical which is linked to rationality, or just the ability to recognize incongruity at all. The former link would provide a firm basis for debunking the Irrationality Objection, with reference to the relative comfort in the recognition of incongruity, whereas the latter would only underscore the rationally superior's ability to recognize irrationality. Thus, this strategy stumbles upon an argumentative impasse in its defense against the Irrationality Objection.

The second counterargument is less empirical, yet more effective. It essentially boils down to a rejection of the full-blooded rationalism from which the Irrationality Objection originates. The fact that we tend to enjoy rationality (e.g., the perfect symmetry in the "oddly satisfying videos") does not mean that we cannot enjoy irrationality as well. Indeed, there are plenty of rational and congruous phenomena available to our senses (e.g., harmonious pieces of architecture) as well as to our abstract reasoning (e.g., sudokus). There is, in other words, no real danger of leaving our rationalistic thirst unquenched. Santayana's inference, then, is a non sequitur. It does not follow from the rational capacities of human beings, and not even from the essential need for rationality, that we cannot enjoy incongruity. Like a chess grandmaster can enjoy stupidity regardless of her interest in excellent chess play, a rational animal can enjoy irrationality regardless of its interest in reason.

In opposition to the rejection of rationalism, one might argue that even proponents of Absurdism have a rationalistic assumption. John Morreall has attempted such an interpretation of philosophies that are based upon one or another notion of the Absurd (whom he calls “existentialists”), focusing specifically on Jean-Paul Sartre:

Though they hold that the world is absurd – that is, without epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical foundations – they are still rationalistic enough to wish it did have such foundations. Indeed, Sartre claims that it is part of the human condition to want foundations, to want a determinate nature which makes us understandable and provides a guide for our actions. We are ‘being pour soi’ craving ‘being en soi.’ So even though our existence is absurd, in Sartre’s view, we have an inherent desire that it not be so. We are all, existentialists included, at least closet rationalists.³⁵

This interpretation of absurdity-based philosophies as rationalistic worldviews has also been brought forward by Alasdair MacIntyre. In his criticism of existentialism, he calls it “disappointed rationalism”.³⁶ Given that Morreall and MacIntyre emphasize the lack of rational foundations as the crux of the statement that “existence is absurd”, the ascription of rationalism extends to Camus’ Absurdism.

The rationalistic outlook is further corroborated by textual evidence from *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The point of departure from which we eventually reach the conclusion of the Absurd is the fact that one “feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason.”³⁷ Surely, Camus is rationalistic enough to wish for foundations, stressing again and again “this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion.”³⁸ Despite the

35 Morreall, 252.

36 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Existentialism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 147.

37 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31.

38 Camus, 51.

contention that “the most universal rationalism always stumbles eventually on the irrational of human thought”, rationalism, understood as the need for rational foundations rather than the positive endorsement of such rational foundations, remains integral to Absurdism. In this regard, the dictate of reason is upheld by Camus:

I am told again that here the intelligence must sacrifice its pride and the reason bow down. But if I recognize the limits of the reason, I do not therefore negate it, recognizing its relative powers. I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear. If that is its pride, I see no sufficient reason for giving it up.³⁹

It is hence that Avi Sagi interprets Camus’ Absurdism not as the outright negation of rationalism, but as a rationalistic line of reasoning: “the understanding that the world is absurd [...] is a conclusion of reason”⁴⁰ I conclude the textual evidence for the rationalism in Absurdism with an especially crystalline statement from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits.”⁴¹ The presence of rationalism could not be clearer.

Still, the required foundations, mentioned in the quote by Morreall, need not be rational. *Introspection* can be taken as a sufficient ground, in what is called “privilege foundationalism”, and one may also bring forward *empirical experience* as a possible foundation, as in “experiential foundationalism”.⁴² Certainly, Camus takes a rationalistic approach to the Absurd, in which reason demarcates itself, but the lack of satisfactory rational foundations is only one dimension of the Absurdist diagnosis. According to philosophers paraphrased in the quote by Morreall, including Camus, the problem is not that only rational foundations are lacking, but

39 Camus, 42.

40 Abraham Sagi and Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (Rodopi, 2002), 62.

41 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49.

42 Matthias Steup, “Epistemology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/epistemology/>.

that there are no foundations at all, neither rational nor introspective nor experiential. In none of these domains, one finds a foundation from which to confound the possibility or actuality of congruity between the desire for resolution and the absence of ultimate resolution.

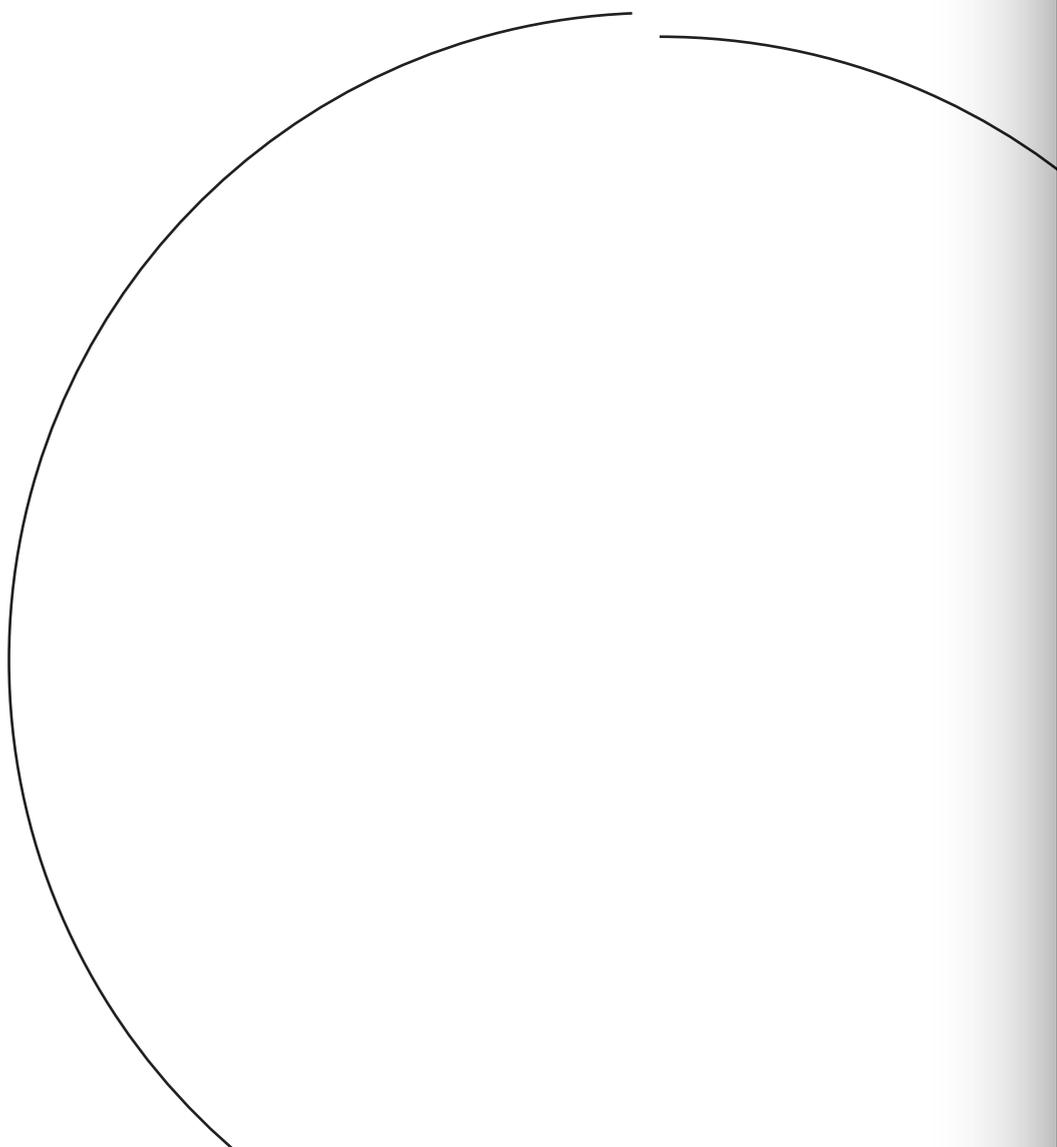
Furthermore, Morreall seems indifferent to the considerable distance between rationalistic desire and rationalistic pretense. Camus, as well as every other proponent of Absurdism, shares with rationalists like Santayana, Barnes and Festinger the desire that reality be congruous at a fundamental level. *The Myth of Sisyphus* would not contain the gravity it expresses if Camus had thought that human beings are completely okay with incongruity. Indeed, the Camusian anthropology explicitly includes a “desire for unity”, a “longing to solve”, a “need for [...] cohesion” and “a longing for [...] reason”.⁴³ Beyond this rationalistic yearning for congruity, there is no rationalistic pretense to be found in any form of Absurdism, for an Absurdist philosophy that suggests the possibility of a reconciliation of absurdity is no Absurdism at all. Such a pretense would reject the very premise of Absurdism.

Because of the conjunction of the rationalistic desire and the lack of rationalistic pretense, the desire for congruity in the Absurd is futile. Following this desire would only frustrate our desire, like a logician’s desire to solve a logical paradox can only stumble upon its frustration. Ergo, in the face of irresolvable incongruity, that is to say, the Absurd, we had better not aim for rationality, for the very sake of the rational impulse.

This does not immediately imply that we should be diverted by the Absurd. Why, then, respond with humorous amusement? In the humorous experience, the serious attempt to resolve incongruity is forsaken. By virtue of this characteristic feature of humor, we ought to endorse, rather than object against, Humoristic Absurdism if we are to avoid the frustration of the desire for congruity. This, of course, leaves room for logical puzzles, architectural symmetry, symphonic resolutions and satisfying videos,

.....
 43 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31, 51.

which can provide our rationalistic desire with positive gratification, in addition to the negative gratification in refraining, when possible, from the agitation of the rationalistic desire. The latter *negative* gratification of the rational impulse toward congruity is exactly what debunks the Irrationality Objection in favor of the humorous amusement, in which we refrain from trying to resolve incongruity. In short, the Irrationality Objection fails in all of its forms.



4.3. The Irresponsibility Objection

Starting from the premise that humorous experiences assume a non-serious perspective to the objects of risibility, the Irresponsibility Objection holds that humor incapacitates the subject in her practical concern about the risible object. In light of this incapacitation, humor falls prey to the predicate of irresponsibility. Applied to Humoristic Absurdism, the Irresponsibility Objection portrays the humoristic disposition as a structural debilitation of the practical concern that we ought to maintain toward the Absurd.

As one of the first thinkers to raise the Irresponsibility Objection, Aristotle explicated its basic premise:

And the life that conforms with virtue is thought to be a happy life; but virtuous life involves serious purpose, and does not consist in amusement. Also we pronounce serious things to be superior to things that are funny and amusing; and the nobler a faculty or a person is, the more serious, we think, are their activities; therefore, the activity of the nobler faculty or person is itself superior, and therefore more productive of happiness.⁴⁴

In other words, a humoristic disposition is considered to be inferior to the serious disposition, not only in terms of virtue, but also with regard to its alleged correlate: happiness. Given that the superior form of life includes “serious purpose”, experiencing things as comical undermines the attainment of a virtuous and happy life. In his insightful overviews regarding the philosophy of humor, John Morreall adds a few names to this history of proponents of the Irresponsibility Objection: Protagoras, Epictetus, the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, John Climacus and William Prynne. These precursive formulations, however, remain terse and incomplete as arguments against humorism.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, trans. H. Rackham, vol. 19 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1177a.

Modern versions of the Irresponsibility Objection are more extensive. Anthony Ludovici characterizes humor as a form of weakness, providing people with an excuse to leave in chaos what they neglect to resolve:

Humor is, therefore, the lazier principle to adopt in approaching all questions, and that is why the muddle is increasing everywhere. Because the humorous mind shirks the heavy task of solving thorny problems and prefers to make people laugh about them... Truth to tell, there is in every inspired and passionate innovator a haughty energy which is incompatible with the cowardice and indolence of humor.⁴⁵

According to Ludovici, the humorist both harnesses and promotes irresponsibility. When presented as laughable, matters do not seem to be in need of concern, let alone a solution, whereas they often do.

Essentially, then, the Irresponsibility Objection to humorism in general highlights the “incompatibility between being amused by something and feeling practical concern about it.”⁴⁶ Put in more strict form, the argument adheres to the following inferential sequence: (1) the humorous experience incapacitates the subject’s practical concern about the risible object; and (2) many incongruities demand practical concern; from (1) and (2), it follows that (3) many incongruities ought not to be experienced as comical; therefore, (4) one ought not to manifest a behavioral pattern of humorous responses to incongruity.

Before applying this objection to Humoristic Absurdism, let us consider a few examples of irresponsibility in countering incongruity with humor. Imagine being on a boat trip somewhere near a coral reef in the Pacific. Tied to a cord, connecting you to the boat, you are swimming around the reef. After many blissful moments of fascination regarding the biodiversity around the reef, a rather different organism appears: a great white shark. Caught by surprise, you burst into laughter, instead of pulling

45 Morreall, “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought,” 255.

46 Morreall, 255.

the cord in order to get to safety. Facing such a dangerous incongruity, humorous behavior would certainly be deemed irresponsible. A more unethical form of irresponsibility may be illustrated by the following case. A friend has been addicted for a decade now. If I am helping this friend to get sober, it would be inappropriate, to say the least, to joke about his odd-looking withdrawal symptoms – his convulsive tremor, his excessive transpiration, his tantalized drooling. The earnestness of addiction and sobriety demands responsible behavior, which is (supposedly) annulled by a consistent pattern of humorous responses to the matter at hand.⁴⁷

In the assessment of Humoristic Absurdism, an advocate of the Irresponsibility Objection should underscore the irresponsibility in being diverted by what matters at such a fundamental level. It is, indeed, not exactly a bagatelle; the existential condition lays the overarching structure in which we ought to live our lives. Thus, according to this imagined camp of critics, the problem with Humoristic Absurdism is that it undermines practical concern about the absurdity of existence and its concrete manifestations.

Admittedly, ethical, rather than existential, objections may be relevant in the general case of a humoristic disposition. If a father burst into laughter upon seeing his daughter burn herself to the stove, many would condemn him on moral grounds. Indeed, Morreall situates the Irresponsibility Objection mostly in the ethical sphere:

The person who laughed about all incongruous events would be someone who never felt concern about things not being what they should be, and so never remedied any problems. Such a nonserious person would certainly be open to ethical criticism on many occasions.⁴⁸

Even in the case of Humoristic Absurdism, a critical reader may raise the objection that a pattern of humorous responses in the face of the Absurd

47 Morreall, 255–57.

48 Morreall, 255.

stimulates unethical behavior, for example on the basis of the lack of practical concern about concrete absurdities, which may radiate to the interpersonal sphere. After all, there are some psychological difficulties with attempting to isolate the non-serious disposition in the existential domain from the ethical domain. Ethics, however, is outside of the scope of this paper, which focuses essentially on the *existential* justification of Humoristic Absurdism. In other words, ‘irresponsibility’ should be conceived in terms of faithfulness to the existential facts, specifically regarding the responsibility to reflect in our actions a stark awareness of the Absurd and its constituents.

In opposition to the Irresponsibility Objection, one might take up the task of denying the link between humor and disengagement altogether. In this counterargumentative strategy, one has to deny the mutually exclusive relation between a humorous experience and proactive concern. To be sure, this is an ambitious strategy, but let us follow this line of thought for a minute. How should we imagine the above examples? Call to mind the image of a diver pulling the cord and ascending to the surface – yet in a state of humorous amusement, perhaps even in a fit of laughter. Imagine, in addition, being amused by the sight of a dear friend’s withdrawal symptoms while simultaneously expressing the grave need for him to endure the process of withdrawal. Even if it is possible to identify with these kinds of psychological ambivalence, it should be conceded that one is not exercising the utmost of one’s proactive capabilities. One could certainly be more effective by getting rid of the humorous experience of the situation and focusing on its solution.

Speaking of effectivity, this counterargumentative strategy may not be completely hopeless, but I believe another strategy to be more effective. Therefore, I concur with the exponents of the Irresponsibility Objection that humor is essentially linked to practical disengagement. From this link, John Morreall in his defense of humor even acquiesces in the force of the objection: “humor does involve a disengagement from what we are laughing about, and it is irresponsible to disengage ourselves from certain kinds

of incongruity.⁷⁴⁹ Which kinds of incongruity demand proactive concern, rather than disengagement, is not essential here. Instead, the question ought to be turned on its head, with a focus on the specific incongruity central to the present inquiry: is the Absurd the kind of incongruity the practical disengagement of which is irresponsible?

The ascription of irresponsibility to Humoristic Absurdism falsely assumes that the Absurd demands proactive concern. Certainly, many incongruities demand concern: the sudden appearance of a shark; drug addiction; the injustices brought about by exploitative companies. Confronted by an incongruity, humor incapacitates the proactive need to remedy the incongruity. The abstract condition of the Absurd, however, has no remedy, for absurdity is tautologically irremediable. We cannot flee from the absurd condition in the way we flee from a shark. Thus, the Absurd is not the kind of incongruity that demands proactive concern. The humorous experience of the Absurd only incapacitates what was already categorically inadequate in remedial power.

Neither do the *concrete* absurdities demand a remedy, for it helps very little to try to restore the dissolved resolution. For example, imagine the fresh pensioner (the one who longs to return to work after decades of looking forward to his retirement) reapplying to his prior job and getting back into the office. As a result, the ex-pensioner will only reinvigorate his desire to retire. Imagine a perfectionist writer, confronted with the insurmountable distance between his writing and literary perfection, refusing to submit his work until it is perfect. He will not surmount the distance; and he will most probably never submit his work. Finally, imagine Sisyphus, desperately holding on to his sense of success when he sees his rock descending to its starting point. However deeply he may experience his momentary triumph, it will not last through eternity. In conclusion, there exists no action that can tenably solve the incongruity inherent to

49 Morreall, 256.

a concrete absurdity and, thus, concrete absurdities do not belong to the category of incongruities that demand proactive concern.

As a final resort for advocates of the Irresponsibility Objection, it may be argued that, although concrete absurdities do not demand proactive concern regarding *the respective incongruities*, they do demand proactive concern regarding *the renewal of striving*. Indeed, the need to strive toward goals is constitutive of the Absurd and thus deserves practical recognition.⁵⁰ In other words, we ought to abandon the sense of success stemming from dissolved resolutions and instead take up the task of striving toward new resolutions. In doing so, we ought to avoid the humorous experience of the concrete absurdity if we are to seriously engage ourselves in the renewal of striving.

Although it is correct that concrete absurdities demand proactive concern for the renewal of striving (in order to respect the innate need to strive), the urgency of concern is exaggerated. After the dissolution of a resolution, we need not immediately return to diligent exertions. Not only does our limited biology hinder undiminished striving, which leaves room for humor in moments of rest, but it is also hardly possible to be in an unceasing state of humorous amusement for more than an hour, let alone a day or even a week. Often, one has a spare five minutes to enjoy an absurd incongruity (especially the pensioner), before pursuing a new project. Besides, humor can indirectly support our engagement in renewed striving, by means of its very propensity to disengage us from incongruity. Instead of succumbing to the negative emotions that may result from the disappointment inherent to a concrete absurdity, we take up a more objective viewpoint, which may enable us to leave behind the frustration of that absurdity and to continue our quest for meaning with renewed spirit. To conclude, the final resort of the Irresponsibility Objection fails to undermine the humoristic disposition toward the Absurd.

50 Recall the justificatory guideline, emphasizing recognition of the Absurd, at the end of Chapter 2.

4.4. The Frivolity Objection

Supplementing the trilogy of objections canonized by Morreall, I present a fourth objection: the Frivolity Objection. In its general form, it assigns to the humoristic disposition a mode of *frivolity*, that is, a misplaced lack of seriousness. In this way, humorism tends to negate the earnestness of certain matters. As a critique of Humoristic Absurdism, the Frivolity Objection protests that the humoristic disposition toward the Absurd renounces the earnest desire for resolution in its experience of the Absurd as a frivolity rather than a matter of gravity. This objection presents the most pressing challenge for Absurdists with a predilection for humorism and calls for a slight modification of Humoristic Absurdism, which is to be investigated in Chapter 5.

In his introductory reflections upon what he infamously deemed the only truly serious philosophical question – *should we kill ourselves?* – Albert Camus himself articulates an objection against a joke regarding suicide, on the basis of deficient earnestness: “Schopenhauer is often cited, as a fit subject for laughter, because he praised suicide while seated at a well-set table. This is no subject for joking. That way of not taking the tragic seriously is not so grievous[.]”⁵¹ In other words, the topic of suicide in an absurd existence, being such a tragic matter, should not be subjected to jest. In his analysis of Camus’ “existentialist ‘dramatics’”, Bob Plant emphasizes “Camus’ insistence that we should not indulge in frivolous ‘joking’ [...] about such existentially weighty matters.”⁵²

In brief, the argumentative gist of the Frivolity Objection is this: (1) humor is unserious in the sense that it emotionally disengages the subject from its object; and (2) some matters demand emotional engagement; ergo, (3) one ought not to manifest an indiscriminate pattern of humorous responses, i.e. humorism.

51 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 15.

52 Plant, “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter,” 123.

Regarding the notion of *emotional disengagement*, it is important to distinguish this type of disengagement from the disengagement that was at the heart of the Irresponsibility Objection. There, we spoke of *practical disengagement*, in which proactive concern is suspended. Given the insuperability of the Absurd, the predicate of irresponsibility on account of lacking proactivity has proven to be misguided. Still, the rejection of *practical engagement* leaves open the question of *emotional engagement*. For example, the death of a loved one demands my emotional engagement, while omitting the necessitation (and perhaps even the very possibility) of proactive concern. There is no getting rid of the incongruity between wanting a loved one around and lacking her presence, but that does not eradicate the need for emotional engagement with this incongruity, actualized in the genuine experience of sadness, grief, anger and the like.

What is the connection between humor and emotional disengagement? John Morreall discerns the emotional disengagement of protagonists in comedy: “While tragic heroes are emotionally engaged with their problems, comic protagonists show emotional disengagement. They think, rather than feel, their way through difficulties.”⁵³ Highlighting the anesthetic effect of humor upon the emotions, Henri Bergson explains the disinterested perspective inherent to humor:

Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy. It is enough for us to stop our ears to the sound of music, in a room where dancing is going on, for the dancers at once to appear ridiculous. How many human actions would stand a similar test? Should we not see many of them suddenly pass from grave to gay, on isolating them from the accompanying music of sentiment? To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.⁵⁴

53 Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

54 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Macmillan, 1911), 12.

Oftentimes, however, anesthesia is not the appropriate means in confronting our problems. In its structural negation of grave emotions, humorism ignores the disappointing form that incongruities can possess, especially those in which we are emotionally invested, such as heartbreak and grief. To put it differently, I may see myself *as if* I were a disinterested spectator, but, ultimately, I cannot *be* this disinterested spectator; and thus I must accept the tragic, rather than comic, experience when I recognize my emotional investment.

Now that we have a sufficient grasp of the Frivolity Objection, it is time to apply it to the case of Humoristic Absurdism. In what sense does a humoristic disposition toward the absurd condition portray the Absurd as a frivolity where seriousness is due? If we are to pin down where the gravity of the Absurd is located, the focus should be on the earnest desire for resolution. As has been explicated in Chapter 2, human beings long for an ultimate resolution that would render their lives ultimately meaningful, but wherever they find resolutions and corresponding meaning, these turn out to be transient and untenable. This is no trifle. For it is impossible to shed the desire for resolution in order to do away with the gravity of our emotional investment in the human condition. If there were no such desire, then the dissolution of resolution may be entirely risible, thereby justifying Humoristic Absurdism, but the absence of this desire would of course change the entire conception of the Absurd.

This objection against Humoristic Absurdism loosely reflects Bob Plant’s criticism of Thomas Nagel.⁵⁵ In ‘The Absurd’, Nagel criticizes Albert Camus for being too dramatic regarding the Absurd. Indeed, lamentation of the absurd condition is illegitimate in the face of the self-defeating premise that “nothing matters”:

If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation (even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises), then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? Like the capacity for

55 Recall 2.3, in which the Nagelian notion of the Absurd was discussed.

epistemological skepticism, it results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.⁵⁶

Bob Plant summarizes Nagel's argument against the tragic view of the Absurd, which nonetheless incorporates the thesis that life is absurd: "Nagel thus grants that there is something about human life that generates absurdity. What he denies, however, is that this is lamentable or deserving of heroic posturing."⁵⁷ Instead, it calls for a more humoristic disposition, in particular ironism.

In opposition to both the Camusian dramatics (which excludes humorism) and the Nagelian ironism (which is a form of humorism), Plant provides a more nuanced perspective on the appropriate disposition toward the Absurd. From a disinterested perspective, the Absurd may manifest itself as comical, but from a subjective point of view it can be legitimately depressing:

In short, living at the juncture of subjective and objective perspectives, we human beings just *cannot help* repeatedly asking *unanswerable questions*. Now, in one sense, this is a curious activity for any creature to engage in. Indeed, if viewed subjectively, such a prospect may seem rather depressing. But that, of course, is not the only perspective available to us; it is just one extreme on the perspectival 'spectrum' [...] We should not forget that this predicament can *itself* be viewed from a more objective, disinterested point of view. From this latter perspective then, the fact that questions such as 'What

56 Nagel, "The Absurd," 727.

57 Plant, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter," 131.

is the meaning of life?' and 'Does life matter?' are both irresistible and futile can legitimately be met with comic laughter rather than existential bemoaning or revolt.⁵⁸

In other words, the Absurd is not only the result of the clash between subjectivity and objectivity, but it can itself be viewed from these perspectives. From an objective perspective, the Absurd does not matter, but from the subjective perspective it does, because we cannot, or at least not permanently, step outside of our commitments and desires (in my terminology, our desire for resolution).⁵⁹ This critique echoes the Frivolity Objection against HA: from a detached point of view, we may burst out in laughter when we are confronted with the Absurd, but the desire for resolution continues to linger in all its earnestness; thus, we can escape lamentation no more than we can escape our subjectivity. Contra Nagel, I conclude that the Absurd is no frivolity.

As in the Irrationality Objection, psychological integrity is at stake here. Facing an incongruity in which such a grave desire as a quest for meaning and resolution is violated, the humorist finds it difficult, to say the least, to maintain his mirth. Imagine someone being confronted with the death of his spouse, trying to keep his sense of humor and to not give in to despair. Friends would not hesitate to say: "It's okay. You can cry." The assumption behind such remarks is that there exists within loving widowers an innate need to be with their deceased loved ones and that the categorical violation of this need must inevitably be met by despair, sadness, anger or any earnest emotion at all. Rejecting the earnestness of the incongruity, then, is psychologically dishonest.

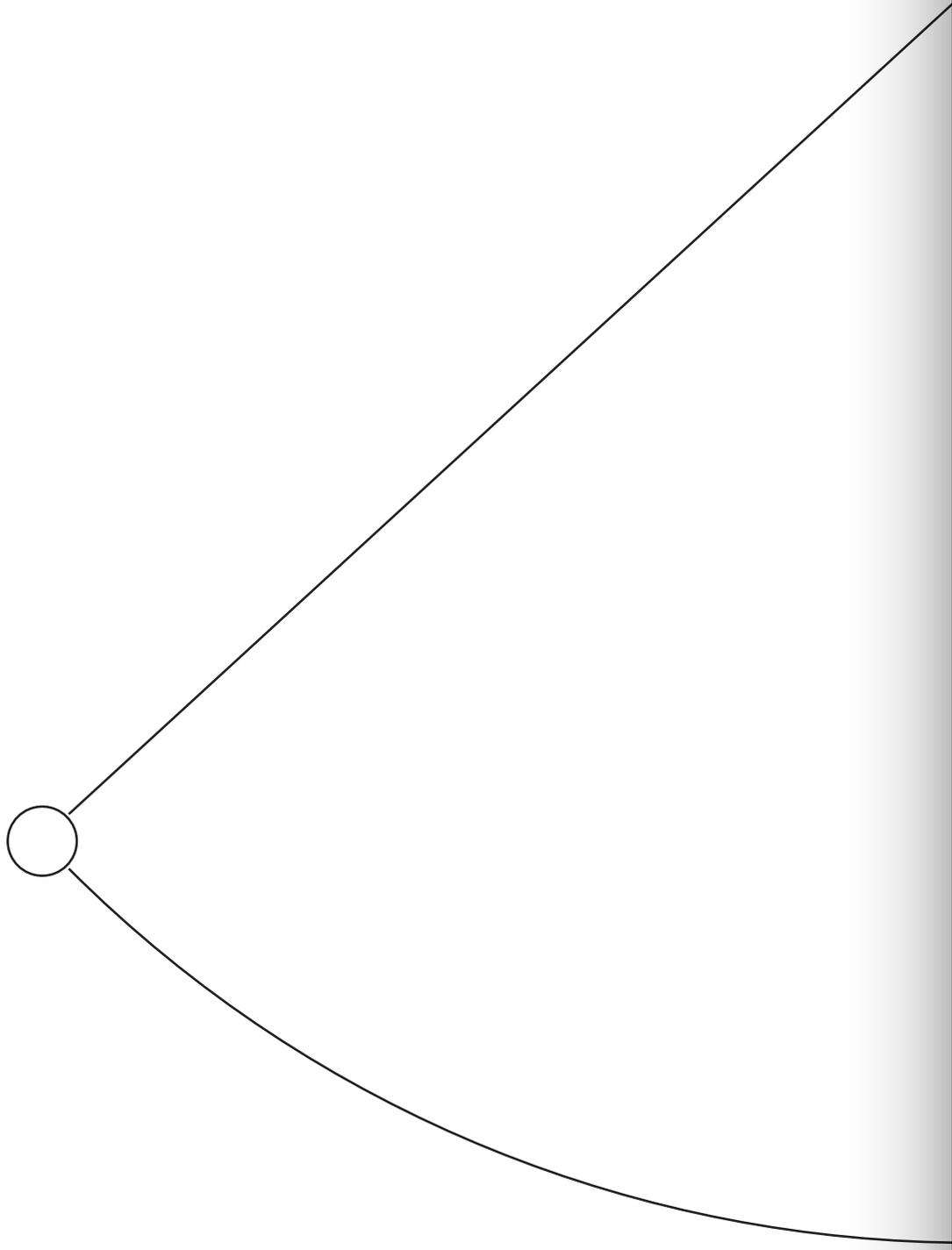
In conclusion, the Frivolity Objection ought to be taken seriously. It has detected a flaw within Humoristic Absurdism: it violates the grave

58 Plant, 133.

59 Although the Nagelian notion of the Absurd has been debunked in Chapter 2, the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity is still worthy of consideration. Indeed, it is reflected in our characterization of the absurd condition: on the one hand, the subjective side of the coin denotes our earnest desire for resolution; on the other hand, there exists an objective perspective that makes it manifest that there is no tenable resolution to our ceaseless striving.

dimension of the Absurd that is constituted by the earnest desire for resolution. In other words, Humoristic Absurdism fails to remain faithful to its starting point. Thus, the success of the Frivolity Objection calls for a revision of Humoristic Absurdism. To what extent can humorous responses be integrated in a disposition toward the Absurd, without falling prey to the Frivolity Objection? Although a comprehensive defense of an alternative disposition is overambitious within the present formal constraints, I propose a preliminary suggestion for the desired modification. This modified disposition, which I call 'Metamodern Absurdism', is the central subject of the next chapter.





Metamodern Absurdism

In substitution of Humoristic Absurdism, which has collapsed under pressure by the Frivolity Objection, this chapter is devoted to the conceptualization of Metamodern Absurdism. What is it? What is the role of humor in Metamodern Absurdism? In what way does it differ from Humoristic Absurdism? How is it justified and, most importantly, how does it avoid the Frivolity Objection? In what follows, I flesh out the notion of ‘Metamodernism’ in its own right (5.1) and in relation to the Absurd (5.2), in order to defend Metamodern Absurdism as *prima facie* superior to Humoristic Absurdism (5.3). Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize the preliminary nature of this defense; essentially, it should be taken as a first attempt to visualize in what way Humoristic

Absurdism can be revised for the better. Metamodern Absurdism is defined as the commitment to an oscillatory pattern of on the one hand humorous and on the other hand earnest responses to the Absurd, which together regard the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a tragicomic phenomenon.

5.1. What is metamodernism?

In *The Metamodernist Manifesto* (2011), British artist Luke Turner and others proclaimed the end of postmodernism, articulating the need to go beyond the “inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child.”¹ As the self-chosen successor of postmodernism, metamodernism advocates a kind of marriage between modernism and postmodernism, though not one of synthesis. It embraces the modernist striving toward some kind of ultimacy, whether it be in authenticity, beauty, truth, justice, happiness or other values, while acknowledging, in a rather postmodern fashion, that this striving is doomed to failure.

The conjunction of modernist enthusiasm and postmodern disillusionment is not one of synthesis, but has an oscillatory structure, like a pendulum swinging to-and-fro between two poles: “Movement shall henceforth be enabled by way of an oscillation between positions, with diametrically opposed ideas operating like the pulsating polarities

1 Luke Turner, “The Metamodernist Manifesto,” *Metamodernism*, 2011, <http://www.metamodernism.org>.

of a colossal electric machine, propelling the world into action.”² In its oscillatory structure, metamodern scholars and artists “must embrace doubt, as well as hope and melancholy, sincerity and irony, affect and apathy, the personal and the political, and technology and techne.”³ In most articulations of metamodernism, it refuses to reduce its oscillatory movement to one central dichotomy, but it remains clear that a very basic dichotomy remains present in all definitions: metamodernism oscillates between ambitious yet naïve modernism and disillusioned yet critical postmodernism. Still, it resists the naïveté of postulating the possibility of ever transcending these dichotomies, acknowledging “the limitations inherent to all movement and experience, and the futility of any attempt to transcend the boundaries set forth therein.”⁴

Furthermore, metamodernism is particularly known, when known at all, for its critique of the ironic disposition that is often considered to be characteristic of postmodernism.⁵ Put briefly, postmodern irony cynically mocks a position by defending it in such a way that it becomes clearly incoherent, ill-founded or false, with deconstruction of that position as the desired outcome.⁶ For example, in response to someone claiming that Christianity has always been about ‘loving thy neighbor’, a postmodern ironist would say something like: “Yeah, right, because that’s what the Thirty Years’ War was about: nothing but love for one’s neighbor...” Metamodern novelist David Foster Wallace acknowledges the deconstructive powers of such irony:

2 Turner.

3 Kim Levin, “How PoMo Can You Go?,” *ARTnews.Com* (blog), October 15, 2012, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/how-pomo-can-you-go-2108/>.

4 Turner, “The Metamodernist Manifesto.”

5 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 2003).

6 This definition inevitably falls short of the complexity of postmodern irony, but remains sufficiently thin to provide us with a general grasp of the irony that is critiqued by metamodern thinkers. Also, it ought to be borne in mind that this defense of Metamodern Absurdism is only preliminary and demands further inquiry in future research. Helene A. Shugart, “Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 433–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319909374653>; Pye, “Comedy Theory and the Postmodern”; cf. Claire Colebrook, “Irony: The New Critical Idiom,” *London & New York: Routledge*, 2004.

The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates. The virtuous always triumph? Ward Cleaver is the prototypical fifties father? “Sure.” Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff’s mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it.⁷

After giving irony its due, Wallace continues to problematize its wholly negative outcome, its deadlock, its utter lack of a positive position: “The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, ‘then’ what do we do?”⁸ Those suggesting positive action in order to restore or ameliorate what is unpleasant or wrong will look naïve in the eyes of ironists: “Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong, because they’ll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists.”⁹ Thus, sincerity turns into a taboo; and ironism becomes tyrannical:

Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like an hysteric or a prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the *question* without attending to its *subject* is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself.¹⁰

From the untenability of ironism in its tyrannical negativity, Wallace envisions a post-ironic disposition, in which artists try to construct something positive, however naïve or sentimental it may seem, amidst the postmodern deadlock that results from deconstruction:

7 Stephen J. Burn, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 48.

8 Burn, 48.

9 Burn, 48.

10 (original emphasis) David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Hachette UK, 2012), 66–69.

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, *who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.* Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. *Too sincere.* Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point. Maybe that’s why they’ll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. [...] The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how banal”. To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law.¹¹

Thus, metamodernism aims to go beyond the ironic detachment in order to treat troubles and emotions with reverence and to endorse and instantiate principles with sincerity. Leaving the many intricacies of post-irony aside, this is what I consider to be the metamodern disposition: a pattern of responses to issues that are sometimes ironic, but no less often sincere, serious and earnest. In short, metamodern thinkers and artists oscillate between irony and seriousness.¹²

For the sake of exemplification, consider the movie *The Bad Lieutenant*, which Matthew Collins summarizes as follows:

The film contains what a *Snakes on a Plane*-style irony-fest should: hokey plot, bad acting, and deliciously over-the-top glorification of sex and drug use. But the film does much more than revel in its

11 (my italicization) David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 192–93.

12 Lukas Hoffmann, *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers* (transcript Verlag, 2016).

genre’s campy history—*The Bad Lieutenant* is gorgeously shot and contains pervasive, incisive commentary on everything from race relations to police corruption and the definition of finding success in America.¹³

This demonstrates how ironic motifs (“hokey plot, bad acting, and deliciously over-the-top glorification of sex and drug use”) can be balanced with a sincere attempt to attain beauty (“gorgeously shot”) and earnest engagement with personal and societal problems (“race relations”, “police corruption” and “finding success”).

Another example of metamodernism is the oeuvre of Guido van der Werve. In the short film *Nummer Acht* (“number eight”), for instance, a man walks on ice in front of an enormous ship, only a couple of meters away from the point that would effectuate his death. He does not stop, but he does not pace up either, thus manifesting an oscillation between ironic detachment and earnest engagement. As the description of the film alludes, “romantic melancholy meets physical absurdity of slapstick comedies”.¹⁴ As viewers, we thus find ourselves unable to resolve whether the image is comical or earnest.

Other names that have been mentioned as part of the movement of Metamodernism include Roberto Bolaño, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Haruki Murakami and Zadie Smith in the literary sphere; Ulf Aminde, Yael Bartana, Monica Bonvicini, Mariechen Danz, Annabel Daou, Paula Doepfner, Olafur Eliasson, Mona Hatoum, Andy Holden, Sejla Kameric, Ragnar Kjartansson, Kris Lemsalu, Issa Sant, David Thorpe, Angelika J. Trojnariski, Luke Turner and Nastja Säde Rönkkö in the fine arts; and Wes Anderson, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Miranda July, and Charlie Kaufman in film. What binds these artists and thinkers together is the attempt to go beyond the ironic disposition, in order to express something sincere, earnest or otherwise emotionally engaging, without abandoning a degree

13 Matthew Collins, “Post-Irony Is Real, And So What?,” *The Georgetown Voice* (blog), March 4, 2010, <https://georgetownvoice.com/2010/03/04/post-irony-is-real-and-so-what/>.

14 Guido van der Werve, *Nummer Acht*, 2002, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3620758/>.

of irony that allows for a detached and more objective perspective. In other words, they oscillate between a particular form of humor and earnestness.

This is why metamodernism is relevant here. It is a contemporary movement, calling for the oscillation between ironic detachment and earnest engagement. As we have seen in the discussion of the Frivolity Objection, there is a pressing need for earnestness amidst a humorous outlook on the Absurd. What is more, the post-ironic motif in the above-mentioned artists and thinkers really concretizes the way in which earnest engagement and humorous disengagement can be combined. With a basic understanding of metamodernism, we can now ask: what is Metamodern Absurdism?

5.2. What is Metamodern Absurdism?

How does Metamodern Absurdism combine humor with gravity? As we have seen in the discussion of the Frivolity Objection, the humorous experience of an object and emotional engagement with the object are mutually exclusive, for humor demands a detached point of view, which suspends serious, emotional concern. This establishes the impossibility of *synthesis*.

Although humor and earnestness cannot be combined in *one* response to the Absurd, they may coexist in a more complex dynamic. In Metamodern Absurdism, the disposition toward the Absurd follows an oscillatory pattern, in which one alternates between humorous disengagement and serious engagement. Thus, echoing the definition of Metamodernism by James McDowell, Metamodern Absurdism combines “ironic detachment with sincere engagement”. Of course, irony is not necessarily the essential mode of humor in the present disposition, but the postironic disposition presented above does provide us with a concrete strategy for balancing earnestness and humor.

How, then, is it different from Humoristic Absurdism? The Absurdist point of departure, of course, remains equivalent: life is equally absurd

according to Humoristic and Metamodern Absurdism. Furthermore, the humorous responses to the Absurd in Metamodern Absurdism are no less humorous than the responses of Humoristic Absurdism. Humor is not suppressed or otherwise weakened in the Metamodern disposition. Rather, the difference regarding the integration of humor is not qualitative, but quantitative. Whereas Humoristic Absurdism prescribes humorous responses to *all* encounters with the Absurd, Metamodern Absurdism dictates the alternation between humorous and earnest responses. We may laugh, we may weep, but we should never magnify either pole of the metamodern dichotomy. To repeat with Bob Plant, “overemphasis on either extremity will inevitably misrepresent the reality of human life.”¹⁵ This misrepresentation amounts to the renunciation of the Absurd or, in other words, the violation of the justificatory guideline that holds for any form of Absurdism.¹⁶ In its dual nature, revolving around the oscillation between earnest engagement and humorous disengagement, the metamodern disposition toward the Absurd does justice to both the tragic and the comical side of the coin. From this dichotomy of tragedy and comedy, we may contend that Metamodern Absurdism views the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a tragicomic phenomenon.

With these characteristics in mind, I conclude that Metamodern Absurdism consists in the commitment to an oscillatory pattern of on the one hand humorous and on the other hand earnest responses to the Absurd, which together regard the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a tragicomic phenomenon.

It is by no means coincidental that I take David Foster Wallace as a central advocate in the metamodern critique of irony. For, in my reading of his oeuvre, he embodies the prime example of Metamodern Absurdism, not only in his non-fictional writings, but also in his literary works. Especially *Infinite Jest* (1996) provides us with an extensive approach to the Absurd as a tragicomic phenomenon, which demands oscillation between humorous

¹⁵ Plant, “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter,” 131.

¹⁶ This ‘justificatory guideline’ refers to the principal criterion for Absurdism laid down in 2.5.

and emotionally engaged experiences of the Absurd. In *Infinite Jest*, each and every character is subject to one or another form of addiction: sex, alcohol, fame and marihuana are some of the objects of addiction. Addiction, of course, is an eminent form of the endless cycle of renewed striving, in which we are repeatedly dissatisfied and craving more. Yet, most importantly, *Infinite Jest* is about an entire society, spanning over the North-American continent, which is at the verge of succumbing to what is called “the Entertainment”, a film so entertaining that all viewers lose interest in everything else and ultimately die of sleep deprivation and starvation. While these addictions and the overarching notions of dissatisfaction and insatiability are, without a doubt, tragic, they are not merely so. The title already suggests the humorous dimension of the novel, which is further corroborated by the vast majority of its critics, who note in unison that *Infinite Jest* is melancholic yet humorous, tragic yet comical. Regarding the metamodern experience of the Absurd, consider the tragicomic scene in which one of the central characters comes home to the alleged suicide of his father, who had put his head in an active microwave:

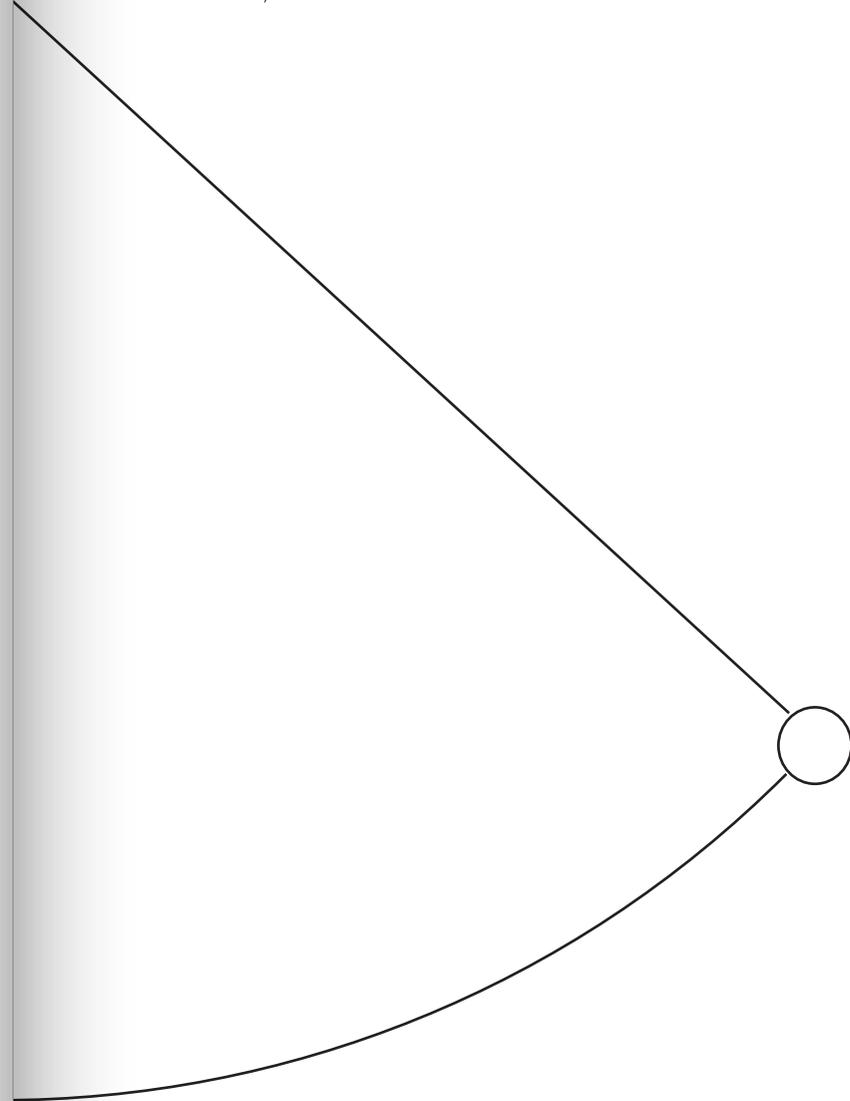
[“]When I first came in and was still in the foyer trying to get my shoes off without putting the dirty laundry-bag down on the white carpet and hopping around and couldn’t be expected to have any idea what had happened. I said nobody can choose or have any control over their first unconscious thoughts or reactions when they come into a house. I said it wasn’t my fault that my first unconscious thought turned out to be —”

“Jesus, kid, what?”

“*That something smelled delicious!*” I screamed.

This unexpected thought of pleasure at what is essentially horrifying is, in my mind, hauntingly comical. Thus, it evokes both humorous mirth and pity, though of course never in synthesis. Another character, Eric Clipperton, is notorious for winning tennis matches, not by means of physical or

strategic excellence, but by threatening to shoot himself in the head if he were to lose.¹⁷ These examples are all comical instances, though the psychological realities behind these comedies, described in detail by Wallace, are dead serious.



17 Since limited space prevents me from providing an in-depth analysis of the metamodern dimension of this example, Wallace’s novel should be considered a mere candidate for Metamodern Absurdism, a prima facie example of the metamodern disposition toward the absurd condition.

5.3. Preliminary Defense of Metamodern Absurdism

Without pretending to be able to put forward a comprehensive justification within the limits of this paper, I defend Metamodern Absurdism in its own right and in comparison with Humoristic Absurdism. Given the orientative purpose of this chapter, we must consider in utmost brevity the viability of at least one alternative after the rejection of Humoristic Absurdism. This inevitably leaves open the possibility of additional arguments in favor or against the alternative. Notwithstanding the incompleteness of both the conceptualization and the defense of this alternative, namely Metamodern Absurdism, I argue in the present section that Metamodern Absurdism is a coherent disposition toward the Absurd, superior to Humoristic Absurdism with regard to its immunity to the Frivolity Objection, which is countered by its post-ironic combination of a form of humor with a degree of emotional engagement in an oscillatory dynamic. In short, Metamodern Absurdism is a promising modification of Humoristic Absurdism.

Of course, by sustaining the comical dimension of the Absurd, Metamodern Absurdism upholds the incongruous nature of the Absurd. After all, humor depends upon the cognizance of an incongruity. In addition to the comical experience, the metamodern disposition embraces the tragic experience of the Absurd. Although tragedy is, in one sense, opposed to comedy, they both consist in the experience of an incongruity or, more specifically, in the contradiction of a norm. Tragedies expose a reality that is quite different from what it ought to be. The difference between the tragic and the comic thus lies not in the object, but in the experience of it. As William Hazlitt strikingly remarks: "Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps: for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be."¹⁸ In this way, the Absurd is recognized as an insurmountable incongruity between norm and reality.

18 Hazlitt, "On Wit and Humour," 1.

Regarding the normative constituent of the Absurd, in other words the *appel humain*, the metamodern disposition acknowledges the existence of the desire for resolution, not only in the humorous apprehension of the Absurd, which needs the presence of a norm, but also in the experience of the Absurd as tragic. By oscillating between ironic detachment and emotional engagement, the valuation of the desire may change, but the desire remains recognized as present in either mode of the metamodern experience of the Absurd.

The same holds for the other constituent of the Absurd, namely the reality that contradicts the *appel humain*. How does Metamodern Absurdism contain a recognition of the absence of an ultimate resolution? In virtue of the oscillatory structure, one bears in mind that earnest striving, however diligent, will always be followed by disengagement. Similarly, lamentation, which may involve initial denial, will always be followed by humorous enjoyment, thus facilitating a sense of acceptance. This inevitable outcome of striving in the metamodern mind thus reflects the inevitability of dissolution, thereby recognizing the reality that makes up the Absurd.

With regard to the Superiority Objection, the response remains roughly the same. The humorous pole of the oscillatory structure does not devalue our ability to find an ultimate resolution; rather, it is the proper valuation of that ability. In addition, through alternating between humorous disengagement and earnest engagement, Metamodern Absurdism oscillates between this relativizing tendency of humor and a healthy amount of self-pity with regard to the reality of dissatisfied desires. Thus, it avoids self-deprecation.

Metamodern Absurdism deals with the Irrationality Objection by giving some room to the rational impulse, which strives toward congruity, thereby allowing oneself to lament the incongruity as such. It allows for the expression of frustration brought about by the Absurd as an *incongruity*, without abandoning the irresolvable nature of the incongruity. After

all, like any legitimate form of Absurdism, the metamodern disposition demands no proactive engagement.

The Irresponsibility Objection is countered by means similar to those employed in section 4.3. Where proactive engagement is needed, a quick moment of mirth hardly impedes committed striving, for humorous experiences tend to be swift and the continuation of such striving is not urgent in the way that dodging a boulder is urgent. Moreover, by incorporating earnest engagement into one's disposition toward the Absurd, one simultaneously incorporates a responsible sense of commitment. This then bypasses the ascription of irresponsibility.

Most importantly, how does Metamodern Absurdism deal with the Frivolity Objection? Unlike Humoristic Absurdism, this disposition toward the Absurd acknowledges the gravity of the Absurd, by portraying it not as a mere comedy, but also as a tragedy. By oscillating between humorous detachment and earnest engagement, one provides oneself with moments of comical relief from the frustrations and tensions and other negative emotions caused by the experience of the Absurd, while never reducing the absurd condition to a frivolity. It ought to be taken seriously, because our innate desire for resolution demands it.

In conclusion, Metamodern Absurdism appears to be able to deal with all objections. As such, it is preferable over Humoristic Absurdism. Admittedly, the defense currently presented is quite incomplete. It has not been my purpose to provide a comprehensive justification for Metamodern Absurdism; rather, this chapter explores the pressing question of how to continue after the rejection of Humoristic Absurdism. Hopefully, this chapter has provided a strategy in the direction of Metamodern Absurdism, as a viable modification of Humoristic Absurdism.

Conclusion

Only in its modified version does Humoristic Absurdism succeed; it needs a metamodern twist. In Chapter 1, humor was defined as the amusing experience of incongruity between norm and (the presentation of) reality, which may devalue the underperforming subject of violation (reality) or the overperformed object of violation (norm), and may provide some degree of tension-relief to the experiencer of humorous amusement by lifting related desires from repression. Chapter 2 defended the notion of the Absurd as the incongruity between one's indefinite desire for resolution and the absence of a definitive resolution. In the third chapter, Humoristic Absurdism was conceptualized as the commitment to a pattern of humorous responses (i.e., a humorous disposition) to the Absurd, which regard the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a comical phenomenon. Although many *prima facie* reasons and more comprehensive justifications of Humoristic Absurdism had been given, not all objections could be countered in Chapter 4. The first objection, the Superiority Objection, was debunked by highlighting that the humoristic disposition need not manifest a hostile or derogatory tendency toward its object. Although humor sometimes devalues its object, its valuation of the ability to find an ultimate resolution, which is the risible object in Humoristic Absurdism, is not an undervaluation; rather, it amounts to the proper valuation of this ability. Second, in response to the Irrationality Objection, we concluded that the desire for congruity does not imply that we cannot enjoy incongruity. Moreover, since the incongruity of the Absurd cannot be resolved, we would only frustrate our rational impulse if we were to follow upon its tendency to solve. Thus, humor seems to be a preferable reaction to incongruity from the rationalistic point of view. Third, the Irresponsibility Objection was assessed by reference to the fact that the absurd incongruity needs no proactive engagement, for there is nothing that can be done about the absurd condition. Surely, it remains vital to commit oneself to striving, in order to live up to our desire for resolution, but this is not so urgent as to prevent a brief moment of humorous mirth. The fourth objection, unfortunately, could not be repudiated. In its full-

blooded form, Humoristic Absurdism is fraught with frivolity; it portrays the Absurd as a frivolity, something that does not demand emotional engagement, thereby renouncing the earnestness of the desire for resolution. Given that its constituent is our very own desire, the Absurd has a tragic side, which ought to be taken seriously. Because of the success of the Frivolity Objection, we sought to modify Humoristic Absurdism into a disposition that maintains a sense of humor while also doing justice to the desire for resolution, by transcending frivolity. In Chapter 5, Metamodern Absurdism was suggested as a candidate. This disposition consists in the commitment to an oscillatory pattern of on the one hand humorous and on the other hand emotionally engaged responses to the Absurd, which together regard the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a tragicomic phenomenon. Although this candidate has not proven its worth just yet, it provides us with a hopeful conclusion to this inquiry.

Due to widespread disagreement and uncertainty in the psychology and philosophy of humor in current scholarly debate, the conclusion of this research is inevitably inconclusive. It is unclear what makes up the formal structure of humor, including both necessary and sufficient conditions, and much remains obscure regarding the psychophysiological workings of humor. From the present state of the art, I have followed what I take to be the most plausible path, but the art is still miles away from its ideal state. One particularly underdeveloped notion is the 'norm' that is violated in humor. Furthermore, while they all constitute an *incongruity*, thus making the Absurd potentially risible, some notions of the Absurd (e.g., the Heideggerian) have been given little attention. Even a restriction to Camus alone would confer a mind-boggling multiplicity of interpretations. Instead of trying to be comprehensive in this regard, I have discussed the accounts that are the most promising, in their own right as well as in the philosophical tradition of Humoristic Absurdism (explicit in Bob Plant). Furthermore, studies of philosophical, literary and artistic examples of both Humoristic Absurdism and Metamodern Absurdism are needed,

in order to distinguish the humorists from the metamodern thinkers tackling the topic of the Absurd. Given the philosophical outlook of the present paper, my deficient expertise in art and literary studies and the limited space in this document, in-depth analysis of specific Humoristic and Metamodern Absurdists has been omitted. Finally, the tenability of the substitutive Absurdism has only been secondary to the possibility of Humoristic Absurdism; therefore, Metamodern Absurdism has only been given preliminary attention. As it is essentially a modification of Humoristic Absurdism, it has certainly been worthwhile to lay the foundation of Metamodern Absurdism, as a way out for those Absurdists that find themselves sympathetic to humor and humorism. However, it should be borne in mind that this candidate, while still in the race, has not carried the day just yet.

In terms of future research, these points of discussion indicate that inquiry into the philosophy of humor is paramount. Incongruity Theory should be given special emphasis in further inquiries into Humoristic Absurdism, Metamodern Absurdism or other brands of Absurdism that incorporate some degree of humorism, not only because it turned out to be the most promising explanatory theory of humor's formal structure, but also because it conceptually unites the philosophy of humor and the philosophy of the Absurd by illuminating the incongruous nature of humor that is inherent to the Absurd. The role of incongruity, and especially one of its constituents, which we have called a 'norm' or an 'ought', should be fleshed out and challenged in order to further the development of Humoristic Absurdism and its theoretical relatives, regardless of whether it be destructive or progressive. Yet, the other theories in the canonical trichotomy should not be underestimated, for the Relief Theory may shed light upon the viability of humor as a coping mechanism in the face of the Absurd and the Superiority Theory (or, more specifically, the Devaluation Theory) may problematize humor as a frustration of value and normativity in the context of the existential condition. Given the great multiplicity of conceptualizations of the absurd condition, the possibility

of Humoristic (and Metamodern) Absurdism should be investigated with regard to these rival philosophies of the Absurd, such as the Heideggerian or Sartrean. Finally, Metamodernism, still being in its infancy, needs further investigation, especially in philosophical departments, in order to conceptualize it as the possible successor of postmodernism.

Bibliography

- Amir, Lydia B. *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. SUNY Press, 2014.
- Apte, Mahadev L. "Ethnic Humor Versus 'Sense of Humor' An American Sociocultural Dilemma." *American Behavioral Scientist* 30, no. 3 (1987): 27–41.
- Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*. Translated by H. Rackham. Vol. 19. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- . *Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . *Rhetoric*. Kessinger Publishing, 2004.
- Beattie, James. "An Essay on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition." *Essays*. William Creech, Edinburgh, 1776, 414–456.
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Macmillan, 1911.
- Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, UK, 2005.
- Bolton, Sharon C., and Maeve Houlihan. "Are We Having Fun yet? A Consideration of Workplace Fun and Engagement." *Employee Relations* 31, no. 6 (2009): 556–568.
- Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel. "The Laughter of Being." *MLN* 102, no. 4 (1987): 737–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2905788>.
- Brombert, Victor. *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Burn, Stephen J. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
- Caird, Sara, and Rod Martin. "Relationship-Focused Humor Styles and Relationship Satisfaction in Dating Couples: A Repeated-Measures Design." *HUMOR* 27 (May 1, 2014). <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2014-0015>.
- Camus, Albert. *Happy Death*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.
- . "Nuptials." *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 1968.
- . *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.
- . *The Fall*. Penguin UK, 2013.
- . *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien, 2013.
- . *The Plague*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.
- . *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Vintage, 2012.
- . *The Stranger*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.
- Caruso, Gregg D., and Owen Flanagan. "Neuroexistentialism: Third-Wave Existentialism." In *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, edited by Gregg D. Caruso Owen Flanagan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Cioran, E. M. *The New Gods*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Clasquin, Michel. "Real Buddhas Don't Laugh: Attitudes towards Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China." *Social Identities* 7, no. 1 (March 2001): 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630120043549>.
- Cohen, Sheldon, and Thomas A. Wills. "Stress, Social Support, and the Buffering Hypothesis." *Psychological Bulletin* 98, no. 2 (1985): 310.
- Colebrook, Claire. "Irony: The New Critical Idiom." *London & New York: Routledge*, 2004.
- Collins, Matthew. "Post-Irony Is Real, And So What?" *The Georgetown Voice* (blog), March 4, 2010. <https://georgetownvoice.com/2010/03/04/post-irony-is-real-and-so-what/>.
- Crowell, Steven. "Existentialism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2017. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/existentialism/>.
- Dauer, Dorothea W. "Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas," 1969.
- Davis, Jessica Milner, and Jocelyn Chey. *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011.
- Descartes, René. *Passions of the Soul*. Hackett Publishing, 1989.
- Dewey, John. "The Theory of Emotion: I: Emotional Attitudes." *Psychological Review* 1, no. 6 (November 1894): 553–69.
- Dundes, Alan. "The Dead Baby Joke Cycle." *Western Folklore* 38, no. 3 (1979): 145–157.
- Elst, Koenraad. "Humour in Hinduism." *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*, 2011, 35–53.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. *De lof der zotheid*. By Jan van Heekeren, 1719.
- Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press, 1962.
- Finnegan, Ruth, and Robin Horton. *Modes of Thought in Western and Non-Western Societies*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017.
- Fransen, Tim. *Het leven als tragikomedie: over humor, kwetsbaarheid en solidariteit*. Lemniscaat, 2019.
- Fuller, Benjamin A.G. "Is Reality Really Comic?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 22 (1946): 589–598.
- Furnham, A., E. Pereira, and R. Rawles. "Lay Theories of Psychotherapy: Perceptions of the Efficacy of Different 'cures' for Specific Disorders." *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 2001): 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548500125641>.
- Goldin, Paul R. "Xunzi." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/xunzi/>.
- Goodwin, Robin. "Sex Differences among Partner Preferences: Are the Sexes Really Very Similar?" *Sex Roles* 23, no. 9–10 (1990): 501–513.
- Gordon, Mordechai. "Camus, Nietzsche, and the Absurd: Rebellion and Scorn versus Humor and Laughter." *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 2 (2015): 364–378.
- Graham, Harry. *When Grandmama Fell Off the Boat: The Best of Harry Graham*. 2nd edition. London: Sheldrake Press, 2009.
- Greengross, Gil, and Geoffrey Miller. "Humor Ability Reveals Intelligence, Predicts Mating Success, and Is Higher in Males." *Intelligence* 39, no. 4 (July 2011): 188–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2011.03.006>.
- Grice, H. Paul, Peter Cole, and Jerry Morgan. "Logic and Conversation." *Speech Acts*, 1975, 41–58.
- Hamer, Thom. "The Dissolution of Resolution. An Alternative to Nagelian Absurdism." *Unpublished*, 2019.
- Hannay, Alastair, and Gordon D. Marino. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- Hansen, Sally L. "Dating Choices of High School Students." *Family Coordinator*, 1977, 133–138.
- Harbsmeier, Christoph. "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy." *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3 (1989): 289–310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399450>.
- Hatab, Lawrence J. "Laughter in Nietzsche's Thought: A Philosophical Tragicomedy," 1988, 13.
- Hauck, William E., and John W. Thomas. "The Relationship of Humor to Intelligence, Creativity, and Intentional and Incidental Learning." *The Journal of Experimental Education* 40, no. 4 (1972): 52–55.
- Hay, Jennifer. *Gender and Humour: Beyond a Joke*, 1995.
- Hazlitt, William. "On Wit and Humour." *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, 1819, 1–35.
- Hewitt, Lester E. "Student Perceptions of Traits Desired in Themselves as Dating and Marriage Partners." *Marriage and Family Living* 20, no. 4 (1958): 344–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/348256>.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, 1651.
- Hoffmann, Lukas. *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*. transcript Verlag, 2016.
- Holt, Dan G., and Colleen Willard-Holt. "An Exploration of the Relationship between Humor and Giftedness in Students." *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 8, no. 3 (2009): 257–272. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1995.8.3.257>.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 2003.
- Hutcheson, Francis. *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon [Mandeville's] The Fable of the Bees: Carefully Corrected*. Baxter, 1750.
- Hyers, Conrad. *The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.
- Immanuel, Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785.
- Janaway, Christopher. "Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy," 1989.
- Johnson, Robert, and Adam Cureton. "Kant's Moral Philosophy." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/kant-moral/>.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Hackett Publishing, 1790.
- Kao, George. *Chinese Wit And Humor*, 1948. <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.48556>.
- Kenrick, Douglas T., Edward K. Sadalla, Gary Groth, and Melanie R. Trost. "Evolution, Traits, and the Stages of Human Courtship: Qualifying the Parental Investment Model." *Journal of Personality* 58, no. 1 (1990): 97–116.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. "Concluding Unscientific Postscript." A *Kierkegaard Anthology* 1 (1946): 190–252.
- . *Gesammelte Werke*; 1. Verlag nicht ermittelbar, 1933.
- . *Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII, Volume 8: Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- . *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter: Kommentarbind Til Gjentagelsen, Frygt Og B\`a Even, Philosophiske Smuler, Begrebet Angest, Forord*. Vol. 4. Gad, 1998.
- . *The Humor of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*. Edited by Thomas C. Oden. Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Knechtges, David R. "Wit, Humor, and Satire in Early Chinese Literature (to AD 220)." *Monumenta Serica* 29, no. 1 (1970): 79–98.
- Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna de, and Peter Singer. *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Levin, Kim. "How PoMo Can You Go?" ARTnews.Com (blog), October 15, 2012. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/how-pomo-can-you-go-2108/>.
- Lewis, Barry. "Postmodernism and Literature." *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Liao, Zhaozhi. *Taiwanese Perceptions of Humor: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. Crane Publishing, 2001.
- Lippitt, John. "A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Salvation: Climacus as Humorist in Kierkegaard's 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript.'" *Religious Studies* 33, no. 2 (1997): 181–202.
- . *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*. Springer, 2000.
- Lyubomirsky, Sonja, and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema. "Self-Perpetuating Properties of Dysphoric Rumination." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 2 (1993): 339.
- Lyubomirsky, Sonja, and Chris Tkach. *The Consequences of Dysphoric Rumination*, 2008.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Existentialism." In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards, 3–4. New York: Macmillan, 1967.
- Magee, Bryan. *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Malantschuk, Gregor. *Kierkegaard's Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Marmysz, John. *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*. SUNY Press, 2012.
- Martin, Rod A., Patricia Puhlik-Doris, Gwen Larsen, Jeanette Gray, and Kelly Weir. "Individual Differences in Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire." *Journal of Research in Personality* 37, no. 1 (February 2003): 48–75. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00534-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2).
- Matthews, Julie, and Robert Hattam. "Did Buddha Laugh? Zen, Humour and Pedagogy," 2004.
- McDonald, William. "Søren Kierkegaard." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2017. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/kierkegaard/>.
- McGinnis, Jon, and David C. Reisman. *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*. Hackett Publishing, 2007.
- Monro, David Hector. "Argument of Laughter." *Philosophy* 27, no. 103 (1952): 372–73.
- Morreall, John. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

- . “Philosophy of Humor.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/>.
- . *Taking Laughter Seriously*. SUNY Press, 1983.
- . “The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought.” *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3 (1989): 243–65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399447>.
- Morris, T. F. “Humour’ in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript.” *The Heythrop Journal* 29, no. 3 (1988): 300–312. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.1988.tb00858.x>.
- Nagel, Thomas. “The Absurd.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716–727.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, Susan, Blair E. Wisco, and Sonja Lyubomirsky. “Rethinking Rumination.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 5 (2008): 400–424.
- Oring, Elliott. *Engaging Humor*. University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Parrill, Lloyd Ellison. “The Concept of Humor in the Pseudonymous Works of Soeren Kierkegaard.” PhD Thesis, Drew University, 1975.
- Pien, Diana, and Mary K. Rothbart. “Incongruity and Resolution in Children’s Humor: A Reexamination.” *Child Development* 47, no. 4 (1976): 966–71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1128432>.
- Plant, Bob. “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter.” *Philosophy* 84, no. 1 (2009): 111–134.
- Plato. *Philebus*. Penguin Books Ltd, 1982.
- Plester, Barbara. “Healthy Humour: Using Humour to Cope at Work.” *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2009.9522446>.
- Pözlner, Thomas. “Camus’ Feeling of the Absurd.” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 477–90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-018-9633-1>.
- Pye, Gillian. “Comedy Theory and the Postmodern.” *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 19, no. 1 (2006): 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1515/HUMOR.2006.003>.
- Reeve, C. D. C. “Plato: Republic.” Hackett, Indianapolis, 2004.
- Sagi, Abraham, and Avi Sagi. *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*. Rodopi, 2002.
- Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty*. Courier Corporation, 2012.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World As Will And Idea*. Edited by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp. 7th Edition. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.
- Schultz, T. “A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humor.” In *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*. New York: Wiley, 1976.
- Scruton, Roger, and Peter Jones. “Laughter.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 56 (1982): 197–228.
- Seinfeld, Jerry. *Seinlanguage*. 1st ptg. edition. New York; Toronto: Bantam, 1995.
- Semrud-Clikeman, Margaret, and Kimberly Glass. “The Relation of Humor and Child Development: Social, Adaptive, and Emotional Aspects.” *Journal of Child Neurology* 25, no. 10 (October 2010): 1248–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0883073810373144>.
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper. *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, With a Collection of Letters, 1790*.
- Shaw, Joshua. “Philosophy of Humor.” *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 2 (2010): 112–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00281.x>.
- Shelley, Cameron. “Plato on the Psychology of Humor.” *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2003.
- Shugart, Helene A. “Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy.” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 433–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319909374653>.
- Sibley, Dennis. “The Laughing Buddha Humour and the Spiritual Life.” *Buddhism Now* (blog), May 31, 2014. <https://buddhismnow.com/2014/05/31/the-laughing-buddha-humour-and-the-spiritual-life-by-dennis-sibley/>.
- Smith, Jane E., V. Ann Waldorf, and David L. Trembath. “Single White Male Looking for Thin, Very Attractive...” *Sex Roles* 23, no. 11–12 (1990): 675–685.
- Smuts, Aaron. “The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 333–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-009-9203-5>.
- Sprecher, Susan, and Pamela C. Regan. “Liking Some Things (in Some People) More than Others: Partner Preferences in Romantic Relationships and Friendships.” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19, no. 4 (2002): 463–481.
- Steup, Matthias. “Epistemology.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/epistemology/>.
- Suls, Jerry M. “A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis.” *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* 1 (1972): 81–100.
- Suoqiao, Qian. “Translating ‘Humor’ into Chinese Culture.” *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 20, no. 3 (2007): 277–295. <https://doi.org/10.1515/HUMOR.2007.014>.
- Szameitat, Diana P., Kai Alter, André J. Szameitat, Chris J. Darwin, Dirk Wildgruber, Susanne Dietrich, and Annette Sterr. “Differentiation of Emotions in Laughter at the Behavioral Level.” *Emotion* 9, no. 3 (2009): 397–405. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015692>.
- Todosijević, Bojan, Snežana Ljubinković, and Aleksandra Arančić. “Mate Selection Criteria: A Trait Desirability Assessment Study of Sex Differences in Serbia.” *Evolutionary Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2003): 147470490300100100.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Confession*. Translated by David Patterson, 1983.

- Treynor, Wendy, Richard Gonzalez, and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema. "Rumination Reconsidered: A Psychometric Analysis." *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 27, no. 3 (2003): 247-259.
- Turner, Luke. "The Metamodernist Manifesto." *Metamodernism*, 2011. <http://www.metamodernism.org>.
- Wahman, Jessica. "We Are All Mad Here: Santayana and the Significance of Humor." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 2, no. 2 (April 21, 2005): 73-83. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000019>.
- Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Hachette UK, 2012.
- . "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 151.
- Werve, Guido van der. *Nummer Acht*, 2002. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3620758/>.
- White, Elwyn Brooks. "Some Remarks on Humor." *The Second Tree from the Corner*, 1954, 173-181.
- HowStuffWorks. "Why Do We Get So Much Pleasure From Symmetry?," November 6, 2017. <https://science.howstuffworks.com/why-do-get-so-much-pleasure-from-symmetry.htm>.
- Xu, Weihe. "The Confucian Politics of Appearance: And Its Impact on Chinese Humor." *Philosophy East and West* 54, no. 4 (2004): 514-32.
- Yoon, K. Lira, and Jutta Joormann. "Is Timing Everything? Sequential Effects of Rumination and Distraction on Interpersonal Problem Solving." *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 36, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 165-72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-010-9330-2>.
- Yue, Xiao Dong. *Exploration of Chinese Humor: Historical Review, Empirical Findings, and Critical Reflections*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2010.
- Yue, Xiao Dong, Xiao Hao, Lan Lan, and Fei Yan. "Humor and Youth Empowerment: A Self-Cultivation Approach." In *2nd International Conference on Youth Empowerment*, Pok Fu Lam: City University of Hong Kong, 2006.
- Yue, Xiaodong. *Humor and Chinese Culture: A Psychological Perspective*. Routledge, 2017.

