

Schopenhauer's Pessimistic Laughter

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Abstract

Schopenhauer's theory of laughter, usually known as an incongruity theory, finds its origin in the relation between perception and rational knowledge. Concepts strive to replace perceptions, but always fail, which results in incongruity (WWR II, Chapter 8). The origin of laughter, Schopenhauer tells us, resides in our mode of knowledge; more precisely, in its limitation. Schopenhauer is a pessimist who rejects happiness as an end of existence. Happiness is an inborn error caused by an illusion, he writes in his main publication, *The World as Will and Representation* (WWR I, §38). Later on, however, as part of his thoughts about the good life, and with no relation to his metaphysical ideas, Schopenhauer maintains that it is possible to have a joyful life – within that error. In this article, I first explore Schopenhauer's theory of laughter in order to reveal its significance within his philosophy. I then assess his theory in relation with Schopenhauer's thoughts about the good life and happiness, as developed in *Parerga and Paralipomena*.

Key Words: Schopenhauer, laughter, incongruity theory of laughter, humor

Introduction

When we initially think about Schopenhauer we realize that his philosophy has several implications. One of them is pessimism, a negative posture toward life. This is also true in relation to his theory of laughter, which he presents in *The World as Will and Representation*.² How does the pessimist philosopher conceive of laughter? In a bad mood? Does he depreciate laughter? To the contrary, Schopenhauer does not disapprove of laughter, and it is important to bear this in mind when evaluating his philosophy. Therefore, in this article, I address the following question: given that no philosopher can theorize laughter without intimating how he himself laughs, doesn't the fact that a pessimist philosopher favors laughter point to interpreting it in a new way?

Schopenhauer's theory of laughter is considered an incongruity theory and as such plays an important role in contemporary debates. Briefly, scholars agree that an incongruity theory introduces the cognitive aspects of laughter ("stimulus mentalis") instead of a description of the laughable object. Its beginnings, as John Morreall explains, refers to "some scattered comments in Aristotle, but did not come into its own until Kant and Schopenhauer" (Morreall 1982, p. 244). Though the two modern philosophers retain

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² The author refers to two kinds of laughter: one psychic and another physical. I will not explore the physical aspect of laughter, because, for my purpose, only the psychic aspect matters. Schopenhauer explains psychic laughter in *The World as Will and Representation* (WWR). Physical laughter, in *Parerga and Paralipomena* (PP), "On Philosophy and Natural Science," §96.

their differences, both develop the same idea of a violation of "normal mental patterns and normal expectations":

We live in an orderly world where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, events, etc. When we experience something that doesn't fit these patterns, that violates our expectations, we laugh. (Morreall 1982, p. 245)

In that way it was possible to detect and extract an "incongruity theory" and retroactively to apply it to other philosophers. The point that unites this theory among different authors is that it implicates the use of understanding and concepts as components of the structure of amusement. As Ian Straus points out, the "incongruity theory essentially posits that people feel amused when they have an experience that violates the normal order of things according to their own subjective understanding of what normal order of things is" (Straus 2014, p. 6).

What are the consequences of extracting from different philosophers a general theory of "incongruity"? What are the consequences of that kind of abstraction in regard to Schopenhauer's theory? These questions arise from skepticism toward the contemporary understanding of Schopenhauer's theory. As Peter Lewis rightly says, "little has been written on the role of laughter in Schopenhauer's pessimistic vision of the world" (Lewis 2005, p. 36).

I suggest that Schopenhauer does not conceive of his theory of laughter in the same way that it is used today: as a tool to examine jokes and comical situations, in order to reveal what is incongruous in them, and "explain," or better, describe, why we laugh in each case. Schopenhauer does not do that, and even when he demands that "the reader take in account any risible that occurs to him" (WWR I, §13) in order to test the theory, it is not enough to prove the theory only by facts. The point here is that, for Schopenhauer,

a science shall not be constituted by a general concept and an indefinite multiplicity immediately under it, but that knowledge shall descend by degrees from the general to the particular, through intermediate concepts and divisions, according to closer and closer definitions. (WWR I, §14)

This means that jokes and comical situations does not summarize the general incongruity Schopenhauer describes. Rather, as I hope to show, jokes are a manifestation of a fundamental incongruity between the representations of reason and intuitions in general. So, it seems that it is not possible to say that Schopenhauer has a proper *theory* of laughter, as if he has extracted it from several cases and samples; it is more accurate to say that he has a general principle that explains the particular case.

In addition, as I have pointed to the tendency to consider Schopenhauer's theory only by its conceptual aspect, I feel compelled to assert that the process extrapolates the

conceptual domain towards the body and the real (the Will). So, to consider Schopenhauer's theory without the element of Will and the body is similar to considering experience without intuition, or life without the struggling will and desire that constitute the real being of things. This kind of exclusion reduces the theory to a rationalist or linguistic conception and does not correspond to Schopenhauer's philosophy of Will. I will show that the author explains why we are able to laugh in general, and why laughter is important in relation to the body and the will, whilst considering the whole structure of the human experience of life.

1. Schopenhauer's metaphysics

Before examining Schopenhauer's theory of laughter, his metaphysics should be briefly explained. To justify this detour, suffice it to say that Schopenhauer presents his theory of laughter in his main book, *The World as Will and Representation*. Thus, we should determine why the author felt the need to develop a theory of laughter from his own philosophic point of view.

The German philosopher begins his main work by saying that "the world is my representation" (WWR I, §1). The proper source of this truth is the subject-object distinction, which Schopenhauer claims to be incontestable. Indeed, what exists to knowledge exists only as an object to a subject. Therefore, any relation that we acknowledge is formed accordingly. For a subject, there are conditions in which objects appear, such as time, space and causality. In time, space and causality all objects have only a relative existence, relative to a subject:

Each instant exists only when it has annulled its predecessor, its father [...]; as the past and the future are null as any dream, and the present is only a frontier without extension and content between them [...] everything that exists in space and time and, therefore, everything that proceeds of causes and effects, has only a relative existence. (WWR I, §3)

The conditions of experience constitutes the world: time, space and causality are intuitive forms in which every phenomenon appears to us. It is evident, here, that Schopenhauer continues Kant's division between the "thing in itself" and the phenomenon. I will not elaborate on their differences, but it is important to highlight the fact that Schopenhauer thought that he was the only true Kantian disciple, the one who had discovered the real meaning of the "thing in itself."

That which Kant calls a phenomenon, Schopenhauer refers to as representation. Two distinctions follow: according to Schopenhauer, we have intuitive representations and abstract representations that constitute the phenomenon. Abstract representations, as a specific group of representations, constitute concepts or reason. In turn, intuitive representations are more encompassing, as they embrace "the entire visible world, or the whole of experience, together with the conditions of its possibility" (WWR I, §3). Time

and space are intuitive representations a priori which form the apparition of an object, and because of that a group of objects is defined by the objects' successiveness (time) and simultaneity (space). The notion of cause³, then, has only a relative existence, and matter is only an effect that fulfills the requirements of time and space. Thus, there is a consistency of all relative objects which constitutes the world as representation; Schopenhauer calls it "the veil of Maya": a world that one cannot say whether it exists or not.

This leads to the following question: "We ask if this world is nothing but representation, in that case it would have to parade before us as an inessential dream or a vaporous ghost, without earning our attention" (WWR I, §17). However, that does not happen. We are engaged in the world and even though it seems just a dream, it has a kind of coherence, organization and enchainment that lead us to search for its essence.

Thus, the world as representation must have a complement: "The world is my will" (WWR I, §1). The limitation of the world as representation demands that the essence of the world, or its effectiveness, is in another side, in a side distinct from representation, in an immediately given fact to all living being: the will, which has the character of an activity. The will subsists in every phenomenon, representation, action, as the element that gives significance to the series of objects and their connections; otherwise, every act, for example, would be strange and incomprehensible, without connection and meaning, like a vaporous ghost.

The will, "considered purely in itself, is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge, as we see it appear in inorganic and vegetable nature and in their laws, and also in the vegetative part of our own life" (WWR I, §54). Nevertheless, the volitional character of that generic impulse is only a projection of human volition. As explained above, the will is a "given fact to all living being," because the body is both an object among objects and something that is "known immediately by each one," where the act of the will and the action of the body are simultaneous in perception. Schopenhauer calls this conception of the body "Objektivität des Willens," the "objectivity" of the will. The body knows a priori the will, and the will is the a posteriori knowledge of the body.

The body is, therefore, a condition of the external experience (where objects occupy time and space) and, at the same time, an immediate object of inner experience. We cannot represent the will without representing our body. As M. Cacciola explains, "The body is the immediate object in relation to the world as representation but also mediates

³ Causality, although it is relative, is understanding itself and all matter and effectiveness exists only to and through understanding. Schopenhauer elaborates the idea of an "intellectual intuition," in the sense that "everything" is submitted to the forms of intuition which is understanding itself. In that way the German philosopher tries to give reality to our intuitions and overcome the distance that Kant establishes between intuition and rational thought.

object, when it is part of this world and knows himself in it" (Cacciola 1994, p. 39). The manner in which we know our body is double: on the one hand, it is known immediately as will, on the other, it is mediated as representation.

However, the difference between human volition and the Will as the essence of the world resides in the need of human beings to find an end, a purpose, which would be the cause of action in a phenomenal order. We only know our will partially by several isolated acts, therefore, only when it happens in successive time as a phenomenon. The Will as the essence of existence, as the "thing in itself," does not know what to want, because it is a will and nothing more. Even so, the Will is not the cause of anything; it only manifests itself as phenomenon. Each phenomenon is a phenomenon of the Will, and has its "cause" at a determinate time and space, as a particular phenomenon.

Therefore, will and representation are two aspects of the world. That is the right meaning of the German word *als*, "as" in English, that composes the title of Schopenhauer's main book: *The world (taken) as will and (the world taken) as representation*. Will and Representation are continuous but they do not appear together at the same time, as a totality of the world. That kind of parallelism founds Schopenhauer's philosophy and determines his posture regarding other aspects of human life. We aim to comprehend his theory of laughter in the same way.

The approach to the notion of incongruity has its grounds on that parallelism. Nevertheless, to begin, we must ask, What is incongruity to Schopenhauer? Why is incongruity funny to Schopenhauer? Our perception – to use his concepts – of incongruity is not enough to make us laugh. To understand it rightly we must look at the foundation of Schopenhauer's theory.

2. Schopenhauer's theory of the laughable

In Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, the paragraphs that precede his thoughts on laughter address the advantages and disadvantages of concepts, defining them as a representation of a representation, that is, something that is remote from perception. It is fundamental for Schopenhauer to insist that there is a gap, an abyss, between perception and representation. Concepts never formulate what perception is without inadequacy, and for that reason, Schopenhauer refers to concepts as errors. That is how the author realizes a kind of criticism of the value of abstract knowledge, as if he were saying to us, "do not fully believe in concepts, they are mistaken," they never entirely correspond to real things. At the same time, this makes of perception the only ground of all knowledge: "perception [...] is the source of every truth and the ground of every science" (WWR I, §14).

As mentioned above, the world as representation has two kinds of representations: intuitive representations and abstract representations. To Schopenhauer, everything that concerns knowledge, understanding and reason, has its grounds in an intuitive

representation. It can be empirical or a priori (like time and space); in any case, it is from an intuitive representation that reason elaborates a concept. The Faculty of Judgment is responsible for transmitting to abstract consciousness what was intuitive knowledge. Thus, the Faculty of Judgement collects, groups, and fixes the data that one can know intuitively, empirically or a priori, by its identity or difference. This is so until the most abstract knowledge becomes possible. "Concepts in general exist only after previous representations of perception, and in the reference to these lies their whole nature; consequently, they presuppose these representations" (WWR I, §10).

However, this action suffers from a chronic inconsistency. "Although abstract rational knowledge is the reflex of the representation from perception, and is founded thereon, it is by no means so congruent with it that it could everywhere take its place; on the contrary, it never corresponds wholly to this representation" (WWR I, §13). It is exactly at this point that laughter comes in, as the effect of the perception of the constitutive incongruity of a concept with perceived objects. The concepts are unable to achieve subtle changes in what is intuitive and laughter is precisely the effect of the perception of this general and necessary inadequacy. This is the reason why a "theory of the laughable" or the "risible" [Lächerlichen⁴] expresses more precisely than a "theory of laughter" Schopenhauer's view. Here, we are dealing with a general notion of what causes us to laugh, what constitutes the laughable object as a phenomenon for us. In other words, in a ludicrous situation what we perceive is the very incongruity of our cognitive knowledge in relation to perceptive representations.

Then, we may say, the cognitive aspect of Schopenhauer's theory of laughable lies exactly on the mismatch between perception knowledge and rational knowledge, achieving a comprehensive notion that shifts the perception towards the very problem of knowledge. As he clearly states in Chapter 8 of *The World as Will and Representation*, volume II: "It's on the opposition between intuitive representations and abstracted representations [...] that lays down equally my theory of laughter" (WWR II, Chapter 8). Laughter and perception are opposed to representation and concepts, because they create one general incongruity of reason. "The origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it" (WWR II, Chapter 8). It is difficult to understand now what it actually means to conceive "mental patterns" and a violence towards it when the whole structure of "the mind" grounds itself in an incongruity. Those patterns are more instable and "fictional" than were expected.

Yet, this is subtle. The origin of laughter is in our mode of knowledge: more precisely, in its limitation. The connection that leads Schopenhauer to explain laughter is precisely

⁴ Schopenhauer does not use the expression "theory of laughter." The title of Chapter 8 in WWR II is precisely: *Zur Theorie des Lächerlichen*, translated in English as *On the Theory of the Ludicrous*.

that paradoxical relation between perception and abstract representations. Schopenhauer says at the beginning of section 14:

By all these various considerations it is hoped that the difference and the relation between the cognitive method of reason, rational knowledge, the concept, on the one hand, and the immediate knowledge in purely sensuous, mathematical perception or intuition and in apprehension by the understanding on the other, has been brought out quite clearly. Further, there have been also the incidental discussions on feeling and laughter, to which we were almost inevitably led by a consideration of that remarkable relation of our modes of cognition. (WWR I, §14)

Actually, the paragraph in which Schopenhauer explains laughter is a “parenthesis” in his explanation of concepts and representations. Thus, I tend to understand that we laugh not exactly at incongruity, but mainly because of the fundamental incongruity of knowledge. By this, Schopenhauer explains why human being laughs in general, why the human being is able to laugh. By this interpretation, laughter is therefore a sign and an effect of a constitutive failure of reason in relation to objects. We may say that the production of laughter, in comedy, jokes, etc., derives from this fundamental incongruity; and we can only produce an incongruity because between concepts and objects the relation is essentially incongruous, leading us to reproduce and create incongruent situations by imitation (or projection?). That is why Schopenhauer does not give us several examples of jokes; it is not necessary. Jokes will not explain something about laughter, they are intentional (WWR II, Chapter 8); it is the condition of experience and the mode of knowledge in which human beings are able to laugh that explains jokes and humor in general.

However, it is not obvious that this fundamental incongruity makes us laugh and brings us joy. It is possible to think that incongruity can lead us to despair or to pessimism as everything appears to be “out of order.” To laugh, it is not enough to notice incongruity; noting the incongruity of reason does not seem funny at all. In any case,

As a rule, laughing is a pleasant state; accordingly, the apprehension of the incongruity between what is conceived and what is perceived, i.e., reality, gives us pleasure, and we gladly give ourselves up to the spasmodic convulsion excited by this apprehension (WWR II, Chapter 8).

The reason that laughter implies joy, Schopenhauer explains, is that we laugh because incongruity is a failure of reason. Because our grave reason loses its pretense power. It is reason that falls into a manhole:

In the case of that suddenly appearing contrast between the perceived and the conceived, the perceived is always undoubtedly in the right, for it is in no way

subject to error, and needs no confirmation from outside, but is its own advocate. Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract concepts, cannot come down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of what is perceived. This triumph of knowledge of perception over thought gives us pleasure (WWR II, Chapter 8).

In this way, laughter is the triumph of perception, it is the victory of intuitive knowledge, and a happy moment of expansion to our body and will. The point that must be clear here is that laughter, as an intuitive perception, has an inner sense of victory, a kind of superiority over reason. "To see reason succumb is enjoyable. [...] We laugh because we see that our abstract thinking [...] cannot go beyond itself to achieve the objective reality" (Alberti 2002, p. 176). Would that be a "superiority laughter of intuitive knowledge"? What are the consequences of such an idea?

3. **The good life**

If laughter is a state of joy, are those who laugh in a Schopenhaurian way happy? Those who have intuitive knowledge up and strong against the calculating and exigent reason, are they more happy than others? To begin with, Schopenhauer's metaphysical thoughts excludes the possibility that happiness be the goal of existence. "Happiness on Earth is destined to be frustrated," says the pessimist. A good life is a contradiction. To believe in that is an innate error, itself an incongruity. The Will gives us the impression of a possible continuous happiness by a sequence of specific satisfactions. If happiness is the recognition of a permanent state of enjoyment, we shall never be happy. The world is full of opportunities to shows us that. According to the author, pain and disillusion are the only reality, the ultimate truth of existence. For Schopenhauer, pleasure is negative, a momentary absence of pain: "Only pain and want can be felt positively; and therefore they proclaim themselves; well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative" (WWR II, Chapter 46).

What is, then, the good life for Schopenhauer? Despite the sad truth of life, the author conceives that it is possible to be "kind of" happy. In order to write about happiness and the good life in his book *Parerga and Paralipomena*, however, Schopenhauer needs to turn away from his own metaphysical thoughts and look instead for a pragmatic meaning of life, isolating from empirical life what is true about happiness. He does not conceive the possibility that the empirical life would incorporate his metaphysical thought without despair, without an invitation to suicide. What we can do in empirical life is to avoid suffering, and Schopenhauer uses the Stoic philosophers to support his idea. Only reason, as an effort to avoid suffering, could lead us to the good life. Our hypothesis is that laughter could play an important role in this process, insofar as laughter, as an apprehension of the incongruity, can regulate reason with joy.

In his *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer asserts that a good life presupposes good health. It also depends profoundly on our temperament. Sane body, sane mind.

Schopenhauer asserts that a good life implies “a serene and happy temperament, happy to enjoy a perfect health, a clear understanding, lively and penetrating, which see things rightly, a moderate and light will, and, therefore, a good consciousness” (PP Chapter 2). In reality, what we are inside favors more our good life than what we have or what we represent to others. Therefore, what is decisive in what happens to a human being is how he feels it, how he perceives and understands it. In others words, how real and intuitive representations are subsumed under concepts, how reason works on this painful experience of life.

Hence, Schopenhauer asserts that “the world in which each of us live depends mainly of our own interpretation of it and, thus, it appears differently to different human beings; for one it is poor, tasteless and monotonous, to another it is rich, interesting and important” (PP Chapter 2). We may conclude that one who possesses, through reason, a light temperament will, with more efficiency, avoid pain and think about all pains without despair, keeping calm and serene. This way, if one is not truly happy, one will be at least open to the opportunity of joy every time joy “opens doors and windows” to us.

As noted above, laughter is an effect of perception. More than that, it is the perception of a failure of reason through incongruity and in that sense, is a joyful perception of our paradoxical reason, which at the same time demands something that is impossible to achieve. Thus, laughter in itself has nothing to do with funny objects; it is something related, essentially, to one's self. Even if it is also a collective behavior, it is primarily an inner activity. Schopenhauer recognizes here a fundamental relationship between laughter and loneliness:

I am not surprised that people are bored when they are alone; they cannot laugh when they are by themselves; even the very idea of such a thing seems to them absurd. Is laughter, then, only a signal for others and a mere sign, like a word? Lack of imagination and of mental keenness generally is what prevents them from laughing when they are alone. (PP Chapter 26)

The idea of “self-enjoyment” when one is alone reinforces the very notion that what causes laughter is a perception of one's mode of cognition through a constitutive incongruity. In that sense, it is remarkable how the author praise the English word “joy”:

In everything and with everything he [the human being] first of all enjoys only himself; this already applies to physical pleasures and how much truer is it of those of the mind! Therefore the English words “to enjoy oneself” are very apt expression; for example, we do not say "he enjoys Paris," but "he enjoys himself in Paris". (PP Chapter 2)

Now, if we laugh at incongruity as a cognitive perception, if laughter is an intuitive or perceptive knowledge defeating our severe reason, could laughter work on our "perception" in order to improve our understanding, leading us to "enjoy ourselves"? Schopenhauer recognizes, in his *Parerga*, that the one who laughs a lot is "happy." Moreover, a happy person "will laugh more honestly when he is capable of a great seriousness" (PP, Chapter 2). In order to be capable of conceiving the real and painful world with seriousness, we may suppose that laughter is necessary, a voice of intuitive knowledge that leads our reasoning, avoiding thus the blind enthusiasm of concepts and opening our interpretation to the very core of the world; showing us incongruity where reason attempts to fix, determine and judge.

Conclusion

If we define laughter as an effect of reason's distressing impossibility to comprehend the surrounding world with certainty, but we feel this impossibility with joy, a joy of perceptive knowledge, then we may have found a specific philosophic laughter in Schopenhauer's philosophy. The difference between this and other theories is that here, laughter works with perception and reflection, through a possible adjustment of reason. It is Schopenhauer's suggestion of a higher commitment to perception that places this laughter at an advanced level. Showing that our earnest life is only an illusion, laughter may guide philosophy to a serious yet joyful practice. Therefore, laughter, reason and interpretation are the same sole problem of incongruity, and laughter is a kind of joyful apprehension or response that reminds us of our enthusiastic and shortsighted reason, in order to create a proportion between what we aspire to and what we really have, thereby diminishing suffering.

There is, thus, an improvement when the truth of the fundamental incongruity of life does not necessarily lead to despair or suicide. The pessimism of Schopenhauer is at the same time an invitation to a brave laughter, a serious one. After all, who are those who do not laugh with Schopenhauer? Maybe the ones who do not accept the painful truth of life: that there is no full satisfaction, that the world is only my interpretation... The need to explain laughter by the fundamental opposition between perception and representation opens this pessimistic philosophy to new perspectives. Maybe it designs a pessimistic laughter. This laughter has nothing to do with happiness and is not a manifestation of a "satisfied" life, fulfilled by any goal or achievement; it is only the joyful experience of a moment of absence of reason, and in this way, an apprehension of truth through perception. That perhaps can explain why Schopenhauer himself wrote with such a surly humor, making fun of Hegel, for example. Perhaps this can explain an obscure commentary made by Nietzsche: "Seen from afar: the philosophy of Schopenhauer suggests that things happen in a way so unspeakably more idiotic than believed. Therein lies an improvement of perception"⁵.

⁵ Nietzsche, KGWB/NF-1884, 25[384]; posthumous fragment consulted at <http://www.nietzschesource.org>.

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