

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

Boris Sidis, Ph.D., M.D.

© 1913, 1919, 1923

CHAPTER XIX

THE LUDICROUS AND THE LAW OF SUGGESTION

When a mental process, instead of attaining its aim, suggests the reverse inference of what has been intended, the laugh is raised by the failure and by the mental stupidity of the person. The following is an example:

A committee was accused of not attending to its work assiduously; only one half of the committee was doing any work, the others being idle. One of the members of the committee, an Irishman, undertook in a meeting the defence of the committee. "We are accused," he exclaimed, "that only one half of the committee is doing work, the other half being idle; as a matter of fact the reverse is the case."

We often find that the comic writer or speaker avails himself of suggestiveness and double play. There is first present the joke or the comic situation, and this is further emphasized by its lack of comprehension which reveals the stupidity of the person who manifests it by some foolish or absurd

remark. The manifestation of the double play heightens the sense of the ludicrous.

"To make a slow horse fast," advised a wag, "is not to give him anything to eat."

"Would not the poor beast die?" asked an English with much concern.

An American in playing golf with an Englishman jestingly that in the United States golf balls squeak when they are lost. The Englishman was amazed at such a remarkable invention. An hour later he came to the American and told him that the invention was really extraordinary, but he could not understand how the golf ball knew when it was lost.

Often the stupidity of the person ridiculed is manifested by having him repeat a joke. The repetition is so constructed that the point of the joke is lost or even completely perverted. This is a form of dramatic play. In the first place, a joke is introduced, thus arousing the sense of the ludicrous; and, in the second place, a character is introduced on the scene, which is raised to a climax of the ludicrous by dullness of understanding. The ludicrous is emphasized by a process of double ridicule. The factor of suggestiveness runs all through the play.

We may take the following anecdote directed against the Englishman:

An American and Englishman chanced to pass by a small country station and saw an announcement "Ten miles to town. They who cannot read should ask the gateman." The American laughed and the

Englishman followed suit. On his arrival home the Englishman told of the notice and exclaimed: "How silly! Suppose the gateman were not there."

Uncle Will reads the London Times in his office.
Enters young Henry.

"Why, uncle," exclaims Henry, "I see you are behind the Times!"

Uncle Will laughs at the joke. In the evening, at dinner, Uncle Will repeats the joke to his wife, "Mary, a fine joke Henry made this morning. I read the paper and Henry said, 'Why, uncle, I see you are behind the newspaper.'" Uncle Will wondered why Mary did not laugh.

An Englishman saw an inscription on a tombstone "Here lies an honest lawyer." No name was given, because the lawyer's name was Strange and every passerby, on seeing the inscription, would exclaim, "How Strange!" On coming home the Englishman related his experience of the nameless epitaph of the lawyer, Strange: "'Here lies an honest lawyer.' Everybody who will pass by will exclaim, 'How peculiar!'"

Jack laughed at Harry's coat because it was too short. On which Harry remarked that it would be long enough before he got another one. Later on Jack communicated the joke to his friend Tom. "Tom," he said, "I heard a capital joke made by Harry. I told Harry that his coat was too short, and he said that it would be a long time before he got another."

"Where is the joke," asked Tom.

"Ah," exclaimed Jack, "but it was an excellent

joke when Harry made it."

A man named Herring fell into a ditch. A wag passing by said: "There, Herring, you are in a fine pickle." A gentleman thick of wits heard it and told the story to friends.

"A man by name Herring fell into a ditch and a fellow passed by and said: 'There, Herring, you are in a fine condition.'

"Well," observed one of the company, "where is the joke?"

"It was a good one when I heard it."

We have pointed out before that a joke falls flat if addressed to people who have not the proper training, knowledge, and experience. The comedies of Aristophanes will hardly be appreciated by a Hindoo or by a Chinaman, nor would Boccaccio or Voltaire have been appreciated by a Greek or Roman audience. One must take into consideration the knowledge and experience of the people addressed. If the mass of associations, whether conscious or subconscious, is wanting, the whole play is lost. The joke does not call forth the appropriate associations and is either ignored or is even misunderstood. To appreciate a joke it must first of all be understood, and this presupposes the presence of conscious and subconscious associations which form the mass that apperceives the joke.

If we inspect the inner structure and function of the ludicrous, in whatever form it may be expressed, we find that these so-called apperceiving or synthetizing masses of association, whether conscious

or subconscious, form the mainsprings of the joke or of the ludicrous. The force of the joke or of the ludicrous lies in the upheaval of masses of conscious and subconscious associations. All these associations must converge toward one focus in showing the low standard, the silliness of what is claimed to be normal, or what is thought to be superior.

The main force of the joke or of the situation regarded as ludicrous is the allusion, the suggestiveness, the great mass of associations of inferiority and superiority which becomes stirred up in the depths of the mind, conscious and subconscious. The stronger the allusion or the suggestiveness the greater the mass of conscious and subconscious associations. The more such associations are awakened to activity, the keener is the appreciation of the joke or of the ludicrous side of the object, of the person, or of the given situation. The allusion, the suggestiveness of the inferiority of the object laughed at forms the mainspring of the witty and the comic. In fact, we may say that this holds true, not only of comic, but of all wit.

Aristotle pointed out the important fact that mental activity of the free and artistic type is one of the greatest sources of enjoyment in human life. Now, in a joke, as in all good wit, the hint is given and the rest is left to the listener or the reader. If the whole mass of associations heave up at the hint given and the target aimed at is hit by the reader or listener, the latter feels the joy of free activity accompanied with the feeling of superiority, and the consciousness of inferiority of the ridiculed object. The listener has the

consciousness of wisdom, and the object is an example of folly and stupidity. *This is the source of the comic.*

Putting it from a purely logical standpoint, all forms of wit, among which the comic takes its place, are what Aristotle terms *enthymems*—a syllogism in which some of the premises are omitted. *The reasoning is left to the reader.* It is the ability to realize the reasoning, to supply the missing links that forms the essence of the comic, and gives a special pleasure to the readers or to the audience. The whole force of the wit, the comic, and of jokes consists in the fact that the listener is left to supplement the rest from his own mind. The supplementary systems of associations must be present in the mind, consciously or subconsciously.

The person who makes the joke must be able to reach by an appropriate phrase and allusion the association of systems. The delight of the listener consists in the fact that these associations become by an adroit and happy hit manifested in a free and easy way. In the case of the comic and of the joke the inferiority of the object, person, institution, or of the thought must be present, but in a veiled form. *The force is in the allusion.* The audience takes special delight in supplying the last links, in spontaneously forming the finale of the act or of the thought. The listener in this respect feels himself intellectually the actor and takes active part in the artistic piece of work presented to him. This delight in suggestiveness of the inferior is the soul of the comic.

Humor, irony, sarcasm, satire, various forms of jokes dead with the ludicrous and are species of wit, wit being the genus. We may in passing point out that some authors, such as Freud, for instance, have confused wit with the ludicrous. A good joke must be witty, but the witty need not concern itself with the ludicrous. Man is a mortal being, but not every mortal being is a man. Æsop's fables, the parables of the Gospels, the proverbs of the Old Testament are witty, but they do not necessarily deal with the ludicrous. In all the different forms of wit of which the ludicrous is one of the varieties allusion must be present. The factor of suggestiveness specially plays an all-important role in that species of wit which excites the ridiculing, the derisive laughter of man—the ludicrous.

In my "Psychology of Suggestion" I have pointed out that in the normal state indirect suggestion is specially efficacious. I formulated the law of normal suggestibility: "*Normal suggestibility varies as indirect suggestion and inversely as direct suggestion.*" This holds true in the case of all wit, of all forms of the ludicrous and the comical. The more veiled the suggestion, the greater the indirect suggestion, the higher is the effect. Along with the conscious systems of associations subconscious systems of associations must become subexcited, and the total effect is proportional to the amount of psycho-physiological activity brought into play by the artistic work of the person who arouses in us the sense of the ludicrous.

The joke and the comic, like all wit, are addressed both to the conscious and subconscious sides of mental life. The conscious side finds, as

Aristotle has pointed out, immense satisfaction in the independent and free mental activity given by the veiled and subtle allusions; while the subconscious side is aroused to activity according to the law of normal suggestibility. The effect is especially enhanced when the two factors belonging to the conscious and the subconscious sides of human nature become inextricably intertwined. *Allusion and indirect suggestion are the two main factors that make wit pregnant with meaning and make the comic so irresistibly ludicrous when the hidden reference is a relation of inferiority and superiority.*

We can realize now why so many investigators and thinkers have misunderstood the nature of wit, the comic and the joke. Freud regards brevity, condensation, economy of thought as the essentials of wit and the ludicrous. This is as far from the mark as possible. It is like the Aristotelian actor who explains the lightness and quickness of the flying statues of Dædalus by the ingenious hypothesis of their bodies being filled with quicksilver.

If condensation and economy of phraseology or of thought constitute the essence of wit and the ludicrous, then an algebraical formula or geometrical theorem should be good examples of wit and the comic. "The law of gravitation," says Karl Pearson, "is a brief description of how every particle of matter in the universe is altering its motion with reference to every particle. It simply resumes, in a few brief words, the relationships observed between a vast range of phenomena. It economizes by stating in conceptional shorthand the routine of our perceptions which form

for us the universe of gravitating matter." In fact, according to Pearson, scientific law "is a brief description in mental shorthand of as wide a range as possible of the sequences of our sense impressions." It is an economy of thought. Surely it would be absurd to class Newton's laws or the binominal theorem as wit, or regard them as a joke.

The principle of economy in science is also laid stress on by Mach. The principle of economy holds true in science as well as in business and in industry. In fact, economy holds true in all utilitarian activities of man. In the aesthetic activities, and especially in the play activities, the principles of economy break down completely. *The principle of reserve energy takes the place of economy. In all play the manifestation of surplus energy is the sole aim.* The feeling of free unimpeded activity, the consciousness of the presence of reserve, surplus energy is the predominant motive in play, in wit, and the comic.

Human stupidity, or rather a suggestion at it, a mere hint at human folly, which brings into play the inner mental resources of the audience, is sufficient to set us in a roar of laughter. We may lay it down as a fundamental law that *allusion to human stupidity is the root of all comic.* The effect of the ludicrous is greatly enhanced when along with stupidity there is also present some form of physical and moral defectiveness. If, however, one digs deep enough into the comic, the jocose, and the humorous he will invariably find human stupidity. Any example will answer the purpose. We may take the first examples

that come to hand:

"If you plaze," said an Irish recruit, to the sergeant, "I've got a splinter in the hand."

Sergeant: "Wot yer been doing? Scratchin' yer 'ead?"

A certain ingenious gentleman proposed, as the best most effectual way of sweeping chimneys, to place a large goose at the top and then by a string tied round her feet to pull the animal gently down to the hearth. The goose would struggle against it with all her might; and during this resistance would move her wings with such force and rapidity as could not fail to sweep the chimney completely.

"Good heavens!" cried a lady present, "how cruel would that be to the poor goose!"

"Why, madam," replied the gentleman, "if you think my method brutal to the goose, a couple of ducks will do."

A silly old fellow meeting his godson asked where he was going.

"To school," replied the boy.

"That is well," said the old fellow. "There is a penny for you. Be a good boy. Mind your book, and I hope I shall live to hear you preach my funeral sermon."

This may be matched by the story of the Irish soldier who, when taken to task for cowardliness in running away from battle, replied: "I'd rather be a coward for half an hour than a corpse the rest of my born life."

"What is the difference?" asked the captain of artillery of the Archbishop Whatley, "between an archbishop and a donkey?"

Whatley gave it up and received the following reply: "The one carries his cross in front and the other in back."

"Very good, indeed," said Whatley laughing, "and now can you tell me the difference between a donkey and a captain of the artillery?"

"No, indeed I cannot," replied the officer. "Nor I either," rejoined Whatley.

Bassompierre, the French ambassador to Spain, was one day telling Henry IV how he entered Madrid. "I was mounted on the very smallest mule in the world," said the ambassador.

"Ah, what an amusing sight to see the biggest ass mounted on the smallest mule!"

"I was your Majesty's representative," was the quiet rejoinder.

An Irish servant was instructed what to tell a gentleman who was expected to come a few days later. The servant soon returned and asked what she should tell the gentleman, if he should not come.

An officer gave his servant two dollar bills and told him to buy for a dollar tobacco, and provisions for the other dollar. The servant returned perplexed. He did not know for which dollar to buy tobacco and for which to buy provisions.

A fool said that his simplicity was not his fault; he was bright at birth, but his nurse exchanged him

for another child who was a fool.

Recruit to officer: If I told you you were an ass, what would you do, sir?

Officer: I should put you under arrest.

Recruit: And if I only thought it?

Officer: Then I could do nothing; thoughts are invisible.

Recruit: Well, I am thinking it.

We may add that we derive a good deal of pleasure from the readiness and quickness with which a person repels all insinuations in regard to himself or in regard to anything which is near and dear to him. *Readiness of reply reveals a source of free and unimpeded energy which gives us pleasure to witness on account of inner imitation with the activities of other men. When a man without a moment's notice is taken at a disadvantage and is accused of some defect we rejoice and laugh when he is able in the form of a joke or what we term repartee to turn the point of ridicule against the man who assails him.* He shows that the other man does not understand, that the defect is only apparent and should be really counted to his credit, or that the defect really belongs to the assailant. A few examples may answer our purpose :

An Englishman and an Irishman were riding in a carriage and chanced to pass by a gallows. "Where would you be," said the Englishman, "if everybody had his due?"

"Alone in the carriage," was the response.

A judge threatened to fine a lawyer for contempt

of court.
"I have expressed no contempt for court," said the lawyer, "on the contrary, I have carefully concealed my feelings."

A nobleman seeing the great philosopher, Descartes, enjoying a good meal, said to him sarcastically: "What! do philosophers enjoy such sweets?" "Why," replied Descartes, "do you fancy that nature has produced all its good things only for fools?"

In the first joke the suggestion of the criminality of the Irishman is answered by the suggestion that the real criminal is the Englishman. In the second example the lawyer, while denying in so many words the contempt of court for which he is threatened with a fine, really affirms by indirect suggestion his actual contempt of the judge. In the third example, Descartes points out the folly of the nobleman. This action and reaction, this play of opposites, of contrasts, affirming by denying and denying by affirming, constitute an important element of all wit, joke, and the comic. Really what we have here is the playful manifestation of the fundamental factor of what we have termed suggestiveness. Like a lambent flame the joke plays around the subject and suggests, consciously and subconsciously, possible, vague, distant associations of moral and mental inferiority.

The late Bishop Williams of Connecticut was sitting in a box in an opera house where collegiate commencement exercises were being held. The toilettes of the ladies were extremely *décolleté*. After

looking round the house with an opera glass one of the ladies exclaimed: "Honestly, Bishop Williams, had you ever seen anything like it in your life?"

"Never," gravely replied the Bishop. "Never, madam, since I was weaned."

Here the insinuation was naïvely made that the Bishop had seen such immoral sights before. The Bishop in self-defence had to say "no." The sting, however, of the ridicule is added and is directed against the audience of women. Instead of simply replying, "No, I have never seen anything so bad and immoral," he puts the negative reply in an affirmative form, denying and affirming such a spectacle. "I have not seen it since I was weaned." Such a state was only seen by him when nursing at his mother's breast. This further gives rise to a vast number of associations, all tending to bring out the inappropriateness, the shamelessness of the women who expose themselves without having the pure motives of motherhood. In other words, it is a spectacle not fit for adults, but only for babies and sucklings. At the same time there are *dissociation* of the exhibition from all dignified human life and *association* with the purposes of nursing. These women are stupid and silly and behave like wet-nurses. The ridicule is directed against the woman whose person, dissociated from the beautiful, becomes associated with wet-nurses and sucklings. The sting of the ridicule is against the attire of the women, which is fit for nursing purposes; such *décolleté* is fit only for the gaze of innocent infants. In other words, the attire is ugly and stupid, and shows

the mental inferiority of the women who dress in such an inappropriate and silly fashion.

"I am willing," exclaimed the candidate, "to trust the people."

"Great Scott!" yelled a man in the audience. "I wish you'd open a grocer's shop."

Here we have the pun on the word "trust" with the strong suggestion that the candidate had better turn storekeeper or grocer, and with the indirect suggestion of the candidate being what the French term *épiciier* (grocer) or philistine. In other words, the candidate is stupid. Misapprehension, stupidity, and ignorance, various forms of mental inferiority, form the butt of ridicule. The effect is specially ludicrous when both the one who criticizes and the one who is criticized are involved in the dramatic action, one playing the part to bring out the fault of the other.

A good old-fashioned darkey was bitterly complaining about the delinquencies of her niece who had greatly offended her sense of propriety. When asked, "Dinah, can Mabel read and write?" she looked scornfully at her mistress and answered: "Yes'm, she got a fine edgecaeshun; that's the reason she's sich a foal and ain't got no sense!"

There is the laughter at the ignorance and stupidity of what the darkey misapprehends by education. There is laughter at the one who gets such an education. At the same time, in the background of our consciousness or subconsciousness there is lurking the suspicion that a good deal that goes under

the name of education is nothing but silly stupefaction of natural good sense. Education in the ordinary sense is associated with increase of knowledge and of wisdom, but there is a good deal of education which deprives one of *original* thinking and makes of one an *educated fool*.

At a trial for murder the counsel for the accused asked the examining physician if prussic acid was not sometimes spontaneously evolved from the stomach. "I do not know," answered the witness, "but if it be so, it must be very dangerous to have a stomach."

The lawyer, as is usual with his tribe, wishes to confuse the physician by some clever puzzling question and so to discredit the physician before the jury both as to intelligence and knowledge. The reply of the physician, when fully developed, is to the effect that the counsel's question displays ignorance and shows that he is stupid. Prussic acid is one of the most powerful poisons for the organism. If the stomach should give rise to prussic acid, the stomach, one of the most important animal organs requisite for the normal nutrition and life of the organism, would not only be useless, but would be a positive danger to the individual. The counsel thinks he is a clever man, but he is really ignorant and stupid.