

# THE INCONGRUITY OF INCONGRUITY THEORIES OF HUMOR

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**ABSTRACT:** The article critically reviews the Incongruity Theory of Humor reaching the conclusion that it has to be essentially restructured. Leaving aside the question of scope, it is shown that the theory is inadequate even for those cases for which it is thought to be especially well suited – that it cannot account either for the pleasurable effect of jokes or for aesthetic pleasure. I argue that it is the *resolution* of the incongruity rather than its mere apprehension, which is that source of the amusement or aesthetic delight. Once the theory is thus restructured, the Superiority Theory of Humor and the Relief Theory can be seen as supplementary to it.

**KEYWORDS:** Humor, Resolution of Incongruity

Socrates: And when we laugh ... do we feel pain or pleasure?

Protarchus: Clearly we feel pleasure.

(Plato, *Philebus*, 50)

In the literature on humor and laughter it is customary to distinguish between three classical theories: The Superiority Theory (Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes), the Relief Theory (Spencer, Freud) and the Incongruity Theory (Cicero, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard).<sup>1</sup> The three theories are usually seen as rivals, competing for the most plausible answers to questions like: „Why do we laugh?“, „What is the nature of humor?“, or „What does the comical consist of?“

The Superiority Theory says that the comical is perceived as inferior and our laughter is an expression of the sudden realization of our superiority. The Relief Theory emphasizes the liberating effect of humor. Laughter is seen as a discharge of surplus energy which alleviates psychic tension. The Incongruity Theory maintains that the object of amuse-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Monroe (1967). See also Morreall (1987a). This anthology contains a selection of texts from the classical representatives of the three theories, as well as articles of contemporary theoreticians. All the references and quotations refer to this anthology.

ment consists in some kind of incongruity and that laughter is an expression of our enjoyment of the incongruous.

The Incongruity Theory is the most popular of the three at present. This is mainly because its rivals are considered discredited. Hutcheson, in his response to Hobbes, has already pointed out that feelings of superiority are neither necessary nor sufficient for amusement or laughter.<sup>2</sup> As to the Relief Theory, it has been noted that it „simply seems false that every time we laugh we are working off excess energy“ (Morreall 1987a, 6). More generally, the two rival theories are seen „inadequate in capturing the essence of humor, because they focus on the incidental benefits to the amused person rather than on what it is about amusing things that makes them amusing“ (Morreall 1987a, 6).

The Incongruity Theory, especially in its contemporary versions, focuses on the formal object of amusement. The theory is considered to be particularly well suited to account for the humorous laughter and amusement occasioned by *jokes*, though it has often been extended to other objects of amusement (comedy, satire, parody, mimic, clowning, trickery, caricature, slapstick, absent-mindedness, folly, etc.). Some authors also claim that the Incongruity Theory reveals the connection between the humorous and the aesthetic, that the enjoyment of incongruities forms the basis of aesthetic enjoyment. I shall not be concerned here with the question whether the concept of incongruity adequately covers all cases of laughter, humorous amusement, or aesthetic pleasure, since I shall argue that the Incongruity Theory is inadequate even for those cases for which it is thought to be especially well suited. I will show that the Incongruity Theory cannot account either for the pleasurable effect of jokes or for aesthetic pleasure. I argue that the Incongruity Theory, as it stands, stands on its head; that it has to be essentially restructured if it is to account for what it purports to account for. I also show that once the Incongruity Theory is restructured, the Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory can be seen as supplementary to it.

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The first traces of the Incongruity Theory can be found in Cicero and Kant, but it was not until Schopenhauer that the theory was fully arti-

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<sup>2</sup> Hutcheson, F.: *Reflections upon Laughter*. Glasgow 1750. See esp. Morreall (1987a, 26 – 31).

culated. Indeed, Schopenhauer is the *locus classicus*; the following passage is often invoked by contemporary incongruists:

The cause of Laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. It often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through *one* concept and the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary followers of the Incongruity Theory consider this account to be in need of refinement and revision, but the central idea, that the object of amusement and laughter is the incongruous, has been accepted by all.<sup>4</sup>

Let us see how it is supposed to work. Here are two jokes analyzed by Schopenhauer:

When someone had declared that he was fond of walking alone, an Austrian said to him: „You like walking alone; so do I: Therefore we can go together.“

Schopenhauer explains: „He starts from the conception, ‚A pleasure which two love they can enjoy in common,‘ and subsumes under it the very case which excludes community.“

The soldiers in the guardroom who allowed a prisoner who was brought in to join in their game of cards, then quarreled with him for cheating, and turned him out.

Schopenhauer explains: „They let themselves be led by the general conception, ‚Bad companions are turned out,‘ and forgot that he is also a prisoner.“<sup>5</sup> This seems basically right.

Yet there is a problem. From Plato to the present day, all theoreticians of humor have stressed that amusement and laughter are pleasurable. The pleasurable effect of the comical could easily be accounted for by the Relief from Restraint Theory or by the Superiority Theory. But what

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<sup>3</sup> Schopenhauer, A.: *The World as Will and Idea*, quoted from Morreall (1987a, 52).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Clark (1987), Morreall (1987b), Scruton (1987), and Martin (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Morreall (1987a, 58). Basically the same analysis of examples of amusing stories is given by Clark (1987, 147 - 148).

about the Incongruity Theory? Is it reasonable to assume that we find pleasure in incongruities?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* assigns to „incongruity“ the following meanings:

- (i) Disagreement in character or qualities; want of accordance or harmony; discrepancy; inconsistency.
- (ii) Want of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting; unsuitableness, inappropriateness, absurdity.
- (iii) Want of harmony of parts or elements; want of self-consistency.

The range of these meanings certainly covers the sense in which Schopenhauer and his followers use the concept. Yet when we reflect upon them they do not strike us as conveying or invoking pleasurable connotations. In fact, our associations seem to go in the opposite direction. We tend to associate „discrepancy“, „inconsistency“, „inappropriateness“, „want of harmony“, etc., with something disagreeable, displeasing or disturbing, rather than with something agreeable or pleasing.

This uneasy feeling is only strengthened when we consider explanations offered by other classical proponents of the Incongruity Theory. In Chapter 63, Book II, *On the Orator*, Cicero writes:

The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said: here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh. (Morreall 1987a, 18)

But why should disappointed expectations make us laugh? Normally, when our expectations are disappointed we just feel disappointment, which is hardly a pleasurable feeling. With Kant's explanation of laughter we get the same problem. In *The Critique of Judgement* he writes:

Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing (Morreall 1987a, 47).

Shouldn't we feel frustrated rather than amused?

The same problem afflicts contemporary versions of the Incongruity Theory. Thus, for example, John Morreall says that „humor always involves the enjoyment of a perceived or imagined incongruity“ (Morreall 1987b, 136), and Michael Clark writes: „I have insisted that a reason for the enjoyment in cases of amusement must be the apparent incongruity of the object“ (Clark 1987, 154).

It is not difficult to see why the incongruity theorists were led to believe that incongruities are enjoyable. Since we enjoy jokes, and since jokes involve incongruities, they (erroneously) concluded that „humor always involves the enjoyment of a perceived or imagined incongruity“, that ‘the incongruous’ *as such* is *the* reason, or at least „a reason for the enjoyment.“ Schopenhauer himself (unlike some of his followers) did not consider this conclusion quite so self-evident, and he offered an elaborate argument in its support. Let me quote in full:

In every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all, requires no confirmation from without, but answers for itself. Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract conceptions, cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of difference of the concrete. This victory of knowledge of perception over thought affords us pleasure. For perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself. It is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and gaiety; moreover it is attended with no exertion. With thinking the opposite is the case; it is the second power of knowledge, the exercise of which always demands some, and often considerable exertion. Besides, it is the conception of thought that often opposes the gratification of our immediate desires, for, as the medium of the past, the future and of seriousness, they are the vehicle of our fears, our repentance, and all our cares. It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency (Morreall 1987a, 160).

Schopenhauer’s explanation fits the general framework of his heroic metaphysics with its irrationalist overtones. Considered by itself, however, it is not very convincing. Leaving other problems aside, it just doesn’t seem plausible that we should be pleased to see our faculties of reason so helplessly insufficient. Schopenhauer’s argument failed to convince Santayana, who saw the problem clearly:

The comic accident falsifies the nature before us, starts a wrong analogy in the mind, a suggestion that cannot be carried out. In a word, we are in the presence of an absurdity; and man, being a rational animal, can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold (Morreall 1987a, 92).

I think contemporary psychologists would agree with Santayana that incongruities „displease us...as by their nature they must“, that “incongruities, as such, always remain unpleasant“ (Morreall 1987a, 93). These

observations led Santayana to reject the idea that there is any intrinsic connection between humor and incongruity. I believe that even though his observations were correct, there is something essentially right about the idea that the humorous has to do with the incongruous. The Incongruity Theory need not be rejected altogether. It has to be, however, radically restructured, or rather, as I will show, inverted. In order to see how, let us once more invoke Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer actually unwittingly points to instructive counter-examples when he says that „all laughter is... occasioned by a paradox“. It is clear that Schopenhauer does not use the term ‚paradox‘ in quite the same sense as it is used by contemporary logicians. Nevertheless, the question of why we don't laugh at paradoxes arises just the same. Why aren't we amused by paradoxes (such as those of Russell, Grelling, Hempel or Goodman) the way we are amused by jokes? They certainly exemplify incongruities *par excellence*. Yet we find them disturbing and confusing, rather than pleasing or amusing.

Should we say that there are two kinds of incongruities: the disturbing ones and the pleasing ones? I think that Santayana was essentially right when he insisted that incongruities *as such* are always disturbing. Perhaps the differences in degrees of sharpness among various types of incongruities may account for the different reaction prompted by jokes and paradoxes. Couldn't we say that the incongruities involved in jokes are appreciably milder? Schopenhauer could, perhaps, accept this to account for bad jokes but hardly for good ones. For this suggestion is at odds with his other thesis (also endorsed by contemporary incongruity theorists) that the more glaring the incongruity, the more laughable it is. Let me quote again:

The greater and more unexpected, in the apprehension of the laughter, this incongruity is, the more violent will be his laughter (Morreall 1987a, 55).

... the more correct the subsumption of such objects under a concept may be from one point of view, and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox... whether this is expressed in words or in action (Morreall 1987a, 51).

We thus come back to the same problem. One could suggest that the difference between paradoxes and jokes is that the former typically involve highly abstract concepts and their structure is purely formal, while the latter typically involve a human element and have a narrative structure.

Perhaps, as Bergson has suggested, „the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*“ (Morreall 1987a, 117). It may indeed be true that what we laugh at typically involves a human element, but this doesn't really solve our problem. For some paradoxes also involve a human element (e.g. Zeno's paradoxes, or the liar's paradox) and may be presented in a form of a narrative (e.g., Newcomb's paradox, or the Surprise Test paradox). This, however, does not make them less disturbing. The difference has to be sought elsewhere.

The reason we are not amused when we reflect on paradoxes is that we usually cannot find an acceptable solution. We do not understand what has gone wrong, where the mistake is, where the misconception is. We do not quite know how we got into this cognitively incongruous and logically intolerable situation, nor how to get out of it. It is thus only natural that the effect of the paradox is highly disturbing. This is not the case with the incongruities exhibited by jokes, even when their structure can be described as paradoxical. Jokes do not disturb the natural order of things. With jokes we understand the source of the incongruity, the misapplication of the conception, the reason for the mistake, since understanding a joke means seeing how the incongruity involved can be resolved. Its enjoyment, often expressed by laughter, is occasioned by a shift from the state of cognitive dissonance to that of cognitive resonance. If we find Schopenhauer's story about the Austrian amusing it is not because of the fact that it produces an incongruity, but because we realize what is the mistake which gave rise to this incongruity. Schopenhauer's own explanation of the humorous effect (in the two examples quoted above) is not in fact a description of the incongruity, but a description of the misconception which produced it. Once the source of the incongruity is identified, the incongruity disappears, the incongruous becomes congruous again. It is *thus the resolution of the incongruity* rather than its apprehension which is the source of amusement.

Consider cases of delayed reaction to jokes, or cases when jokes fail to elicit their desired response. What happens when we don't understand the joke, when we don't „get it“? We perceive the incongruity all right, but we fail to see how it is resolved. We are, so to speak, stuck with the incongruous. Consider the following example:

Why was Oscar Wilde? Because he didn't get his *Daily Mail*.

It may happen that we don't *get* this joke at first for we might not immediately realize that the punch line is based on the phonetic equi-

vocation of „mail“ and „male“. Until we realize this we are stuck with the incongruity of the question (its ambivalence and strangeness) as we are stuck with the incongruity of the answer (which does not supply good reason for Oscar Wilde's ‚wildness‘). Consequently we are not amused. We tend to laugh only when these incongruities dissolve, when we suddenly realize how everything fits together, how it all makes sense after all.

This example brings us to another misconception or incongruity of the Incongruity Theory. All the classical theoreticians noted the importance of the element of suddenness: Hobbes speaks about „sudden glory“, Kant about „sudden transformation of expectations“, Schopenhauer about „sudden perception of incongruity“. The element of suddenness has also been stressed by contemporary incongruity theorists: Thus Morreall, for example, writes: „Not just any change in psychological state will trigger laughter... the change must be sudden“ (Morreall 1987b, 133). He subsequently uses the expression „psychological *shift*“ to emphasize the *instantaneous* nature of this change. But does it really make sense to speak of „sudden perception of incongruity“ or „psychological shift“ in connection with strained expectations, apprehension of strangeness, dissonance, etc. There is nothing inherently sudden or instantaneous about being puzzled by, or being stuck with, the incongruous. What is sudden or instantaneous is the dissolution of the incongruities, the realization that the incongruous is congruous after all as soon as we identify its source.

If we are right that the true cause of amusement is resolving the incongruous rather than apprehending it, we need to explain why we don't respond to the solution of a paradox the same way that we respond to a good joke. The main reason is that the solution of the incongruities involved in a real paradox typically requires a revision, often quite a drastic one, of some of our basic intuitions or concepts. Typically there is a ‚price‘ to be paid for the solution. With jokes (and other species of the humorous) the incongruities are resolved within our existing conceptual framework. No revisions of basic intuitions are required, we pay no ‚price‘ for the ‚solution‘. This is also true of puzzles. Indeed, from the present point of view jokes and puzzles belong to the same family. Yet there are also significant differences. Mathematical puzzles and crossword puzzles do not look like jokes and our reactions to them are correspondingly different. The relevant difference here is that the resolution of

the incongruous in jokes is spontaneous and typically quite effortless, while that of puzzles requires ingenuity and exertion of cognitive energy. Mathematical puzzles typically present a genuine cognitive problem, the solution of which may not be easy. This is not the case with jokes. The incongruities of jokes are spontaneously *dissolved* by the common faculty of understanding rather than solved by intellectual ingenuity. It should also be noted that resolution of puzzles takes time. The method of trial and error is often applied. This is true even of crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzles and other intellectually not too demanding tasks. With jokes we can hardly speak of trial and error, for the dissolution of the incongruous is typically as spontaneous as it is obvious. Jokes can be viewed as a special kind, or limiting case, of puzzles, in which the resolution of the incongruous is trivial. Or, to put it differently, the more trivial the puzzle (i.e., its resolution) the closer we get to jokes. What attests to the triviality of jokes is that the incongruity is often dissolved as soon as it is apprehended. The apprehension and the resolution may in such cases appear indistinguishable. This may be another reason why so many theorists have come to the conclusion that incongruities as such are amusing.

Let me now turn to some alleged counterexamples. The suggestion that the object of enjoyment is the resolution of the incongruity rather than the incongruity itself is explicitly rejected by Morreall. „[T]he main thing I want to establish“, he writes, „is the most obvious – that it is possible to be faced with some incongruity and simply enjoy it, without feeling compelled to figure it out“ (Morreall 1987c, 196). Morreall illustrates his claim by the following example:

Humor based on unresolved incongruity can be found not only in jokes and cartoons, but also in real life. Consider, for example, situations in which we have overlooked the obvious, as when we spend several minutes searching for our glasses, only to discover that they are on our head. To be amused by such situations, we do not need to be able to resolve their incongruity – indeed we usually find them funnier if they seem simply absurd (Morreall 1987c, 199).

I think that neither the claim nor the example which is supposed to illustrate it are very convincing. When we discover the glasses on our head we do not laugh because we are stuck with some unresolved incongruity. If we find it funny it is precisely because we realize that we

have „overlooked the obvious“, because we have figured it out and thus resolved the incongruity.

Consider also the often cited example of laughter occasioned by watching the victim of the banana peel, which is allegedly also explained by the Incongruity Theory. The incongruity here is, presumably, the irregularity or the unexpectedness of the event: a walking man suddenly falls. Now, imagine seeing people suddenly falling, without the slightest clue as to the reason for this irregularity. The incongruity in this case would, I suppose, be even stronger,<sup>6</sup> yet it wouldn't be amusing at all. It is only when we understand the cause of the incongruous that we can afford to laugh. But then the incongruity disappears. The incongruity is spontaneously resolved once we realize what the reason is for the apparent irregularity. This example can be projected onto other irregularities and bizarre behavior. People sometimes laugh at drunkards. The same behavior which elicits laughter when we know that the person is intoxicated would, however, be quite disturbing, or even frightening, should we have no clue as to its causes. (Incidentally, I am not claiming that the proposed Inverted Incongruity Model is best suited to explain all cases of amusement or laughter. Our laughter at a man who slips on a banana skin is perhaps better explained by the Superiority Theory. My claim is rather that insofar as the Incongruity Theory is used to explain such cases (as it is used by Martin, for example) the explanation is better when it is inverted.)

Even if we cannot accept Morreall's account in general, perhaps we should admit that there are at least some examples which fit his claim that "*Getting a joke... is never the complete elimination of incongruity*" (Morreall 1987c, 199). *Prima facie*, this seems to be just the right thing to say about absurd or nonsense jokes. Morreall gives an example of a joking question: "What's the difference between the duck with one of its legs both the same?", and goes on to explain:

Here the fun lies precisely in our inability to switch to an alternative scheme which turns the joke into a coherent question (Morreall 1987c, 197).

But is this really a case of unresolved incongruity? In a sense: Yes, but only in *a* sense. It is quite true that the incongruous remains incongruous: the question remains incoherent and we do not manage to answer it. But are we really stuck with the incongruous in the same way as

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<sup>6</sup> After all, we do expect people to slip on banana skins.

when we try to figure out what is wrong with statements like “This sentence is false”? We may be initially puzzled by the absurd question, but we do not *remain* puzzled (as in the case of a paradox, or an unresolved puzzle). For we instantly realize (again unlike the case of a paradox or puzzle) the source of the incongruous – namely, the faulty logic of the question. We immediately dissolve the incongruity by identifying its faulty logic, by realizing that there is nothing to be answered. If we find such questions amusing it is not because we cannot figure out the source of their incongruity. It is because their resolution is trivial. It consists in realizing how silly the incongruities are. But when the incongruous strikes us as silly it is not because it is incongruous (paradoxes don’t strike us as silly) but because its resolution is trivial. This applies also to other cases of nonsense species of humor. What we tend to laugh at is the faulty logic. But we can laugh at it only because we know that it is faulty, or rather, when we realize what the fault is.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that the Inverted Incongruity Model I am proposing need not be seen as incompatible with the Superiority Theory or with the Relief Theory. Indeed, the two theories may now be seen as supplementary, providing deeper psychological or physiological explanations within the basic conceptual framework of the suggested model. We might thus want to say with Hobbes that “the passion of laughter”, occasioned by the resolution of incongruities, “is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves” (Morreall 1987a, 20) – a kind of self-congratulation. We may also want to acknowledge Freud’s insight as to the liberating element of

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<sup>7</sup> Morreall is well aware of the fact that aside from the context of humor there is nothing especially pleasurable about incongruities. „That we can enjoy incongruity at all“, he says, „is quite an accomplishment in *homo ludens*. That we can enjoy it even when it evokes repulsion or puzzlement, shows how profoundly aesthetic a species we are“ (Morreall 1987c, 205). Morreall explains that our ability to enjoy incongruity in the case of humor is facilitated by our lack of practical and theoretical concern. We adopt a playful attitude (which he identifies with the aesthetic attitude, or aesthetic enjoyment), „so that the violation of conceptual patterns won’t evoke negative emotions or disorientation“ (Morreall 1987c, 206). If our present analysis is right, we need not postulate the lack of practical or theoretical concern with incongruities to account for our extraordinary ability to enjoy them. Instead, our lack of practical and theoretical concern is explained by the intrinsic triviality of the resolution of the incongruities involved in jokes and other species of the humorous. Since there is nothing to be learned from the resolution of the incongruities involved, it would simply be unrewarding to take a practical or theoretical interest in them. Quite often the incongruities are just plain silly.

relief triggered by the resolution of the incongruous. We might now, perhaps, even accommodate Kant's „sudden transformation of strained expectations into nothing“, as an aspect of the dissolution of the incongruous.<sup>8</sup>

Let me finally turn to the issue of the alleged *aesthetic* enjoyment of incongruities. Morreall claims that „humor is a kind of aesthetic experience“ (Martin 1981, 66). M. W. Martin in his article „Humor and the Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities“ opposes this generalization, concluding that „on one fairly broad definition of aesthetic satisfaction not all amusement qualifies, although much does“ (Martin 1987, 180). I do not wish to take sides in this dispute, for I take exception to the assumption that they both share – namely, that incongruities give rise to *aesthetic satisfaction* or that we find *aesthetic enjoyment* in them. For the same problem which plagues the incongruity account of humorous enjoyment reappears, perhaps even more glaringly, with respect to aesthetic enjoyment.

Let us, for argument's sake, assume that the proper object of aesthetic enjoyment or aesthetic satisfaction is our perception of incongruities. Consider again the meanings of „incongruity“ listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* quoted above, but this time in the context of art criticism. How would we take an art review which describes the exhibits in terms of „disagreement in character and qualities“, „want of accordance and harmony“, „inconsistency“, „want of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting“, „inappropriateness“, „want of harmony of parts and elements“, „want of self-consistency“, etc. Would we interpret such remarks as an expression of the critic's aesthetic enjoyments, satisfaction, or appreciation? It seems more likely we would take them as pretty devastating criticism of aesthetic failures. We would take it that the critic is pointing out aesthetic deficiencies rather than merits, what is aesthetically bad rather than what is aesthetically good. Should we conclude

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<sup>8</sup> My suggestion that Superiority Theories and Relief from Restraint Theories need not be seen as rivals to the Incongruity Theory but rather as complementary is not new. Michael Clark, for example, makes the same claim with respect with his version of the Incongruity Theory. The difference is that in his theory there is no connection whatsoever between the incongruous and the other two „complementary“ theories. They are invoked exactly at the point where his Incongruity Theory runs into trouble, to explain what his theory fails to explain – namely, the connection between incongruity and amusement.

that we find aesthetic satisfaction in aesthetic deficiencies? Surely this would be somewhat perverse.<sup>9</sup>

The incongruous is just the very opposite of the aesthetic ideal: harmony, self-consistency, or internal unity. Leon Batista Alberti was essentially right when he wrote:

I shall define Beauty to be Harmony of all the Parts, in whatsoever Subject it appears, fitted together with such Proportion and Connection, that nothing could be added, diminished or altered, but to the Worse.<sup>10</sup>

Alberti's definition is, however, in need of an important qualification. We do not judge aesthetic merits of works of arts *only* by ascertaining how unified, well-balanced or harmonious they are. Consider a picture consisting of a circle drawn in the middle of a rectangular canvas. It could be argued that it exemplifies a perfect harmony that it is perfectly unified and well-balanced in the sense that „nothing could be added, diminished or altered, but to the worse“. This does not mean, however, that we would consider it a supreme artistic achievement. What we admire in art is not just harmonization, or congruity *simpliciter*, but rather the harmonization or unification of diverse, heterogeneous and indeed *incongruous* elements and forms. I take it that this was, roughly, what Plato and Aristotle had in mind when they characterized beauty as „unity in diversity“. I think it would be in the spirit of what they meant to say that what we appreciate in art is harmonization of heterogeneous forms, finding the concord in the dissonance, showing that the apparently incongruous is congruous after all. One could even venture to say that the more incongruous the features that are brought together under a coherent (congruous) scheme, the more impressive is the artistic achievement. (This, incidentally, echoes the intuition of Schopenhauer in connection with the effectiveness of jokes.)

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<sup>9</sup> Martin tries to forestall this kind of objection by dismissing it in a generalized form, i.e., „that as rational beings we never enjoy incongruities to any extent for their own sake“. Invoking Santayana, he says that „[t]he best response to this view is to reject this picture of rationality as overly rationalistic“ (Martin 1987, 183). Martin continues:

Indeed, so long as we value much of the capacity to enjoy incongruities for themselves, including the inappropriate, the absurd, and even occasionally the degrading, we can turn Santayana's picture on its head. Our delight in humorous incongruities reveals something about the kind of rational beings we are (Martin 1987, 184).

<sup>10</sup> Alberti, L. B.: *De re aedificatoria* (VI, ii) quoted from Beardsley (1966, 125).

To sum up: the aesthetic, just like the humorous, certainly has to do with the incongruous. But it is not the incongruous itself which is the proper object of the aesthetic or humorous enjoyment, but its resolution. The incongruous is thus the pre-requisite of the pleasurable (whether humorous or aesthetic), but it is its resolution which effects it.

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