How do Jokes Work?

Ron Aharoni

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies.
(E. B. White)
Contents

Part 1: Matter over Mind.............................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

The force of life ....................................................................................................................... 12
Matter and mind ...................................................................................................................... 14
Detachment of Intentions ...................................................................................................... 30
Some more actions detached from meaning ......................................................................... 33
Detachment of Responsibility ............................................................................................... 35
Detachment of Drive ............................................................................................................. 53
Detachment of the "I" ............................................................................................................. 56
Mirror Neurons ..................................................................................................................... 60
Deciphering Intentions ......................................................................................................... 62
Detaching empathy ............................................................................................................... 64

Part 2: Incongruity ................................................................................................................. 39
A disguised minister .............................................................................................................. 40
Swapping horses in mid-race ............................................................................................... 45
From high to low .................................................................................................................... 47
Ambiguity ............................................................................................................................... 50
What’s missing ........................................................................................................................ 52

Part 2: Self-Reference .......................................................................................................... 53
Circularity ................................................................................................................................. 67
Arrows Rebounding on the Archer ....................................................................................... 69
In or Out? ................................................................................................................................. 71
Paradoxes ................................................................................................................................ 73
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shifting</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Objects</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 12: Why Humor?</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor and Creativity</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturing</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking the Truth Within</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estrangement</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Defenses</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In my childhood my parents told me a story, that I now know to be an old Polish legend. Somewhere in the kingdom of the enchanted, stood a mountain made of glass. On its summit grew a tree, whose fruits were golden apples. Not just any old golden apples: each of them was in fact a magic key. Whoever held it in his hand could enter the palace that towered the peak, in which (you guessed correctly) lived a beautiful princess, in a room full of treasures. Innumerably many princes tried their luck climbing the mountain, on the back of gallant horses, and all failed, gliding to their death. The lucky winner was eventually a young boy, that reached the top thanks to a giant eagle, that tried to prey on him, and against its intentions carried him to the palace.

I recalled this legend in connection with the topic of this book. There are many popular science books telling the story of great discoveries in the exact sciences. These are advents of conquests of mountain peaks. As the result of joint efforts of the scientific community, and the accumulation of insights of determined investigators, one of them eventually reaches the top. A classical conflict-struggle-resolution story.

In the humanities it is not like that. The mountains are made of glass. The conflict is there, and so is the struggle, but the solution refuses to come. The princes gallop with all their might, only to find themselves sliding to the bottom. Ancient riddles – what is a poem, what makes a literary piece great, and of course the entire lore of philosophical questions, are still open, with no consent on solution in view. “We are no wiser than Plato – isn’t it marvelous how clever Plato was?” derided Wittgenstein his colleagues, himself included.
The question treated in this book, “what is a joke?” has a stand of honor in this list. Considering the apparent light weight of its topic, it shouldn’t be that hard. But, like its sister problems, it continues to mock the princes trying to climb its mountain. We seem to be no nearer to the answer than 2500 years ago. In a conference on humor in Cardiff in 1976, a questionnaire was passed among the participants – did the conference bring them any nearer to an understanding what a joke is? The sweeping consent was that no.

So many have tried to reach the summit, that the suspicion may arise: perhaps there is none? Perhaps there is no clear cut answer? After all, we are dealing with soft science. But some witnesses testify to the contrary. These are the humor sensors in our brain, that recognize humor with no hesitation or doubts. Does it often happen to you that you are not sure whether something is funny or not? The certainty with which we identify humorous instances attests that the question “what is humor” must have a clear cut answer. The contours of the joke, and of humor in general, are possibly hard to be put to words, but this is not because they are not sharp. They are probably well defined.

Is it my plan to try climbing myself the slippery slope? I will not deny – indeed, this is the case. But I have also another aim in mind. I want to tell the story of humor research. As already mentioned, it is not a success story. It is strewn with “Eurica!” calls that turned out to be false alarm, and daring attempts at definitions that did not withstand the test of time. Many claim to have caught the eel by its tail, usually capturing just one type of humor, of the many that exist. But failures are no less interesting than successes. The failed expedition of Scott to the south pole has attracted the imagination of writers no less than that of the successful Amundsen. More than that – it is quite possible that from the various theories of humor we
shall be able to extract some arrow that points in the right direction. Perhaps we shall find a common denominator, one mechanism that underlies them all. I cannot promise anything, but let us try.
The riddle

Why did you flee the operation table?

The nurse said – “don’t worry, it's a simple operation,
no reason to be afraid”.

She was just trying to put you at ease!

Yes, but she said it to the surgeon.

Did you laugh? I bet you did, or must have at least smiled. Did you wonder what made you laugh? I bet you didn’t. Humor is like breathing; it comes too naturally for us to ponder "why". The only traces it leaves behind are a smile and convulsions of the diaphragm. Understanding what it is - what for? Why should I care why I laugh, as long as I enjoy it? Even worse, won’t understanding ruin the enjoyment? He who increaseth knowledge decreaseth pleasure.

And yet, it may be worth asking. Humor is clearly more than merely a spice to life. Examine your daily interactions and you will realize how central it is. An average four-year-old laughs three hundred times a day. Adults laugh on average seventeen times a day, once every waking hour, and they, too, probably feel the tickling of humor hundreds of times.

Often, you know the value of a problem only after it is solved. If the solution illuminates other problems, it is a sign that the question is fertile. So, you will have to be patient. At the end of the book you will be able to judge whether humor is a serious business. For the moment, it suffices for us to know that many thinkers thought so. Plato, Aristotle, Pascal, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Freud – and this is a very partial list - all searched for the shape
of the keyhole in our brain that the joke knows how to open. The brain scientist De Bono claimed, with typical exaggeration, that “humor is the most important function of the brain”.

Those who try their hand in the problem soon realize they are dealing with a creature as slippery as an eel. Humor is a notorious defiant of definition, a butterfly that refuses to be pinned to a board. In the hide-and-seek game it plays with its definers it is the one who laughs last. Ask anybody why they are sad or what makes them jealous, and they will know. What makes them laugh – this is a different matter. Something in humor does not want us to know. "Enjoy me", it says, "but don’t ask wherefore you do. Seek not the things that are too hard for thee". But this is good reason to insist. If somebody is hiding something, he must have a reason. It is likely that this something is interesting.

*  

Before we start, a remark about the abundance of jokes in the book. I included a large part of the jokes I like. This is done for the enjoyment of the reader, but also because it is necessary. Some humor researchers pretend that their science is deductive, like mathematics. That it can be studied by the sheer power of logic. Many theories of humor use a limited number of jokes – often a single canonical example. Schopenhauer, for example, declares that the few examples he provides in his book about humor are intended only for the benefit of “the lazy, who cannot come up with examples of their own”. But humor research is no mathematics. It is an experimental science, and as such it requires examples. And the more, the merrier.
Part 1: Detachment of identification

Two neglected theories of humor

A problem worthy of attack, shows its worth by fighting back. (Piet Hein, a Danish mathematician and poet)

It is a good omen if a problem gives serious fight. There is no point in tackling easy riddles. And if war it is, then a la guerre comme a la guerre. We should use stratagems fit for the combat. The scheme I will use is familiar to all natural scientists: start from the bottom. From a small corner. Instead of looking for a common denominator for all humorous instances, find a common feature of just a small subset. This task is much more modest, and has better chances of success. Generalizations – those we can keep for later.

For this purpose, I will conjure two old theories of humor, that are nowadays all but forsaken, unjustly so. They both contain valid and valuable observations. Indeed, both sinned in over-generalization, yet the job of humor research should not be to condemn them for that, but to incorporate them in a general theory. As a first step – find a common denominator to the two, a mechanism they share.

One of them is the oldest theory of humor – disparagement. The other is a theory offered at the turn of the 19-th century by the French philosopher Henri Bergson – the “automatic behavior” theory. On a superficial look they appear to be far apart. This only means that if a common mechanism is found for the two, it is significant. It cannot be coincidental.
The force of life

In December 1940, the Jews of Paris were ordered to register in the offices of the Gestapo. In the long queues that meandered the freezing streets stood also an eighty-one years old man who was not obliged to be there. He was a Nobel laureate, and one of the forty “immortals” – the name given to the members of the French Academy, and due to his special status the was exempt. During the previous years he was gradually converting to Catholicism, claiming that it captured the spirit of Judaism better than the original. However, as he told his wife, in such times he wanted to share the fate of his people. Back in his home he fell sick with pneumonia and died a few days later.

The person's name was Henri Bergson. During the first three decades of the twentieth century he was the philosopher best known to the general public, not only in France but in all of Europe. A book he published in 1907, “Creative Evolution”, became a best-seller, and won him the 1927 Nobel Prize for literature. In this book he developed an earlier idea of his, the “force of life”, or “élan vital”. It speaks about the advantage of man over the machine. Man creates himself, so claimed Bergson. He is not subject to mechanical rules. Any attempt to pinpoint his will or thoughts will meet rebellion: “I can choose otherwise”. This is one formulation of the sensation of Free-Will, man's feeling that his decisions are dependent only on his choice. Bergson even went a step further: Evolution itself is not subject to physical rules. It is generated by creative powers.

If you find all this too hazy to comprehend, let me console you in that so do I. I am not sure that this idea is going to win eternal glory. But another idea of Bergson on the relationship between man and machine probably will. It is his definition for “humor”, that he published in a 1900 book, “Laughter”.
Bergson thereby joined a long dynasty of grim-faced philosophers, not necessarily of outstanding sense of humor or light writing style, that each discovered one day that the question “what is humor” is of crucial importance for them. Each spent months and years on the problem, to eventually reach a formula that in his mind exhausts the entire picture, that is, covers all types of humor. Often this is a delusion. The formula fits only a small corner, and demands gymnastics of thought to impose it on other types of humor.

Bergson’s definition is no exception. It, too, fits only a small part of humor. In fact, among all humor theories it is the most esoteric, in that seemingly it does not connect with any other theory. Researchers of humor do not know how to digest it. Still, they all cite it, acknowledging that it does capture some important feature of humor. For us it will be extremely useful, because it will serve as a good springboard to the heart of the matter. As we shall see, it does connect to other types of humor, and how.

What direction did Bergson choose? A surprise is awaiting us. We all know the ambiguity of jokes, the surprise in the punch line, the switch from one mode of thought to another. One could expect that the definition will address some of these elements. But Bergson’s definition takes a completely different, and refreshing, direction. We laugh, he said, when we discover automatic behavior where a human one is expected. When the \( \text{\textit{\'{e}lan vital}} \) has a day off, and a person behaves like a machine.

Strange, indeed. How does “automatic behavior replacing flexibility of thought” connect to the known properties of humor? To understand this, we shall have to go some distance.
Matter over mind
Every theory of humor must address the best known of all comic incidents – slipping on a banana peel. Why is it funny? Plato (428 – 348 BC) and his student Aristotle (384-322 BC) opted for the natural answer: Schadenfreude. Gloating over the person’s mishap. In fact, both master and student ascribed all humor to derision (I told you – every philosopher chooses one corner of humor and declares it to be universal). Their conclusion was that it is best to avoid joking altogether, mainly so as not to commit inadvertently the sin of deriding the Gods – Gods forbid. But this cannot be the secret of the entire humor. We rarely laugh at others’ mishaps, and most instances of humor do not involve mockery.

Bergson, too, made slipping on a banana peel the starting point of his theory. His explanation is that we laugh because the person behaved like an automaton. We expected his behavior to be subject to his will, and instead we witness victory of matter over mind. The will of the banana peel prevailed.

Bergson tried to explain in these terms also other forms of humor. For example, comedies of character. The protagonists of such comedies – the hypochondriac, the miserly, the distracted – do not act by their free will, but by the commands dictated by their trait. They are marionettes of their character. Bergson also explained this way the funniness of repeated occurrences. If somebody treads on your toe in a party, you will be annoyed. If three different people tread on your toe one after the other, you will laugh. Why? – Automatism, says Bergson. Stiffness of behavior of the world.

No doubt – automatic behavior is funny. A living creature that behaves like a robot, and does not change his behavior with changing circumstances, makes us laugh. Cartoons take such a situation to absurdity in the well-
known scene of the protagonist who continues to tread in air after the ground has disappeared beneath their feet. The circumstances have changed, but they continue their automatic behavior.

One expression of automatic behavior is detachment of spontaneity. For example, the children who ask their parents, on a day of outing –

\[ \text{Are we having fun yet?} \]

Old age is an excellent vehicle for detachment of spontaneity, and of drives in general.

\[ \text{Wife: "Do you remember how, when we were young, you used to nibble gently on my earlobe?"} \]

\[ \text{Husband: "If you bring me my glasses and my false teeth, I can do it again."} \]

Bodily expressions are usually spontaneous, and not subject to conscious control. Here is what happens when an expression is postponed:

\[ \text{A man approaches a passerby hugging a watermelon in his arms. “Could you tell me where the post office is?” he asks. The passerby asks – "could you please hold the watermelon for a moment?" The man does. “I have no idea”, says the passerby, shrugging and extending his arms to the sides.} \]

[cartoon]

In the TV series "Modern family" a woman is mad with her husband. "I could have slapped you", she tells him, turns around and walks away. After a second or two she is back, and tells him "As a matter of fact - " and slaps him on his face. What is funny here (the hired audience, at least, laughed)
is the detachment between the slap and the immediate anger. In music such a delayed effect is called “syncope”, having its own humorous tinge.

So, automatic behavior is a sufficient condition for laughter. Is it also necessary? Does all laughter result from the observation of automatism? The fact that Bergson’s theory has not caught indicates that not, unless we interpret “automatic behavior” in a very general way. But the grain of truth that it contains will be very useful for us. It points at a head of a trail leading to interesting places.
Derision

It is not known when the first jokes appeared. Probably long before the invention of writing. The oldest known written joke is Sumerian, and dates back to 1900BC:

Something which has never occurred since time
immemorial; a young woman did not fart in her husband’s
lap.

Well, tastes have changed since, I guess. Philepous, the father of Alexander the great, paid the members of an Athenian club to collect their jokes in a book. That book is lost, but another jokes book, “Philogelus”, from the fifth century AD, survived and still has new printouts. Some of the jokes there would be funny (a bit) also for our contemporaries. For example:

A fortune teller predicts that his customer will enjoy a
long life. The customer tells him that he will pay him
tomorrow. “And what if you die before tomorrow?” asks the astrologist.

The Greeks were probably not the inventors of the joke, but they were the first to ask what it is. No wonder – they were the first to ask “what is” about everything – beauty, truth, wisdom, poetry. The first theories of humor ever proposed were those of Plato and his disciple Aristotle. They gave the same answer: derision. Every laughter is a leer at the misfortune of others. Not a very complimentary theory, and indeed Plato denounced humor and recommended gravity. Laughter may end up in disrespect for the Gods – Gods forbid.

Aristotle, the father of modern science, contributed with his dogmatism also to some of its stalls. The Greek preference to ideas over matter took its toll also with him - it meant that observations had for him second priority. He claimed that women have fewer teeth in their mouths than men,
not bothering to ask his wife (he was married twice) to open her mouth. He applied the same attitude to humor. Had he checked the facts, he would have found that only a small fraction of the jokes is based on mockery. For example, he may have known the following joke, which appears in “Philogelos”:

How do you put four elephants in two carts? – two in each.

This is the forerunner of the present day joke –

How do you fit four elephants in a Mini? – two in the front, and two in the back.

The Greek version has the advantage that the trap is clearer: the listener thinks of size, only to find out that it is an arithmetic riddle. Mockery? you'd have to bend over backwards to find it here.

Strangely enough, there was a thinker who was prepared to perform this feat. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) maintained that laughing at a joke derives from self-mockery. "How naive we were", we tell ourselves, "to have fallen for it".

There are some supporters of the derision-superiority theory to this day, notably Rapp (...). But they are few and far between. Like Bergson’s theory, it has very few followers nowadays. It suffers from the curse of many humor theories – over-generalization. Obviously, it is applicable only in a limited domain of humor. And still, it must carry some truth. Deriding is accompanied by joy, sometimes even laughter. "Ridicule" comes from the Latin ridere, to laugh, and it is described as “laughing at”. The children who mocked the prophet Elisha “go up baldy, go up baldy” were gleeful, at least in the first part of the story. Arthur Koestler (to whose
theory of humor we shall return later) found that of 29 mentions of laughter in the bible, 27 are in the context of scorn.
A common denominator
Do mechanical reaction and scorn have anything in common?

If you dig a bit beneath the surface, you will find that the answer is yes, very much so. Let me start with the obvious: both involve de-humanization. The person observed is deprived of human motives. In mechanical behavior, or rather – interpretation of his or her actions as mechanical, it is because machines do not possess human intentions and motives or intelligent planning. In scorn, because the scorned person seems to be so stupid, or worthless, that we do not take his or her intentions seriously. He or she lose their status as human beings with wishes, intentions and will.

An even more precise way of expressing this is that in both scorn and ascribing mechanical behavior there is detachment of empathy. In other words, withdrawal of identification. Scorn is the precise opposite of identification. We reject the scorned person, an attitude that manifests itself among other ways in the facial expression: an imitation of spitting food out, and pulling the nostrils so as if to avoid bad smell.

In order to understand the significance of such withdrawal, we need to understand the importance of empathy in our lives. It is highly valued, and justly so. It means compassion, understanding, and what is nowadays called “emotional intelligence”. All these seem important from the point of view of the receiver but in fact it is even more important from the direction of the giver. It plays a much more significant role than being nice to our fellow human beings: it enables predicting their actions. Identifying with a person is the king’s road to understanding him or her, and knowing where they are heading. This, of course, is essential for survival.

Such an advantage must express itself genetically, and indeed Evolution has shown its respect for empathy by imprinting it in the human genes. In
fact, in the genes of all primates. We don’t have to learn empathy (well, most of us don’t) – we are born with it. Some forty years ago it was discovered that the brain of primates contains so-called “mirror neurons”, that operate (mutedly, namely shooting signals without causing action) when their owner observes others performing some specific action (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004). These are “empathy neurons”.

Automatism involves the very same detachment. Discovering automatism in a person’s behavior, we stop identifying with him, because his actions are not guided by will. Machines do not have will. There is no point in identifying with a person slipping over a banana peel, because his action is not governed by his intentions. He wanted to move forward, and the peel wanted otherwise. When we identify with a person’s actions, we want and intend and plan together with him or her. When we realize he or she are acting as an automaton, the identification vanishes. The action is perceived as hollow of motives.

This is the reason that while in tragedies we identify with the protagonist, and undergo a psychological process similar to his, in comedies we are dissociated from the characters. We laugh at them, not with them.
Detachment of meaning of actions

We swim in an ocean of meanings. Everything around us demands interpretation, which is giving deeper meanings to external appearance. In this ocean, words are just froth on the waves. It is mainly actions that we construe and give meaning to. And the king’s road to ascribe meaning to people’s actions is empathy. Through it we are able to decipher their intentions and motives. Actions have many possible meanings: goal, purpose, intention, aim, responsibility, drive or motive. When we ask people for the meaning of their actions, we mean precisely that – what are the aims, intentions or drives behind the actions. These are no less important for understanding the world around us than the meaning of words. And as we have seen, for some reason that is as yet mysterious for us, we sometimes enjoy it, when the meanings are detached, which means that their carriers suddenly become empty – like the actions that become mechanical, and hence devoid of their usual meaning.

Having found detachment of actions from their meanings in two humorous settings, it is natural to look for it also in other humorous contexts. This turns out to be rewarding. Deciphering actions is important, but strangely enough, also its negation, the. When the action is detached from its meaning, we experience pleasure. In this section I will give a few examples, in all of which the meaning is the intention or purpose behind the action.

Two laborers toil on a mountain. One digs a hole in the ground, the other fills it, one digs, the other fills. An onlooker is puzzled – "what are you doing?" “Usually we are three”, explains the digger. “I dig, Sasha plants a tree, and Misha refills. Today Sasha is sick”.

22
The act of digging is detached from its goal - the planting. It acquires a life of its own, independent of its original intention, like a lizard's tail that continues wiggling after being detached from the body.

Actions can also be detached from drives:

A woman returns to her room in the old age home to find another old lady with her hands on her husband's pants. She is furious: “What does she have that I don't?” “Parkinson”, answers the husband.

An action presumably strongly loaded with meaning turns out to be involuntary convulsions.

"Motive" is something a bit different from "goal" or "drive". It, too, can be detached.

A guy walks into a bar and orders the barman – "a drink for me, a drink for you, drinks all around". The barman serves out the drinks but when asked to settle the bill, the generous customer declares that he hasn't a penny. The angry barman gives him a good thrashing and kicks him out. The following week the same guy appears, and orders again – "a drink for me, a drink for you, drinks all around". Certain that the customer has learnt his lesson, the barman complies. But again, when it's time to pay, the customer declares he has no money. Again the barman beats him up and throws him out. The following week the same guy appears: "a drink for me, drinks all around", he orders. Insulted, the barman demands: "what about me?" "You", says the customer, "when you drink you become violent".
The generous-on-others'-expense non-challantly construes the behavior of the barman to his convenience, detaching it from its real motive.

**The irrelevance of the “change of scripts” theory**

Let me now return to the linguistic revolution in humor research. The theory is very simple. Verbal utterances have meanings, which in linguistic terminology are called “scripts”. A joke is formed, so says the theory, if the same expression or the same situation fits two incompatible scripts. This is a linguistic version of the incongruity theory.

Can the process described in this paper – detaching actions from their meanings, and leaving them empty of meaning, gain any insight from the “change of scripts” theory? Hardly. Such analysis is bound to flatten it,

This kind of analysis

Can this kind of analysis explain what is funny in derision, or superiority? Here is an attempt at explanation, from Morreal’s chapter “Philosophy and religion” in the Humor Primer Book:

We might add a note here about the traditional connection drawn between superiority and humor. If, as I have argued, feeling superior to someone is neither necessary nor sufficient for amusement, why was the Superiority Theory the only theory of laughter and humor
for two millennia? To answer this question, we should note that most of the incongruities we laugh at, especially in comedy, are human shortcomings – ignorance, stupidity, awkwardness, mistakes, misunderstandings, and moral vices. The Incongruity Theory would say simply that it is the unexpectedness, the out-of-placeness of these shortcomings.

We have seen above that

The question is whether this terminology can shed light
So, how does “detachment of meaning” fit scorn? Scorn is a detachment of identification. Ridiculing somebody means declaring him stupid, which means depriving him, in our mind, of will and power of deliberation. He becomes a Bergsonian automaton. He is denied the human privilege of identification with his actions.

Thus scorn is the reverse of empathy. Its object is perceived as hollow, devoid of intentions and emotions. Consider again the derision of a person slipping over a banana peel. Watching him walking, our mirror neurons are at work, we accompany his motions in our mind. When he slips, this breaks, and we no longer identify with him. He becomes, at least for a second, an inanimate object.

So, again, in explaining the comic nature of scorn the detachment theory succeeds where incongruity fails miserably.
Stereotypes

*How does a Rumanian recipe for chicken begin? – Steal a hen…*

*How does a Moroccan recipe open? – First of all, calm down.*

*What is the epitome of Jewish dilemma? – Free pork.*

Stereotype jokes are yet another domain where incongruity theories fail miserably. There is no way of viewing jokes about Scotsmen miserliness as the meeting of two incongruent frameworks. Quite the contrary, the joke does what it promised to do – the Scotsman lives up to his expected miserliness. In this case scorn theories do seem to apply – we deride the Scotsmen for their miserliness or the blondes for their presumed stupidity. But then, scorn is not a successful theory elsewhere. And it does look like there is something here beyond plain derision.

Again, detachment explains this genre cozily. Like in scorn, the mechanism is that of denying the protagonist his motives and will. But here it is done in a subtle way: it is the stereotype that acts, not the person. The person becomes a puppet of his or her type. And the stereotype is in the eye of the beholder: it is in our heads, not in reality. So, it is again "victory of the symbol", the symbol being in this case the label.

Even more plainly, it is detachment of intention. The stereotyped person is a Bergsonian automaton, obeying his image instead of being a free agent. We don't have to know the Moroccan woman in person in order to know that she is irate, and do not have to tackle in our thoughts the tasks facing the Blonde. Identification is no longer the name of the game. It is the image
that acts. Indeed, acting in accordance with an image, rather than by free will, is one of comedy's oldest tricks. In comedies of character somebody is given one or two prominent traits, and acts according to them. It is not a matter of feeling scorn or contempt to the character. It is a matter of telling ourselves "Aha, just as expected".

While tragedies are based on identification with the protagonists, vicariously living their conflicts, comedies are based on the precise opposite – detachment from them. They are marionettes of their stereotypes. This is why tragedies are called after the names of the heroes, while comedies are often named after the characteristics of protagonists – *The Miser, The Hypochondriac*.

In fact, this works also in everyday life. When somebody acquires the name of a miser, and he acts miserly, we laugh. And it is not even necessary for the joke to use a stereotype. It is enough to declare the characteristic:

*Harry is so slim, he has just one stripe in his pajamas.*

*Joe is so miserly, that when the radio broadcasts a song he heard before, he turns it off.*

And then there are the epitome jokes. They use the same mechanism – declaring a property, and then letting the person act upon it:

*What is the epitome of miserliness? – Using both sides of the toilet paper.*

And there are personal images that are used in jokes. For example, Bill Clinton's name as a womanizer:

*Clinton and the Pope die the same day. By mistake, they are exchanged – Clinton goes to heaven and the pope to hell. When the error is discovered, Angel Gabriel orders them to go each to his right place. On the way they meet,*
and the Pope tells Clinton – Oh, how I long to see Virgin Mary. “You are a day late”, says Clinton.

There is another mechanism here at work, which was named by Freud "shifting". Weight is shifted within the same situation or the same expression. The Pope's stress is on "Mary"; Clinton's response shifts the weight to "virgin".

Finally, a joke whose topic is a label:

An old Scotsman sits with a young fellow in the main street of the village. “Do you see this fence?” asks the old man. “I built it with my own hands. Do you think that they call me McGreggor the fence builder? – no”. Silence ensues. “Do you see this wharf on the lake? I built it with both my hands. Do you think that they call me for this McGreggor the wharf builder? – no”. After another pause, the old man continues – “Do you see this church spire? I built it with my own hands. Do you think that they call me McGreggor the spire builder? – no”. Silence ensues again, and then the old man sighs – “Ah. But one time you screw a sheep”.

Bergson indeed hit the nail on its head: slipping on a banana peel is funny because of action being detached from will. We can take this formula, and proceed further. We can note, for example, that not only will can be detached from an action. Actions have many possible meanings, and all of them can be detached. For example, intention. A throws a custard pie at B, B bends over and the pie hits C. What makes this funny is the split between intention and outcome.

Actions have meanings: goal, purpose, intention, aim, responsibility, drive or motive. Why do I call these "meanings"? Here language comes to my aid: we ask people for the meaning of their actions, and it is no coincidence that "intending to do something" is expressed as "meaning to do it". Perceiving an action, we assume a guiding force behind it. Its overt manifestation has a covert side, that has to be interpreted, and hence we view it as "meaning". “Meaning” is precisely that – the deep interpretation of an overt occurrence. Deciphering this meaning is crucial to our survival, because it tells us what to expect - where is the person heading, and what will be the consequences of the action.

Deciphering is important, but strangely enough, also its negation. When the action is detached from its meaning, we experience pleasure. Here is, for example, detachment of purpose.

*Two laborers toil on a mountain. One digs a hole in the ground, the other fills it, one digs, the other fills. An onlooker is puzzled – "what are you doing?" "Usually we are three", explains the digger. “I dig, Sasha plants a tree, and Misha refills. Today Sasha is sick".*
The act of digging is detached from its goal - the planting. It acquires a life of its own, independent of its original intention, like a lizard's tail that continues wiggling after being detached from the body.

Actions can also be detached from drives:

A woman returns to her room in the old age home to find another old lady with her hands on her husband's pants. She is furious: “What does she have that I don't?” “Parkinson”, answers the husband.

An action presumably loaded with meaning turns out to be involuntary convulsions.

"Motive" is something a bit different from "goal" or "drive". It, too, can be detached.

A guy walks into a bar and orders the barman – "a drink for me, a drink for you, drinks all around". The barman serves out the drinks but when asked to settle the bill the generous customer declares that he hasn't a penny. The angry barman gives him a good thrashing and kicks him out. The following week the same guy appears, and orders again – "a drink for me, a drink for you, drinks all around". Certain that the customer has learnt his lesson, the barman complies. But again, when it's time to pay, the customer declares he has no money. Again the barman beats him up and throws him out. The following week the same guy appears: "a drink for me, drinks all around", he orders. Insulted, the barman demands: "what about me?" "You", says the customer, "when you drink you become violent".
The generous-on-others'-expense non-challantly construes the behavior of the barman to his convenience, detaching it from its real motive.

* 

We have learnt something: that "detachment of an action from its meaning(s)" is closer to the target than "automatic behavior". The latter is but a special case, in which an action is detached from will. There are other meanings to an action, and in all examples so far, such detachment occurred. Is this the winning formula? Have we reached the promised land? Of course not. It is not even the case that every joke contains an action. In word plays, for example, there is rarely an action, let alone its detachment from meaning.

But for the time being, let us pursue this direction, if only to convince you how pervasive this type of humor is. In order to cover humor in its entirety we shall have to widen the scope considerably, but "action detached from meaning" is an excellent first key to the riddle.
Some more actions detached from meaning

The following children's joke is endearing in its silliness. I like it also because it is a distilled example for detachment of intention:

A scuba diver with the best diving equipment tries to dive and fails. Suddenly he sees a man with no equipment sinking effortlessly. “How do you dive so well?” he asks him. “I am not diving”, comes the reply, “I am drowning”.

The assumption of a purpose behind the sinking is refuted.

Ballet students invest a lot of effort in learning to stand on their toes. See what happens when the motive to that is detached:

Why do they make ballerinas stand on their toes?
Wouldn't it be simpler to hire taller dancers?

Here are two more jokes with detachment of motive:

Walking in the wood, a man runs across a bear. He decides to feign death, and indeed the bear sniffs him, and walks away. The overjoyed survivor invites his friends to the local pub to celebrate his salvation. Suddenly, who should appear but the bear? How embarrassing.

Feigning death is suddenly viewed as plain cheating, forgetting the motive that was behind it. There is another mechanism here, that of personification of the bear – reversal of detachment of intention. As we shall later see, this is the other side of the coin of detachment.
At the crack of dawn on a cold street in Moscow people are queuing for meat. After two hours the butcher announces – “there isn't enough meat. Jews – home”. Two hours later he comes out again and says: “No meat left. Everybody - home”. A voice from the crowd is heard – “again those Jews had it better”.

The outcome is described correctly, but not so the motive of the butcher. Detachment of intention can be subtle:

A person with a prostate problem to a stutterer: "I pee the way you speak".

There is a Bergsonian point here: speaking is considered as subject to voluntary control, stuttering peeing is the result of a mechanical problem. Detaching speaking from intention is one reason for the proliferation of stutterer's joke.

If it weren't for the fact that the TV set and the refrigerator are so far apart, some of us wouldn't get any exercise at all.

The intention of the "sportsman" is a bit different. He does not intend to exercise.
Detachment of Responsibility

Another meaning of an action is responsibility. The owner of the action is supposed to be morally, or at least factually, responsible – “It is I who did it”. And responsibility, like all other meanings, is often detached in jokes.

What is the Englishman's grace? – "Please, God, give me strength to eat this meal in front of me".

As if the meal was prepared by aliens. A more elaborate joke on the same theme:

Three construction workers, an American, an Arab and a Pole sit for lunch on the scaffoldings of a high rise building. Before opening their lunch boxes, the American says – "if I have a hamburger again, I am going to jump". The Arab says – "if I have Pita bread with Hummus again, I am going to jump". The Pole says – "if again I have sausage with sour cabbage, I am going to jump". The American opens his box, finds a hamburger inside and jumps. The Arab opens his box, finds pita bread with hummus and jumps. The Pole opens his box, finds sausage with cabbage and jumps. At their funeral the American widow laments – "had I but known I would have prepared anything he wanted". The Arab widow is also devastated by remorse. The Polish widow says – “But he prepared his own lunches!”
A case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand does. There is also detachment of knowledge - the Pole does not know what is in his lunch box, though he prepared it.

A common denial of responsibility is for the choice of spouse. The man in the next joke has an original excuse.

> A man stands before a grave in a cemetery, and laments
> “Why did you die, oh why did you have to die?” A passerby is intrigued: “Was he a relative?” – “No”, says the man. “A friend?” “No, never met the guy”. “So why are you so sad?” “He was my wife’s first husband”.

The next joke is from South Africa, when power cuts were frequent, and people got stuck in elevators:

> Three hours late for work, after a long power outage, a worker explains: “I was stuck on an escalator”.

A common claim is that in humor wrong logic is applied, and indeed this is what happens here: the logic of elevators doesn't work for escalators. But on a deeper level, the funny thing is in ascribing the responsibility for walking to the escalator.

Here is a responsibility-disclaiming dictum:

> Your personality is determined by your parents, that of your kids by genetics.

> Moses and Mohammed share adjacent seats on a plane.
> They relax, take off their shoes. At some point
> Mohammed appeals to Moses – "you have the aisle seat, would you kindly fetch me a drink?" – "Willingly", says Moses and goes for the drink. Off the plane, Mohammed says to Moses: "You know, when you fetched the drink, I
"spat in your shoe". "Dear-dear", says Moses, "spitting in shoes, pissing in juice, where will it all end?"

Is it the twist in the plot (a characteristic commonly ascribed to jokes) that is funny? To see that this is not the case think what would have happened had Moses said “Really? And I peed into your juice”. Not very funny. What makes the joke is Moses' disclaimer of responsibility. The peeing as if happened on its own, and who knows where will it lead to.

Two psychologists meet. "You'd never guess what a Freudian slip I made today", says one to the other. "I was going to tell my wife 'please pass me the salt' and instead I said 'you bitch, you've ruined my life' ".

A case of applied psychoanalysis.
Part 2: Incongruity
A disguised minister

We are still at the stage of collecting evidence. The first step we made was discovering a family of jokes, in which intentions are detached. I hope that I convinced you how ubiquitous it is, and that it provides a hint towards the solution of the riddle.

But the reader is probably curious at this stage: what are the currently prevailing humor theories? What conclusions has modern humor research reached?

The answer is that there is no single theory that is commonly accepted. Instead, there is a family of closely related theories, that can all be gathered under the umbrella of the term “incongruity theories”. Each says, in its own words, more or less the same: that in a joke there occurs a collision of two incongruous lines of thought. The same situation can be interpreted in two ways, a sudden change of viewpoint reveals a new meaning, a logical pattern that suits one situation is imposed on a state of affairs in which it is totally not suitable, a metaphor is applied to the wrong situation.

One of the best known examples of such theories was formulated by Arthur Koestler. Koestler (1905 – 1983) was one of the most colorful intellectual figures of the twentieth century. His adventures – both corporal and intellectual – could provide material for ten biographies, and he indeed wrote a few autobiographical books. He was born in Budapest, and when the first World War erupted his family moved to Vienna. There he studied towards a degree in engineering, but when the time came to finish his studies he burnt his diploma and went to Palestine, living for a few months in a kibbutz. When refused membership in the kibbutz he moved to Haifa, where he spent a few months of hunger and destitution.
He went back to Vienna, started a career of journalism, and as a journalist went back to Palestine for two years. Then he travelled to Germany, joined the communist party, became famous for covering a Zeppelin flight to the North Pole, travelled extensively in communist Russia, and then served as a spy in the court of Generalissimo Franco, in Spain. He was exposed, and waited four months to be executed, a fate that he escaped due to the intervention of British intellectuals and the efforts of his former wife. He then published what was to become his best known book, “Darkness at Noon”, on the atrocities of the Stalinist regime. Luckily for him, this was not written from firsthand experience: his former lover did the work for him, having spent sixteen months in the communist jail. He led tumultuous love life, and his only daughter, born out of wedlock, received total ignoring. Let me stop here – I think you have grasped what kind of a man he was.

The scope of Koestler’s intellectual interests can also make one dizzy. He wrote books on history, the history of science, popular science, pseudo-science, philosophy, poetry, humor, politics, parapsychology, euthanasia. As to the last topic, he practice it first hand: when he was diagnosed with cancer, he committed suicide, together with his female companion, who was younger than him and healthy.

In the 1960-s Koestler published a book titled “The Act of Creation”, that expounded a theory on the nature of discovery – in science, art and humor. His main claim was that discoveries, works of art and jokes do not appear from thin air, but are the result of the meeting of two different planes of thought. Here is an example in point that he gives – the discovery of vaccination, probably one of the few most useful discovery of all time.
In the summer of 1879 Louis Pasteur went on vacation. When he returned to his laboratory, he found there an old culture of chicken cholera. Rather than throw it away, he infected with it a batch of chickens. They all became unwell, but survived. Pasteur then injected them with fresh bacteria, and surprisingly they did not even fall ill. Upon hearing it, Pasteur stared ahead, and said to his assistant: “Don’t you see? They were vaccinated”.

At that point in time the word “vaccination” meant a completely different thing from its use today. It referred to a procedure discovered by Jenner, an English rural doctor, who heeded an observation of the farmers that a person who contracted cowpox was then immune to smallpox. Jenner deliberately infected humans with cowpox and indeed it worked, and this specific course of action was called “vaccination”. Nobody understood the mechanism behind it, until Pasteur saw in a flash the connection to his chickens.

Koestler called such sudden connection of ideas “bisociation”, and he claimed that it occurs also in art and in jokes. Like many humor researchers before and after him, he was a person of (mainly) on joke. The example he uses is:

A man returns home, and finds his wife in bed with the bishop. He opens the window, and waves to the people down below. “What are you doing?” asks the wife. “The bishop is doing my job”, he answers, “so I am doing his”.

This is a clear case of detachment – detachment of the emotion of jealousy. The act of love is compared with work (we shall meet many jokes based on this mechanism). But Koestler analyses it in terms of two planes of thought – love and work.
Was Koestler right? As a mathematician, I can testify that ideas indeed intertwine. Ideas from one topic have fruitful interaction with ideas from another. But sometimes there are totally new ideas – there must be. Scientists use metaphoric thinking, but not only. The same is true for poetry. Indeed, it often connects the unconnectable, but this is not all that it does.

And how about jokes? There the idea of bisociation is indeed very apt, for which reason people return to it time and again, in different formulations. The most systematic and comprehensive of those was given by the Russian-Israeli-American philologist Victor Raskin – a formulation already mentioned in the preface. It uses the terminology of “scripts”. A joke is formed, so goes this theory, when the same situation can be construed according to two scripts. The flagship joke used by Raskin is:

“Is the doctor at home?” asks a person standing in front of the doctor’s door. “No, come in quickly”, answers a young female voice from the other side.

The joke goes from a script of “patient” to that of “lover”.

Theories of “incongruity” have a long history. The first to have coined the term was Beattie, an English poet living in the 18-th century. But already before him there were similar formulations around. Frances Hutcheson (1696-1747), an Irish-Scottish philosopher, published in 1725 a book titled “Thoughts on Laughter”, in which he replace the derision theory that prevailed until then by a theory of incompatibility. For example, we laugh at a person slipping over a banana peel because of the incompatibility between our expectation and what happened in reality. Hazlitt, an English poet and critic of the beginning of the 19th century, defined humor as “finding similarity between the different, and difference between the similar”. Interestingly, the English mathematician Sylvester
used precisely the same words to described mathematics, and the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley described poetry in the same terms. The German poet and humorist Jean Paul (1763-1825) used a metaphor:

The joke is a disguised minister, that weds every couple.

Fisher, a philosopher of the same period, added

And he likes most wedding those couples whose relatives will frown on the match.

Schopenhauer (1788-1860) used a very similar terminology. Humor is born, so he claimed, from the application of wrong concepts.

Tourist: When I was here last year there were ten windmills, and now only two. What happened?
Local: There wasn’t enough wind for all.

A logic appropriate in other situation is applied where it does not work.
“Meeting of two planes of thought” can be done in two ways. Either you find yourself at the same time on both, or you are walking on one and then discover that you have unheedingly switched to the other. The second type involves change. It is the more common of the two, but certainly not the only one. For example, in the joke about the elephant waiting for his leaf to fall the two planes appear simultaneously.

One advocate of “change” definition was Isaac Asimov (1920 – 1992). He was one of the most prolific writers of all time. During some period of his life he published dozens of books every year – in one of them thirty seven – needless to say, with the help of ghost writers. Fast writing required fast typing, and indeed he held a world record in that. He was a colorful person, who loved good food and good company. Alongside, he was an excellent popularizer of science, and I am still grateful to him – the first book on atomic physics that I read was his.

Asimov was also an avid collector and teller of jokes. Naturally, he wrote also about humor. He published a collection of his favorite jokes, and added a short theoretical preface. In it he gave a definition of humor. In a joke, he said, there is always a sudden switch of viewpoint. As if we are swapping horses in the middle of a race. Like an electron circling the nucleus of an atom, and then suddenly jumping to another orbit.

The surgeon joke, with which the book opened, is of this type. Here is another.

A man holding two penguins, one under each arm, approaches a policeman and asks him “do you have any idea what to do with them?” “Of course,” says the policeman. “Take them to the zoo”. The next day the
policeman meets the same guy, with the same penguins.

“Didn’t I tell you to take them to the zoo?” he asks. “I did”, says the man. “Today I am taking them to the movies”.

Later we shall see that no less important here is the personification – the opposite of the Bergsonian automatism.

Here is another change of preliminary assumption:

Two friends go in the African savanna, and suddenly they see a lion. One of them hurries to put on his running shoes. “This way you are planning to outrun the lion?” asks his friend. “I don’t have to outrun the lion”, says the guy. “I have to outrun you”.

A good joke for a course on evolution. There is yet another mechanism here – self reference. The friend’s mind is directed at the lion, and it turns out that this is not about the lion but about himself.

On his death bed the husband asks his wife “I always thought that John is different from his three brothers. Now that I am dying you can tell me – is it true that he is not mine?” “Now that you are dying”, says the wife, “I can tell you. He is the only one that is yours”.
From high to low

Of all the philosophers who studied humor, the most unexpected to be found in the list is Emanuel Kant (1740 – 1817). He was one of the most solemn men to have walked the earth. He was a man of habits. The poet Heine related that the people of Konigsberg, the town in which he was born and never left, used to set their clocks by his promenade to the university and back. The conformism that governed his life also dictated his theories. He was set to prove that all that exists is precisely the way it should be. For example, that the laws of geometry formulated by Euclid in 300 BC must be true, *a priori*, namely from unassailable principles (a hundred years later Einstein showed that the world obeys completely different rules). He was the world champion in justifying things by hanging them on their own tail – for example he claimed that he could prove why the existence of causality is a must. Without it, he claimed, we couldn’t know the world.

With all this seriousness, he also tried to define “humor”. His definition was of the incongruity type. He claimed that in every joke there is a transition – but of a very special type: from high to low. The example he used was

*An Indian visits Europe for the first time, and first in his life he witnesses the opening of a champagne bottle. “I am not so impressed by the foam”, he says, “but by how you managed to put it all in”.*

From high to low? Hardly. Let me challenge the reader, if you wish, to explain it in light of the concepts we shall develop later. But Kant was not completely off mark. Here are some examples that better suit his
definition. Let us start with a saying of Bob Paisley, the legendary manager of Manchester United:

\[ \text{Football is not all there is to life. It is much more than that.} \]

And another football joke, in which an Asimovian change of viewpoint occurs, but the basis is the absurdity of the importance ascribed to football.

\[ \text{In the 2016 world cup games in Brazil, the English team visited a Brazilian orphanage. “It is heartbreaking to see faces so utterly empty of hope”, said 6 years old Jose after the visit.} \]

When my daughter was two years old I asked her what do dragons emit from their mouths –

\[ \text{“Fire”, she said. “And from their noses?” – “snot”}. \]

I am sure she meant it to be funny. From a legendary creature spitting fire and smoke the dragon is degraded to be human-like. The next joke does something to which we shall return – takes the air out of the balloon of a metaphor, but also goes from high to low in a concrete manner.

\[ \text{Girl: I will never give you my heart.} \]
\[ \text{Suitor: I never aimed as high as that.} \]

Blaise Pascal was another philosopher who addressed the question of humor. “There is nothing more funny”, he said, “than an expectation for something big, that ends in something weightless”. In the 19-th century the same definition was taken up by Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903), the philosophical voice of the industrial revolution. He was trying to prove that not only is it the case that machines can replace humans, but also the opposite is true – humans can be viewed as machines, their mind obeys
physical rules. And just as in nature systems strive to reach a state of minimal energy (a ball would end up in the lowest point it can reach), the mind also goes in the direction of minimal expenditure of energy. The joke does precisely this: from high, namely a state loaded with energy, it transits to a state of low energy. The energy saved thereby is turned into pleasure. Sigmund Freud adopted this approach with glee – we shall get to his version of the story later on.
Ambiguity

The best known case of switching of meaning – changing horses in mid-race – is puns. Play on words is considered a cheap form of humor, and indeed it is easy to generate. But it can also be sophisticated, as in the following limerick.

There was a young fellow named Paul
Who into a spring he did fall.
Oh, what a poor thing!
Did he die in that spring?
No, he didn't. He died in the fall.

A strange coincidence is that “spring” and “fall” both serve as names of seasons, but also of jumps, and they both are linked with water. A whole circus of words.

Usually, it is not play on one word that takes place, but on whole phrases. It is easy to generate ambiguity.

Doctor: You are ill.
Patient: I want a second opinion.
Doctor: OK. You are also ugly.

Double meaning of situations is even more common in jokes than puns. This is the “two scripts” story of Raskin.

A man complains to his friend: Yesterday I was going on a walk, and on the roadside there stood a frog. She told me that if I take her to bed she will turn into a princess. Did I have a choice? I took her, and indeed in be she
turned into a beautiful girl. Just then my wife comes in. Go explain things to her.

Here is a classic case of two interpretations of the same situation:

The crown prince travels in his kingdom, and finds somebody similar to himself like to drops of water. “Didn’t your mother work by some chance in the palace?” he asks him. “No”, says the guy, “but my father did”.

Give this joke to an evolution researcher and to a feminist, and you will get quite opposing opinions.
What’s missing

Great, the reader may tell himself or herself. We have reached a safe harbor. There is consent. All incongruity theories say more or less the same, so it turns out that most humor researchers agree on the same formula. Moreover, this formula explains many features of humor. For example, the feeling of the rug being pulled from beneath our feet, which results from the sudden change of meaning. Or the surprise, or the fondness of the joke for double entendre. Shouldn’t we declare the riddle solved and move on to the next problem? Is there anything missing?

Well, there is. In fact, quite a lot. There are many types of humor that the incongruity theories fail to explain. They do not connect in any way to the Bergsonian theory, and they fail to explain why automatic behavior is funny. They miss the laughter arisen by mishaps, like slipping over a banana peel, and why derision is funny. They do not explain the jokes based on stereotypes, notably ethnic jokes – there is nothing incongruous there. Quite the contrary, the protagonist is true to the stigma associated with him. They are alien to the funniness of self-reference, and of coincidences. They do not explain the ubiquity of jokes based on detachment of actions from their various meanings. In fact, they to accommodate most of the jokes we have met so far.

But the main problem is the reverse – not under-inclusion, but over-inclusion. “Two planes meeting” includes also non-jokes. “Switching from one mode of thought to another”, or “meeting of two incongruous modes of thought” occur in many places. As Koestler noted, they appear in poetry, science, in fact everywhere. Something subtler and more specific happens in a joke.
Part 3: More detachments
Detachment of Drive

Why are there so many dirty jokes? Of course, the man to ask is Freud, and of course, he has an answer ready up his sleeve: because of prohibitions on sex. Jokes allow us to circumvent prohibitions, so says Freud, and later on we shall see how he tried to impose this pattern also on naïve jokes. But the real answer is simpler: because sexual meanings carry a lot of energy. This is why jokes like to detach sexual meanings, and even more often do the opposite – load a seemingly innocuous action with sexual meaning. As already remarked, detaching meaning and loading with meaning are almost the same thing.

Drive was detached, for example, in the Parkinson joke (see page X). Here are a few more examples:

First old man: "Do you remember how we used to chase girls?" Second old man: "Yes. But I don’t remember why".

The old man does not say “I no longer have the drive” - that would not be very funny. No – he does not relate to the meaning of the chasing (namely, the drive). He still speaks about the action, only emptying it from meaning. This will be a main theme in our discussion: the joke puts the weight on the symbol, not the meaning.

A man is stranded on a desert island and finds six women there. They make an arrangement: every weekday he does it with another woman, and Saturday is a day off. One day another man reaches the island. The first comer is pleased – "we can share the work".
“Sorry, I am gay”, announces the newcomer. “Shucks”, says the guy, “there goes my Saturday off”.

Who wouldn't change places with the lucky guy? But for the man it is work, that he did not ask for. Sex is detached from its usual meaning, and perceived as duty. And not only detachment of "wanting" can be found here, but also of "not wanting". The guy doesn't really want to do it with a man, but work is work.

Here is another joke with sex as chore:

“Now in, now out. Now in, now out” – the farmer's daughter instructs the inexperienced farm boy. “Make up your mind”, he tells her, “I must feed the cows”.

And another detachment of drive:

A husband walks into the kitchen. His wife, who is facing the stove, turns to him and says: "You must do it with me, right now". – "This is my lucky day", thinks the husband, and they do it on the kitchen table. The woman dresses, and says “Thanks”. – "What was all that about?" asks the man. – "The egg timer broke", she says.

Bergson would have had here a field day – sex as done by automata. In our terms, sex disengaged from drive and from spontaneity.
Detachment of the "I"

There is an most extreme form of detachment of responsibility: the detachment of the "I". "It is not at all I who acts, or makes choices, or who is there at all". Here it is, out of Woody Allan's keyboard:

After years of psychological therapy, I have solved all my problems. Except for one – I all the time want to be somebody else.

Atlas, the son of the Titans, is punished by Zeus by having to carry the dome of heaven on his shoulders, for eternity. When he sees Hercules passing by, he lures him: can you hold the firmament for me for just a minute? When Hercules complies, he declares that he is not going back to his duty. "OK", says Hercules, "but can you please hold it for just a moment, while I arrange my robe?" With unthinkable naiveté Atlas agrees, and Hercules walks away. In the next joke something similar happens. The "I" is lent for a moment to somebody else, and then the lending becomes total dissociation.

A man used to visit his local every evening and always ordered two glasses of wine. He sat by himself and sipped alternately from each. When the bartender could no longer contain his curiosity, the customer explained the origins of this habit: “My brother and me, we used to drink a glass of wine together every evening. My brother relocated to America and this is how I remember him”. One day the man comes in and orders a single glass of wine. The bartender sympathizes – “So sorry, old chap”. “Ah, no, my brother is fine”, says the man. “It's me. The doctor ordered me off alcohol”.

56
Here are some more classical jokes of detachments of the "I":

_Herschel of Ostropol (a well known jester in Jewish folklore) was renowned for his ugliness. “I was actually a very handsome baby”, he explains. “But a wicked neighbor swapped me in my crib with an ugly baby”._

_Two elderly ladies ride in a car. To the dismay of the woman occupying the seat next to the driver's, they drive through a red light. She keeps silent, but then it happens again. When it happens a third time she leans towards the woman sitting next to her, and politely inquires – "Do you know you just went through a red light for the third time?" "What?" exclaims the other, "am I the driver?"

 _What is a minor operation? – An operation on somebody else._

_A Polish woman looks at the mirror. “Serves him right”, she says._

The woman is objectifying herself, "an inanimate object instead of a person" so Bergson will describe it. Here is another joke with the same idea – a person realizing that he is not only an agent of wishes, but also an object for another creature – this time as food:

_A Jew meets a lion in the forest. Quickly he takes out his prayer book, only to see that the lion does the same._

"What is this for?" he asks. "For grace".

_Bears can experience existential dilemmas of identity, too:_

_A polar bear cub asks his mother – “Mom, have you always lived in the North Pole?” – “yes”, says the_

And a detachment of national identity:

Taking a walk, Abe and Sol see a notice on the door of a church: $1000 FOR CONVERTING. Abe says – "let me check what this is all about". He enters the church. As he comes out again after half an hour, Sol asks – “What did you do in there? Why do they want to convert people? Did you get the $1000?”, to which Abe responds – “Money, that's all you people care about”.

Nationality is supposed to be part of one's skin. Here it turns out to be an easily shed garment (shed for greed at that, precisely the characteristic Abe blames on his old nationality).

Here is a confusing perception of identity (religious, again):

The detached elements were hanging by a thin thread. In the region where I live, by the way, this is no fiction.

Here is pure detachment of the "I", or of responsibility:

*Two old ladies ride in a car. To the dismay of the woman occupying the seat next to the driver's, they drive through a red light. She keeps silent, but then it happens again. When it happens a third time she leans towards the woman sitting next to her, and politely inquires — "Do you know you just went through a red light for the third time?" "What?" says the other, "am I the driver?"*
Mirror Neurons

A statistical fact: someone witnessing a yawn has a 55% chance of yawning himself within the following five minutes. Yawning, like crying and laughing, is contagious. Why? A possible explanation is this: witnessing a yawn draws a person’s attention to their respiratory system. And then, like the proverbial centipede that when suddenly aware of its many feet starts stumbling, breathing stops being automatic. This results in less oxygen reaching the brain and the yawn is there to fill the deficiency.

But about thirty years ago a much better explanation emerged. It has to do with another well-known phenomenon. Have you noticed that when two people face each other, they quickly assume identical postures? One puts his or her hand behind their head, and the other follows suit. Then the other (there is no leading and led issue here – it may go both ways) puts one leg on top of the other, and the other person does the same.

In a series of experiments carried out in the Italian city of Parma during the 1980s, a team of researchers led by Giacomo Rizzolatti found a physiological basis for this phenomenon. Their objects of study were Macaque monkeys, and they discovered that specific neurons in the monkeys’ brains fire signals not only when performing a specific action, but also when observing other monkeys performing it. A monkey watching a human sticking out his tongue may do the same, but something else may happen too: neurons in the region of its brain responsible for sticking the tongue out fire signals. Such neurons were tagged "mirror neurons". It was found that about 10% of the neurons in a monkey’s brain have mirror counterparts.
This is totally unexpected: why would the brain waste precious space on neurons that do not act, but only react to others’ actions? The secret is in identifying their primary function. Mirror neurons are the agents of empathy. By their agency, when we see a person tilting to one side and almost toppling over, we react by tilting the other way to "prevent" the fall. So, the contagiousness of yawning, crying and laughter is induced by mirror neurons. And indeed, people with a faulty faculty for empathy, on the autistic spectrum, for example, do not contract yawns.
Deciphering Intentions

The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*)

We highly appreciate empathy in others. It is the kings' road to sociability, communicability, mutual understanding. But empathy is useful not only to others. It has at least as much value for one's self. It enables us to decipher other people’s motives and intentions. And other people’s intentions are an important component of our existence.

As Pascal noted, like all animals, humans are future-oriented. Evolution made them so. The future is much more important for them than the past, since "life" and "future preservation" are almost synonymous. Even a historian, when preparing an omelet, mind a great deal more where the egg is going to be in a minute than where it had been (even if he strictly buys free range eggs). For this reason, people's intentions are even more important for us than their actions. More than the fact that somebody trod on my toe, it is important for me to understand whether they did it on purpose. If they did, I will have to be doubly careful next time I meet them. This is why we apologize when we accidentally hurt someone: we are communicating benign intentions.

The Hungarian-English depth psychologist Peter Fonagy has made this the core of his theory. Depth Psychology, associated primarily with the teaching of the German-English psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, deals with the first months, sometimes weeks or even days of life. Some of its precepts may strike the non-initiated as strange: the baby envying its mother’s
breast; its wish to destroy the breast. But Fonagy’s theory is actually easy to digest. He claims that the bond between a baby and its mother is based on the baby’s ability to decipher the mother’s intentions. He even uses the terminology that will be central to this book: the baby ascribes meaning to its mother’s actions. This is logical and almost obvious: bonding means trust, and trust is based on the ability to predict the other person’s actions.
Detaching empathy

An operation is held in India, of sterilization of men. A journalist interviews one of the sterilizers: "How do you do it?" "We take two stones, put the member between them, and hit". "And doesn't it hurt?", asks the journalist. "Sometimes, when a finger gets caught".

There is also switch of identity – who is getting hurt. A somewhat more refined joke in this direction, from the times that husbands did not attend labor.

A man is waiting while his wife is in labor. He walks to and fro, bites his nails. Eventually the nurse comes out and says: "Congratulations, it is a girl". "Thank God", the man says. "I wouldn't want my child to go through what I just experienced."

These jokes are about detachment of empathy, or caring. Many doctors jokes are based on this principle. Those whom we wish so much to trust turn out to be either not caring or incompetent. Here are two more such jokes:

Doctor: "Try this medication, and tell me how it worked. I have precisely the same problem".

Before the complicated operation, Joe sees the doctors conferring intensively at the corner of the operation theater. Eventually the head surgeon approaches him and asks: "Before we start, can you tell me where, precisely, does it hurt?"
Part 4: Self-Reference
Circularity

We have covered some ground. From "automatic behavior" we moved on to the wider "detachment of an action from its meaning". We have not yet defined what is, precisely, "detachment", and why is it funny. But let us not jump the gun. It is best to have first more examples at hand, and best – as far removed from "detachment of intention" as possible. The narrower is the domain common to two patterns of thought, the easier it is to look in it for the common denominator to the two – just as it is easier to search for something in one room than in the entire house.

The next type of humor we shall consider indeed fulfills this condition. It is totally different. It is not even related to actions. It is self-reference. Something that appears to relate to the world turns out to point at itself. A common name to this mode of thought is "circularity". It is so non-standard, that one could expect it to be rare. But quite the opposite is true: the jokes based on this mechanism are surprisingly numerous.

I always thought I was indecisive. But now I am not so sure.

How is it that everybody complains all the time, and I don't?

Non-conformists of the entire world – unite!

I don't understand women. Whenever they hear anything, they ascribe it to themselves. - I am not like that!

Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question? - Why shouldn't he?
He is such a total loser, that if a contest of losers were held he would come out last.

It is an instance of "circularity", or "self-reference". In mathematics circularity is responsible for some very beautiful theorems. But it is best known for its role in another field – paradoxes. The best known of those is The Liar's Paradox: "This sentence is false".

Is this sentence true, or false? If it is true then, by its content, it is false. But if it is false then, again by its content, it is true. So, it is both false and true - a contradiction. A contradiction usually indicates flawed logic, but this one seems to arise from impeccable preliminary assumptions, and it seems to undermine our beliefs in the laws of logic.

Philosophers have made a lot of this paradox. Thousands of papers and books were written on it, and an enormous amount of work was devoted to constructing theories of truth that avoid it. It is told that a fourth century BC Greek philosopher, Philetas of Kos, died trying to solve it, from exhaustion and lack of sleep. Like all paradoxes, it conceals some cheating. Paradoxes are overt contradictions stemming from covert erroneous assumptions. Some concept – in this case, the truth value of the sentence – is circularly defined. It is just like the paradox arising from defining a person as "the father of the person defined in this sentence", believing that the definition points at a real person, and then panicking about having discovered an impossibility: a person who is his own father.
There is something amusing in an arrow shot into the world, only to hit its sender.

There are two secrets to success in life. One is not telling all you know.

In fact, circularity is almost invariably funny. Form a self-relating idea, and almost surely you will have a joke at hand.

I don't understand women. Whenever they hear anything, they ascribe it to themselves. I am not like that!

Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question? Why shouldn’t he?

He is such a total loser, that if a contest of losers were held he would come out last.

Doctor: "You have got two problems - with your heart and with your memory". Patient: "Memory shmemory. The main thing is that my heart is OK".

Here are three of my favorites:

A man comes home, sits on the couch, turns on the TV, and calls: “Woman, beer! It is soon coming”. The wife brings him beer, he finishes it and then calls: “Woman, beer! For it is coming.” After the third time the woman explodes: “You brute. All you know is to watch TV, drink and growl”. “Ah, it is come”, says the husband.
A manager has a hundred CVs on his desk. He shuffles them well, and throws half to the trash bin. Asked why he did it, he answers: “I don't want losers”.

A fairy appears at a restaurant, turns to one of the diners and offers him a choice between one of three wishes: beauty, a million dollars or wisdom. He thinks and thinks, and eventually chooses wisdom. The fairy waves her wand, and suddenly the man's friends see that he is crestfallen. “What's the matter?” they ask. “I should have chosen the million dollars”.

The object of choice is apparently closely related to the faculty to make a choice. A similar joke was invented when the extent of Fed snooping after American citizens came to light:

*Obama goes to a McDonald’s branch, and strikes a conversation with a kid. “Dad says you are spying on us”, says the child. “He is not your dad”, answers Obama.*

*What is worse, ignorance or apathy? - I don't know. But who cares?*

A cute little ad on the radio:

*Saleswoman: We now have a special offer, two for the price of one.*

*Man on the other side of the phone: Wonderful! Why don't you advertise it on the radio?*

*Saleswoman: We do. There was an ad on the radio, you just missed it.*
In or Out?

There is a special genre of self-reference jokes, in which the listener suddenly finds himself part of the joke. A quick transition occurs from the position of an observer to that of a participant.

To qualify for the Ku-Klux-Klan you have to kill a Negro and a dog. Why the dog? You are in.

The listener becomes a candidate himself, and "why a dog" acquires a new meaning: "I pity dogs, not blacks".

A man went to the toilets. (silence). And? Wait till he comes out.

Want to hear a joke from end to beginning? - Yes! - Then laugh first.

Do you want to hear a joke? - Yes. - OK. Once there were two jokes. One fell ill. The other sat by its bed, consoled it, fed it soup. Isn't it a good joke?

In spite of being a children's joke, this joke is quite sophisticated. There is a quick transition from being outside to being in the joke – you realize that "a good joke" relates to the one you are presently hearing, and you have to admit that indeed, it is a good joke.

The Monty Python group likes this type of humor. In a famous skit, The Arguments Clinic, a person enters an office, and the man sitting there attacks him viciously: “You vacuous, toffee-nosed, malodorous, pervert! Your type makes me puke!” and so on. The visitor says – "I came in for an argument!" At which his attacker becomes excessively sweet: "Ah, sorry, this is Abuse". So far, we witnessed a case of "detachment of intention", or
actually of emotions. The man in the office does it as a job, not motivated by real emotions. Now comes the self-referential part: the visitor finds the right room, asks "is this Arguments?" and the man inside tells him "I told you once", the guy says "no you haven’t", and so on. The client remonstrates – "contradiction is not an argument!" to which the arguer answers of course "yes it is". After about a minute the arguer says "your time is up", and the visitor protests – "it should have been five minutes!" and an argument evolves on this matter. At any given moment the man may wonder whether he is having an argument or arguing his right to have one.

And speaking of Monty Python, there is the classic self-reference in Life of Brian. Brian (read "Jesus") opens the window of his room in Jerusalem, and sees a multitude gathering in the street below, calling "A grace, a grace!" "You don’t have to follow me", he calls, "you are all individuals!" "Yes, we are all individuals", they shout back in unison. "You are all different", he tells them, and they all call together "We are all different!" A sole dissenting voice is heard saying: "I am not!"

A classical class of jokes in which the listener has a role is the "Knock-knock" jokes. Here is one imbued with circularity:

-Knock knock

-Who's there?

-The interrupting cow.

-The interrupt –

-Moooon!
Paradoxes

When my daughter Geffen was seven years old, she returned one day from the dentist, and told me:

*Do you know how to make the anesthesia injection painless? You give you an injection before.*

Geffen knew that I like such things. All mathematicians do. They also use circularity in their work, for proofs. The famous Gödel's theorem, that says that every reasonable system of axioms on numbers has a formula that it cannot prove, is based on it. A system of axioms is "reasonable" if there is a computer program that can tell between formulas that are axioms and formulas that are not.

It all starts with paradoxes. Paradoxes are thought tricks, similar to the tricks of magicians. A flesh and blood person stands in front of you and does the impossible. In a paradox somebody conjures an impossible conclusion from seemingly impeccable assumptions. Fascinating indeed. Like conjurers, thought gymnasts are impostors. Paradoxes are based on deception. A faulty conceptual structure is presented as sound, and the cracks in it give rise to a contradiction. A paradox is a covert faulty assumption, that leads to an overt absurdity.

Strangely, all persistent paradoxes are based on circularity. Some concept is self-defined, and therefore does not correspond to something in reality. Supposing that it does leads then to a contradiction. For example, "the number defined in this sentence, plus 1" does not point at a number in reality. To find it, you have first to know what it is – a circular task. If you still believe that it does correspond to a number, you get a contradiction – a number equal to itself plus 1. Of course, nobody is
going to take this "paradox" seriously. The faulty definition has to be better concealed. This is what happens, for example, in the most famous paradox of all, the "Liar Paradox":

**This sentence is false**

Is this sentence true? If it is, it means that it is false. But then, by its content, it is not false, namely it is true. In either case we get a contradiction.

Confusing? So it should be. But also valuable. It is on this paradox that Gödel based the proof of his theorem.

And there are also jokes that look like a paradox, or at least an oxymoron:

*The main thing in life is sincerity. If you manage to fake it, you are in business.*
Part 5: Symbols Taken at Face Value
Realization of Metaphors

Girl: "I will never give you my heart". Suitor: "I was not aiming that high".

In poetry the device used in this joke is called "realization of a metaphor", a metaphor taken literally. Metaphors are second order symbols. My beloved is "as the lily among thorns" (Song of Solomon, 2:2) starts as a first order symbol: the words point at an object in the world, a flower among thorns. Then this image is used for another purpose – to underscore the beauty of the poet’s beloved. Realization of metaphor means descending one level - from second to first order. The symbol is flattened. Psychologists note that this mode of thinking characterizes schizophrenia patients.

In the example of "lily among thorns" the effect of this ruse is poetic. Under different circumstances, it is funny. The difference is whether truth is expressed (and then we have a poem), or plain silliness (in which we have a joke).

What is the epitome of wastefulness? – Telling a hair-raising story to a bald man.

Realization of a metaphor is but one example of our fourth sample mechanism: symbols taken at face value, relating to a symbol as if is a concrete object rather than a conveyer of meaning. A sudden switch in the narrative deprives the symbol of its meaning.

A Chinese couple makes a pact when they marry: each of them will have a jar, and whenever one is unfaithful to the other, the unfaithful partner will put one grain of
rice in the jar. After fifty years of marriage they decide to open the jars. The husband’s jar is found to contain three grains of rice. "What was the first infidelity?" asks the wife. - “You remember when your mother was ill, and you went to nurse her for a few months? I did it with the young school teacher”. And the second? - “Do you remember the nice maid we had some thirty years ago?” "And the third?" – “Do you recall the time of the big flood, when I went to the big city?” Then they open the wife’s jar, and it is empty. "Have you never been unfaithful to me?" asks the husband. “Do you remember”, says the wife, “the big famine, when everybody starved and we had plenty to eat?”

Rice is also food, plain and simple.

Here is an example told in the sign language of the deaf. The deaf have jokes that hearing people would not understand. In certain sign languages (they vary from one country to another) "marriage" is signaled by a hand brought from the forehead to clap on the other hand.

A deaf and dumb giant falls in love with a tiny girl. He places her gently on his palm and pops the question.

The sign language symbol turns out to have concrete implications, to which its symbolic function is quite secondary. In this case, not only the meaning of the symbol, but also a relationship, becomes detached.
Symbols Depleted of Meaning

*Husband: "You are ugly!" Wife: "And you are drunk".*

*Husband: "Yes, but I will sober up by morning".*

On the surface, this is verbal scuffle, and a vulgar one at that. On a deeper level, there is a subtle shift from second to first order symbols. The wife's retort is of second order – it is not plainly a demeaning remark, but an attempt to explain the husband's behavior: "… and that's why you are so obnoxious". The husband brings it back to first order, as if it is all about reciprocal evaluation. To this there is added a strange form of detachment: it transpires that there are attributes that can be shed.

Here is another case of second order turning into first:

*An old lady tells her friend: "I keep forgetting my password. So I changed it to 'incorrect'. This way the computer reminds me – 'your password is incorrect'".*

The computer is telling the user she had made a mistake. The user interprets its message as a string of letters. And here is a pointer that turns out to be the thing itself:

*"My wife is unfaithful to me with a carpenter", complains a man to his friends. “How do you know?” – “I found sawdust in our bed”. “My wife is unfaithful to me with an electrician”, says the other. “How do you know?” – "I found electric wires in our bed". “My wife is unfaithful to me with a boxer”, says the third. “How do you know?” – "I found him in our bed".*
Ten men reach the gates of heaven, to be met by the Angel Gabriel. "Those who were master in their home – to the right, those whose wife called the shots - left”, ordered the angel. Nine burly guys go to the left, and only one frail looking chap goes right. “What?” says Gabriel, “of all these men you were master in your home?” “I don't know”, says the guy, “my wife told me to go right”.

The symbolic meaning of turning right is reversed, the main point being that
Part 5: Victory of the Symbol

As it happens, I do own the road
(sticker on a car)
Symbols Detached from their Meaning

I hope I have convinced you how ubiquitous are the three humoristic mechanisms discussed so far. I will be even happier if they look to you far away from each other. If this is the case, then when we find a common denominator to the three it will probably not be coincidental. It will surely get us closer to the solution of our riddle. But is this viable at all? Can we possibly find a link between self-reference and actions detached from their meanings? Or between these two and the flattening of metaphors?

The answer is "yes", and the next joke, that does not belong to any of the three families, will help us find the secret common ingredient, because it shares with all three a basic maneuver.

The owner of a tail docked cocker spaniel brings it to the vet, and asks him to cut the tail even shorter. To the surprised vet explains: “My mother in law is coming to visit, and I don’t want any sign of joy in the house.”

The mechanism here is transparent: replacing meaning by symbol. The wagging of the tail is a symbol, pointing at something – it is an expression of emotion. The man is not interested in the meaning of the wagging – he doesn’t care whether the dog is happy or not. He relates solely to the symbol. Between symbol and meaning he chooses the first.

This has two sides:

- The symbol is detached from its meaning.
- The weight shifts from meaning to symbol. The symbol, depleted from meaning, is left as sole victor in the battlefield.
My claim is that this happens in every joke. Every joke gives a symbol priority over its meaning.

The first step towards corroborating this claim is demonstrating it in the three families we have studied so far. The most clear cut case is that of realization of metaphors. The metaphor is a symbol, and when interpreted verbatim it loses this meaning. It remains bare of meaning – and happily so. It has had the upper hand, it now precedes its meaning.

Next in transparency is self-reference. There, in a sudden acrobatic U-turn, the symbol points at itself, instead of the world. By this it becomes the center of attention, the winner of the game. It is now orphaned of its original meaning, proud of being so.

Hardest is the type with which we started, detachment of intentions. It is not for nothing that this type, though probably being of widest scope among the three in terms of number of jokes, is least mentioned in the literature – "least" actually meaning "not at all". Actions are not usually recognized as carriers of meaning. Saying that an actions are "symbols" may cause the raising of eyebrows. But they are. As we realized, people are incessantly busy deciphering the meaning of actions, and in this sense actions are symbols. When the meaning disappears, the action remains an independent entity, like in the case of digging the holes with not purpose to it.

So here is the formula: a joke is formed when a symbol is victorious over its meaning. When the two are detached, and the weight of attention shifts from meaning to symbol.

Here is a joke in which this scheme is explicit:

*The commander to the recruits: "I will call you 'Sir', and you will call me 'Sir'. You will mean it".*
I won't mean it, says the commander. And here is another classic on the priority of the symbol:

   A woman praises her friend’s baby for its beauty. “Wait till you see the pictures!” responds the mother.

A picture is in some sense a symbol: it points at the object itself. Here it is preferred to the object.

In Athens there was a philosophical school called "cynics", meaning "dogs". Like dogs they lived in the street, some say that like dogs they even made love there, defying common morality. The most famous of them was Diogenes (323-412 BC), about whom it is told that his possessions amounted to a waist cloth, a bowl and a jar. When one day he saw someone drinking from the stream by cupping his hands, he broke the jar. The symbol behaves in jokes in a similar way. Its most precious possession is its meaning. But it happily forsakes it, to become liberated of worldly possessions. Relieving itself of the burden of the meaning, it feels free and jubilant.

   An e-mail message from a Jewish mother to her son:
   “Start worrying. Details to follow”.

Worrying is a symbol: it points at something - the cause for concern. Here it precedes its referent. You can worry just so.
A Tail Wagging the Dog

Remember the joke about the old geezer who recalls having chased the girls but can't think why? The old chap could have just said "Yes, but I no longer possess the drive". This would not be funny. The reason is that it would not constitute a detachment of meaning. It would still relate to the meaning of the chase, the sex drive. What makes it a joke is that the old guy still addresses the symbol, namely the action of chasing, but independently of its purpose - to overtake and copulate.

Negation is not detachment. Detachment requires something essential: a shift from meaning to symbol. The symbol has to become the center of attention. For example, the laborers on the mountain don’t just say that they are not planting. They relate to the digging, independent of its purpose, and moreover they take it very seriously.

Jokes, like poems, are based on magic. And in magic the most important thing is that you don’t perceive what is happening. When the ground of meaning is pulled from under your feet, it is important that your eyes will be diverted to the outer appearance of the meaning – namely the symbol. A joke is formed by victory of the symbol over its meaning.

Often this victory is subtle:

An engineer is stranded on a desert island, and leads a miserable Robinson Crusoe style existence. A few months on he discovers a beautiful woman stranded on the other side of the island, and finds that she has managed to provide herself with the comforts of civilization – a cabin with running water, kitchen and
furniture. She invites him to a lavish dinner, wine included. After dinner she says: "you have been stranded here so long, you must feel lonely. Is there anything else I can do for you?" His eyes light up – “Do you have e-mail?”

Is it the absurdity of the request that is funny? Partly. Absurdity is also a form of detachment of meaning. But the real detachment here is more subtle. E-mail is a means of communication, and as such it is a carrier of meaning, pointing as it does to the addressee. The woman offers the thing itself – herself - the engineer prefers the symbol.
Clutching the Pointing Finger

Proud parents provided me with a metaphor that nicely explains the interplay between symbols and meaning that occurs in a joke. They told me how they were trying to teach their baby the names of objects, by pointing at them while articulating their names. Until it was ten months old, the baby did not understand the point of pointing. Instead of looking at the object, it looked at the finger, sometimes trying to clutch it.

This is what happens in a joke: you look at the finger rather than at the thing at which it is pointing.

Unfortunately, most slaves' mutinies in history failed – even when they gain the upper hand, slaves lack the confidence to cash on it. In the joke the mutiny of the symbol carries the day.

A patient complains that his hearing is so bad that he does not hear himself fart. The doctor prescribes some medication. “Will this improve my hearing?” asks the patient. “No, but it will make you fart louder”.

A gregarious woman studies the restaurant menu and eventually says to the waiter – “yes”.

A menu is a symbol, in that it indicates various referents and the choice to be made between them. Here it becomes the thing itself.

The victory of the symbol can be subtle:

A man in a train car keeps moaning – “Wow, am I hungry. Am I hungry”. The man on the opposite sit gets annoyed, and eventually pulls a sandwich out of his bag.
and offers it to him. The guy devours it and then says  
“Wow, was I hungry, was I hungry.”

Neither the hungry passenger nor his impatient travelling companion is concerned with the hunger or lack of it so much as with the verbal expression thereof.
"Good prose should be transparent, like a window pane", said George Orwell, and Jean Paul Sartre added: "...words are transparent" but for the poet "All language is... the mirror of the world". In poetry words are not transparent. They are not only tools. They draw our attention because they are put to irregular use. The same happens in jokes. The symbol-window rebels and tells us "I am here, and not as a mere servant". For a moment, the servant symbol becomes master, and we share its glee. For example, in puns the words rebel against their meaning: "We are not committed to the meaning assigned to us".

What is the difference between in-laws and outlaws? –

Outlaws are wanted.

Puns are so easy to generate, that they are considered to be cheap humor. But some of them are subtle. The following limerick exploits the strange coincidence whereby "fall" and "spring" both relate to seasons, to jumps and to water. It's not a mere word game we have here but a full blown circus:

There was a young fellow named Paul
Who into a spring had a fall.
Oh, what a poor thing!
Did he die in that spring?
No, he didn't. He died in the fall.

The next joke can be considered as realization of a metaphor. A symbol is formed only to materialize as "the thing itself":
Two nonagenarians marry. On the first night he gropes for her hand, they hold hands and fall asleep. On the second night he gropes for her hand, they hold hands and fall asleep. On the third night when he gropes for her hand she says: “No, darling, not tonight. I have a headache”.

The holding of hands is a symbol, in that it excites our anticipation of what must follow. On the third night it transpires that it carries no meaning beyond itself – this is it.

And here is a victory of words over reality:

Patient: "I am 70, and in bed it is not what it used to be. My next door neighbor in the old age home is 74, and he tells me he does it every night. What should I do?"

Doctor: "What should you do? Tell him, too".

Had the doctor said: "your friend is lying", the joke would have been lost. He would be relating to meaning. The funny point is that the doctor relates to the conveyer of meaning – the saying. To enhance confusion he relates to it as "doing". In the following joke, as in the "am I hungry" one (see page X), the saying is more important than the act, the doing:

An old man goes to confession and tells the priest: “I am 80 years old, and yesterday I met two 18 year old beauties and wow, what a night we had”. “Say three Hail Marys and you will be forgiven”, says the priest. “But I am Jewish”, says the confessor. “So why did you tell me?” – “I am telling everybody”.

A similar idea:
A violist comes to his orchestra’s rehearsal and finds the hall empty but for a janitor sweeping the floor. “Where is everybody?” he asks. “Didn’t you hear? The conductor died and the rehearsal was cancelled.” "OK", he says, and walks away. After a few minutes he returns. “Where is everybody?” – “I just told you, the conductor died, and the rehearsal was cancelled”. "OK", he says, and walks away. After a few minutes he returns, and asks “Where is everybody?” – “I told, you, the conductor died. Are you deaf?” – “No, I just enjoy hearing you say it”.
Part 3: Coincidences
Detachment of Cause

Blaise Pascal (1650-1689) was a largely wasted mathematical genius. By the age of 19 he had made important mathematical discoveries, and invented the first calculating machine in history. After 19, he turned to religion and to philosophy. This probably had to do with his poor health. The precise nature of his illness is still unclear, but clearly it was not imaginary. He died at the early age of 39.

Like many other philosophers, Pascal tried to define "humor". Unlike most other philosophers, he dubbed in humor himself. He was known for his sharp style of writing. In one of his writings on humor he noted that if we see two identical faces, and know that they are not twins, we laugh. If two friends meet and find that without previous coordination they both wear green pants and yellow shirts, they will laugh. Coincidences are always funny.

Why? because they constitute a detachment of causal links. In the inanimate world "intention" is replaced by "causality". We don’t look for intentions on the part of objects, but we do try to find the logic by which they operate. Our brains are constantly busy making sense of the world. Similarity, or proximity of events, makes us believe in some causal link between them, and "coincidence" means that in fact there is no such link. The ostensible causality is detached.

Many of Gary Larson's cartoons are based on coincidences. The annual meeting of poodle breeders happens to take place next door to where vultures are trained; a nursery is located by dingo kennels (just when in Australia a baby was said to have been snatched from its tent by a dingo); a parachute club operates next to a crocodile farm. In a New York
apartment a man is half swallowed by an alligator as the alligator is being strangled by a boa constrictor. How likely? Well, two cops are at the site, and one tells the other: "I have seen these things before, and it ain’t a pretty sight". In another cartoon two bandaged men are sitting in wheelchairs, one asking the other – "What, have you also been stricken by lightning twice?" And directly above them a meteorite is heading to crash them both.
Gary Lineker, the English footballer, explained:

Football is a simple game. Twenty two men kick the ball for 90 minutes, and the Germans win.

A friend of mine has a similar view of education:

In education you do what you do, and you get what you get.

Cause and effect are detached. Here is a joke with such detachment:

An Irishman is rushed for an important meeting, and cannot find a parking place. After an hour of searching, he turns in his despair to God: “If you help me just this time, I will go to church every Sunday, and say Hail Mary every evening for a year”. He barely finishes the sentence, when a parking spot appears before his eyes. “Forget it”, he tells God, “I found one”.

The following is a cautionary tale against placing a precious treasure beyond your control:

A man encumbered by a 50cm long penis goes to consult a doctor. The doctor tells him – "I cannot help, but in the nearby forest lives an old woman. Go, ask her to marry you, and see what happens". The man goes to the forest, and indeed finds there an old woman. “Will you marry me?” he asks, and she says “No”. To the man's surprise, his penis is reduced by 10cm. Encouraged, he asks again – “Will you marry me?” and she says “No”. Again, the penis grows 10cm shorter. One more time and
it will be settled, thinks the man, and asks – “Will you marry me?” “Are you deaf?” says the woman. “How many times do I have to tell you – no, no, no”.

Detachment of outcome is a private case of detachment of causality.

A hare and a turtle hold a joke telling contest. The umpire is a monkey, and the rule is that whoever makes the monkey laugh will win a prize, and whoever tells a joke that fails to amuse the monkey will be devoured by the lion. First the turtle tells a very funny joke, all animals burst their sides laughing – except the monkey, who remains impassive. Well, a rule is a rule, and the lion devours the turtle. Then the hare tells a totally inane joke, no animal laughs – except the monkey, who falls around laughing. "Why are you laughing?" - ask the animals. – "The joke the turtle told, it's really funny", says the monkey.

In music such delayed effect is called syncope. Strangely, in music too, the effect is pleasing, it is even a little funny.
Part 6: Eye of the Beholder
"Symbol before meaning" means "internal before external". Inner thoughts are more important than reality. This happens also in poems. Poems convey the message that the truth is inside, not outside. Here is a famous example:

*To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, -*

*One clover, and a bee,*

*And revery.*

*The revery alone will do*

*If bees are few.*

*(Emily Dickinson, poem number 1755)*

Jokes carry the same message, except that there the preference of inner perception over reality is erroneous. We do not really believe that "perception" expresses a truth.

*After long years of therapy, I solved my wetting problem.*

–You no longer wet your bed? – I do, but I am no longer ashamed of it.

Wife: "You must stop drinking. We are out of money".  
**Husband: "Just yesterday you spent $200 on make up!"**

Wife: '"This is so that you would find me pretty".  
**Husband: "That's what the beer is for, too".**

If it were a poem, we would believe the husband genuinely seeks to find his wife beautiful. In the joke he is deriding her, what he really wants is to be too drunk to recognize her lack of beauty.
The cartoon scene already mentioned, of the hero-figure treading air but falling only when looking down, is an example of "perception before reality", and indeed, it is poetic. Its funniness comes from the collision between reality and its perception. Dickinson evades this clash, the cartoon takes it head on.

Here is another example, from Freud's book on the joke:

_The Rabbi of Kutsk raises his head from the Holy Book, pulls at his hair and says – “the worst has come to pass. The great Rabbi of Lemberg has died”. His students tear their clothes and settle to mourn the Rabbi of Gori. A week later a visitor from Gori appears and informs that the Rabbi of Gori is as hail and hearty as ever. A follower of another Rabbinical court teases one of Rabbi of Kutsk's students – "what a fool he has made of himself". “Yes”, says the student, “but you must admit that the leap from Kutsk to Gori was impressive”._

Freud calls the mechanism of this joke "fantasy over reality". What happens in your head is more important than the actual events outside. Of course, this is one form of detachment of meaning. Not committed to reality, the symbol has its own game. Here is a famous Mark Twain saying:

_When I was a boy of fourteen, my dad was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years._

Here is a "perception before reality" solution to getting old:

_You cannot keep young forever. But you can stay immature._
If this contained some truth, it would be poetic. It is funny because immaturity, as opposed to youth, is neither desirable nor coveted.

A letter to the income tax authorities: “All night I was rolling around in my bed, recapitulating how I cheated on you. I am sending a check to the amount of $1000. If I still fail to fall asleep, I will send the rest”.

It is not the cheating that is important, but the impact of its perception.

Here is a victory of external show over actual profit:

Oligarch A: "I bought this watch for $100,000".
Oligarch B: "That's stupid. In the shop across the road you could purchase it for $200,000".

Two more such jokes:

Why do women invest so much in makeup and so little in learning? – Because most men are stupid and only a few are blind.

A ship rescues a Jew stranded on a desert island. Passengers on board observe two constructions on the shore. "What is this building?" they ask. “This is my synagogue”, replies the Jew. “And the other?” “This is the synagogue I don't attend”.

The parallel of "imaginary friend" is "imaginary shunned" (synagogue, in this case.)

A woman complains to her friend: “Last week I went to see a dentist. The man reminded me of somebody from school, but I thought to myself – 'this cannot be. He looks so old and wrinkled'. But then I saw the diploma
on the wall, and recalled – 'yes, this was his name'. I asked him 'what school did you go to?' "Walt Whitman School", he said. "Aha, I said, so you were in my class! And then this decrepit bastard says 'Yes? What did you teach?'"

In jokes, what the eye "beholds" is separate from reality.

A Jewish mother introduces her children to a guest – “The four year old is the lawyer, the two year old is the doctor”. 
"Inside before outside" means "perception before perceived". Which means the same - symbol before meaning.

Two women visit Cuba, and in a night club they attend an impressive performance: a black guy takes two nuts and smashes them with his member. Twenty years later, they decide to visit the same place again, to see if this show is still on. Sure enough, the guy is still there, doing the same trick, but this time with two coconuts instead of nuts. Curious, they go behind the curtain and ask – "why coconuts?" "You see", he says, "My eyesight is not what it used to be".

Freud, please lay down your pen. The real mechanism in this joke is putting the sight of the object before the object itself. Here is a subtle one:

Jack and Joe go for a walk with their dogs. They come across a restaurant, and jack says – "I'm hungry, let's go in". Joe points out that there is a NO DOGS ALLOWED sign. “Do as I do”, says Jack. He shuts his eyes and goes in. When the waiter tells him that dogs are forbidden, he says “this is my seeing eye dog”, and the waiter lets him in. Joe follows suit, and when the waiter stops him he says “this is my seeing eye dog”. “A chi Wawa?” says the waiter. “What?” says Joe, “Is that what they gave me?”
Like many jokes, this too is more sophisticated than meets the eye: the Seeing Eye dog is turned from a tool for sight, to the object of sight (or in this case, non-sight).

Airplane passengers wait patiently as two men in pilot uniforms and dark glasses, white sticks in hand, grope their way along the aisle to the cockpit. They are a bit perplexed, but they don't say anything. The plane starts running on the runway, but does not take off. As it gets closer to the end of the runway. The passengers are more and more terror stricken. When the plane is a few meters from the end of the runway they shriek with fear. The plane takes off, and one of the pilots turns to the other: “you know, one day they might not shout loudly enough, and we shan't know when to take off”.

There is detachment of emotion – the shrieks become a mere technical tool. But the main point is a type of self-reference: the reaction to the (almost non-) take off becomes a tool towards it.
Part 7: Form over Content
"Don’t look at the jar but at what’s inside it", is an ancient Hebrew proverb. Jokes do the opposite. They look at the jar. That is, at the symbol and not at its content. This is another surprising tangential point with poetry: in poetry this element, "look at the shell", is of central importance. Until about a hundred years ago, most poetry was written in rhyme, and in constant meter. Nowadays rhyming is less prominent, but meter is still there, even if not totally regular. Have you ever considered why this is so? What the role of these seemingly superficial elements is? The answer is surprising: diversion. The two divert our attention from content to form. The similarity of sounds lulls our mind to believe there is similarity in content, and the constant meter has a hypnotic effect. The content is then delivered subliminally, which is how the poem wants its message transmitted.

Something similar happens in the joke, similar, but not quite identical. The poem circumvents our critical thought in order to transmit some underlying truth. In the joke the message turns out to be erroneous. For example, in the following joke words take priority over content which results in stupid content:

*Up the steepest street in San Francisco a truck is seen going backwards. To the curious passers by the driver explains – “they say there is no room to turn around at the top”. After a while, the same truck comes back down – again, in reverse. “Stupid bastards”, he explains “there was room”.*

Another "form over content" case with a ridiculous outcome:
Could your honor, the Prime Minister, summarize the state of the nation in one word?

In one word – good.

And in two words? Not good.

The number of words dictates the message. Its content becomes irrelevant.

Puns are all about form. Here is a combination of puns and mispronunciation:

A story telling contest is held, using the words green, pink and yellow. The three finalists are a Frenchman, an Englishman and an Indian. The Frenchman says: "I had dinner at a restaurant and ate green peas with pink salmon and yellow mustard". The audience applauds enthusiastically. The Englishman says: "I sat in the green meadow, drinking pink lemonade and watching the yellow sun". The audience is beside itself with enthusiasm. The Indian says: "I was sitting in my living room and suddenly the phone went 'green, green'. I pink up the phone, and says 'yellow'".

Knock-knock jokes are all about form:

-Knock knock
-Who's there?
-Little old lady.
-Little old lady who?
-I didn’t know you could yodel!

And here are two jokes in which content is overshadowed by the form of enunciation:
A blonde girl goes into a library and bellows: “A pizza with all toppings and a can of coke”. The shocked librarian whispers to her – “this is a library!” The blonde whispers back – “OK, a pizza with all toppings and a can of coke”.

American: "Never did George Washington's lips utter a falsehood!" Englishman: "Of course not. He spoke through his nose, like the rest of you".
Chiasmus

Poetry is replete with tricks of diverting the reader’s attention to external appearance, in order to sneak in some truth. A poem is a pickpocket that instead of stealing something from our pocket stealthily puts something in it. One of the mechanisms for drawing attention to externals is called "chiasmus", meaning "crossing". The origin of the name is the Greek letter chi, which is pronounced like the Dutch ch, and looks like an X. When expressing truth, the chiasmus is poetic. When it is based on false logic, it is funny. In jokes it appears in the form of swapping roles. For example, the favorite adage of Valère, a Molière character in *The Miser* – "One must eat to live, and not live to eat" (act 3, scene 1).

"Today we are going to dissect a frog”, announces the professor of biology. He opens his bag and takes out a bulky sandwich. “Strange”, he says. “I was sure I had eaten my sandwich”.

"Eating a sandwich, dissecting a frog", is replaced by its cross-shifted opposite.

What is more horrible than ten babies in a garbage bin?
– One baby in ten garbage bins.

And here is a wise comment on philosophy:

What is the difference between mathematics and philosophy? That in mathematics, somebody important is somebody who said something important. In philosophy, something important is something said by somebody important.
Of course, this is also detachment of meaning – shifting from content of an utterance to the identity of the person uttering it.
Part 8: The Reverse Direction - Loading with Meaning
There is no Early or Late in a Joke

If anybody wants to refute the "detachment of meaning" theory of the joke, they have a seemingly unbeatable argument: the ubiquity of jokes in which precisely the opposite happens. Old meaning is not detached, but a new meaning appears. A joke may start with meaning attached to the symbol and end up detaching one from the other, or it can start with a seemingly meaningless object and then load it with meaning.

Three Jewish mothers sit on a bench in the park. “Oy vey”, sighs one. “We agreed not to speak about the children”, rejoin the other two.

What is the secret behind this apparent contradiction? It is that our brain is very fast, faster than we think it is, and it can quickly scan events in both directions of time. When meaning is loaded, we look back and realize that it had been detached. It is a "hindsight detachment". Jokes are indifferent to the direction of time.


In the beginning of this joke the word "repeat" is a seemingly meaningless name. At its end, it acquires meaning. So, although the process is the reverse of what we are accustomed to, there is true detachment of meaning. Once the word is loaded with meaning, we realize that beforehand it had been detached.

Here is a similar example, a children’s joke:

Three men, called Stupid, Nobody and Nothing, go on a fishing trip. Suddenly Nobody falls into the water, and
Nothing asks Stupid to phone the police. Stupid calls:

“Hello, I am Stupid. I am calling for Nothing. Nobody fell into the water”.

The Italian-American psychologist Silvano Arieti gives a nice example of this phenomenon. When Italians read Spanish they laugh. The reason is that at first sight the words look meaningless to them, but they quickly realize that they are in fact familiar.

Even a matzo, the Passover bread, can be loaded with meaning (which is then immediately detached):

A blind man fingers a matzo and asks – "who wrote this nonsense?"

Many knock-knock jokes are based on this mechanism. A meaningless name is loaded with new meaning when combined with the inevitable "who":

Knock-knock

Who's there?

Hutch.

Hutch who?

Bless you.

The familiar process that occurs in many jokes, of forming unexpected conceptual links, can be viewed as loading with meaning. An object suddenly assumes a new role:

Where do Scotsmen marry? In the yard, so that the chickens can feed on the rice.

As suggested above, the opposite of the Bergsonian mechanicality in human actions is also funny. Something mechanical that impersonates a
human is funny. A cat wearing a hat, a monkey imitating a man, a hose that moves on its own volition – they all make us laugh. The reason is that their actions are loaded with a meaning that, we soon realize, does not exist.
Loading with Intentions

Words are often loaded with meaning in jokes. But even more common is the loading of actions with intention. An action that seemed devoid of intention turns out to be bursting with it.

A woman disappears. Her husband looks for her everywhere, informs the police – to no avail. Two days later she appears at home. The husband asks – "what's happened?" – "Don't ask", she says. "Five brutes abducted me and made me their sex slave for a week". – "A week?" Wonders the husband – "But you have only been away for two days!" – "No", she says. "I just came to pick up a few things".

In the same spirit:

An old lady calls the police and complains –" two young men are wandering around naked in the next door apartment". The police arrive and see no naked men. – "Climb the cupboard", says the woman, "and you'll see".

Here is a question disguised as a riddle, but revealed as loaded with a wish:

What are ten lawyers at the bottom of the sea? – A good start.

A few more jokes disguising true intentions:

Two psychologists meet. "You'd never guess what a Freudian slip I made today", says one to the other. "I was going to say to my wife 'please pass me the salt' and
what I actually said was 'you bitch, you've ruined my life'".

A grandma brings her grandchildren water pistols. "What", remonstrates her son, "Don't you remember how we made your life a misery with these pistols?" "Of course I do", she says smiling broadly.

And here is a bizarre loading with meaning:

To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness (Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest)
Personification

A familiar form of loading with intentions is attributing human features to objects or animals. This is a well-known poetic device, and is no less common in jokes. The following example is a case of ascribing choice to those manifestly unable to choose:

What is the difference between involvement and commitment? In bacon and egg the chicken is involved, the pig is committed.

Attribution of human emotions to the inanimate:

Statues of a young man and a young woman are placed in a park. They are close to each other, almost touching, almost kissing. One day a fairy visits the park, and her sympathy is aroused. With a wave of her wand she brings the two to life, and tells them – “you have half an hour of life. Spend it as you wish”. They disappear behind some hedgegrow and sounds of glee are to be heard from that direction. After twenty minutes the fairy approaches the hedgegrow and whispers – “you have ten more minutes”. She hears the girl saying to the boy “OK, now you hold the pigeon and I shit on it”.

There is resurrection of the dead:

A skeleton goes to see the doctor. The doctor says: “Now you come?”

And there is the opposite of personification - relating to a human as to an inanimate object:
A man is lost in the wood for many months. When he is found, a woman journalist interviews him: “what did you do for sex?” “I did it with holes in the trees.” “And don’t you want to do it with a real woman?” she asks and undresses. To her surprise, he delivers her a few hefty kicks. “What are you doing?” she asks, “Driving away the squirrels”.

The next joke is unsuitable to vegetarians, be warned:

A man visits his friend in the country, and sees at his home a pig with a wooden leg. “Why does he have a wooden leg?” he asks. “Watch, and you will understand”, says his friend. The man watches, and sees the pig wake up the kids, prepare them sandwiches, send them off to school. “A great pig”, says the man, “but why does he have a wooden leg?” “Watch, and you will understand”, says the friend. The man observes – the pig cleans the house, cooks lunch, when the kids come home from school he prepares dinner for them, then puts them to bed, tells them a bedtime story. “Wonderful”, says the man, “but why does he have a wooden leg?” “A pig like this”, says the friend “would you eat it all at once?”

The detachment is obvious, and macabre. It is personification of the purpose of de-personification.

Personification is fundamental to the large class of talking animal jokes. Here is a refined one:

A man goes into a bar, and bets the barman that his dog can talk. To demonstrate the dog’s ability he asks him:
“What is the top of a house called?” The dog says “Roof”. The Barman is furious – “you are pulling my leg”. OK, says the man, “Who was the greatest baseball player of all time?” “Ruth”, says the dog. The barman can’t contain his fury, and throws them both out. Once outside, the dog turns to his master and asks “DiMaggio?”
Part 9: A Catalogue

*The less you understand a poem, the more impressed you are by the magic.*

*(Samuel Butler, Hubridas)*
Detaching an Anchor

*I got it: there are troubles of all sorts.*

*(I had trouble getting to Sola Solew, Dr. Seuss)*

We got it: there are all kinds of detachments. There are many types of symbols, many types of meaning, and many ways to separate the two. This part of the book is a catalogue of some of the most common means of detachment. There is no way to exhaust all of them – there are too many. But I tried to list some of the more common.

We start with detachment of premise, i.e., a non-explicit assumption. An presupposition tacitly agreed on at the beginning of the joke turns out to be unfounded. An anchor of the discussion is detached. For example:

*Ah, if I only had some egg, I would eat some egg and bacon, if I only had some bacon.*

The famous Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdos tells a story from his youth in Budapest. He and a friend knocked on the door of Simon Sidon, a mathematician known for his misanthropy. "Can you come another time", said Sidon from behind the closed door, "and to another person?"

A premise is assumed at the beginning of the story (come to ME another time) and is pulled from under our feet at the end (come NOT to me). Of course, it is also a case of detachment of identity.

Here are a few more jokes of this type:

*Patient: "Would I be able to play the violin after the operation?"* Doctor: "Yes, of course". Patient: "How wonderful. I couldn't before".

*Have you heard? In Moscow they are giving away cars.* -

*I heard. Only it's not in Moscow but in Leningrad, it*
isn't cars but bikes, and they are not giving but taking them away.

We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know (W. H. Auden)

What is the best contraceptive? - Orange juice. - Before, or after? - Instead.

If a doctor told you that you have just three more months to live, and your uncle bequeathed you a million dollars, what would you do with the money? I would seek a second opinion.

The assumption underlying the question is denied.

Here is a classical detachment of anchor:

Moishele is unmarriageable. He is stupid, ugly and uncouth. When he reaches forty, his father decides to turn to a matchmaker. The matchmaker browses through his folders, and finally says – yes, I have somebody for him - Princess Anne. “What, a shikse?” says the father, “no way”. “Yes”, says the matchmaker, “but she is from a good family. They have money, they are not anti-Semitic”. After lengthy persuasions, the father says – "ok, if aunt Bella gives her consent I will go along". Aunt Bella's reaction was the same. “A shikse? – over my dead body”. The matchmaker works like he never did before. Eventually aunt Bella gives in – "OK, I will move to another country, if this will make Moishele happy". The matchmaker goes out, wipes the sweat off his brow, and says “one down, one to go".
In the following joke detachments of anchor come in rapid succession:

A boy asks his father for ten dollars. “Why do you need eight dollars?” asks the father. “Six are enough. Here, take four.” He gives the boy two dollars, and tells him – “bring me the change”.

Joe likes to imitate others. When Bill ordered coffee with sugar and milk, he told the waiter – “the same, but tea instead of coffee, sweetener instead of sugar, and lemon instead of milk”.

“Aren't you a Jew, by any chance?” – “No, I am not”. “I wont tell anybody, honestly, I am not even from this area. Aren't you a Jew?” “OK, if you keep it a secret, I will tell you – I am a Jew”. “Strange. You don't look Jewish”.

One type of detachment of anchor is acceptance of a logic that contradicts that of the starting point:

A Jew comes to the Rabbi, and tells him: “The worst has happened to me. My son has converted to Christianity".

“Listen”, says the Rabbi. “It has happened to me too”.

“And what did you do?” “What could I do? I went to God”. “And what did he say?” “He said – listen, it has happened to me too”.

Please be warned, the next joke is not for the faint hearted:

A man goes to hospital to collect his newborn son. “I have bad news”, says the doctor. “The boy doesn't have hands”. “Never mind”, says the father. “I will love him as he is”. “Neither does he have legs”, says the doctor.
“Never mind”, says the father. “I will love him as he is”. Slowly the truth transpires – the baby has only one ear. The father bends over the bed and whispers to his baby: “Never mind, sweetheart, I will love you as you are”. “Don't bother”, says the doctor. “He is stone deaf as well”.
A man arrives at a Jewish town and asks for the Gabbai (collector of congregational dues). “Ah, that bastard son of a bitch?” he is told – “Go straight for three streets, turn left and ask again”. He asks the next person, and hears “This good for nothing idiot, that beast in the shape of a man? – go right, then left, then ask”. This goes on, until the man reaches the Gabbai. “Is your work hard?” he asks him, “very”, answers the Gabbai. “And the pay?” – “None, it is a voluntary position”, says the Gabbai. “So why are you doing this?” “For the honor”.

The secret of this joke is that we know something that the protagonist does not. Comic situations are often based on this stratagem – the hero acts upon false premises, and only the audience is aware that this is so.

And here again we find a tangential point with poetry. Detachment of knowledge can be poetic. The novel *Fatelessness* is based on the childhood experiences of its author Imre Kertesz in the holocaust. At the age of fifteen he was incarcerated in Auschwitz. It takes the child a long time to understand what is being done to him, and the effect of the gap between his knowledge and that of the reader generates strange and awesome beauty. Non-explicit knowledge is one of the main tools of poetry, but under different circumstances, a gap in knowledge may be funny. The comic effect of sitcoms is often generated by such a gap: the audience knows something that the protagonist does not.
Jokes of naïveté are based on detachment of knowledge of some taboo. A taboo is breached by a person unaware of it. Freud tells of an incident he witnessed.

*Two children were staging a play for an audience of grownups. In the play a man leaves his home for many years, and returns loaded with gifts. “I haven't been idle either”, his wife tells him, pulling away a curtain and displaying an array of little children.*

Such jokes are funny for the same reason that comedies of errors are – the audience knows something that the protagonist seemingly doesn't. By the same token, if the law broken concerns morality, a suspension of moral judgment is also involved.

*A monastery hires a Jewish gardener. After two weeks on the job, the Mother Superior calls the gardener to order: “We don't mind you using the holy candles to light your cigarettes and the holy water to water the plants. But, for Mercy's sake, stop calling me Mother Shapiro”.

Not knowing the law does not exempt from punishment but not knowing conventions does, and it is a lot of fun. And the contrary is also true - ascribing knowledge to those who are assumed not to have it:

*A mother to a friend: "You know Johnny the plumber is homosexual?" Her five year old son: "Mom, what's a 'plumber'?"*

*Johnny's parents think it is time their son knew the facts of life and ask his older brother to illuminate him. The brother summons Johnny and asks: "Do you know what*
"my girlfriend and I do every night?" – "Yes", says Johnny. "So", says the brother, "Mom and Dad want you to know that the birds and the bees do the same".

Of course, this is also a case of a symbol and its referent exchanging places.

Adam goes to God to inquire what to do with the creature just born from his rib. “Go bring her a flower”, says God. Adam does so, and comes back to God – "what now?" “Give her a kiss”, advises God. Adam does as advised, and returns. “Now go caress her”. Adam goes, and then returns: "God, what's a 'headache'?"

Adam is naïve, Eve isn't. She is as well versed as if their marriage was as old as the hills.

A woman gives birth to a quintuplet. The first four emerge in rapid succession but the fifth refuses to come out. The doctor peeps inside and hears a whisper: “is the kicking one out already?”

And here is pure detachment – forgetting what it was all about:

A big wave sweeps a toddler out to sea. His Jewish mother prays to God – "please bring him back, I'll do anything". Eventually another big wave comes and carries the child back to shore. “He had a hat”, says the mother.
Detachment of Moral Judgment

A couple is preparing for their annual vacation. — "You know what?" says the woman. — "This time you will check whether the alarm is on, the main faucet is closed, the electrical gadgets are unplugged and all doors are locked, and I shall sit in the car and honk the horn".

Honking the horn signifies many things – childishness, laziness, inconsideration. The woman detaches all these meanings, and relates to the honking as part of a fair distribution of work.

A plane is touching down in Tel Aviv. The pilot offers good wishes to the passengers: “Welcome to Israel. I wish all those who are seated a merry Christmas, and those standing a happy Chanukah”.

The habit of Israeli passengers to get up from their seats as soon as the plane touches down drives the air crews crazy. The pilot detaches it from emotions – it is used just as means for distinguishing between Jews and Gentiles.

Here is another detachment of judgment:

A T-shirt printed with an inscription of the American Brewers Association reads: FINISH YOUR BEER. IN AFRICA KIDS ARE GOING AROUND SOBER.

The analogy to the admonition of parents to their kids for not finishing their meal, based on the hungry kids in Africa, is broken mainly because sobriety, unlike drunkenness and obviously hunger, is considered a desirable state.
A bridegroom arrives by train at a little Jewish town. On the platform it transpires that the matchmaker goofed and promised him to two would be brides. The would-be mothers in law bicker – this says “he is mine”, and the other “he is mine”. They bring the matter before the Rabbi, who decrees – the groom shall be cut in two, a half to this and a half to that. One mother says – "oh no, let the other bride have him". The second says – "Cut". The Rabbi proclaims: the second is manifestly the true mother-in-law.

The following joke employs many techniques, among others detachment of intention:

A woman asks her husband to change a light bulb.
“What am I”, he says, “an electrician?” She asks him to repair the tap. “What am I”, he says, “a plumber?” This goes on for a while, until one day the husband comes home to find everything fixed. “Who fixed it all?” he asks. “The neighbor did”. “And what did you do in return?” “He asked me either to sing for him or to sleep with him”. “And what did you do?” “What am I, a singer?”

Sleeping with the neighbor is detached from its sexual meaning: it is equated with singing, and the only reason the woman did it was that she does not know how to sing. There is also some twisted logic here: she, unlike her husband, fulfils her marital duties. Just not with him.
Detachment of Identity

A man used to visit his local every evening and always ordered two glasses of wine. He sat by himself and sipped alternately from each. When the bartender could no longer contain his curiosity, the customer explained: “My brother and me, we used to drink a glass of wine together every evening. My brother relocated to America and this is how I remember him”. One day the man comes in and orders a single glass of wine. The bartender sympathizes – “So sorry, old chap”. “Ah, no, my brother is fine”, says the man. “It's me. The doctor ordered me off alcohol”.

Here are four classical jokes of detachments of identity:

Herschel was renowned for his ugliness. “I was actually a very handsome baby”, he explains. “But a wicked neighbor made a cruel swap – took me from my crib and replaced me with an ugly one”.

A Polish woman looks at the mirror. “Serves him right”, she says.

What is a minor operation? – An operation somebody else is undergoing.

After years of psychological therapy I have solved all but one of my problems. I still yearn to be somebody else.

This is obviously another case of detachment of anchor as well. For isn't an understanding that you are you the basis of your personality? But then,
detachment of identity is the ultimate detachment of anchor. Here is detachment of identity in a speaking animal type joke:

A polar bear cub asks its mother – “Mom, have you always lived in the North Pole?” – “yes”, says the mother. “And grandpa and grandma too?” – “yes”, says the mother. “And auntie and uncle, too?” – “yes”, says the mother, “why are you asking?” “Because I am cold”, it says.

The joke challenges our assumption that polar bears are never cold. And there can be detachment of national identity:
Detachment of Emotions

Few things are more powerfully loaded with energy than emotions. In accord, humor likes also detaching emotions. “Joke” and “sentimentality” are irreconcilable. A joke must be told with a stiff upper lip. Deep emotions are not easily detached, and are not prone to be detached in jokes. If they are, we feel uneasy. But less charged emotions may be detached. Here is detachment of fear:

A man goes to a bank, and asks to open an account. The clerk tells him – “Please sign here, here and here”. He refuses: “I give the money, you sign”. The clerk’s attempts at persuasion fall flat – the client adamantly refuses to sign. In her despair she calls the bank manager. He tells the client – “you are going to sign right away, or get the hell out of here”. Without another murmur, the client signs. The clerk asks – “Why is it that when I told you to sign you refused and when the manager told you the same you agreed?” “You told”, says the client, “he explained”.

A rather macabre detachment:

A man on his death bed smells his favorite cookies being baked in the kitchen. In his death throes he crawls to the kitchen and reaches his hand to the counter. His wife slaps his outstretched hand – “this is for the wake”.

There is a double detachment here – the explicitness of telling the man of his imminent death (this is loading with meaning), and the detachment of
the wake from its emotional content, as if it is not linked to respect for the soon to be dead, now reaching out for a biscuit.

Physician jokes are very popular. Many of them are based on detachment of empathy. The person expected to care for you turns out to be either indifferent or regrettably incompetent:
The Joys of Frustration

Three sailors are stranded on a desert island. After seven years, a fairy appears and grants each of them a wish. The first says: “I miss my wife. I want to return home”. The fairy waves her wand and he is back home. The second says “I miss my village. I want to be home again”. She waves her wand, and there he is. The third says: “I am lonely. Bring them both back”.

If you wish, this is detachment of outcome, or even circularity: you end up where you began. In jokes, frustration serves as a means of detachment. And strangely, it makes us happy.

Three missionaries are taken captive by a savage tribe. The chief offers the first a choice – death or bubu. What can be worse than death? – thinks the missionary, and chooses bubu. The members of the tribe assault him, rape him violently, and he dies in great agony. The second is given the same choice. He thinks he may be more resilient than the first, and also chooses bubu. The brutes assault him, rape him, and he dies in great agony. The third, having learnt the lesson, chooses death.

“OK”, says the chief, “but first bubu”.

We ascribe great importance to the choice, only to find that it is totally meaningless. If you wish – this is detachment of the result of choice. But this means frustration.
Stammer Jokes

What is your name? – Da-da-da-david. - Have you always stuttered? – Not at all, but my father did, and the clerk at the registry of births was an idiot.

Stutterer jokes are popular because they shift the center of gravity from content to form, from what a person says to the way he says it. The above exemplifies a shift from content to form, adherence to the letter of the law rather than to its spirit.

The other mechanism that appears in stammer jokes is detachment of spontaneity. What most people achieve effortlessly involves hard work for the stutterer.

A man gets on a bus and asks the driver – “How-how-how-ma-ma-many sto-stops to the hos-hospital?” “Fi-fi-fi-five stops” answers the driver. The next passenger asks “how many stops to the police station?” and the driver answers – “Seven stops”. The stutterer is furious – “W-w-why di-di-did you ma-ma-make fun of me?” The bus driver answers – “I-I-I di-di-didn't. I-I-I ma-ma-made fun of him”.

The next joke is based on both stammering and double entendre:

Whe-whe-where i-i-is the-the-the school for stu-stu-stutterers? You don't need to go there. You stutter very well.
Words Totally Emptied of Meaning

The most common theory on jokes is that of switching between meanings, of words or situations. Some jokes do not change meaning, but do something more extreme: empty the meaning entirely. That is, they go from meaningfulness to meaninglessness. For example, it is possible to talk about nothing:

*Usually your long phone conversations are long. This time you spoke for only ten minutes. What happened? – It was a wrong number.*

*A letter from a nursery school teacher to the parents: “If you won't believe everything the children tell you about kindergarten, I promise not to believe all they tell me about home”.*

There is a veiled threat here but also plain detachment – not everything said is grounded in reality. Or at least let us collude in pretending it is not.

*How can you tell that a salesman is lying? – His lips move.*

There is no need to listen to content. He lies as he speaks, that's his job.

*If a man speaks, and no woman hears him, is what he said still balderdash?*

There is no need to listen to a man in order to know what a woman's opinion of what he said is going to be and no need to listen to her either.

*A five year old child has not uttered a word in his life. His parents take him to the best of doctors, to no avail. One day his mother serves him soup, and he says – “it's too salty”. “What?” cries the mother, “you can speak!*
How come you never did?” “Until now everything was OK” says the child.

A very strange detachment indeed: an assumption emerges that words serve to convey only complaints. Here is a similar assumption:

A group of old Jewish ladies sits in a restaurant. A waiter comes and inquires – “is anything alright?”

Here is total detachment of communication:

How can you tell between an introverted mathematician and an extroverted one? – The extrovert looks at your shoes when he speaks to you.
The Detachments of Old Age

Life is a humbling experience. In our youth we feel so winged, that we can outrun ourselves. Old age makes us realize our position in the world. It brings with it acceptance and an understanding that the grip on external things is not that important. Vanity is for the young.

All that drives us on when we're young – ambitions, hopes the quest for fame and wealth – declines in old age. For this reason, old age is a wonderful vehicle for detachment in jokes, mainly detachment of drives. This explains the abundance of old age jokes.

Old man A: "How are you?"

Old man B: "OK".

A: "And your wife?"

B: "My wife – I think she is dead".

A: "What do you mean by 'think she is dead'?"

B: "Well, sex is the same, but the dishes started piling up in the sink".

Even knowledge is detached in old age. This is what happens in jokes on loss of memory:

Johnny complains to his wife that his eyesight is so weak that he doesn't see where the golf balls fly. "No problem", says the wife. "Take my brother with you. He is 75, like you, but his eyesight is still excellent". The two men go golfing and Johnny hits the ball. "Did you see
where it went?” asks Johnny, and his brother in law says “yes”. “Where?” asks Johnny. “I forget”.

And, of course, there is the loss of control that comes with old age. This should be classified as "detachment of intentions":

Two old men pee in a public lavatory. “Shit”, says one.
“I peed on my shoe”. “You win”, says the other.

And here is a cruel one, in which a person who is a pointer at something becomes pointed at:

Two old women sit on a bench. One of them says:
“Hanna, do you also smell a corpse? Hanna? Hanna? – Hanna!?”
Exposing Hypocrisy

Humorists often claim that they depict reality as it is. Here, for example, is what the Israeli humorist Ephraim Kishon had to say on the subject:

If you take reality, and add some ornamentation, you get an article. If you tell it as it is, you get a humoresque.

Or the words of the Hungarian humorist George Mikes:

\[ \text{You generate humor. I only write it.} \]

What the two mean to say is that human actions are usually veiled in hypocrisy. The humorist's job is to unveil them, or in our terminology, detach the action from its disguise. For example, Kishon wrote a humoresque about his neighbor, who found a cockroach in her apartment and called him for help. After a heroic fight, he manages to kill the insect. The neighbor spat between her teeth – “murderer”. In reality she probably thanked him, but he wrote the undercurrent that he sensed. And, of course, there is a deep observation here about what we do to our soldiers and policemen.

Jokes, too, often expose hypocrisy:

\[ \text{A man appears in a synagogue on the high holidays, telling the doorman that he just needs to hand a friend something. “OK”, says the doorman. “But don't let me catch you praying”}\]

The absurdity in having to pay for the right to pray is ruthlessly unmasked.
Indirectness

A common technique in jokes is revealing a truth by stating its opposite:

A captain writes in the log of his ship: “Today was a bad day. The first mate was drunk”. The officer in question begs him to erase it, to no avail. A week later the first mate enters in the log: “Today was a good day. The captain was sober”.

Two diners ask for water – “but please see that the glass is clean!” warns one of them. The waiter returns with two glasses of water, and asks – “who wanted the clean glass?”

In a communal women’s shower on a kibbutz a penis is gleans through a flaw in the partition. “This is not my husband!” says one woman. “Right, it isn’t”, says the second. Looking closely a third says: “He is not from the Kibbutz”.

Tautologies

In recent years our import is more and more from other countries (President J. W. Bush II)

Tautology means in Greek "same word". It is something that fleetingly looks like a piece of information, but in fact is vacuous. "The water is wet", for example. Tautologies may be funny, simply because they do not carry the meaning that we initially assume they would.

Upon being asked about the quality of some book, President Lincoln answered – "it is a good book, for people who like such books".

And once, when the short legs of one of his generals were discussed, he said that "A man's legs should be just so long as to reach from his body to the ground".

Some people utter tautologies less intentionally. Best at that are probably politicians and sport commentators. "If you don't score, you lose", explained once a football coach. And the cautious commentator added – "unless it is a nil draw". "We won 2 to 1", explained a football player, "and had I not scored the second goal it would have been 1 all". In sport analysis, all share the solemn feeling that deep thoughts are expressed. In jokes, tautologies are used to feign meaningfulness. Like children who put a package tied to a string to lure an innocent passerby, only to pull it away when he tries to pick it up.

Doctor: "Have you had it before?" Patient: "Yes".

Doctor: "Hmm. I think you have it again".

140
Philosophers' favorite syllogism (a tautology expressed as a logical argument) is "Men are mortal; Socrates is a man; Therefore Socrates is mortal." Here it is, in joke attire (which is much deeper, not to speak of funnier):

\[\text{Inscription on the grave of a hypochondriac: "I told you."}\]
Part 10: The Explanatory Power of "Detachment"
Incongruity Theories

Books on the theory of humor (there are many of these) usually start with a review of existing theories. I chose not to do so for I wished to relate to these theories through the prism of the conceptual framework of this book, to which I had to introduce the reader first. As mentioned above, each of the better-known theories points at some aspect of humor, and as such should be explained.

The first theories, Plato's and those of his disciple Aristotle, spoke of derision, of laughter as a leer at the misfortune of others. This is not a very complimentary theory to humanity, and indeed Plato denounced humor and recommended gravity. Laughter teaches you disrespect for the Gods, he claimed.

There must be some truth in the derision theory. Deriding is accompanied by joy, and sometimes even laughter. "Ridicule" comes from the Latin ridere, to laugh, and we use the words "to laugh at…" to describe it. So, any theory of humor must explain why derision is funny. On the other hand, derision can only account for a very small portion of jokes. You'd have to bend over backwards to link most of those mentioned in this book in any way to mockery. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was one thinker prepared to perform this feat: laughing at a joke, he maintained, derives from self-mockery. "How incredulous we were", we tell ourselves, "to fall for it".

Modern theories mostly converge around the idea of "incongruity". In a joke, so these theories argue, two incompatible ideas meet. There are many variations on this theme. Isaac Asimov, besides delving in science fiction was a keen collector of jokes. According to him every joke contains a sudden change of view point. In his book The Act of Creation the colorful
and versatile Hungarian-English intellectual Arthur Koestler proposed that humor, art and scientific discoveries are all generated in similar fashion – an encounter between two planes of thought. He called this pattern "bisociation", in which two apparently distinct ideas meet to create a new conceptual entity. The linguist Victor Raskin defined a similar idea in terms of two scripts, each offering a different construction to the situation. Like many humor researchers before him, Raskin is a man of one example (which he himself describes as rather masochistically "the most hated joke in the theory of humor"):

A man stands before the door to a doctor's surgery, and asks “is the doctor at home?” “No, come in quickly”, whispers a voice from within.

The joke leaps from the script of patient to that of lover.

Can the theory of incongruity stand up to critical scrutiny? Not really. It fails to accommodate most of the jokes we have met so far, and when it does, it's at the expense of missing their essence. For example, ethnic jokes are totally outside the pale of this idea. In such jokes there is no change in viewpoint: quite the contrary, the protagonist is true to a fault to the stigma associated with him. Incongruity does not explain the funniness of derision or of self-reference.

By contrast, how incongruity fits the pattern of "detachment of meaning" is obvious. Switching from one meaning to another contains both detachment and loading with meaning – the symbol loses one meaning and gains another. The word "symbol" signifies here, as elsewhere, an extensive range of referents. So, for example, the situation of a man standing before the door of a surgery signifies for us a specific meaning or interpretation.
Hence we shall see how "detachment of meaning" or "the victory of the symbol" explains the various types of humor.
Explaining Scorn

“Scorn” was the first theory of humor. Plato and his disciple Aristotle spoke of laughter as a leer at the misfortune of others. Of course, this is very complimentary, and indeed Plato denounced humor and recommended gravity. Laughter teaches you disrespect for the Gods, he claimed.

There must be some truth in the derision theory. Deriding is accompanied by joy, and sometimes even laughter. "Ridicule" comes from the Latin ridere, to laugh, and we use the words "to laugh at…" to describe it. On the other hand, derision can only account for a very small portion of jokes. You'd have to bend over backwards to link most jokes to mockery. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was indeed prepared to perform this feat. Laughing at a joke, he maintained, derives from self-mockery. "How incredulous we were", we tell ourselves, "to fall for it".

So, how does “detachment of meaning” fit scorn? Scorn is a detachment of identification. Ridiculing somebody means declaring him stupid, which means depriving him, in our mind, of will and power of deliberation. He becomes a Bergsonian automaton. He is denied the human privilege of identification with his actions.

Thus scorn is the reverse of empathy. Its object is perceived as hollow, devoid of intentions and emotions. Consider again the derision of a person slipping over a banana peel. Watching him walking, our mirror neurons are at work, we accompany his motions in our mind. When he slips, this breaks, and we no longer identify with him. He becomes, at least for a second, an inanimate object.

So, again, in explaining the comic nature of scorn the detachment theory succeeds where incongruity fails miserably.
Stereotypes

*How does a Rumanian recipe for chicken begin?* – *Steal a hen*…

*How does a Moroccan recipe open?* – *First of all, calm down.*

*What is the epitome of Jewish dilemma?* – *Free pork.*

Stereotype jokes are yet another domain where incongruity theories fail miserably. There is no way of viewing jokes about Scotsmen miserliness as the meeting of two incongruent frameworks. Quite the contrary, the joke does what it promised to do – the Scotsman lives up to his expected miserliness. In this case scorn theories do seem to apply – we deride the Scotsmen for their miserliness or the blondes for their presumed stupidity. But then, scorn is not a successful theory elsewhere. And it does look like there is something here beyond plain derision.

Again, detachment explains this genre cozily. Like in scorn, the mechanism is that of denying the protagonist his motives and will. But here it is done in a subtle way: it is the stereotype that acts, not the person. The person becomes a puppet of his or her type. And the stereotype is in the eye of the beholder: it is in our heads, not in reality. So, it is again "victory of the symbol", the symbol being in this case the label.

Even more plainly, it is detachment of intention. The stereotyped person is a Bergsonian automaton, obeying his image instead of being a free agent. We don't have to know the Moroccan woman in person in order to know that she is irate, and do not have to tackle in our thoughts the tasks facing the Blonde. Identification is no longer the name of the game. It is the image
that acts. Indeed, acting in accordance with an image, rather than by free will, is one of comedy's oldest tricks. In comedies of character somebody is given one or two prominent traits, and acts according to them. It is not a matter of feeling scorn or contempt to the character. It is a matter of telling ourselves "Aha, just as expected".

While tragedies are based on identification with the protagonists, vicariously living their conflicts, comedies are based on the precise opposite – detachment from them. They are marionettes of their stereotypes. This is why tragedies are called after the names of the heroes, while comedies are often named after the characteristics of protagonists – *The Miser, The Hypochondriac*.

In fact, this works also in everyday life. When somebody acquires the name of a miser, and he acts miserly, we laugh. And it is not even necessary for the joke to use a stereotype. It is enough to declare the characteristic:

*Harry is so slim, he has just one stripe in his pajamas.*

*Joe is so miserly, that when the radio broadcasts a song he heard before, he turns it off.*

And then there are the epitome jokes. They use the same mechanism – declaring a property, and then letting the person act upon it:

*What is the epitome of miserliness? – Using both sides of the toilet paper.*

And there are personal images that are used in jokes. For example, Bill Clinton's name as a womanizer:

*Clinton and the Pope die the same day. By mistake, they are exchanged – Clinton goes to heaven and the pope to hell. When the error is discovered, Angel Gabriel orders them to go each to his right place. On the way they meet,*
and the Pope tells Clinton – Oh, how I long to see Virgin Mary. “You are a day late”, says Clinton.

There is another mechanism here at work, which was named by Freud "shifting". Weight is shifted within the same situation or the same expression. The Pope's stress is on "Mary"; Clinton's response shifts the weight to "virgin".

Finally, a joke whose topic is a label:

An old Scotsman sits with a young fellow in the main street of the village. “Do you see this fence?” asks the old man. “I built it with my own hands. Do you think that they call me McGreggor the fence builder? – no”. Silence ensues. “Do you see this wharf on the lake? I built it with both my hands. Do you think that they call me for this McGreggor the wharf builder? – no”. After another pause, the old man continues – “Do you see this church spire? I built is with my own hands. Do you think that they call me McGreggor the spire builder? – no”. Silence ensues again, and then the old man sighs – “Ah. But one time you screw a sheep".
Exaggerations

One thing must be conceded: no stereotype joke is based on stereotypes alone - always something else is added. Often it is a huge exaggeration.

A Polish couple drive on the highway, when suddenly they hear on the radio: “drivers beware, there is a car going on the highway in the wrong direction”. “One car?” says the Pole to his wife, “there are hundreds of them”.

Exaggeration jokes are a genre in their own right.

Your mother is so fat they built a ring road around her.

Your mother is so fat, she has a zip code all her own.

For some reason, exaggerations are funny. For some reason they are also poetic – in poetry they even have a special name - hyperboles. Here is a famous hyperbolic poem, written by W. H. Auden after his friend's death. It may have been originally written as a parody of eulogies, but it was taken very seriously by the movie Four Funerals and a Wedding, through which it gained much of its fame. Here is the last verse:

The stars are not wanted now, put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Very strange indeed. Aren’t poems supposed to use understatement? Shouldn't they be non-explicit, hinting at things rather than bringing them to full day light, and blown up at that?
A hint can be found in the everyday use of hyperboles. For, we do use them on daily basis: "hellishly painful", "unbelievably beautiful", "enormously rich", "immeasurably clever". Why do we like so much to exaggerate?

The answer is that a hyperbole does not stress things, but does the contrary – it detaches them. Ascribing the pain to the moon and to the sun makes the pain bearable. When something goes beyond ordinary reality, it is no longer ours.

This is why hyperboles are funny. They detach. They are a way of putting things beyond reality. And they do so by label. You give a label of "fat", and then have the permission of saying something ridiculous, so ridiculous it is connected to the origin only by label. "Fat" and "surrounded by a ring road" both relate to being big, but they are not really related, the link is totally external.

There are two steps exaggeration jokes, putting one exaggeration as bait for the still larger exaggeration to follow. They may be called "crescendo jokes".

> In a bar in the Wild West a call is heard – “Big Joe is coming”. Most guests disappear, some hide beneath the tables. Heavy steps are heard, the door is smashed with a kick, a mountain of a man appears, hits the counter with his fist till all glasses rattle, and orders “Barman, two beers. Be quick, Big Joe is coming”.

Of course, this is also a case of victory of a symbol: the big guy was supposed to be the meaning of the expression "big Joe", and then it turns into a carrier of this meaning – he repeats the expression.

> A man tells his friends of the wonderful new medication he is taking to improve his memory. He tries to recall the
name of the medication. “What is the name of that beautiful thorny flower?” he asks his friends. “Rose”, they tell him. “Right,” he says, and yells to his wife – “Rose, what is the name of this new medication that I am taking?”

Again, the deeper mechanism is not the exaggerated amnesia, but something that is pointed at ("rose") turning into a carrier of meaning rather than the meaning itself. Here is crescendo in an ethnic joke:

A Scotsman goes to the pharmacy, and asks to repair his toothbrush. The pharmacist delivers the bad news to him, that it is impossible to repair a toothbrush. He will have to buy a new one. “I don't know”, says the Scotsman. “I will have to consult my partners”.

A man delivers an enormous fart. He is so ashamed, that he flees abroad. After many years he dares return to his country. He meets a boy and asks him cautiously “when were you born?” – “Two years after the big fart”, says the boy.

Here, too, the exaggeration is just one side of this joke. The other is loading of meaning: the fart became a symbol, on a national level.
The Joys of Frustration Revisited

Legend has it that in a certain casino in Las Vegas there is a machine, that if you insert a quarter in, it gives you your quarter right away back. I wouldn't go all the way to Las Vegas to play this machine, but in jokes, strangely enough, this is precisely what happens, sometimes:

A tourist is watching two cows in the meadow, one white and one black. A farmer stands next to him, and the tourist asks politely: “These cows, do they produce a lot of milk?” – “The white cow does”, answers the farmer. “And the black?” – “The black one, too”. After some silence the tourist asks: “Do they give birth to calves every year?” “The white cow does”, says the farmer. “And the black?” – “The black does, too.” This kind of exchange goes on for a while, until finally the tourist gets curious: “Why do you always answer on the white cow first, and only then on the black?” “You see”, says the farmer. “The white cow is mine”. “And the black?” – “The black one, too”.

This is an obvious victory of the symbol. The coin aims at something – a possible gain (or more likely, loss), and this something turns out to be the coin itself. The puzzle of why the farmer answers first on the white cow becomes its own "solution". In fact, this is a circular joke: it returns to its beginning.

This is frustrating. But then a victory of the symbol is always frustrating. You think about something, and find out it was all in vain. It is not at all the object of thought that is at the center of attention, but the thought.
Two contenders come to a Rabbi, to relate their complaints. The first one sits at the Rabbi's desk for a long time, and presents his arguments. The Rabbi pulls at his beard, and says – “You know what? – you are right”. The second contender comes and presents his arguments, and the Rabbi pulls at his beard, and says “You know what, you are right”. The Rabbi's wife, who listened to the discussions, is indignant: “They said completely opposite things, how can they both be right?” The Rabbi pulls at his beard, and says: “You know what, you are right”.

How can frustration be amusing? Just as an operation can be minor – if it is an operation on somebody else. If somebody else is frustrated, and his efforts turn out to null, we are amused because we saved energy. Vicariously, we shared his thinking effort, and suddenly this effort has turned to be redundant. Another explanation is that we enjoy playing, and play is an effort that does not lead to any obvious product. Letting our faculties operate without immediate consequences gives us pleasure. And it does so, because it is beneficial, after all. You practice, without commitment and without the danger of dire consequences if you fail.
Part 11: Delving Deeper: Jokes, Dreams and Insanity

*He who lives knows. Even if he doesn't know he knows*
(Klaris Spector, "Star Hour")

*Not always are Freud's chains of argument valid. But you can always find beautiful beads.*
(Unfortunately, I don’t remember who said this)
The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious

1905, Einstein's *Anno Mirabilis*, was also a good year for Freud. It marked the beginning of his public acceptance. A short book he published that year, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 80 pages long in its first edition, brought him the recognition he yearned so badly. The ideas we identify more than all others with psychoanalysis – childhood sexuality, the Oedipus complex, the effect of the taboos on sexuality – all appeared there in concentrated form. In the same year he also wrote another book, opposite in style and fate: *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Unlike *Three Essays*, and in sheer contrast to the nature of its topic, it was cumbersome and heavy. And unlike *Three Essays*, it was almost unheeded. It got some attention only many years later. Freud himself related to it as a "step-book", and in his later life even expressed regret for the diversion from the main course that the book caused him.

Reuben Fine, a famous chess grandmaster turned psychoanalyst, once defined psychoanalysis, the Freudian theory, as "plainly dynamic psychology". Namely a theory that acknowledges the existence of conflicting forces in the same mind. This was indeed the basic insight of Freud, from which arose all the rest. For Freud the forces in the mind were personified – it is as if a person is playing inside you. Freud first applied this to dreams. He claimed that the strange format of dreams is the result of a struggle between drives and wishes and between inhibitory forces that try to curb them. The dream disguises the forbidden wishes in symbolic
form, so as to hide them from the eyes of the inhibitory forces. Escaping the criticism, they can now appear in their undisguised form.

Freud's interest in jokes was aroused by a comment from his friend Wilhelm Fliess. Fliess, a Berlin nose-ear and throat doctor, had strange ideas of his own, about two cycles that govern the behavior of humans – a 28 days feminine cycle and a 23 days masculine cycle (I met Fliess' daughter in my grandmother's retirement home, and was very enthusiastic: a woman that as a child met Freud in person. "Yes, Freud", she told me. "I hardly remember him. But my father had interesting theories!"). The two friends were in dire need for each other – each had his own set of strange ideas that were not recognized by the scientific community, and each found in the other an ear and a shoulder.

One of the friends living in Berlin and the other in Vienna, the relationship was mainly maintained by correspondence. Freud wrote Fliess about his interest in dreams, and in one of his letters Fliess wrote that dreams reminded him of jokes, since both share the same strange logic. Freud adopted the idea, and combined it with a liking that he always had for Jewish wit. The main idea is not at all absurd: the logic of the joke is often that of the dream and that of madness. It is the logic of the unconscious, in which every link is allowed.
The Interpretation of Dreams, published in 1900, was closer to Freud's heart than any other work of his. Therefore he quickly embraced the challenge, and started writing a long and in some places convoluted book, The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious. The idea was that the purpose of jokes, like that of dreams, is to allow forbidden ideas to go through the sieve of the inhibitions, by disguising them. A convoluted idea indeed, that cannot pass even superficial scrutiny. But Freud was persistent, and he went through. As I told you, some twenty years later, looking back at his career, he viewed the book as a detour from his main research line, possibly feeling that it did not unveil any deep truth.

Summing up, Freud's theory of jokes was that the joke distorts ideas, so that we shall not notice their forbidden nature. This requires, first of all, an assumption that every joke contains some hidden message that is abhorrent to our morality. There is some supporting evidence for that – the multitude of sexual and cruel jokes. But obviously, this is true for only a small part of the jokes. Most jokes in this book, for example, are so called naïve jokes, not containing any forbidden content.

Freud had to face this difficulty. The Viennese satirist Karl Kraus once said that "psychoanalysis is the disease that it pretends to cure", and in this particular case he was painfully correct: Freud's solution to the existence of naïve jokes is a masterpiece of convoluted thinking. He claims that the forbidden message in such jokes is the distorted logic itself. The distortions, that in tendentious jokes (so he called the non-naïve jokes) serve to hide the message, are in naïve jokes the forbidden message itself.
In everyday life we demand from our brain obedience to the laws of reality; in the joke our brain receives temporary leave.

This is an obvious no-goer. But it is not to say that *The Joke* is worthless. Freud's *The Joke* reminds me of a joke:

> A mathematician meets an old friend, and learns that the friend became very rich. "How did you do it?" - he asks.

> "It all comes from believing in dreams. I dreamt one night of a train with seven cars, six horses in each. I immediately understood that my lucky number is 7 times 6, which is 43, so I put all my money on horse number 43, and won". "But 7 times 6 is 42!" cries the mathematician. "Really?" says the friend. "Well, you are the mathematician".

(If you are looking for detachment, it is that of causality - there is no connection between the dream and the success of the bet, but the gambler does not care.)

Like the ignorant gambler, Freud believed in dreams. And like him, he unintentionally found some treasures. He tried to prove the prevalence of the dream techniques in jokes. This was wrong, but on his way he had some deep insights. Let me tell you of a couple of these.
Reversal

One of the mechanisms of distortion used by the dream is that of reversal. Ideas are often represented by their opposites: undressing by dressing, chasing by flight. Freud claimed that the hardest part in interpreting a dream is realizing whether an idea appears directly or in reversal. In humor reversal appears mainly in irony: saying "how clever" instead of "how stupid", or "How nice of you" instead of "you are an asshole". Or saying "Brutus is an honorable man", meaning the opposite.

There is one realm in which an inhibition resulting in reversal is very clear. It is facial expression. In 1873, one year after the publication of *The Descent of Man*, on the evolutionary origins of mankind, Darwin published a beautiful book: *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*. He explained there the evolutionary origins of non-verbal expressions.

For example, the expression of anger, in which we bare our teeth and lower our brows, was born from preparation for attack: baring the teeth prepares them to bite, and the brows are lowered to protect the eyes in the impending fight. In all expressions Darwin found such functional origin. In all – except for one, that of helplessness, the one appearing in the joke about the person who hands his watermelon in order to perform it.

This is indeed the most puzzling expression of all. The shrug, the stretching of the arms to the sides, the turning upwards of the palms, the raised brows, the lowered upper lip – all these do not seem to have any function. Why are they there?

Here Darwin gave his most ingenious explanation. Indeed, all these components do not have any direct aim. They are the reverse of an
expression having such an aim – that of preparation for confrontation. The shrug is the opposite of stiffening the neck that is needed in a physical struggle; the upward facing palms are the opposite of clenching fists; the stretched hands are the opposite of protecting the body with arms close to it; and the lowered upper lip is the opposite of baring the teeth.

So, a motion is reversed here. Darwin found this reversal also in animals – it is always the expression of preparation for confrontation that is reversed. But then, this reversal itself must have a function. Why should an animal reverse an expression? The answer is – inhibition. When an animal realizes it is too weak for the looming fight, it had better restrain itself from attacking. And inhibition of an action is done, among other ways, by operating the antagonistic muscles to those of the original action, namely, by reversal.
We mentioned the mechanisms of the joke, of taking metaphors literally. It was Freud who first noted that very mode of thinking is typical in schizophrenia patients. He called it "concrete thinking", and claimed that it is typical of madness. It means playing with the external appearance of the concepts, rather than their meaning. The concept is handled as a concrete object, not as a carrier of meaning. Concrete thinking connects concepts by external appearance, their verbal form or sounds, or by loosely formed associations; precisely the detachment of meaning that we find in jokes. This is lawyer’s logic, sticking to the words of the law rather than to its spirit.

An example given by the Chilean psychologist Ignacio Matte Blanco is of a schizophrenia patient who was bitten by a dog, and went to a dentist. The logic, by the interpretation of Matte Blanco, was this: "I was bitten by a dog" turned into "I bit the dog. The dog is bad – I am bad – my teeth are bad".

Concrete thinking is nothing but victory of the symbol. Its abstract meaning detached, it remains a concrete object. Concrete thinking is thus also a characteristic of the joke:

"Two friends go on a hunting trip. One of them falls, hits his head against a root on the ground, and seems dead. His friend calls emergency: “I think that my friend is dead, what should I do?” “First of all make sure that he is really dead”, they tell him. “OK”, he says. Silence ensues. Then the sound of a shot is heard. The man returns to the phone “I made sure. Now what?”"
The shooter obeys the order (as he understood it) without relating to its meaning.

Madmen are captive of this mode of thinking. The joke makes use of it for its purposes. What is uncontrolled in the schizophrenia sufferer is wit at the hands of a humorist.

_The American writer Dorothy Parker stood together with a young beauty in front of a door of a house to which they both were invited for a party. “Age before beauty”, offered the young. “No, pearls before pigs”, said Parker._

Parker uses the accidental fact that "before" has a double meaning, that of before in time and that of before in space, to take a little revenge on the girl.
Not all techniques of the dream also appear in jokes. But some do. A prominent one is shifting, which means drawing attention to a side component, away from the real central idea.

You know, when your wife visited Tallahassee she slept with half the town? - Tallahassee, some town.

The shift can be between parts of sentences:

How are you? I have never been better. Sorry to hear.

There is a comparison here, of past state with the present. The person answering the question uses the past as a yardstick, meaning to say he is doing great; His interlocutor takes it as reflecting on the past.

I didn't know you were suffering from an ulcer. - What did you think? that I am enjoying it?

In a sail around Manhattan the guide saved us from utter boredom by a witticism:

The cables holding the George Washington Bridge are so thick, that if you take them and decompose them into their little strands, the bridge is going to fall right into the water.

Of course, this is also taking a metaphor literally.

Let me end with a "mathematical" riddle that impressed me with its sophistication that uses shifting. I didn't solve it, while my other family members solved it immediately. Here it is – fill in for the question mark:
1=5
2=28
3=234
4=1066
5=?

So as not to spoil the fun, I will divulge the solution at the end of the chapter.

Here is a famous comic verse that is based on shifting. Gelett Burgess (1866-1951), its writer, is remembered today mainly for it:

   I never saw a purple cow,
   I never hope to see one.
   But I can tell you anyhow,
   I'd rather see than be one.

Why is the poem funny? Mainly because of a shift of weight. In "I never saw a purple cow" the weight is on "purple", it being so surprising. Later, the stress is on "see" (as opposed to "be") – something that is supposed to be secondary. Well, if you wish – the eye of the beholder.

Burgess hated his identification with the poem. He wrote a sequel:

   Ah, yes, I wrote the purple cow
   I'd rather wish I didn't.
   But I can tell you anyhow,
   I'll kill you if you quote it!

Let me return now to the "mathematical" riddle. The answer is 1. Why? Because in the first line it says that 1=5. In the first line the weight is on the "5", so it does not occur to you to reverse it.
By the way, the reason that mathematicians cannot solve this riddle is that they cannot take the equality sign seriously – there is no sense in saying that 1=5. They assume that the person asking the question just uses this sign slackly, meaning really "goes to". In this sense "1 goes to 5" does not imply "5 goes to 1".
Partial Objects

One parameter of maturity is integration - relating to whole objects. The reverse is called in psychology "relating to partial objects". For example, relating to wealth, or to a part of the body of an object. Or, thinking about the moment instead of on long term processes. This fragmentation is a type of detachment, and thus is bound to appear in jokes. Indeed, it does:

How do you call that piece of flesh around the genitals of a woman? – A woman.

Or, the orthopedists version:

How do you call the piece of flesh around the elbow? – A patient.

Here is temporal fragmentation, relating to the moment:

The lecturer asks the audience – "who here has sex once a day? And once a week?" When he reaches once a year, an enthusiastic voice calls from the crowd – "I, I, I!". “If you have it only once a year, why are you so happy?” “Yes, but it is today, it is today!”

The "partial object" technique appears also in poetry – it is called there a synecdoche. Something is represented by a part of it, like a house by the roof, or the American government by the residence of the president – "The White House decided to intervene in Ethiopia".
Omission

There is yet another technique that Freud justly identified as common to jokes and the dream: omission. Some part of the puzzle is deliberately missing. The following witticism is ascribed to Tshernivhovsky, a famous Israeli poet.

_A man leaves a party to go outside, and returned with his pants wet. “Rain?” they ask him. “No, wind”, he answers._

The funny part is in what the poet did not say. And there is play with external similarity (the answer, like the question, has to do with weather), while the content is quite different.

_What is a Jewish boy that cannot bear to see blood? - A lawyer._

_How do you know that a new immigrant from Russia disembarking from the plane is a pianist? – He is not carrying a violin._

There is also loading with meaning – a strange premise suddenly transpires in both jokes. But then, omission always involves loading with meaning, which happens when you fill in the missing part. Often the omission is obtained by indirect hinting:

_The hostess gives directions to the guests: "When you arrive, press the bell with your elbow. Then press with your elbow the handle of the gate, to open it. Then press with your elbow the light button"._ The guests get
curious: "why with the elbow?" – "You do not mean to arrive empty handed, do you?"

Here is another indirect message, combined with exaggeration:

A Beetle stops next to a Rolls-Royce in a red light. The owner of the Beetle rolls down his window, and calls – "Hey, you. I have a TV in my car, do you?" "Of course", says the Rolls owner. This is a Rolls Royce. "I have a bar in my car", says the beetle owner. "Do you?" "Of course", says the Rolls owner. "This is a Rolls Royce". "I have a double bed in my car", says the beetle owner. "Do you?" The Rolls owner is irritated. He does not have a double bed. He goes to the Rolls agency, and fixes a double bed in his car. He is looking for the Beetle, and finds it in a parking lot, its windows covered with steam. He knocks on its door, and when the Beetle owner sticks out his head, he says: “I have a double bed”. “For this you took me out of the shower?” says the beetle owner.
Part 12: Why Humor?

*Humor is the foremost function of the brain.*

*(Edward de Bono)*
Humor and Creativity

If indeed humor detaches conceptual links, then we are in for a puzzle. Why would anybody want to undo a structure that he or she constructed so laboriously? In short – what is the purpose of humor? In what way does it benefit our thinking? And there is no doubt that it does. So much effort as is put into joking is not there for nothing.

A key can be found in a well-known feature of humor: its connection to creativity. Open any book on creativity and you will find linkage to humor. Creativity and humor go hand in hand – this is universally accepted. Creative people often have a highly developed sense of humor. Why is that?

The usual explanation is that both creativity and humor require an ability to form unexpected thought connections. This is true, but it is not the entire truth. Creativity also demands the ability to disconnect ties, to break apart from old thinking patterns. Asked for the secret of his discoveries, Einstein answered "I ignored an axiom". He probably meant the axiom that the result of a measurement is independent of the observer (in relativity, the measurement of the mass of a body can give two different results to two different observers, depending on their speed relatively to the object measured). The ability to swerve away from the old route is no less important than forming new ideas. And this is what humor does – it detaches old thought ties.

The Nobel Prize for chemistry in 2004 was shared by Abraham Hershko and Aaron Ciechanover from Israel, and Erwin Rose from the USA. They won it for the discovery of how the cell disassembles proteins. You may raise a brow – is this what matters? Isn't it the assembling of proteins that
is important? In fact, the three biochemists understood something deep – that dismantling proteins is just as important. It clears the way for the construction of new proteins, and prevents the old ones from causing damage.

Destroying the old is an important part of regeneration and of renewal. "The earth shall rise on new foundations", as *The International*, the anthem of the revolutionary movement of the beginning of the twentieth century, says. And this is one thing that humor knows how to do. It does it by detaching old links.
Change

*How many shrinks are needed to change a light bulb?* - *One is enough. But it has got to really want to change.*

As every light bulb knows, wanting to change is not enough. Change is hard. And more than anywhere else, this is true for change of personality. It is one of the hardest things to achieve in life. The billions of brain cells, with the billions of billions of ties between them, cannot change by mere external decision. A lot of the time, attempts at change are self-deceptive. The undercurrents remain the same.

And still, minor changes are possible, possibly because it is not necessary to change all links between the synapses. It is enough to change something in the headquarters. Possibly, these are the words that help us change. Words are more flexible than any other function of the brain. And humor is one of the best ways of doing the job. It is one of the most efficient agents of change. In order to change, you must relinquish your attachments to the external world. And humor does it, by breaking old ties, telling us "It ain't necessarily so". These may be emotional ties, and humor tells us then "it is not as significant as it looks". Or they may be ties of a word to reality, in which case humor draws our attention to the fact that such ties are arbitrary.

There are other ways of achieving this aim, for example, crises. In a crisis we retreat inside, which means precisely this – undoing ties to the external world. There is a lot of good in a crisis – if you face it and recover. It means delving inside, withdrawing from the external world for a while, for the purpose of reorganization. Humor is a local crisis. And it does not carry with it the pain of major crises. On the contrary, it is pleasurable.
Maturing

Remember the joke "you cannot stay young, but you can stay immature"? "Aging" and "maturing" are almost synonymous, but why? Why do we mature with age? Gaining experience is the self-evident answer. Changing position in life, from being taken care of to giving care, is another. But there is another factor, almost as important: with age our drives and passions weaken. And as Gautama Buddha preached, the less you want the wiser you are. Not wanting something desperately means being able to look at it with some detachment, with objectivity, and yes – with humor.

This is one explanation to the benefit of detaching synaptic links. It makes you wiser. Old people are wiser because they can look at the world in a detached way, with some irony and by taking things in the right proportions. Humor is one way of achieving this without the price of getting old.
Seeking the Truth Within

Change is hard, among other factors, because we know only a thin shell of our mind. Powerful motives are covered by verbal layers, constructs through which we think we understand the world. Words are flexible, so we claimed, but they are also on the surface. "Words are a tool for concealing the truth", said Pascal. Trying to know ourselves through words is like trying to understand deep social trends in a country by studying the speeches of its ambassador. And trying to change using words is similar to trying to change the social structure of a country by persuading its ambassador to change the wording of one of his speeches.

"Symbol over meaning" means also "inner over external". And what humor (and poetry, and also crises) know how to do is to make us relinquish external attachments, and delve inside.

*Three vampires brag to each other. The first, covered with blood, tells his friends – "do you see this village? I drank the blood of half its inhabitants". The second, even more covered with blood, explains – "do you see this town? I drank the blood of all its citizens". The third is even more covered with blood. His friends ask how he did it. “Do you see this pole there? I didn't see it”.*

If this were a poem, I would say that its message is "find your truth within". In the joke no inner truth is revealed. Hitting a pole does not uncover some deep insights. And still, the message is there. Detachment means going in. It means turning to your own resources; A very important message for all of us.
In fact, change and retreat inside are connected on a deep level. In order to change, you have to sever external links, and go inside in order to find new ones. Ernst Kris, a psychoanalyst who studied art from a psychological point of view, coined an apt name for this: "regression in the service of the ego". Regression is usually harmful in the short run. It means renouncing reality in favor of inner fantasies. But in the long run, there are advantages. If the person is able to come back to reality, he will do it with his inner forces re-organized.
Estrangement

The Russian literature theoretician Victor Shklovsky (1890-1984) could consider himself lucky. As a member of the Leningrad literary milieu, he saw people around him lose their life or the lives of their dearest to the Stalinist terror. His close friend, the poet Mandelstam, died in the Gulag, and Anna Achmatova, another close friend, lost two husbands and a son. The Shklovskys' life was not easy, but they somehow managed to stay dry between the drops.

Today Shklovsky is known mainly for one term that he coined: "estrangement". It is a literary device, which makes something familiar look strange. The aim is to return to things freshness of primality, to make us view old things with new eyes. "To make a person living near the sea hear again the murmur of the waves", as Shklovsky put it.

Shklovsky used yet another term for this – de-automatization. An automatic reaction is halted, causing its owner to look at himself with bewilderment – have I been really doing this all my life? Jonathan Swift estranges wars to us when he ascribes the motive to a war in Lilliput to the moot question of whether an egg should be opened from its sharp or from its blunt side. Dr. Seuss plagiarized this idea (to the benefit of all children) in The Butter Battle Book, where the cause for the war is the dispute over which side of the bread should the butter be spread – top or bottom, which makes us realize how stupid our own wars are, those which we so automatically think are logical.

Estrangement is often comic:
The violinist turned comedian Jack Benny had a radio program in the 1940's, in which he often mocked his own miserliness. In one of the programs a robber points a gun at him, and says "your money or your life". Silence ensues. The robber gets irate – "I told you, your money or your life". "I am thinking!" mutters Benny.

"Your life or your money" is not really a choice you are offered. It is a figure of speech, a way of expressing the threat. Benny de-automatizes it, taking it literally.

In Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* a duel is described, detached from its meaning of a fight for honor:

> You see, one day he and some sergeant rode outside town, and also took swords with them, and got to strike each other, and Alexei Ivanovich even stabbed the sergeant, although there were two witnesses present.

Estrangement is the opposite of the Bergsonian automatic behavior. But we already know – there is no early and late in the comic. De-automatizing detaches spontaneous behavior. In art, it is meant to illuminate. In the comic, we do not return to the object with new view – we really detach. The farm boy's detached attitude to sex in the joke "now in, now out" *(see page X)* is estrangement of sex. But it doesn't really shed new light on sex, it is plainly silly.

Yet some jokes do shed some light on human nature:

*One side of a sign: ROAD BLOCKED! NO THROUGH WAY! Second side: DIDN'T WE TELL YOU?*
Overcoming Defenses

There is yet another famous role of humor: pulling down defenses. It is well known that humor is disarming. There is nothing as effective as a humorous remark to thaw tensions. In their book *The New Leaders*, Goleman, Boyatzis and MacKay describe how a failed publicity campaign led to a tense meeting in a company, and how the tension melted when somebody said to the person responsible for the failure: "You must have forgotten to put on your glasses".

Once we understand humor in terms of detachment, it is easy to understand how this works. A humorous approach to life means ease at untangling strong emotional attachments. It is the understanding that things are not as critical as they look. Detachment is a means of renewal, and renewal can take people out of their digging in. This can apply to beliefs, to attitudes, to emotions. Interestingly, one emotion that is hard to disarm by the use of humor is envy: does envy go deeper than anger?

Disarming works for other people’s defenses as well as for one’s own. One of the strongest forces driving humans is protecting their self-image. In order to function well in life, a person must feel that he or she deserves love. This means maintaining an inner image of an intact self, which projects positively to the surroundings. Once this self-image is damaged, we do everything to restore it. This is the source of the enormous power exerted on people by wishes of revenge. They feel that the only way to restore a self-image that was damaged is by destroying the person threatening this image.
The need to maintain positive self-image is so strong, that it is almost impossible to fight the denials that it entails. There is almost only one way to achieve this: humor.

This reminds me of a joke about self-image, and the difference between the way a person perceives himself and reality.

A Bedouin and his son walk in the desert. After a while the son asks: "Father, why is the sky blue?" – "What can I tell you", says the father – "I don't know". Later the boy asks – "Father, why do camels have humps, and donkeys don't?" – "What can I tell you", says the father, - "I don't know". This goes on for a while. Eventually the boy asks – "Father, are you annoyed at me for asking so much?" – "Ask, my son, ask" – says the father. "Otherwise, how will you learn?"
Bibliography


Also in http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4352.


In the last three decades, humor research has seen a regrettable turn, from genuine observation to scientific pretension. This has taken the form of switching from the psychological vantage point, which reigned before, to a linguistic one. “Linguistics is the most theoretically advanced discipline among the humanities and social sciences, and it can probably beat quite a few natural sciences on this count” – so claims Victor Raskin, the expounder of the new approach. The humor research community, not a very large one (there are no humor departments in universities) and lacking the backbone provided by tradition and mass of researchers, bowed. Academics in the humanities often envy the rigor of natural sciences, and when they try to imitate them the result is pretentious formalism, replacing “soft” but meaningful discussion. Pretending to be somebody you are not is as detrimental in science as in life. Humanities have their own kind of depth and should boast it, just as a person should reconcile to his personality. The result in humor research was renouncement of looking at the deeper processes, in favor a formalism. Later we shall describe this.

Indeed, with all its drawbacks. The main one of those is that often one specific mechanism of humor is declared to be universal, without ample justification. Many theories of humor take one type of humor, and claim it to be exhaustive - all humor is like that. It is a mistake to judge such theories harshly. Though not telling all the truth, they often contain some of it. They point at mechanisms that are really there, waiting to be incorporated in a more general theory.
In the last three decades, humor research has seen a regrettable turn, from genuine observation to scientific pretension. This has taken the form of switching from the psychological vantage point, which reigned before, to a linguistic one. “Linguistics is the most theoretically advanced discipline among the humanities and social sciences, and it can probably beat quite a few natural sciences on this count” – so claims Victor Raskin, the expounder of the new approach. The humor research community, not a very large one (there are no humor departments in any university in the world) and lacking the backbone provided by tradition and mass of researchers, bowed. Academics in the humanities often envy the rigor of natural sciences, and adopt fancy sounding terminology, to pretend they play in the same playground. The result is formalism, that replaces “soft” but meaningful discussion. Pretending to be somebody you are not is as detrimental in science as in life. Humanities have their own kind of depth and should boast it, just as a person should reconcile to his true personality.

I will describe the linguistic approach later on.