

The Secret of *Seinfeld's* Humor

Jorge J.E. Gracia on the Significance of the Insignificant

One of the most paradoxical features of the *Seinfeld* phenomenon is the extraordinary popularity of the TV series, particularly with younger Americans, in the face of the insignificance of the topics around which the show revolves. How can a show that deals with what appear to be ordinary, everyday occurrences have such great appeal to a generation of Americans that seems to thrive on sex, violence, and catastrophe? The sex on *Seinfeld* is tame and the violence nonexistent. So, what is the secret of its success? The answer, of course, has to do with the nature of comedy and its opposite, tragedy.

Comedy, Tragedy, and *Seinfeld*

Why do we laugh, and why do we cry? Everybody knows that we laugh at what is funny and we cry at what is sad, but no one yet has come up with an acceptable theory of what is funny and what is sad. Every day we experience things that make us laugh and things that make us cry, and there are persons – actors, movie directors, authors – who seem to know how to cause both. The success of movies, TV shows, and fiction in general surely depends on whether they make us laugh or cry. What is it, though, that brings about these effects? It is very difficult to say. The problem is that, as St. Augustine observed about time, we seem to know what it is until we ask about it.

There is no scarcity of things that cause us to laugh and cry, and similarly, there is no scarcity of views and attempts to explain why we do so. This is not a case in which a lack of examples could contribute to the difficulty in explaining the facts. Of course, along with everyone else, I do not know the satisfactory answer, and frankly, at the moment I am not interested in it. Indeed, it would be quite boring to go through and examine the many theories that have been proposed to explain the funny and the sad. That is better dealt with in learned treatises and doctoral dissertations which collect dust in impressive libraries.

My task here is different. I am going to suggest one way of distinguishing the funny and the sad, without claiming that this is the only way to do so, that is, that it has perennial and universal validity. I leave such inflated claims for more sober treatments that seek scientific accuracy. After all, there is something incongruous about discussing the funny and the

sad scientifically, for these are matters of emotion and feeling, of the heart if you will, rather than of science and the intellect.

The thesis I am going to illustrate, since I will not be mounting a defense properly speaking, is that we laugh at something because we see in it the significance of the insignificant, and that we cry at something else because through it we grasp the insignificance of the significant. Doesn't this formula sound impressive? It is meant to, although in fact I want to do more than to impress you. I want you to see something that I think I have grasped with some clarity. So,

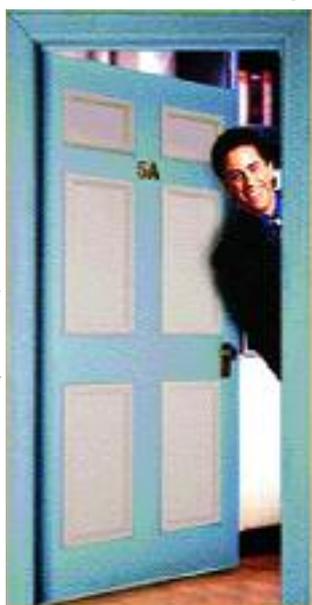
what do I mean by this pedantic formulation?

Actually nothing pedantic. Or even very profound. Not even something new. It could not be very profound because if it were, it could not describe something with which we are so frequently and closely acquainted; it could not be new because something experienced so frequently could not have been overlooked in human history.

I mean to suggest that one of the reasons we laugh at a play, a show, or a book is that in it we see ourselves in a new light. All of a sudden we consider ourselves, our every day idiosyncrasies, manners, ways, and customs, the peculiarities that we generally do not notice but that permeate our existence, presented for what they are, regularities of daily living that pass us by as insignificant and yet have significance. A good comedy usually makes these come alive. Comedy is about

what is ordinary, but it has to do not with accepting it as ordinary, but rather with seeing it as extraordinary. Here lies the key to success in comedy, and here lies the secret of humor in *Seinfeld*.

This series, like other successful comedies, attracts attention by capturing the significance of the insignificant. *Seinfeld* is not about important events in the lives of the protagonists; it is about what no one would consider important. In one of its most self-reflective moments, the show acknowledged this point: "It is about nothing," says the Executive of NBC who is considering producing it. Yet, the aim of the series is precisely to bring out these commonplaces. In doing so, it underscores that they are pertinent in ways that we never thought they were, and certainly in ways the characters themselves do not think they are. The portrayal of an event, or peculiarity, itself does not include



the realization by the characters of what the audience realizes. The players continue to regard it as unimportant, but the audience, which sees itself through the characters immersed in the situation, realizes its relevance.

The case of the sad, what makes us cry, is just the opposite. A tragedy is not concerned with what is common and unimportant in our everyday lives, but rather the reverse. The subject matter of tragedy is momentous: love, death, betrayal, vice, virtue, pain, injustice, cruelty, revenge. Do I need to continue? The list is long, but anyone can easily distinguish these themes from those of comedy. No tragedy has ever been written about the sale of a van, mail delivery, or non-fat yogurt. And the same can be said about the characters of the play. In a piece intended to make you sad, the characters are, as the saying goes, 'larger than life'. In matters of sadness, we generally deal with heroes and villains, with victims and ogres.

The aim of a tragedy is not to underscore the significance of an event or character. This is assumed and evident. Too much literary criticism takes for granted that this is in fact what tragedies are aimed to do. No. The sad makes us see precisely that what we regard as significant and important is in some ways insignificant. Our will, our love, our cruelty, are, in the general scheme of things, unimportant. The gods have more momentous matters with which to concern themselves. In tragedy, then, as in comedy, our world is turned upside down. The order of our values and priorities is reversed. We learn that our beliefs do not hold, and a revision of them, a correction in our understanding of the way things are, must take place. But in tragedy, unlike in comedy, we do not laugh, because this realization involves the shattering of what we hold dear. Whereas comedy reveals to us the relevance of much in our lives to which we pay no attention, tragedy shows us that what we regard as important is not really so. The first teaches us a lesson without pain; the second makes us learn a shattering truth.

Comedy, unlike tragedy, focuses on what we ordinarily regard as insignificant because it is in this that the follies, absurdities, and idiosyncrasies of cultures are revealed. In death, suffering, catastrophes, great vices and virtues, crimes, and the like – which are the stuff out of which tragedy is made – the core of human nature is made evident. Human behavior at this level is the same or very similar, and cultural differences appear only as thin veneers that lack import. When it comes to comedy, on the contrary, it is the innocuous, everyday customs, attitudes, and events that take precedence, revealing as they do, the contradictions, paradoxes, and relativity of different cultures. This is one reason why comedy dates more easily than tragedy.

Jorge J.E. Gracia is Samuel P. Capan Chair and SUNY Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Reprinted by permission of Open Court Publishing Company, a division of Carus Publishing Company, Peru, IL, from Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book About Everything and Nothing edited by William Irwin, copyright ©2000 by Carus Publishing Company.

The inevitable

Philosophy Lightbulb Jokes

How many philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?
It depends on how you define 'change'.

How many existentialists does it take to change a light bulb?
Two – one to bemoan the darkness until the other redefines something else as light.

How many analytic philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?
None – it's a pseudo-problem...light bulbs give off light (hence the name). If the bulb was broken and wasn't giving off light, it wouldn't be a 'light bulb' now would it? (oh, where has rigour gone?!)

How many Heraclitians does it take to change a light bulb?
None – it's never the same light bulb again anyway

How many Epicureans does it take to change a light bulb?
None – they're too busy taking advantage of the darkness!

How many Marxists does it take to change a lightbulb?
None. The lightbulb contains the seeds of its own revolution.

How many Nietzscheans does it take to change a light bulb?
0.00001

How many Natural Selectionists does it take to change a lightbulb?
Well actually, we won't even *try* to change the bulb. We will simply stop using the room that has the burned out bulb, and start using only rooms with *functioning* bulbs. That way, over time,

How many fatalists does it take to change a light bulb?
None, why fight it?

How many Humeans does it take to change a light bulb?
None – since the bulb actually contains a gaseous substance, and thus contains no 'abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number' nor any 'experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence' it will simply be removed and thrown in the fire...

How many Kantians does it take to change a light bulb?
Two to change the phenomenal bulb; and one to explain that we might not have actually changed the *bulb-an-sich* at all.

How many theologians does it take to change a light bulb?
100 – one to change the bulb, and 99 to explain why an infinite God of love would allow darkness to occur in the world at all.