

Riddles and Jokes: Growing Children's Use of Humor in Response to Societal Demands for Rational Thinking

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Abstract: Sigmund Freud contends that the price we pay for living in civilized societies is that we live beyond our psychological resources. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud, 1960; originally published in 1905) suggests that humor is a means to save in the expenditure of psychological resources. I focus specifically on his consideration of civilized society's demand that its members learn to think logically and rationally, renouncing illogical ways of thinking common to very young children, and on the ways in which humor, especially riddles and jokes, enables children, adolescents and adults to resist this demand. I draw on Martha Wolfenstein's (1954) study of ninety school children attending a private school, specifically on her exploration of the role riddles play in school children's struggles with this societal demand. I conclude with three proposals to address the problems this demand creates: (1) resolve the conflict between humor and rational thinking; (2) affirm growing children's appreciation for riddles by helping them to expand their repertoire of riddles; and (3) recognize the intrinsic value of illusion, especially when it takes the form of humor.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, Humor, Children, Rational Thinking, Riddles, Illusion

Introduction

Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud, 1960) was originally published in 1905, five years after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1965). *The Interpretation of Dreams* became tremendously popular and established Freud as the single most

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influential psychologist of the twentieth century. In stark contrast, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is probably his least known—and read—book. I believe that this is unfortunate, because many of the points that Freud makes in his mature work about civilization and its discontents (Freud, 1961; see also Capps & Carlin, 2013) are anticipated in his early book on humor.

One of his central points about civilization is that it requires us to live beyond our psychic means. As he notes in his essay on war and death, written during World War I, civilized society “exacts good conduct” but “does not trouble itself about the impulses underlying it” (p.217). As a result, it has “won over to obedience a great many people who are not thereby following the dictates of their own natures” (p.217). Encouraged by this success, society has tended to strain “the moral standard to the highest possible point, and thus it has forced its members into a yet greater estrangement from their instinctual dispositions,” and “anyone thus compelled to act continually in the sense of precepts which are not the expression of instinctual inclinations, is living, psychologically speaking, beyond his means” (p.217). Freud goes on to say that as a consequence of this tendency to live beyond our psychological means we become, both individually and collectively, hypocritical, displaying a moral rectitude incongruent with our unacknowledged desires and passions.

The purpose of this article is to explore the role that humor plays in saving in the expenditure of our psychological means, means which we do not in fact possess because, as Freud sees it, we are borrowing against the future in this regard, living, as it were, on credit. Freud makes explicit the connection between humor and this tendency to live beyond our psychic means in the concluding paragraph of the last chapter of his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud, 1960; see Capps, 2005, pp.8-9). Here he notes that he has come to the

end of his task, which has been to show that all forms of humor are designed to give us pleasure (and thus support the pleasure principle over-against the reality principle). More specifically, however, he has shown that the pleasure in jokes seems “to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an expenditure upon ideation . . . and the pleasure in humor from an economy in expenditure upon feeling” (p.293). In other words, humor (broadly understood) saves in the expenditure of *costly inhibitions, difficult thinking, and painful emotions*.²

Thus, where Freud emphasized in his article on war and death that civilized society imposes upon us a moral standard that forces us to live beyond our psychological means, humor counteracts this imposition of excessively high standards and helps us to save in the expenditure of psychological resources that we do not, in fact, yet possess. Moreover, it does this in a manner that avoids a direct assault on the moral standards that civilized society imposes on its members. It accepts the fact that these standards are integral to civilization as we know it, but it affords a certain leverage from them by means of levity, i.e., by not taking them altogether seriously.

Humor and the demand to think rationally

In his essay on war and death, Freud (1958) emphasizes the inhibitions society imposes on its members, especially of the sexual instincts, and the role it plays in the development of neurotic

² I discuss these three savings in more detail in my chapter titled “Good Humor Role Models: Lawyers, Parrots, and Blondes” in *Laughter Ever After. . . Ministry of Good Humor* (Capps, 2008). The chapter focuses on jokes featuring the heartless lawyer who saves in the expenditure of *painful emotions*, the foul-mouthed parrot who saves in the expenditure of *costly inhibitions*, and the dumb blonde, who saves in the expenditure of difficult thinking. As the latter is especially relevant to the focus of this article on the demand to think logically and rationally, it is noteworthy that some of the jokes about the dumb blonde emphasize that her tendency to think illogically and non-rationally has its own logic and leads to positive outcomes (pp.76-81). I might also note that the heartless lawyer’s counterpart in Freud’s book on humor (Freud, 1960) is the baron in the genre of baron and beggar jokes. These jokes reflect the emergence of a middle class in European Jewish society in the mid-nineteenth century and the conflicts they experienced with regard to traditional Jewish precepts relating to charity. They questioned whether the same obligation of the wealthy class to give to the poor was also applicable to them. The Baron and beggar jokes reflected their ambivalence. Thus, Freud tells the joke about a baron who, upon listening to a beggar’s tale of woe, rang for his servants. When they arrived, he said, “Throw him out! He’s breaking my heart!” (p.135). In *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud*, Elliott Oring (1984) argues that Freud’s book on jokes reflects his struggle with his Jewish identity.

disorders (p.217). In the following consideration of children's humor, I will be focusing instead on the issue of *difficult thinking*, and, more specifically, on the fact that civilized society requires its members to adopt and endorse logical and rational ways of thinking. The standards in this case are less moral and more conceptual. But we should not treat these standards as if they were entirely distinct from one another, for the expectation of school children to *think* logically and rationally produces has its own moral dimensions, and, in consequence, *costly inhibitions* are involved in the demand that one forego ways of thinking that are fanciful and deliberately nonsensical. Humor is a way to resist these inhibitions by finding ways to circumvent the restrictions rational thinking imposes on our desire to retain and/or recover our capacity as small children to imagine a world not confined to or controlled by the reality principle.

If *difficult thinking* requires *costly inhibitions*, it is also responsible for *painful emotions*, especially feelings of anxiety if one has difficulty thinking in the logical and rational manner demanded by teachers, parents, and older siblings. This anxiety can manifest itself in feelings of inferiority in relation to other children who are more successful in meeting this demand, and also in feelings of envy of younger children who are blissfully unaware of the demands to which older children are subject.

Humor and unacceptable impulses

In his book on jokes, Freud (1960) points out that humor in general and jokes in particular provide a means to work against the repression of our unacceptable impulses that civilized society demands of us. For example, in his discussion of tendentious jokes,³ Freud notes that a

³ The word *tendentious* means "characterized by a deliberate tendency or aim, especially advancing a definite point of view" (Agnes, 2001, p.1474). The translator of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* explains in a

primary purposes of jokes is to afford pleasure, especially the pleasure that comes from expressing an impulse or idea for which one would be castigated if one had expressed it openly and without the disguise of a joke or the freedom to claim that one was merely joking (p.118). The tendentious jokes Freud discusses here include *aggressive, cynical, obscene, and skeptical* jokes.

In most discussions of the moral implications of humor, *aggressive* and *obscene* jokes tend to get the most attention. However, in this article I will be focusing on the use of jokes to express *skepticism* and *cynicism*. These, too, provide savings in the expenditure of costly inhibitions, but they are especially related to the demands that school children experience in the realm of difficult thinking. I find Freud extremely helpful in this regard. Although he shows that children, even very young children, use humor to work against the repression of all unacceptable impulses, much of his discussion focuses on the fact that, for children, humor is directed toward the demand that they begin the process of thinking clearly and logically about the world. In other words, children allow the reality-principle to inform their view of the world and of themselves as participants in the world.

Freud suggests that the first challenge children confront in this regard is to learn the language of the society in which one lives, to give up “baby talk” and begin to emulate the vocalizations of adults. Although some of this can be pleasurable, much of it is the source of anxiety, especially if the adults or older siblings are critical or derisive of the young child’s fumbling efforts to use the language of the culture. Freud notes that during this early period of development, children seem especially to enjoy word play. In effect, humorous word play enables them to turn a task that is the cause of anxiety into something pleasurable. Through

footnote that the German word *Tendenz* is translated throughout the book as *purpose* but the German adjective derived from it (i.e. *tendenziös*) is translated *tendentious* (p.107).

word-play, the child has fun with language and, indeed, makes fun of the seriousness of the very task of learning the language of his or her society. Freud (1960) suggests that such word play is “the first stage of jokes” (p.157).

A form of word-play found among children reappears in the form of poetry. Freud points out that during the period when the child learns the language of the culture, “he puts words together without regard to the condition that they should make sense, in order to obtain from them the pleasurable effect of rhythm or rhyme” (p.153). However, little by little, the growing child “is forbidden this enjoyment, till all that remains permitted to him are significant combinations of words, but when he is older attempts still emerge of disregarding the restrictions that have been learnt on the use of words” (p.153). Now, “Words are disfigured by particular little additions being made to them, their forms are altered by certain manipulations, or a private language may even be constructed for use among playmates” (p.154). He adds that these attempts are found among certain categories of mental patients.

Humor and the educational process

Freud goes on to note that whatever the motives behind the child’s original engagement in word games, he believes that in the child’s later development “he gives himself up to them with the consciousness that they are nonsensical, and that he finds enjoyment in the attraction of what is forbidden by reason.” Thus, the child “now uses games in order to withdraw from the pressure of critical reason” (p.154). In effect, the younger child’s anxiety relating to the task of learning the language of the culture has shifted to a new anxiety relating to the demand that he or she engage in critical reasoning. Freud suggests that the demand to think logically and critically and the restrictions this demand place on the child’s thought processes are central to the whole educational process. So central, in fact, that it is not surprising that the child would rebel against

it. In his view, this “rebellion against the compulsion of logic and reality is deep-going and long-lasting,” and even the “phenomenon of imaginative activity must be included in this [rebellious] category” (p.154). He concludes:

The power of criticism has increased so greatly in the later part of childhood and in the period of learning which extends over puberty that the pleasure in “liberated nonsense” only seldom dares to show itself directly. One does not venture to say anything absurd. But the characteristic tendency of boys to do absurd or silly things seems to me to be directly derived from the pleasure in nonsense. In pathological cases we often see this tendency so far intensified that once more it dominates the schoolboy’s talk and answers. I have been able to convince myself in the case of a few boys of secondary school age who had developed neuroses that the unconscious working of their pleasure in the nonsense they produced played no less a part in their inefficiency than did their real ignorance. (p.154)

This pleasure in nonsense continues beyond the secondary school as the University student engages is similar “demonstrations against the compulsion of logic and reality, the dominance of which, however, he feels growing ever more intolerant and unrestricted” (p.154). Freud suggests that student “rags” are a part of this reaction and so are the ludicrous speeches delivered at beer parties. Through these well-established media, “the student tries to rescue his pleasure in freedom of thinking, of which he is being more and more deprived by the schooling of academic instruction” (p.155). Much later, “when as a grown man he meets others in scientific congresses and once more feels himself a learner,” he engages in a distortion of the new

discoveries presented by others into nonsense, thereby offering himself “a compensation for the fresh addition to his intellectual inhibition” (p.155).

In other words, a process that begins with word-play in the case of the very young child develops into a penchant for nonsense in the older child, and this penchant takes on new forms among adolescents, University students, and mature adults.

Difficult thinking and the joking riddle

In the early 1950s Martha Wolfenstein (1954) attended classes at a private school in New York City and interviewed ninety children between the ages of four and twelve, ten each from each age group, five boys and five girls (p.216).⁴ Subsequently, she expanded her study to include fifteen adolescents between thirteen and seventeen who attended another private school in New York City. The inspiration for this study was Freud’s book on jokes, and the primary focus of the study was Freud’s emphasis on the role that humor plays in enabling the child (in this case) to deal with painful feelings by “making light of disappointment and chagrin” and to “gain under the guise of foolishness some gratification for forbidden wishes” (p. 11). In other words, she focused primarily on the role of humor in the saving of the expenditure of *painful emotions* and *costly inhibitions*. Her opening chapter titled “Joking and Anxiety” focuses on the children’s use of humor to deal with *painful emotions*, and chapter two titled “Sex, Names, and Double

⁴ I am aware of the fact that Wolfenstein’s study is dated but I have included a discussion of her work in this article because I believe that it sheds light on the issue that concerns us in this article, i.e., the societal demand that we learn to think logically and rationally and relinquish, to the extent possible, the pre-logical and pre-rational ways of thinking that were accepted as normal during our earlier years of development. As we will see, Wolfenstein focuses on growing children’s interest in riddles, and on a type of riddle that was very popular at the time that she conducted her study. This type of riddle is not found in contemporary joke books. I assume, however, that this is due primarily to the fact that civilized societies have experienced considerable consciousness-raising as far as potentially offensive types of humor are concerned. For example, ethnic and racial humor that was considered acceptable in earlier joke collections (e.g., Lupton, 1938; Braude, 1964) are less common in more recent collections (e.g., Greene 1999; there are, however, exceptions, e.g. Rovin, 1989; Tibballs, 2000). It is worth noting, however, that a large percentage of ethnic humor is the product of humorists who are members of these ethnic groups.

Meanings” is primarily concerned with *costly inhibitions*, mostly relating to sexual taboos, sexual identity, but also involving issues of aggression.

However, in a later chapter she addresses the issue of *difficult thinking*. Chapter 3, titled “Riddles and the Legend of the Moron,” focuses on the joking riddle, which, she notes, “is the favorite form of joke for children between the ages of six and eleven” (p.93).⁵ The riddle relates directly to the societal demand that we learn to think logically and rationally, for, as Wolfenstein points out, “The child who asks the riddle shows how smart he is, for when the other cannot guess, he gives the answer himself” (p.93). Thus, the joking situation itself reflects this societal demand. But, in addition, the very content of the riddle reflects it. For, as Wolfenstein goes on to note:

A great number of these riddles have to do with the behavior of a moron, someone who does stupid things that the child would not do. In contrasting himself with the moron, the child again feels how smart he is. Children at this age are peculiarly preoccupied with the issue of who is smart and who is dumb. They are especially sensitive to being put in the wrong or not knowing what someone else knows. When a child has been outwitted or outdone by another, one hears the heartfelt cry: “You think you’re smart!” Any advantage is apt to be felt as smartness, any disadvantage as dumbness. This preoccupation is reflected in the favored jokes of children of this age. The riddle form stresses the issue of who knows and who

⁵ The narrative joke with the clever punch line seems to replace the riddle as the favorite joking form of early adolescents. As Wolfenstein points out, at the age of eleven or twelve riddles are being discarded in favor of anecdotes (p.94). This preference tends to continue in later adolescence and on into adulthood. However, for some adults the pun (another expression of wordplay) becomes their favorite form of joking humor.

doesn't. *The figure of the moron represents all that the child repudiates in his aspiration to smartness.* (pp.93-94).⁶

Wolfenstein points out that the joking riddle deals with knowledge in a special way, that is, by making a parody of questions and answers: "The question posed is trivial or absurd; the solution of nonsensical" (p.94). She suggests that the prehistory of riddles is the child's earlier sexual curiosity, "which has remained incompletely satisfied" for even the most forthcoming parent has inevitably frustrated and disappointed the child, "not letting him see for instance all that he would like to see, much less gratifying his sexual longings which go beyond seeing" (p. 95). Moreover, "they have seemed to give foolish or evasive answers to his questions." She thinks that the child's earlier disappointment is to be found in joking riddles, for in joking riddles "children make fun of their earlier investigations, substituting silly questions and answers for the serious ones of the past." Thus, "In the riddle something is concealed, there is something hard to guess, but when the answer is produced it turns out to be absurd." (p.95).

I would not want to disagree with Wolfenstein's analysis of the etiology of the joking riddle. But it is important to recognize that boys and girls of this age are under considerable pressure to think logically and rationally, a fact that plays a major role in their newly discovered interest in the riddle. After all, children spend the better part of their day in the classroom, a learning environment, under considerable pressure to acquire knowledge. The fact that they are

⁶ It is important to note that for children of this age the word "moron" did not have any associations to mental retardation. The dictionary provides two definitions of the word *moron*: (1) a retarded person mentally equal to a child between eight and twelve years old; an obsolescent term; and (2) a very foolish or stupid person (Agnes, 2001, p.938). When I was a boy, there was a girl who lived in our neighborhood who was mentally retarded. I would never have associated her with the moron riddles that I shared with male friends in grade school. After all, although we would not have been fully conscious of this fact, moron riddles were self-referential. Wolfenstein quotes this anonymous bit of American folklore: "See the happy moron, / He doesn't give a damn. / I wish I were a moron— / My God! Perhaps I am." The moron riddles that Wolfenstein cites tend to emphasize the moron's misunderstanding of words or phrases, and thus a failure to recognize that many words have double or multiple-meanings. For example, "Why did the moron take a ladder to the party? Because he heard that the drinks were on the house."

assigned to classes, many of whose composition remains the same throughout the school year, means that there are inevitable comparisons being made between themselves and other students in terms of their relative intelligence, capacity to learn and retain what they have learned, and so forth. In this context, the riddle saves in the expenditure of difficult thinking and the painful emotions that accompany its demands. In other words, it is subversive and a form of rebellion, but one that does not lead to the sorts of punitive actions that disruptive behavior in the classroom invite.

Wolfenstein notes that the boys and girls she interviewed tended to have ambivalent feelings about the joking riddles. The reason for this is that on the one hand these riddles represent knowledge, while on the other hand, “they are a mocking substitute for more serious inquiries” (p.102). She cites the example of Stephen, an eleven-year-old boy, who, “despite his pride in knowing and inventing so many riddles,” calls them “stupid.” He says that a riddle “is a stupid joke. Most of them are stupid. People who make them up are stupid. When you make them up you feel you’re being stupid” (p.102). A girl whom Wolfenstein interviewed also noted that when she says these riddles over and over again “they get boring.” The first time she hears a riddle it isn’t funny “because people are telling them to me” (p.104), which is to say that when someone else tells a riddle with which one is unfamiliar, one is placed in the position of being the stupid one. I suspect that children eventually abandon the riddle in favor of the narrative joke because, over time, riddles fail to do their work, which is to save in the expenditure of one’s psychological resources, resources that one may or may not already possess.⁷

⁷ In *Jokes and Their Relation to Society* Christie Davies (1998) points out that ethnic humor tends to work with the same smart vs. stupid distinction, with the ethnic group that is the butt of the joke being portrayed as stupid. He also notes that stupidity jokes are a very ancient tradition. For example, “the jokes told today in Egypt about the simplicity of the Nubians from the far south are based on a comic script about Nubians that is thousands of years old” (p. 11). A similar joking tradition can be traced to ancient Greece, with Boetians being the butt of ethnic jokes that originated among the Athenians (p.11; see also Capps, 2005, pp.118-126).

Finally, Wolfenstein notes that when she asked the children “How did the moron get that way?” they would often take this as an implied accusation. One seven-year-old girl, for example, replied defensively: “Don’t ask me, ask them.” A seven-year-old boy laughed at the question then said he didn’t really know: “Maybe he was brought up from the wrong mother and father. They taught him these things. Lots of kids on my block are brought up by the wrong mother and father” (pp.133-134). Wolfenstein also notes that the most striking dissociation of the child from the moron is the depiction of the moron as a grown man. Asked how old the moron is, a nine-year-old boy replied, “I think about forty. You never can really tell. Thirty up to about forty. Maybe twenty. No, not twenty. He looks older. He’s tall and skinny. I think he has red hair.” Other children responded that the moron is fantastically old. Thus, an eleven-year-old boy said, “His brain must have worn out. Let’s make him two-thousand years old. I think his brain would wear out by then.” A nine-year-old boy seemed to be under the impression that the moron is a pre-historic creature: “Something that isn’t living. Some kind of animal that isn’t living” (p.135).

The boy who suggested that the moron’s brain has worn out seems to be expressing the view that thinking, at least of the kind that schooling imposes, is hard on the brain, and that the moron, in that case, is a man who suffers the effects of the demand imposed by civilized society to think logically and rationally. The wearing out of the brain is, in effect, the consequence of this demand.

Is there a solution to the problems?

Having discussed the problems that are caused by the societal demand to think logically and rationally, I would like to devote the remaining pages of this article to the question: Is there a solution to these problems? It is quite evident to me and, I would suppose, most if not all readers

of this article, that the solution is not to advocate a return to our pre-civilized state. Even if such a return were possible, there are obvious benefits of living in civilized societies in general, and of the privileging of rational thinking in particular. On the other hand, we have seen that there is a heavy price to be paid for these obvious benefits. One of the prices we pay is the tendency to disenfranchise the imaginative and fanciful ways of thinking that are common to very young child. Humor is a valuable counterforce in this regard, but, as Martha Wolfenstein's study of growing children reveals, it is not a solution to the problem. At best, it is a means to reduce the psychological damage resulting from this demand.

By focusing here on the growing child's recourse to the joking riddle, we have seen that humor can provide a savings in the expenditure of one's psychological means. But the joking riddle is likely to lose its effectiveness as the child grows into early adolescence (11-14 years of age). Some children will respond to this situation by replacing the joking riddle with the narrative joke. Some children will find other ways of subverting the societal demand, such as by taking an interest in poetry or other forms of imaginative discourse. Others will simply accede to the societal demand and conform themselves to it; they will, as Freud puts it, accept as irrevocable their estrangement from their instinctual disposition. Still others, as Freud suggests, may take refuge in mental illness, especially one that enables them to privilege irrational modes of thought and perception.

In these concluding pages, I would like to make three proposals relating to the dilemma that has been the focus of this article, i.e., the consequences of the societal privileging of logical and rational thinking, and especially the fact that it requires the expenditure of psychological resources that one does not in fact possess.

The use of humor in support of learning how to think rationally

The first proposal that I would like to make is that instead of viewing humor and logical and rational thinking as essentially opposed to one another, we may view humor as a means of helping a person developed these skills. This approach is presented in some detail in a book that my son, John M. Capps, and I wrote titled *You've Got to Be Kidding: How Jokes Can Help You Think* (Capps & Capps, 2009). This book was written for an undergraduate course in critical reasoning, a course that my son, who is on the philosophy department faculty at Rochester School of Technology, teaches on a regular basis. We note in the very first chapter:

Critical thinking is about examining the reasons we give for what we believe. It is also about communicating in a clear, understandable, and reasonable way. Technically speaking, critical thinking is rational thinking. The word “rational” implies the ability to reason logically and usually means that one avoids emotionalism, i.e., appealing to one’s feelings or intuitions as the basis for a particular belief. In practical terms, critical thinking involves being “reasonable,” or having defensible reasons for what we believe and say. The word “reasonable” may imply the use of practical reason in making decisions and choices, and in this sense, critical thinking is relevant to solving problems. In this book, we will be using both terms—“rational” and “reasonable”—depending on the context. (p.1)

We go on to note that we will be using the word “irrational” to refer to beliefs and actions that are illogical. We make a distinction between “irrational” and “emotional,” and point out that “just because someone speaks or writes in a highly emotional manner does not necessarily mean that the belief itself is irrational, and, conversely, merely because someone speaks in a calm and measured way does not necessarily mean that the belief expressed is

rational. Thus, “The ‘emotionalism’ that is being called into question here is where one appeals to one’s emotions and, in effect, ignores or rejects evidence that challenges the validity of the belief in question” (p. 1).

Where does humor or, more specifically, jokes come in? We suggest that jokes “make good illustrations of the logical fallacies that are a regular feature of critical reasoning courses,” and “figuring out which logical fallacy a joke illustrates can be a valuable exercise in critical thinking” (p.1). We go on to note that “by using jokes to illustrate critical thinking we risk undermining the importance of critical thinking, but that we hope that this illustrative use of jokes will enable our readers to take the goals of fallacies better fixed in their minds than would otherwise be the case” (p.2), if critical reasoning “is about examining the reasons people have for what they believe, then jokes are an especially engaging and memorable way of showing how these reasons can fall short” (p.2). Moreover, “if critical thinking is about being able to communicate in ways that are clear, understandable and reasonable, this often means avoiding the logical fallacies that create confusion and undermine honest dialogue, and because jokes commit these fallacies, they can help us learn where our communicating goes wrong” (p.2).⁸

I will not discuss the book any further, but these introductory comments indicate that logical and rational thinking and jokes need not be viewed as adversarial, that, as the subtitle of our book suggests, “jokes can help you think.” In fact, one reason that very young children do not “get” a joke is that they do not understand how or in what way the joke

⁸ Here is an example of a joke presented in the book, in the chapter titled “Fallacies of Evidence”: “A professor of medicine, a man well-known for his view that alcohol is damaging to one’s health, was lecturing to his medical students on the damage that alcohol can do. To demonstrate its effects on the nervous system, he took a worm and dropped it into a glass of gin and tonic. The worm wriggled around for a few minutes before finally giving a few convulsive twitches and then died. ‘What can we deduce from that?’ the professor asked with a triumphant air, assuming the conclusion was obvious. A voice called out from the back of the lecture hall, ‘If you’ve got worms, drink alcohol!’” (pp.48-49).

violates the rules of logic. Often, jokes are considered funny because one or more character in the joke unknowingly violates the rules of logic and the reader or listener knows that this is the case.

We could, in fact, argue that Freud's own book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* exhibits a very strong commitment to rational thinking. Like his earlier book on dreams, he is concerned in his book on jokes to make sense of them, to explain how they work. Its commitment to rational thinking is reflected in the fact that the book is divided into three parts—analytic, synthetic, and theoretical—and that there are chapters on the techniques, purposes, and motives of jokes as a social process. This, then, is not a book that simply organizes a great number of jokes under various topics (see, for example, Rovin, 1989; Greene, 1999; Tibballs, 2000; Prairie Home Companion, 2009). And yet, Freud's book includes some one-hundred-and- fifty jokes (see joke index, pp.305-308). Clearly, his book reveals that he has adopted civilized society's high evaluation of logical and rational thinking, but the book also reveals that he enjoys humor for its own sake. Thus, one way to address the problem that civilized society demands too much of us by requiring us to relinquish ways of thinking not under the aegis of rational thinking is to identify ways to reconcile the two ways of thinking, ways that recognize the validity of both.

The affirmation of the growing child's appreciation for riddles

A second proposal to address the problems that the societal demand creates is the affirmation of growing children's appreciation for riddles by helping them to expand their repertoire of riddles. The inspiration for this proposal was Wolfenstein's case of Stephen, the eleven-year-old boy who, despite his pride in knowing and even inventing many riddles, tells Wolfenstein that riddles

are “stupid” and that people who make them up, himself include, are being “stupid.” If the riddle is this boy’s means of resisting the demand that he think logically and rationally in a way that accepts the fundamental necessity and benefits of this demand, it is unfortunate that he disparages the riddle as merely “stupid.” As we have seen, the amusement derived from jokes is based on understanding the rules of logic and rationality; otherwise, we would not “get” the joke. This is also true of riddles. But, in addition, riddles may also alert us to the fact that there are truths that disclose the very *limits* of logical and rational thinking. In fact, the riddle as an art form is designed to suggest that truth itself is often elusive or inaccessible.

Martha Wolfenstein’s (1954) allusion to Jesus in her chapter on riddles is noteworthy in this regard. She writes:

Jesus died after he failed to answer the riddle asked by Pilate: “What is truth?”

While Pilate’s question on the manifest level appears to be rhetorical, from its place in the pattern of the hero myth, as well as from its profound significance, it may be taken as a riddle by which the hero is tested. (p.97)

She suggests that the reason he cannot answer it is that, in Jesus’ case, “the taboo on knowing in the sense of carrying out the Oedipal wishes had been observed to the fullest extent” for Jesus “had completely renounced both sex and aggression” (p.97). Thus, in contrast to Oedipus “he could not answer the riddle with which he was confronted at a crucial moment in his career, and he perished” (pp. 97-98).

I believe that Wolfenstein has misinterpreted the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, that Pilate’s question is neither merely rhetorical nor a riddle that Jesus seems incapable of answering. Rather, it probably reflects Pilate’s view that truth is elusive and, in any event, it is not directly relevant to the issue at hand, i.e., the guilt or innocence of Jesus. For, after he asked

the question, Pilate went out and said to Jesus' accusers, "I find no crime in him," then proposed a possible solution: "But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover," and this being the case, "Will you have me release for you the King of the Jews?" They, however, demand the release of Barabbas, a convicted thief, and Pilate acceded to their wishes (John 18:38-40).

Despite the fact that I disagree with Wolfenstein's suggestion that Jesus was unable to answer what she considers to have been Pilate's riddle, the fact that she believes that the riddle was commonly employed in Jesus' own social world is significant. In fact, in his book *Jesus the Riddler* Tom Thatcher (2006) argues that Jesus himself was no stranger to riddles and that, in contrast to the scenario that Wolfenstein constructs, he was far more skilled in the use of riddles than those who opposed him. He makes this point in his chapter titled "It's Good to Be the Riddler, Unless You're Playing with Jesus" (pp.83-94).

In the section of the chapter titled "Jesus Always Wins," Thatcher notes that those to whom Jesus poses the question "know the answer when and if Jesus tells you the answer; if he doesn't, and if you haven't heard this riddle or one very much like it before, you have no hope of getting it right" (p.89). Thus, "Jesus' riddles thereby segregate the world into two categories of people: those who are inside his community of knowledge and can therefore answer his ambiguous questions and those who are outside his community of knowledge and therefore can't," and "the members of the former group 'got inside' only by Jesus' invitation" (p.89).

Thatcher also notes that in cases where Jesus is the riddle, answering ambiguous questions posed by someone else, "the riddler's inherent advantages are harnessed to ironically illustrate Jesus' superior wit" (p.89). Generally speaking, the riddler enters every match with a huge advantage and in most cases "the riddlee can hope for nothing better than a tie." But, in

situations where Jesus is the riddle (as when the Pharisees and Sadducees pose questions designed to demonstrate Jesus' ineptitude), Jesus "consistently defies the odds: he not only answers his opponents' challenges, but he answers them in a way that displays so much genius that the riddler generally slinks away in shame, afraid to provoke him further" (p. 89).

Thatcher suggests that Jesus' authority as a riddler is most explicit in Mark 4 where the disciples ask for a private explanation of the parables and sayings Jesus has presented to the crowd. He notes that they must ask for this private explanation because "the Kingdom of God to which Jesus alludes is a 'mystery' that you cannot 'reason out' on your own; it involves a subject matter and principles of logic that are known only to members of Jesus' community of knowledge, a community that you enter only when and if he chooses to initiate you" (p. 90). Thus, the Kingdom of God is "given" to the disciples in the form of answers to these ambiguous statements and remains "hidden" to those who don't have "ears to hear"—"that is, hidden to 'everyone who isn't sitting within earshot of me right now while I tell you what I'm talking about'" (p. 90). Thus, "reason alone will not even reveal that Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God rather than bread or lamps," and Matthew, "realizing the significance of this fact, emphasizes that membership in Jesus' community of knowledge is a 'blessing' that many prophets and righteous people were not lucky enough to enjoy (Matt. 13:16-17)" (p. 90).

A full discussion of Thatcher's view of Jesus as riddler is beyond the scope of this article, but what is especially noteworthy for our purposes here is his emphasis on the fact that the riddle, as Jesus employs it, relativizes the claims of logical and rational thinking. Thus, unlike the pre-rational thinking that logical and rational thinking is designed to replace, the riddle represents a form of thinking that transcends logic and reasoning. This does not mean, of course,

that the riddle should replace logical and rational thinking, but it does mean that there are forms of “knowledge” that rational thinking fails to encompass.

It is noteworthy in this regard that the editor of Freud’s book on jokes adds an appendix to explain Freud’s earlier reference in a footnote to the riddles of Franz Brentano, a philosophy professor at the University of Vienna Freud especially admired during his student days (Gay, 1988, pp.28-29). In the footnote Freud (1960) notes that there is a connection between jokes and riddles. He focuses on Brentano’s composition of “a kind of riddle in which a small number of syllables had to be guessed which when they were put together into words gave a different sense according as they were grouped one way or another” (p.34). Freud cites several of Brentano’s riddles, and notes that in the case of the riddles “the technique is given as a precondition and the wording has to be guessed; while in the joke the wording is given and the technique is disguised” (p. 34). The reader’s task is to guess the missing syllables. This riddle form is called “daldal riddles” because the missing syllables are represented by the letters “daldal.”

The appendix provided by the editor notes that in 1879 Brentano published a booklet of some two hundred pages of riddles, thirty of which employ the technique that Freud describes in his footnote. Then, suggesting that Freud’s citation of two of the riddles was too cryptic for the reader to understand their construction, the editor provides the riddles in full and then adds an English specimen to make the riddle technique clear:

Burglars had broken into a large furriers’ store. But they were disturbed and went off without taking anything, though leaving the show-room in the greatest confusion. When the manager arrived in the morning, he gave instructions to his assistants: “Never mind about the cheaper goods. The urgent thing is to get the daldal—daldal. (p. 296)

The missing words are “first-rate furs straight.”⁹

It is, of course, unlikely that Stephen, the eleven-year-old boy in Wolfenstein’s study, would be impressed by the fact that Jesus was a riddler and that Sigmund Freud had a deep appreciation for riddles. But this is not the point. Rather, the point is that riddles are not “stupid.” This disparaging view of riddles may well have been influenced by the fact that the most popular riddles in Stephen’s school were riddles involving the legend of the moron, and the riddles portray the moron as stupid. Riddles, though, serve as a parody of the educational process itself and of the methods teachers customarily employ in the upper elementary grades in this process. They involve “knowledge” but in a highly idiosyncratic sense, as the knowledge they exhibit is not useful knowledge. Nor does it ordinarily involve technological knowledge (the kinds of knowledge that involve *difficult* thinking). Furthermore, as Jesus’ use of riddles suggests, they are designed to upset the class structure in a given social context, and in the context of school, this means that they reverse—or, more accurately, imagine the reversal of—the power relationship between teachers and students. This very reversal, and its imaginary quality, is suggested in Pilate’s proposal that he release from custody “the King of the Jews,” a proposal that was undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek if not an expression of contempt.

In short, the riddle is not, as Stephen has come to believe, an instrument or expression of stupidity. Rather, it is a complex form of human discourse, one that, despite the fact that it appears to be nothing more than a form of amusement, nonetheless has social and even political intentions. As befits the very form and structure of the riddle, these intentions are, however, disguised. The fact that riddles are a form of rebellion, but one that

⁹ In addition to Brentano’s riddles Freud cites several riddles by Gustav Fechner, another philosopher, who produced riddles as a way to pass the time when he became blind, and a riddle by Friedrich Schleiermacher, the theologian, that, according to Freud, “has the character of a joke” (pp. 78-79).

does not provoke punishment, is undoubtedly central to its appeal to growing children, especially in the school environment, but also in the family environment, where it can be used to put parents and siblings in their place.

Recognizing the intrinsic value of illusion

Finally, my third proposal for addressing the problems that the societal demand for logical and rational thinking creates involves recognizing the intrinsic value of illusion, especially when it takes the form of humor. At the very time that Freud was taking courses and seminars from Franz Brentano, he was reading the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach. He said in a letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein in 1875, “Among all philosophers, I worship and admire this man the most” (quoted in Gay, 1988, p.28). As Gay points out:

Feuerbach had much to teach Freud, in substance as in style: he regarded it as his assignment to unmask theology, to uncover its all-too-mundane roots in human experience. Theology must become anthropological. Strictly speaking, Feuerbach was not an atheist, being more intent on rescuing the true essence of religion from the theologians than on destroying it all. But his teaching and his method were calculated to make atheists. The point of his work on religion, he wrote in his most famous book, *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in 1841, was fundamentally “the destruction of an *illusion*,” an “*utterly pernicious*” illusion at that. Freud, who came to see himself as a destroyer of illusions, found this stance most congenial. (pp. 28-29).

Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud 1961) was published in German in 1927 and in English translation in 1928. Fifty-two years had passed since he read Feuerbach and nothing

fundamentally had changed in his own view of religion as an illusion. This is not the place to discuss the book in any detail, to explore, for example, Freud's suggestion that religion is simply one of many "cultural assets" that are fundamentally illusions (p. 43) or his observation that unlike his imaginary critic (with whom he carries on a dialogue throughout the book) he does not have to defend his own view with all his might, and is therefore free from a bondage from which his critic cannot free himself without suffering the collapse of his world (p.69). Instead, what is of interest in the context of our focus here on children's humor is the following observation that Freud makes with regard to children:

I think it would be a very long time before child who was not influenced began to trouble himself about God and things in another world. Perhaps his thoughts on these matters would then take the same paths as they did with his forefathers. But we do not wait for such a development; we introduce him to the doctrines of religion at an age when he is neither interested in them nor capable of grasping their import. Is it not true that the two main points in the program for the education of children today are retardation of sexual development and premature religious influence? Thus by the time the child's intellect awakens, the doctrines of religion have already become unassailable. (p.60)

Here Freud suggests that there is a conflict between religious instruction and the child's own natural intellectual development. Thus, in contrast to the societal demand that one engage in logical and rational thinking at the expense of fanciful and imaginative ideation, the problem here is that religion inhibits the natural thought processes of the child. But in a certain sense, the two situations are the same, because both impose limits on the child's freedom of thought, and this, Freud suggests, has a long-lasting permanent effect on one's mind as one grows into

adulthood. He writes: “Think of the depressing contrast between the radiant intelligence of a healthy child and the feeble intellectual powers of the average adult? Can we be quite certain that it is not precisely religious education which bears a large share of the blame for this relative atrophy?” (p.60).

If Freud thus shares Feuerbach’s view that religion is an illusion, it is quite significant that his article titled “Humor” (Freud, 1963) was probably written the same year that *The Future of an Illusion* was written (and published), and that in this article he suggests that humor is also an illusion.¹⁰

Freud (1963) begins the article with reference to his earlier book on jokes. He notes that his objective in the book was to discover the source of the pleasure derived from humor and says that he thinks he was able to show that the pleasure derives from “a saving in expenditure of affect” (i.e. emotion) (p.263). He suggests that there are two ways in which this saving may occur: Either one person adopts a humorous attitude while a second person acts as a spectator, deriving pleasure from the other’s attitude, or one person makes a humorous comment about another person, and one or both experience pleasure as a result.

To illustrate the first approach he relates the story of a convicted criminal who is being led to the gallows on a Monday morning and who comments, “Well, this is a good beginning to the week.” He has adopted a humorous attitude toward himself and, as Freud notes, this evidently affords him a certain satisfaction,” and another person who is standing there may also derive pleasure from what the criminal says, possibly as much as he does (pp.263-264). To illustrate the second approach Freud cites the case of a writer or narrator who depicts the

¹⁰ Freud began work on *The Future of an Illusion* in the spring of 1927. It was finished by September and published in November of the same year. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (see Rothgeb, 1973) indicates that the article was first published in 1927 (p. 485). However, a footnote reference to the republication of the article in Sigmund Freud (1963) in *Character and Culture* indicates that it was first published in *Imago* in 1928 (p.263). Either way, the book on religion and the article on humor were virtually contemporaneous.

behavior of real or imaginary people in a humorous fashion. In this case, there is no need for the people described to display any humor; the humorous attitude only concerns the person who makes them the object of it, and the reader or hearer shares the enjoyment of his or her humor (p.264).

Because humor saves in the expenditure of affect (or emotion), Freud suggests that it has a *liberating* effect because it reflects a refusal “to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer” (p.265). In fact, “It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.” For Freud, this is “a fundamental characteristic of humor” (p.265). Freud suggests that humor, in its refusal to undergo suffering, joins other means of refusing to suffer, but unlike delusional thinking it does not quit the ground of mental sanity and, unlike intoxication, it does not attempt to dull the senses. Referring to the criminal’s joke, Freud suggests that what has taken place here is “the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability” (p.265).

Freud adds that under ordinary circumstances the superego—even of the criminal being led to the gallows—would tell the ego in no uncertain terms that it has no basis for making such a victorious assertion, but in this case the superego abandons its ordinary position as the “stern master” and shows a side of itself that seems rather out of character. Unexpectedly, it embraces the very humor that we would have assumed it would soundly condemn and it “winks at affording the ego a little gratification” (p.268).¹¹ The ego in Freud’s model of the mind is the conscious self which interacts with the external world, on the one hand, and instinctual desires

¹¹ For readers who are unfamiliar with Freud’s terminology here, brief definitions of the words *ego* and *superego* may be useful: The *ego* is the part of Freud’s tripartite division of the mind (id, ego, and superego) which represents the conscious self, the part that reacts to the stimuli of the external world. It tends to be in conflict with the expectations of the id, which is the part of the mind that is instinctual and unconscious. The *superego* is the part of the mind that incorporates parental standards and social rules, thus creating conscience and obedience to externally applied laws and regulations (see Rennison, 2001, pp.85, 87 and 89). Thus, the superego is the product of the internalization of the societal demands that we have focused on in this article.

and passions, and the other; the superego is the part of the mind that has internalized the standards and rules of the social world, including but not limited to parental expectations. As Freud suggests, the superego would ordinarily tell the ego that it must accept the situation in which it finds itself what it is and not engage in a denial of its predicament, but in this case, “in bringing about the humorous attitude, the superego is in fact repudiating reality and *servicing an illusion*” (p.268, emphasis added).

It is true of course that the criminal’s comment about this being a nice way to begin the week has no practical effect on the fact that he is being led to the gallows. Although the men who are leading him there might find his comment amusing, they will still continue to lead him to the gallows. In fact, if they are inclined to be rather humorless and consider his comment rather flippant—after all, they are engaged in serious business, the punishment of a man for a crime that warrants society’s ultimate condemnation—they may even quicken their steps. But despite the fact that the humor does not change anything as far as reality is concerned, Freud notes that without quite knowing why we attribute to this pleasure “a high value” and “we feel it to have a peculiarly liberating effect” (p.268). He adds:

Besides, the jest made in humor is not the essential thing; it has only the value of a demonstration. The principle thing is the intention which humor fulfils, whether it concerns the subject’s self or other people. Its meaning is: “Look here! This is all this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child’s play—the very thing to jest about! (p.268)

Here, Freud in effect invokes his observation in his book on jokes that humor is fundamentally a form of play that originates in early childhood.

He concludes the article with the observation that “If it is really the superego which, in humor, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this teaches us that we have still very much to learn about the nature of that energy” (p.268). But one thing is clear: “If the superego does try to comfort the ego by humor and to protect it from suffering, this does not conflict with its derivation from the parental function” (p.269). It is as if a parents who ordinarily insists that the child adhere to the parent’s rules and regulations were to deliberately look the other way when the child violates a rule or regulation, and does so because the parent can see that the child is feeling vulnerable or overwhelmed by the external world or some especially threatening aspect of it.

In short, humor *is* an illusion, but it is an illusion that tells the ego that things are not as bad—or serious—as the ego believes them to be. Thus, to invoke the response of the seven-year-old boy when asked how the moron got the way he is, humor is the “right” parent for the beleaguered ego of the growing child. Or, as Freud might say, “There are illusions and there are illusions,” and humor is noteworthy for its “peculiarly liberating and elevating effect.”

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