The Stability of Laughter

The Problem of Joy in Modernist Literature

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Epilogue
Kafka's Primate

What could be funnier than the learned discourse of an academic, spoken by a monkey?

In theory, Kafka's 1917 short story, "A Report to an Academy," should be hilarious. A nonhuman primate abducted from the Gold Coast and taught to think and act like a man delivers an erudite speech recounting his adventures. Few species rival the professional intellectual in self-importance. In implying that even an ape can succeed at acquiring the rarified abilities of these professionals, Kafka's talking monkey is bitingly satirical. At the same time, apes are classic characters of buffoonery; they amble, hop, clamor, and interact in ways which resemble slapstick versions of ourselves. Monkeys are like us, except more so, and as Bergson put it, "A man in disguise is comic."[1] The sights and sounds of a monkey aping distinguished members of the academy fulfill time-honored requirements for highbrow and lowbrow humor alike.[2] In theory then, this story should be funny. In practice, it is anything but.

Kafka is well known for juxtaposing surreal plots and ambiguous symbols with precise, clear prose. "Syntax and theme are effectively at war" in Kafka's work, says Judith Butler.[3] It seems unlikely that someone would stay calm enough to speak with sober lucidity about, for example, a bureaucracy running riot or a man turning into a bug. But this is just what Kafka's prose does. "A Report to an Academy," however, is different from works like *The Castle* (1922) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915). In this story, the sobriety of the prose does not conflict with the strangeness of the story's themes. Here, the prose's clarity *is* the evidence of strangeness. The clarity of the prose *is* the comedy.

A talking ape is not supposed to be erudite. And this is what should be funny: a savage acting greater than he could ever be. This is what is absurd: a fool acquiring a level of distinction that his audience could only ever consider a parlor trick. Now imagine all this from the fool's eyes. Might he not misunderstand his absurdity? At times "A Report to an Academy" reads like situational irony, told from the perspective of the situation. Unlike linguistic and narrative forms of irony—dramatic, sarcasm, etc.—situational irony does not wedge ambiguity into our understanding of language. It does not prompt us to question a speaker's

or story's intentions. It leads us to question the world's. Could the world ever understand, though, that its own innate processes might seem strange to someone? It would be like an ape in the jungle realizing that its everyday ways of walking, jumping, shouting, and socializing were being perceived as contrary to natural law. But what could be unnatural about that which could not be otherwise? In theory, isn't anyone who has labored as much as Kafka's hero capable of learning to speak well? Are we not being illogical in assuming that this character should make us laugh, just because he is still a monkey?

Kafka's protagonist is not just parroting back sounds he has been trained to mimic, which is why he cannot be *uncomplicatedly* funny. He has acquired too much self-consciousness. As a result, the joke that is this story's very premise, soon gets, in the words of one critic, "overtaken by grief."[4] The ape's speech can no longer be the joke. Now, it can only be a disquisition of a joke, one that we are learning is still being made.

If all of this has started to sound like its own disquisition on this book's themes, then it is clear why I chose this beautiful story with which to end things. "A Report to an Academy" asks us to laugh *at* a classic comic trope, then *with* an emergent antihero, until we can no longer laugh about someone who resembles ourselves—at least on our better days. "Their laughter was generally mixed with coughing that sounded dangerous but meant nothing," says the protagonist of his captors.[5] In one sentence alone a coughball of laughter comes across as a symptom of a species-wide sickness—that "sounded dangerous"—as well as a symbol whose significance is being permanently withheld—it "meant nothing." At times Kafka's speaker resembles a Baudelairean or Nietzschean narrator, diagnosing a madman's pathology and categorizing the herd mentality that birthed it. At others, he seems a more restrained Dr. Matthew O'Connor, willing to admit of his individual sickness, but only once he has convinced the rest of the world of its universal malady.

And if these nameless brutes' coarse laughing proves so insignificant to an ape, imagine what this ape's displays could ever mean to us: "I, exhausted by too much effort" says the story's hero, "hung limply to the bars of my cage." His captor responds "by rubbing his belly and grinning." One paragraph later, and the speaker has mastered even this subtle display: "I did not forget to rub my belly most admirably and to grin."[6] It is not just a monkey acting like a human that is comic. "There is something essentially ridiculous," says Simon Critchley, "about a human being behaving like a human being."[7]

In the process of mastering man's arts, the ape recapitulates the descent of humankind out of savagery and into modernity's misery:

> That progress of mine! How the rays of knowledge penetrated from all sides into my awakening brain! I do not deny it: I found it exhilarating. But I must also confess: I did not overestimate it . . . .[8]

It is exhilarating to think how much can be made of one's aspirations, even while remaining vigilant not to overestimate them.

No one would overestimate this character's words, though, no matter how much progress he achieves, no matter how many rays of knowledge penetrate his awakening brain, if it were not taken as granted that he can be nothing more than an ape. If audiences assumed that education could succeed at making a nonhuman primate wholly different from his kindred in the jungle, then his words would never be considered comical, as much as their sentiments could ever be thought of as tragic. What is there to marvel at? Culture changes you. Why couldn't it change a monkey?

These questions are not as silly as they seem. Especially if you care to understand how individuals express their wants, hates, loves, and loss, as well as why we clamor and grin in ways which beguile captors and seduce audiences. The study of emotion—like any study on laughter or humor—has always revolved around some version of a single query: How much lies within our power to change?

According to most current theories, our brains produce various emotional experiences which *roughly* correspond to the categories we have names for—"happiness," "anger," etc. These experiences *usually* coincide with particular sets of facial expressions, autonomic activity, and instrumental behavior—i.e., "anger" often produces scowls, elevated blood pressure, and the desire to fight, curse, sulk and what have you. The reason why emotional events and emotion words correspond only *roughly*, as well as why emotional experiences and behavior coincide only *usually* is, basically, the world. Individual intentions, desires, and life histories, along with culture, modify what experiencing an emotion means to oneself and what expressing an emotion *should*, *could*, or *would* mean to others. The entirety of this book has taken these premises as its starting point.

Not everyone is convinced. For some, these premises fail to fully factor in the influence of culture. Constructivists argue that our many emotional experiences would seem pretty similar if we could isolate the body from the situation. What distinguishes "fear" from "anger" from "love" is not a specific feeling. Rather, it is the person before me, my judgment of them, and the words I use to understand my body's reactions to them which determine whether an experience counts as one emotion or another. When we connect our feelings to our situations and then slap a name onto that experience we essentially "construct" what we think of as an emotion. "Anger" versus "happiness," "surprise" rather than "fear"—these labels do not necessarily reflect the workings of the brain; they are interpretations of hazy bodily processes which cultures teach us to make sense of with these names. Language, not biology, accounts for whatever consistency there is between a person's singular experience and the human population's communal understanding of emotion.[9]

A constructivist asks, "Why do people stereotype emotions and look for biological essences, in the same way they essentialize other perceiver-dependent categories, such as race?"[10] A cultural critic would thus do better to investigate why anyone would insist on adhering to emotional categories when situations call them into question, rather than assume that it is the emotional category itself which calls into question the situation. Who am I to tell a modernist that there is an essence to laughter, which a few years of insistence cannot rewrite?

This book has labored in the hope of understanding just what of our inheritances remain, even after culture transcribes them into radically new contexts. It does not dispute that emotions are messy, ambiguous, and beguiling. We smile when we are sad as well as happy; anger makes your heart race as much as fear does (or love for that matter). Nor does this book dispute that we require words to define our emotional experiences; we most certainly do. But we do not need words to *distinguish* these experiences. If words are to blame for why I differentiate a certain something that might be "fear" from a certain something else that resembles "anger," if words alone explain why I believe that "fear" and "anger" do different things within my body, then many forms of feeling should be collapsed into bland generalizations. In which case, something like a headache does not meaningfully differ from other kinds of pain. In which case, I am not really at the mercy of the "cluster" headaches that excruciate my life with disappointing regularity, so much as constructing these experiences of extremely negative arousal based on my preconceptions about how the English language defines head pain.[11]

Words may be arbitrary, but they are rarely unfounded. We need words to describe experiences for other people, as much as for ourselves. We do not require words to understand that there is a good reason to describe them. Culture and context can make sense of a body's various feelings; they cannot account for why we believe these feelings vary in the first place. If words are the sole creators of distinctions within emotional experience, then experiences are not meaningfully distinct. Only their names are.

Rotpeter—this is the name Kafka has given his hero—inserts an important caveat into his speech, one that calls into question the truth-value of everything he says about his past:

> Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it, but although I cannot reach back to the truth of the old ape life, there is no doubt that it lies somewhere in the direction I have indicated.[12]

If Rotpeter really can represent his past "now only in human terms," then the "hopeless sobbing" he mentions in the early days of his capture can be neither "sobbing" nor reflective of "hopelessness."[13] These are

just words Rotpeter learned to ascribe to experiences he learned to categorize. So then why continue to assume that a story like "A Report to an Academy" says anything meaningful about him—or about any other member of a persecuted group surviving by performing the master's tricks? If none of Rotpeter's languages can resist his captors' influence in any way, then he can tell us little about himself, and even less about us which we do not know already.[14]

Assuming that language alone accounts for the consistency of emotional behavior is comforting. It means that humans acquire their emotional inheritances at the rate of cultural variation, not evolutionary adaptation, and this suggests that we have a good deal of control over this change. It also suggests we have a good deal less. For if every aspect of emotional behavior can alter at the speed of culture, what kinds of automatons have we been all this time, absorbing these conventions for so long? Are we really like Kafka's primate, born into naivety, but capable of mastering a set of habits so conscientiously? If so, I think we are much less responsible than we thought for those coarse coughballs in our laughs. Who are we to think we can deviate from the only society in which we may flourish?[15]

The constructivist argument relies on the illusions our habits create, of transformation. The more something gets ingrained, the more natural it seems. "Because we perceive *anger* in ourselves and in others, we believe *anger* exists as an entity to be discovered somewhere in the brain or body."[16] Our minds do such a good job of acquiring certain ways of being that we lose track of what came before. Mirth is paradigmatic in this regard. The more we mature, the less immature our laughter will be, right? I would not laugh at flatulence anymore. I have learned enough about the dangers of cultural stereotyping to no longer find a racist joke funny. And yet, I have met few people who laugh only at what they were supposed to. The more we change, the more it can seem we have always been this way. At the same time, the more we change, the more assured we may become of never falling back into old ways.

Once words take on full responsibility for why we even need words, our emotional experiences become, not just ambivalent, but incoherent. And this makes them meaningless *as private experiences*. Then our emotional categories do not communicate aspects of private experience that overlap with public expectations; they communicate the public expectations that dictate our private experiences. You are no longer at the mercy of your emotions; you are at the mercy of your community. Within such communities, situational irony can only be rhetorical, because any deviations from expectations become deviations that you directed. In such a community in which emotional incongruity can only be intentional, the world is never funny; it is only wrong.[17]

Some researchers believe that facial expressions contain "low informational value"—since people may smile when they are not happy, and feel

happy without smiling, the gesture "does not provide a perceiver with reliable information about the internal state of the sender."[18] In other words, because smiles cannot be interpreted with 100% confidence, they cannot serve as signposts of something specific about experience to other people. Emotional behavior is as unreliable as its lexicon.[19]

Correct. All language, verbal and nonverbal alike, is unreliable, if one expects anything more than probabilistic information from it. But to point out that a word or a facial expression does not provide deterministic information, and therefore, cannot have anything more than a casual relationship to the meanings we ascribe to it, is not so different from the kinds of poststructuralist arguments that reduce understanding to an unresolvable ambiguity. Laughter as *event*, as a perpetually unfolding process that never allows itself to be interpreted definitively, resembles smiles with "low informational value." In both cases, a specific smile or laugh only reminds us that a sign, which people employ consciously and unconsciously according to certain standards, does little to facilitate communication between individuals. Ah, the irony of the situation—poststructuralists imbued laughter with a wisdom that runs deeper than language-dependent reason; constructivists imbue our mirth with a wisdom that runs no deeper than language. And thus does scholarship continue to harp on the possible ways in which meanings *cannot* overlap, rather than on the many ways meanings *do* overlap.[20]

Culture can convince me that smiles are unstable forms of communication; it cannot persuade me to dismiss them as useless. If culture alone led me to believe that smiles are happy in the first place, why have all my unhappy encounters with misinterpreted smiles and misplaced laughs not taught me to disregard them all for good? Why hasn't all this grumpy modernist culture I have ravenously consumed for most of my adult life not disabused me of my naivety? In practice, you can acknowledge that something is unstable and still believe you can do things to get it under control. Otherwise, there would be no such thing as anger management.

"In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom," says Kafka's hero,

> And as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime. In variety theaters I have often watched, before my turn came on, a couple of acrobats performing on trapezes high in the roof. They swung themselves, they rocked to and fro, they sprang into the air, they floated into each other's arms, one hung by the hair from the teeth of the other. 'And that too is human freedom,' I thought, 'self-controlled movement.' What a mockery of holy Mother Nature! Were the apes to see such a spectacle, no theater walls could stand the shock of their laughter.[21]

Throughout Western history, we have found people who lose control hilarious. They stumble, they flail, they fall. What though, really, is so funny about this? What is so funny about that which, given the circumstances, could not have been otherwise? Sometimes it seems that what is funny about a situation is not so much its incongruity, as an observer's hopefulness. How high-handed must people be to assume they will not tumble? asked Baudelaire. What gives human primates the right to mock Mother Nature, asks a theater of apes, and not pay the consequences? It says a lot that we find joy so often in the likeliest of places.

Notes

1 Bergson. *Laughter*, 15b.
2 America's National Public Radio devoted a question-of-the-day to a monkey's comic charms (see Holmes, "Are Monkeys Funny?"). Though I think more enduring proof can be had with the search words "funny monkey" on YouTube.
3 See "Who Owns Kafka?" Butler points to some of the biggest names in cultural criticism who have lauded the "purity" of Kafka's prose, including George Steiner, Hannah Arendt, and John Updike. Deleuze and Guattari have written that, while this prose does boast of idiosyncrasies, "all these marks of the poverty of a language show up in Kafka but have been taken over by a creative utilization for the purposes of a new sobriety . . . ." See *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, 23.
4 Wisse, *No Joke*, 56.
5 This is Philip Boehm's translation from *Words without Borders*. The Muirs' translation, from which I will be citing in the rest of the chapter, is I think a bit too obvious in the context of my interpretation—it reads: "Their laughter had always a gruff bark in it that sounded dangerous but meant nothing." See Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 254. The original is: "Ihr Lachen war immer mit einem gefährlich klingenden aber nichts bedeutenden Husten gemischt"—laughter mixed with a "dangerous-sounding but not significant coughing." See "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie." For another version see Ian Johnston's translation from *Franz Kafka Online*: "Their laughter was always mixed with a rasp which sounded dangerous but meant nothing."
6 Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 256–257.
7 Critchley, *On Humour*, 59.
8 Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 258.
9 Today, Lisa Feldman Barrett is probably the most prominent exponent of a constructivist view of emotion. She introduces her ideas in a variety of places. For nonspecialists, see *How Emotions Are Made* and "You Aren't at the Mercy of Your Emotions - Your Brain Creates Them." For technical introductions, see "Are Emotions Natural Kinds?," "Emotions Are Real," "The Theory of Constructed Emotion," as well as Barrett, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Barsalou, "The Conceptual Act Theory." For a critique of Barrett's ideas, see Leys, *Ascent of Affect*, 284. Most of Barrett's arguments fall in with a new theory of cognition based on statistical logic. For a review of this theory, see Hohwy, *The Predictive Mind*; Seth and Friston, "Active Interoceptive Inference and the Emotional Brain."

   Constructivist assumptions underlie much work in the history of emotions. Case in point, see "History of Emotions," *Max Plank Institute for*

Human Development. For contrasting views see Plamper, who writes that "Since the nineteenth century the study of emotion has turned upon a polarity between social constructivism and universalism. . . . But in fact, most social constructivists do not actually practice any radical social constructivism" (*History of Emotions*, 299). Reddy as well: "if emotional change is to be something other than random drift, it must result from interaction between our emotional capacities and the unfolding of historical circumstances." See *The Navigation of Feeling*, 45.

10 Barrett and Russell, "An Introduction to Psychological Construction," 9.

11 Mayo Clinic Staff, "Cluster Headache."

12 Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 253.

13 Ibid, 252—"Dumpfes Schluchzen," in the original, or "dull sobbing," as Boehm renders it. Johnston translates it as "muffled sobbing." Kafka's modifier seems to describe the tears' acoustics, rather than interpret their meaning. This though is misleading. As an acoustic property, "dullness" contradicts "sobbing." We have a case of a grin that is not a smile, an interpretation couched as a "mere" observation. The Muirs' translation is not necessarily more accurate. It just enacts out loud what Kafka's text muffles.

14 "Rotpeter's transformation was interpreted as an allegory to the assimilation of Jews in Europe, European colonialism in Africa, conformism, a common person who cannot find spirituality, the loss of innocence, the condition and values of humanity, education as a form of brainwashing, or art as inferior imitation"—Harel, "De-allegorizing Kafka's Ape," 54.

Such interpretations assume a nature common to other and non-other alike. For Ziolkowski the story demonstrates "that the human concept of other animals' understanding is primarily due to human perspective," concluding that "Animals' estimation of humans is not as high as humans' estimation of themselves." In order to make this conclusion, one must glean some clue into an "animal's estimation" and thus assume that not all of Rotpeter's report is a misrepresentation. Puchner, meanwhile, uses Kafka's story in an argument about the universality of performativity. "Does not the theatre seem capable of crossing the dividing line between the human and animal," he writes, "by virtue of its dependence on nonverbal, physical communication, on an expressive language of gestures?" Considering he soon references Darwin's *On the Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, I assume he is thinking of smiles, laughter, and sobbing. See Ziolkowski, "Kafka and Italy," 241–242; Puchner, "Performing the Open," 28.

15 "If everything we want is merely an outgrowth or an artifact of our culture," writes Reddy, "then it is impossible for us to want to be free of that culture, or to want to change it." *The Navigation of Feeling*, 41. This has been a familiar line of criticism in anthropology, which Reddy discusses.

16 Barrett, "Natural Kinds," 47.

17 And every laugh that seems out of place, becomes a sign of our mendacity . . . or else a symptom of our pathology. In 2013, doctors reported the case of a 58-year-old man suffering from laughter (reported in Madani et al., "Laughing at Funerals"). He could not control this laughter, even at the most inopportune times—while visiting his mother after her release from the hospital, while mourning at a funeral—to the point that he removed himself from polite society. I assume no one found him funny. Not because they assumed he was enjoying these improper stagings, for that would make his laughter too reliable a marker of his interiority. I can only assume he had some odd desire to abide by his culture's stereotypes for mirth during moments his culture had deemed highly inappropriate. As it turned out, the man had suffered an ischemic stroke, which was causing a mirth-like symptom.

18 Barrett, "Natural Kinds," 48. Barrett does acknowledge that "smiling faces are easily and effortlessly categorized as *happy* and show the largest cross-cultural accuracy rates" ("Natural Kinds," 39–40). For a contrasting view on the communicative potential of smiles, see Hertzberg, "What's in a Smile."
19 For an overview of this line of argumentation, see Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, especially 79–86.
20 For more on laughter as *event*, see Chapter 3, especially note 56.
21 Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 253. In the original "self-controlled movement" is "selbstherrliche Bewegung." Johnston also translates it as "self-controlled," but Boehm uses the phrase "ego-maniacal and high-handed."

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