

Sigmund Freud: Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905)

excerpts from 2 different translations by James Strachey and Maurice Charney

It is easy to divine the characteristic of jokes on which the difference in their hearers' reaction to them depends. In the one case the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve such an aim – it becomes *pointed* (or *pointed*.) Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them.

Non-pointed jokes were described by Vischer as *abstract* jokes. I prefer to call them *innocent* jokes....

There is, first and foremost, one observation which warns us not to leave pointed jokes on one side in our investigation of the origin of the pleasure we take in jokes. The pleasurable effect of innocent jokes is as a rule a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearers. And it may be that a part even of this effect is to be attributed to the joke's intellectual content, as we have seen from suitable examples. A non-pointed joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes pointed ones so irresistible. Since the technique of both can be the same, a suspicion may be aroused in us that pointed jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access.

The purposes of jokes can easily be reviewed. Where a joke is not an aim in itself—that is, where it is not an innocent one—there are only two purposes that it may serve, and these

two can themselves be subsumed under a single heading. It is either a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure)....

The power which makes it difficult or impossible for women, and to a lesser degree for men as well, to enjoy undisguised obscenity is termed by us 'repression'; and we recognize in it the same psychical process which, in cases of serious illness, keeps whole complexes of impulses, together with their derivatives, away from consciousness, and which has turned out to be the main factor in the causation of what are known as psychoneuroses. It is our belief that civilization and higher education have a large influence in the development of repression, and we suppose that, under such conditions, the psychical organization undergoes an alteration (that can also emerge as an inherited disposition) as a result of which what was formerly felt as agreeable now seems unacceptable and is rejected with all possible psychical force. The repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have now, however, been repudiated by the censorship in us, are lost to us. But to the human psyche all renunciation is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that pointed jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost. When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut. In both cases the pleasure springs from the same source. We, however, could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or it would seem to us disgusting. We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help.

Thus what we suspected to begin with seems to confirmed: namely that pointed jokes have sources of pleasure at their disposal besides those open to innocent technique. And we may also once more repeat that with pointed jokes we are not in a position to distinguish by our feeling what part of the pleasure arises from the sources of their technique and what part from those of their purpose. Thus, strictly speaking, we do not know what we are laughing at. With all obscene jokes we are subject to glaring errors of judgement about the 'goodness' of jokes so far as this depends on formal determinants; the technique of such jokes is often quite wretched, but they have immense success in provoking laughter.

We will now examine the question of whether jokes play the same part in the service of a *hostile* purpose.

Here from the outset, we come upon the same situation. Since our individual childhood, and, similarly, since the childhood of human civilization, hostile impulses against our fellow men have been subject to the same restrictions, the same progressive repression, as our sexual urges... In so far as we are all able to feel that we are members of one people, we allow ourselves to disregard most of these restrictions in relation to a foreign people... Brutal hostility, forbidden by law, has been replaced by verbal invective; and a better knowledge of the interlinking of human impulses is more and more robbing us of the capacity for feeling angry with a fellow man who gets in our way. Though as children we are still endowed with a powerful inherited disposition to hostility, we are later taught by a higher personal civilization that it is an unworthy thing to use abusive language; and even where fighting has in itself remained permissible, the number of things which may not be employed as methods of fighting has extraordinarily increased.

Since we have been obliged to renounce the expression of hostility by deeds—held back by the passionless third person, in whose interest it is that personal security shall be preserved—we have, just as in the case of sexual aggressiveness, developed a new technique of invective, which aims at enlisting this third person against our enemy. By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter.

We are now prepared to realize the part played by jokes in hostile aggressiveness. A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible. It will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation, just as on other occasions we ourselves have often been bribed by an innocent joke into overestimating the substance of a statement expressed jokingly. This is brought out with perfect aptitude in the common phrase '*die Lacher auf seine Seite ziehen* (to bring the laughers over to our side)'.

The blocking of insult or an offensive reply through external circumstances is so frequent an occurrence that the pointed joke is used with special fondness in order to allow aggression or criticism against superiors who exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure. The charm of caricatures lies in this same factor: we laugh at them even if

they are unsuccessful simply because we count rebellion against authority as a merit....

Among the institutions which cynical jokes are in the habit of attacking none is more important or more strictly guarded by moral regulations but at the same time more inviting to attack than the institution of marriage, at which accordingly, the majority of cynical jokes are aimed. There is no more personal claim that for sexual freedom and at no point has civilization tried to exercise severer suppression than in the sphere of sexuality. A single example will be enough for our purposes—the one mentioned on p.92, 'An Entry in Prince Carnival's Album':

'A wife is like an umbrella--sooner or later one takes a cab.'

We have already discussed the complicated technique of this example: a bewildering and apparently impossible simile, which however, as we now see, is not in itself a joke; further an allusion (a cab is a public vehicle); and, as its most powerful technical method, an omission which increases the unintelligibility. The simile may be worked out as follows. One marries in order to protect oneself against the temptations of sensuality, but it turns out nevertheless that marriage does not allow of the satisfaction of needs that are somewhat stronger than usual. In just the same way, one takes an umbrella with one to protect oneself from the rain and nevertheless gets wet in the rain. In both cases one must look around for a stronger protection: in the latter case one must take a public vehicle, and in the former a woman who is accessible in return for money. The joke has now been almost entirely replaced by a piece of cynicism. One does not venture

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to declare aloud and openly that marriage is not an arrangement calculated to satisfy a man's sexuality, unless one is driven to do so perhaps by the love of truth and eagerness for reform of a Christian von Ehrenfels. The strength of this joke lies in the fact that nevertheless--in all kinds of roundabout ways—it *has* said what we don't dare say....

Among the various sorts of inner inhibition or suppression is one that deserves our special interest because it is the most far-reaching. It is called "repression" and is recognized by its ability to exclude from consciousness the impulses and their derivatives. We will eventually learn that the pointed joke is able to release pleasure, even from sources subject to repression. If, as indicated above, the triumph over external obstacles can be traced back to the triumph over inner inhibitions and repressions, then we can say that the pointed joke demonstrates the chief characteristic of the workings of jokes—to free pleasure by the elimination of inhibitions—more clearly than all the other phases of the development of jokes. The pointed joke strengthens the tendencies, in whose service it functions, by bringing support from impulses that are maintained in suppression, or it puts itself generally at the service of suppressed tendencies....

..Let us assume that there is an urge to insult a certain person; but this is so strongly opposed by feeling of propriety or of aesthetic culture that the insult cannot take place. If, for instance, it were able to break through as a result of some change of emotional condition or mood, this breakthrough by the insulting purpose would be felt subsequently with unpleasure. Thus the insult does not take place. Let us now suppose, however, that the possibility is presented of deriving a good joke from the material of the words and thoughts used for

the insult—the possibility, that is, of releasing pleasure from other sources which are not obstructed by the same suppression. This second development of pleasure could, nevertheless, not occur unless the insult were permitted; but as soon as the latter is permitted the new release of pleasure is also joined to it....

Dealing with pointed jokes shows that under such circumstances the suppressed tendency, through help from the pleasure of the joke, can become strong enough to overcome the otherwise stronger inhibition. The insult takes place, because the joke is thus made possible. The enjoyment obtained is not only that produced by the joke: it is incomparable greater. It is so much greater than the pleasure from the joke that we must suppose that the hitherto suppressed purpose has succeeded in making its way through, perhaps without any diminution whatever. It is in such circumstances that the pointed joke is received with the heartiest laughter....

We are now able to state the formula for the mode of operation of pointed jokes. They put themselves at the service of purposes in order that, by means of using the pleasure from jokes as a fore-pleasure, they may produce new pleasure by lifting suppressions and repressions. If now we survey the course of development of the joke, we may say that from its beginning to its perfecting it remains true to its essential nature. It begins as play, in order to derive pleasure from the free use of words and thoughts. As soon as the strengthening of reasoning puts an end to this play with words as being senseless, and with thoughts as being nonsensical, it changes into a jest, in order that it may retain these sources of pleasure and be able to achieve fresh pleasure from the liberation of

nonsense. Next, as a joke proper, but still a non-pointed one, it gives its assistance to thoughts and strengthens them against the challenge of critical judgement, a process in which the 'principle of confusion of sources of pleasure' is of use to it. And finally it comes to the help of major purposes which are combating suppression, in order to lift their internal inhibitions by the 'principle of fore-pleasure'. Reason, critical judgement, suppression—these are the forces against which it fights in succession; it holds fast to the original sources of verbal pleasure and, from the stage of the jest onwards, opens new sources of pleasure for itself by lifting inhibitions. The pleasure that it produces, whether it is pleasure in play or pleasure in lifting inhibitions, can invariably be traced back to economy in psychical expenditure, provided that this view does not contradict the essential nature of pleasure and that it proved itself fruitful in other directions....

In laughter, therefore, according to our assumption, the conditions are such that a quantity of psychological energy previously committed to repression is now freely expended. Although not every laugh is a sign of pleasure—but certainly the laugh over a joke is—we will be inclined to attribute this pleasure to the lifting of the previously committed psychological energy. When we see that the hearer of a joke laughs but that the maker of the joke cannot laugh, this may signify to us that in the hearer a commitment of energy has been lifted and discharged, whereas in the formation of the joke there are impediments either to the lifting or to the possibility of removal of this commitment. The psychological process in the hearer, the third part of the joke, we can most appropriately characterize by emphasizing the fact that he buys

the pleasure of the joke with very little expenditure of his own. The pleasure is a gift to him, so to speak. The words of the joke that hears necessarily produce in him a conception or a train of thought that great inner obstacles opposed themselves against. He would have had to make his own effort in order to make it occur spontaneously in the first person, and he would have had to exert at least as much psychological energy as would balance the strength of the inhibition, suppression, or repression. This psychological expenditure he has saved himself.

According to our previous discussion, we might say that this pleasure is in proportion to this saving. Our insight into the mechanics of laughter would rather make us phrase it this way: The psychological energy previously committed to inhibition is now, through the restitution of the tabooed idea through auditory perception, suddenly rendered superfluous, has been lifted, and is now ready to be discharged by laughter. Essentially the two ways of representing what happens come to the same thing because the expenditure of energy that is saved corresponds exactly to the inhibition that has become superfluous. But the second way of putting it is more satisfactory because it allows us to say that the hearer of the joke laughs with the sum total of psychological energy that has been freed by the release of energy committed to inhibition. He laughs, off, as it were, this sum total of psychological energy.

$$L = \sum (\text{released inhibited energy})$$

Joke effect = $f(\text{audience})$
factors in audience = underlying frustration, aggression, repression
 \therefore Stalin created times for great laughter