



Things Explode Every Day: Humour And The Theory Of Cognitive Emotion

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Things Explode Every Day:

Humour and the Theory of Cognitive Emotion

Wittgenstein once observed, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."¹ I admit that sometimes Wittgenstein seems like a lion to me, but I take him to be saying that understanding depends on sharing a common context. And I might sum up what is to follow by adding the following modification to the great philosopher's aphorism: *If a lion could tell jokes, we wouldn't understand them either.* The idea appears to be that both language and humour depend on a *framework*, and we wouldn't understand the lion's framework sufficiently to get the point of his jokes, even if by some miracle we did manage to grasp his language. This seems to show that humour – and perhaps all emotion – has something to do with shared knowledge in some general sense.

The late American philosopher Nelson Goodman was famous for (among other things) a theory of cognitive emotion, a theory which makes affect a central part of both aesthetic experience and general knowledge. A very similar theory has more recently been developed by Martha Nussbaum. I propose to explore these theories via an analysis of two lesser known (but still highly typical) *Monty Python* sketches, showing how one type of humour depends on emotional ill-adjustment on the part of the characters. If it can be argued that the perception of humour in these cases requires or indeed effectuates linguistic and affective adaptation on the part of the reader / spectator,

¹ *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xi, 223^e. Traduction de G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford : Blackwell, 1958.

this might be said to show that the “emotions function cognitively,” as Goodman would have it. Exploring this topic may help us refine the concepts of affect, perception and cognition.

But before I turn to these questions I need (for reasons which will become clear shortly) to deal with some urgent issues raised by the latest developments in an American soap opera, *Santa Monica*. Here is a summary of what has happened so far.

Brandon is a State Senator and a highly respected man in the city of Santa Monica. A long time ago, he got separated from his young wife Allison and their daughter Jessica in a fit of anger and never saw them again. Eighteen years later, Allison and Jessica – whom he thought dead – arrive in Santa Monica to claim recognition. Meanwhile, Brandon’s business and prestige has been threatened by a Chicano named Raoul who is very popular in the community. And the return of Allison and Jessica means that Brandon has to break off a secret engagement he has with Stacy. So will he find love again or is he on the road to emotional and financial bankruptcy?

Of course, the above is no more than my own practical joke: there is no such *soap* as “Santa Monica” and many of you may have already recognized that this story is nothing more than a transcription into modern-day California of the plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Now the point of my practical joke might first appear to be that the difference between great literature and soap opera isn’t going to be in the plot alone, since the basics of plot are the same in both cases. In other words, the practical joke seems to show that the moral and emotional efficacy of literature isn’t a matter of “content” in the most concrete sense of this term. One could argue that the difference between Hardy and “Santa Monica” is going to be a matter of the *language used* to relate the plot, or of the *reflections* and *ideas* attached to the plot. But I’d like to add a second example (not quite as ridiculous this time, perhaps) to show that the situation is somewhat more complicated than that. In *Upheavals of Thought*, her lengthy treatise on “the intelligence of the emotions”, Martha Nussbaum spends much time on the philosophy of mind and the theory of the emotions adumbrated in the work of Proust. In a typical passage, she

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notes how the young Marcel views his mother's goodnight kiss – that “concession to my misery and agitation” (the narrator notes) – with “utmost pain” since, as Nussbaum puts it, “it is a sign that she will soon be departing”.² This may well be a famous passage, but I would wager that a greater number of French people alive today are more familiar with the following refrain from a popular song:

Je suis malade, complètement malade,
Comme quand ma mère sortait le soir,
Et qu'elle me laissait seul avec mon désespoir !

One does get the feeling that Marcel and Serge (Lama) are talking about the same thing, so, as always when one starts to discuss the link between art and emotion, the problem becomes that of the relation between “high” culture and “low.” Who is to say – or how are we to prove – that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is “better” or “deeper” than the popular song? Both of the above examples could be used to show that our criteria of aesthetic evaluation cannot be made in terms of the *intensity* or even the *nature* of the emotion itself. Indeed, to anticipate some of my later arguments, these are all examples where we might want to say, following Goodman, that the “emotions function cognitively” – but I think we should recognize that the standards which will allow us to place Proust “higher” than Lama aren't going to be purely emotive standards.

Nor is the message going to be that great art teaches us to *restrain* the emotions, while pop music gets us to *indulge* in them. Not all “tear-jerkers” are necessarily low-brow rubbish, and there are obviously many works of popular entertainment based on an *inhibition* of the emotions. (How could one appreciate a typical James Bond film if one really stopped to think about death and suffering?) But the subject of inhibition brings me back to the question of humour and forward to the first Monty Python sketch I would like the reader to consider:

² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, CUP, 2001, 176. See Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, 17.

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Two ladies are sitting by the fire looking at a photo album.

Mrs Nigger-Baiter (MICHAEL PALIN) Oh, yes, he's such a clever little boy, just like his father.

Mrs S (TERRY JONES) D'you think so, Mrs Nigger-Baiter?

Mrs Nigger-Baiter Oh yes, spitting image.

The door opens. The son comes in.

Son (JOHN CLEESE) Good afternoon, mother. Good afternoon, Mrs Nigger-Baiter.

Mrs Nigger-Baiter Ooh, he's walking already!

Mrs S Yes, he's such a clever little boy, aren't you? Coochy coochy coo . . .

Mrs Nigger-Baiter Hello, coochy coo...

Mrs S Hello, hello... (*they chuck him under the chin*)

Mrs Nigger-Baiter Oochy coochy. (*the son smiles a little tight smile*) Look at him laughing... ooh, he's a chirpy little fellow. Isn't he a chirpy little fellow ... eh? eh? Does he talk Does he talk, eh?

Son Of course I talk, I'm Minister for Overseas Development.

Mrs Nigger-Baiter Ooh, he's a clever little boy – he's a clever little boy. (*gets out a rattle*) Do you like your rattle? Do you like your rattle? Look at his little eyes following it ... look at his iggy piggy piggy little eyeballs eh... oo... he's got a tubby tum-tum. Oh, he's got a tubby tum-tum.

Son (*whilst Mrs Nigger-Baiter is talking*) Mother, could I have a quick cup of tea please. I have an important statement on Rhodesia to make in the Commons at six.

Sound of an explosion out of vision. Cut to reveal Mrs Nigger-Baiter's chair charred and smoking. Mrs Nigger-Baiter is no longer there. The upholstery is smouldering gently.

Mrs S Oh, Mrs Nigger-Baiter's exploded.

Son Good thing, too.

Mrs S She was my best friend.

Son Oh, mother, don't be so sentimental. Things explode every day.

Mrs S Yes, I suppose so. Anyway, I didn't really like her that much.³

Thus in this hyperbolic vision of the British "stiff upper-lip" we learn that "things explode every day" and that there is nothing to make

³ *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words*, Volume 2, London, Methuen, 1990, p. 64.

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a fuss about. In his 1929 typology of reading errors brought to light by his experiment in *Practical Criticism*, I. A. Richards listed "inhibition" as the seventh major obstacle to efficient understanding of the poetic text. I will examine later on another Python episode (the "Travel Agent Sketch") that corresponds to the sixth item on Richards' list – sentimentality.⁴ But if (to quote Richards) the "due measure" of emotional response is a key to adequate reading, it is also going to be a *theme* of the two sketches under study. What we shall try to see is the extent to which these two instances of humour (based on rather typical mechanisms of incongruity and excess) confirm or invalidate the theory that the "emotions function cognitively".

1. Nelson Goodman and the "theory of aesthetic phlogiston"

One of Nussbaum's main targets in her recent work is the traditional Analytic dichotomy between the *cognitive* and the *emotive* – between the realm of fact and reason and the sphere of affectivity. There is a long history to this point, and many ramifications.⁵ But an influential attack on the distinction had already been formulated by Nelson Goodman back in 1976. In *Languages of Art*, Goodman argues that both aesthetic and scientific experience can be "seen to be fundamentally cognitive in character."⁶ He rejects the idea that the aesthetic must be reduced to the purely emotional: "Any picture of aesthetic experience as a sort of emotional bath or orgy is plainly preposterous." It is true, of course, that aesthetic experience has certain specific features and this may "revive the temptation to posit a special aesthetic emotion" (247). But this, he claims, gets us nowhere: "All difficulties are resolved – by begging the question. No doubt aesthetic emotions have the property that makes them aesthetic. No doubt things that burn are combustible. The theory of aesthetic phlogiston explains everything and nothing" (247). In other words, the

⁴ See I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 1929, London, Routledge, 1978, 16.

⁵ See Ronald Shusterman, *Critique et poésie selon I.A. Richards : de la confiance positiviste au premier relativisme*, Pessac, Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 1988, Chapitre IV.

⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1976, 245.

true solution is not to be found in positing some mysterious aesthetic emotion but in recognizing that the entire emotive / cognitive dichotomy is a mistake:

On the one side, we put sensation, perception, inference, conjecture, all nerveless inspection and investigation, fact, and truth; on the other, pleasure, pain, interest, satisfaction, disappointment, all brainless affective response, liking and loathing. This pretty effectively keeps us from seeing that in aesthetic experience the *emotions function cognitively*. The work of art is apprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses. (248)

The cognitive / emotive dichotomy is illicit, Goodman argues, since the “emotions participate in cognition”. Thus “perception, conception and feeling intermingle and interact...” (249).

Now I am willing to grant that this point is or should be obvious, in a sense, since, in a sense indeed, *absolutely everything* is apprehended by us through the feelings as well as through the senses. This is quite simply *who we are* – this is what it means to be human. One wouldn’t say that a Geiger counter switched on inside of Chernobyl registers both radioactivity *and* alarm (though its readings could cause alarm *in us*). If a lion were to try to understand us, this is one of the first things he’d have to come to terms with. Our approach to the world is necessarily guided by our emotions (desires, needs, and so on) but this doesn’t make these desires and needs into *empirical data* in themselves. To say that the “emotions function cognitively” should not mislead us into denying all distinctions between the *subjective* and the *objective*. In its more moderate forms, the emotive / cognitive distinction is merely a reminder that facts and values are conceptually separate even if they are practically entwined. For example, it does not seem wrong to say that some of what we learn about the world *precedes* or is *independent* of evaluative judgment. I recently learned that on August 17th, 2003, the distance between Earth and Mars reached a minimum that occurs every 5000 years or so – a distance of 55,746,199 km. Quite frankly, I’m not sure what to make of this fact, or what I should do about it – though I do realize that such facts do lead to action if they can hook up to emotions and desire in some way (say by inspiring a President to

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launch a space programme to turn attention away from a military quagmire).

To say that the emotions function cognitively is perhaps a bit like saying that an automobile is fuelled by desire. Obviously, Michael Schumacher's new Ferrari goes (more or less) where he steers it, but it is in fact powered by a V12 engine and not by his emotions. (One would wonder at the mechanic who tried to psychoanalyze a broken piston). Briefly put, the cognitive / emotive dichotomy is based on a rather inevitable way of dividing up reality into things and feelings. It was never meant to show that human beings do not mix the two; it only tried to insist that both can be identified. In the early stages of the development of this dichotomy, there was no doubt an insistence on freeing scientific pursuits from emotive concerns, but that can be understood as an aftermath of the scientific and religious battles of the 19th century. It was in no way a claim that logic must prevail – as Richards himself put it back in 1926: "To live reasonably is not to live by reason alone."⁷ Even if it were true that things explode every day, it would not be reasonable to accept the fact with indifference.

2. Martha Nussbaum: "Things Such as Might Happen"

Martha Nussbaum's attack on the cognitive / emotive dichotomy takes place in a somewhat wider context of a total theory of the emotions informed both by studies in neurobiology and a personal interest in narrative fiction. One of Nussbaum's allies is the neuroscientist Anthony Damasio, a researcher bent on proving (as Nussbaum puts it) that "the emotion / reason distinction is inaccurate" and that "emotions are forms of intelligent awareness" (115). According to Damasio, the emotions are "just as cognitive as other percepts."⁸ But the key to the emotions for Nussbaum, and the basis of her entire theory, is the idea that the emotions are "eudaimonistic" – i.e. concerned for a person's "self-flourishing" (4, 22, 31). An unusual aspect of this theory comes with the idea that the emotions are a sign

⁷ See *Science and Poetry*, 1926; London, Routledge, 1970, 17.

⁸ A. R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York, Putnam, 1994, XV.

of, or a result of, the recognition of our intrinsic weakness or vulnerability: "Emotions are... acknowledgments of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency" (22). The idea is that the emotions arise and connect to the world when we realise that the things we value are external to us and thus beyond our control. Nussbaum adds that the "emotions always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object's salience or importance, in that sense they always involve appraisal or evaluation" (23). She calls this the "cognitive-evaluative" or the "cognitive" view but adds, "by 'cognitive' I mean nothing more than 'concerned with receiving and processing information'" (23). Now what is of special interest for literary theory is the connection Nussbaum never fails to make between the structure of the emotions and the nature of literary experience. For Nussbaum, the emotions "have a complicated cognitive structure that is in part narrative in form, involving a story of our relation to cherished objects that extends over time" (2). This point is essential for her own form of ethical criticism – a version of the "Vicarious Experience Theory" which I have discussed at length elsewhere.⁹ The Vicarious Experience Theory argues that literary works of art give us indirect experiences that help shape us morally. So, in a sense, it requires a theory of the emotions to serve as foundation and explain the process. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum goes into the details of developmental psychology to link emotion, fiction and the growth of moral awareness in a child. Thus:

Emotions... have a narrative structure. The understanding of any single emotion is incomplete unless its narrative history is grasped and studied for the light it sheds on the present response. This already suggests a central role for the arts in human self-understanding: for narrative artworks of various kinds (whether musical or visual or literary) give us information about these emotion-histories that we could not easily get otherwise. (236)

The basic syllogism of this revised Vicarious Experience Theory is as follows:

⁹ See Ronald Shusterman, "Le Texte comme tissu social", in J.J. Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman, *L'Emprise des signes*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

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1. Emotion is essential to our lives.
2. Imagination plays an essential role in the refinement of emotion.
3. The realm of the refinement of imagination is the realm of art.¹⁰
4. Art is emotionally and thus morally good for us.

Now one of the questions that we might ask concerns the nature of the “information” that emotion and art “receive” and “process” in this way. What kind of information is it? What is the *status* of this information? All in all, in her arguments, Nussbaum is simply making *cognitive* synonymous with *intentional* (directed towards an object). Obviously emotions are “cognitive” if this merely means that they connect to something; there is room however for a different use of the term where *cognitive* involves measurable data derived from observation.

If we go back to Damasio’s claim that emotions are “just as cognitive as other percepts”, does this mean anything more than emotions are related to the world? No one will object when Nussbaum argues that emotions “always involve appraisal or evaluation” – but I don’t see how this makes the emotion itself a matter of information. My emotions concerning the distance between Mars and Earth may not be the same as yours – but just because I am in favour of an ambitious space programme and you are not doesn’t prove that we are dealing with a different fact. Nussbaum makes some rather strong assertions without always adding arguments to back them up. For example, she claims that “emotions, like other beliefs, can be true or false, and (an independent point) justified or unjustified, reasonable or unreasonable” (46). I am ready to grant the “independent” point, but I’m not sure what it means to say that an emotion can be *true* or *false*. Perhaps all this is a way of injecting a fully cognitive, fully rational vocabulary into a realm that doesn’t really suit it. For Nussbaum goes to great pains to argue that the emotions are not only cognitive but *rational*. “Emotions need not be ‘rational’ in the sense of being, in

¹⁰ Actually, as we will see in a moment, Nussbaum really has in mind the realm of realist fiction.

every case, explicit or verbal”, Nussbaum observes. “But in another, normative sense they are profoundly rational: for they are ways of taking in important news of the world” (109). Alas, the fact that we can reason about something doesn’t make the thing in question itself an example of rationality. Nussbaum seems to be stretching the word “rational” in order to make it equivalent to “important”; just because we don’t want to say that the emotions are unimportant – or indeed irrational – doesn’t mean that we have to say that they are rational in the full sense, i.e. that they are themselves a kind of reasoning. The fact that it is rational to take our emotions into account when we engage in practical reason doesn’t make emotivity itself a special form of logic. A passage by Jane Austen made it clear long ago that cold reasoning about emotional questions is not the thing to do. Here is the “rational emotion” of Mr Collins’ exemplary proposal to Miss Elizabeth Bennet:

“My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly – which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford – between our pools at quadrille, while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh’s footstool, that she said, ‘Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry.’ [...] Thus much for my general intention in favour of matrimony; it remains to be told why my views were directed to Longbourn instead of my own neighbourhood, where I assure you there are many amiable young women. But the fact is, that being, as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father (who, however, may live many years longer), I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place – which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years. This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem. And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection.” (*Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 29)

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Needless to say, Lizzie is not seduced by the "violence" of his "affection". When Lizzie eventually does marry, she will do so for "reasons" of her own, so to speak. But the fact that one can "reason" in this sense about all sorts of human activities does not make the activities themselves into embodiments of the essence of rationality.

Nussbaum's most explicit statement of the connection of emotion and art comes in a chapter entitled "Interlude: 'Things Such as Might Happen'" (238-48). The title comes from her own rendering of a famous passage from Aristotle's *Poetics* usually translated into English as "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (*Poetics*, 9, 1). The emotional (and thus ethical) interest of fiction comes in its portrayal of "things such as might happen" – the connection of art and emotion is essential since tragedy (for example) can point out "the general vulnerability of human life to unexpected reversals" (241). For Nussbaum, when the novel explores "things such as might happen" it engages "emotional responses" that are "built into the work itself, into its literary structures" (242). But we see here how her analysis drifts away from general considerations about art to more specific conclusions drawn from concentrating on literature in general and the realist novel in particular. It may well be that tragedy points out our vulnerability to unexpected reversals, but I doubt that a Rothko composition can bring me to the same conclusion. Nussbaum insists on our feelings of compassion for fictional characters and the way they connect up to possibilities of our own lives (245); that is why the *sort of thing that might happen* is so essential for her. The problem is that this seems to banish the fantastic, the surreal, and the non-representational from the realm of true art:

Some works of art will elicit only wonder and delight, without tapping our more eudaimonistic emotions. This is evidently true of some works of visual art and of music; and of some literary works as well, those that please primarily by sophistication of form and do not purport to explore human concerns with time, death, love, and other eudaimonistic issues. (248)

The implication seems to be that these are secondary forms, of minor importance and little use for ethics. But I think we need to leave room for emotion – indeed, for ethical and political growth as well – in those forms of art that do not respect the canons of realism. We need to leave room, in other words, not only for *things such as might happen* but for *things that explode* in unpredictable ways. Nussbaum writes that “the ‘potential space’ of aesthetic activity is a space with which we investigate and try out some of life’s possibilities” (243). But this obviously doesn’t work for non-figurative art; though we do want to say that Rothko’s exploring of the “possibilities” of red and brown has its own value.

This is where I believe that my own theory of the *metaethical* dimension of art works better.¹¹ For my metaethical theory holds that the “potential space” in question involves the exploration of possibility itself, it involves the experience not merely of particular judgments and values (as is inevitably the case in the realist novel) but in the experience of the form and process of all judgment and all interpretation. The metaethical theory doesn’t need to pass value-judgments on the arts; it doesn’t establish a hierarchy since all forms of art provide this hermeneutic experience. Even though my experience of a Rothko painting has nothing to do with concrete eudaimonistic issues, it does teach me something about interpretation – that paradoxical combination of necessity and choice. To limit art to “things such as might happen” is to forget Nussbaum’s own implicit lesson that human beings are not to be compartmentalized. Looking at a Rothko won’t help me decide whether or not mankind should visit Mars, but I don’t see why the refinement in perception and emotion that contemplating such a work produces should be totally irrelevant to other human pursuits. And the theory of art has to leave space for surprise just as much as sermonizing; it has to allow for the brief just as much as for the time-consuming. Length of involvement is not necessarily a criterion of unfailing emotional depth or wisdom. Just because it is longer and perhaps more “absorbing” than the average *haiku* doesn’t mean that *The Lord of the Rings* is a better guide to

¹¹ See “Le Texte comme tissu social”, in Lecercle and Shusterman, *op cit.*

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emotional growth. In other words, we need an aesthetics not merely of the philosophically predictable but also of the unexpected event – of things that may happen and things that happen to explode.

If we do grant a place for the metaethical efficacy of all sorts of art, then there is indeed hope for progress through aesthetic experience. Nussbaum invokes Donald Davidson in order to insist on a general mutual comprehensibility of the emotions despite obvious cultural differences (169 ff.). The argument that the emotions are socially constructed, she claims, *implies* rather than denies the possibility of change and improvement. For if the emotions are socially constructed, then they can be discussed, evaluated, and affected by intelligent exchange. The point of my own metaethical theory is that all forms of aesthetic experience, all forms of interpretation, representational or not, deepen our resources for intelligent exchange.

3. Humour and the Metaethical Effect

Recent work on the theory of humour has generally established some sort of link between humour, emotion and social transaction. Simon Critchley, for example, endorses a relatively common “incongruity theory” of the comic (something is funny because of its incongruous nature) but he goes on to add that “in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure – no social congruity, no comic incongruity.”¹² In other words: “There is a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke” (4). We laugh at John Cleese’s remark that things explode every day not only because we know that they do not, but because we belong to a shared social structure where such a remark is totally incongruous and indeed unacceptable. Another theorist argues that humour comes from “the comic intrusion” – the comic is “the perception of an otherwise undisclosed dimension of reality... The comic intrusion is the occurrence of this perception in every possible

¹² Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, London, Routledge, 2002, 3–4.

realm of experience.”¹³ Using other terminologies, we might speak of *defamiliarization* or indeed *deterritorialization*.

Some time ago already, Mary Douglas, a noted anthropologist, argued that this gives a potentially subversive dimension to humour:

The joke... affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general.¹⁴

One might want to contest the idea that all jokes are frivolous, for there do seem to be forms of humour that suggest concrete action. However, Douglas might concede that giving us an opportunity for realising that the social pattern has no necessity is the first prerequisite towards political change. This could link up with a position that Noël Carroll has called “utopianism” – the idea that all art is automatically or even “ontologically” good, since by its very nature it proves that things could be otherwise.¹⁵ Peter Berger goes even further by giving humour a religious dimension and making the comic into a “transitory experience” involving “an intuition, a signal of true redemption, that is, of a world that has been made whole and in which the miseries of the human condition have been abolished.”¹⁶

But all of these critics and theorists invariably point out the awkwardness of philosophy when dealing with the comic. To quote Berger once more: “Philosophy, after all, is the awesome attempt to embrace all of reality in an order of reason. The comic, by its very nature, escapes this embrace” (33). It might be useful, however, to wonder *why* the comic escapes this embrace – to wonder why it is that we want to do things that escape the embrace of philosophy. And this

¹³ Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, New York, Gruyter, 1997, 14.

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Selected essays in Anthropology*, 1975; 2nd edition, London, Routledge, 1999, 150–151.

¹⁵ See Noël Carroll, “Art, narrative, and moral understanding”, in Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998, 2001, 129.

¹⁶ Berger, *op cit*, 205.

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is where my metaethical theory comes in again. For it argues, in a sense, that we need to have these things and these realms that escape the grasp of system. Perhaps the reason that there has never been a perfect theory of the comic is that there *can* be no theory if by “theory” one means an essentialist description of what it *is*. The best one can do, perhaps, is to formulate a pluralist theory of *what it does*. Perhaps Aristotle was lucky that his treatise on the comic was lost for eternity; perhaps he got rid of it himself. For the point here seems to be that the purpose of humour is always to escape a restrictive definition, to escape predictions – and if all one has to say in a treatise is that the comic is unpredictable in unpredictable ways, then perhaps it is better just to go for a walk instead.

4. Humour, Emotion and Language

The two Python sketches I have mentioned are obviously based on ill-adjusted affectivity linked to inadequate verbal behaviour. I would like to argue, however, that such examples of ill-adjustment, humorous or indeed frivolous as they may be, invariably teach us something about the nature of adjustment, both directly in the ethical sense defended by the Vicarious Experience Theory and indirectly in my own metaethical sense.

One of the key points of the Niggerbaiter sketch has to do with the illogic of shaking a rattle at John Cleese and asking if he can talk. The *ooch-coochy-coo* baby talk problem is but an exaggeration of our own constant difficulties in modifying our discourse to meet the needs of a constantly varying audience (fifteen years ago I never would have dared play a practical joke on my readers, today it seems a possibility). In this sketch, the superficiality of language goes hand in hand with the superficiality of emotions, since the real punch line of the text is perhaps not “things explode every day”. The real punch line may be that John Cleese gets his “mother” to admit about her best friend: “I didn’t really like her that much.” And another illustration of ill-adjustment comes in the totally inexplicable name given to the exploding lady – why Mrs. *Niggerbaiter*? But *why does there have to be a “why”*? One of the things that humour can teach us – and that my

metaethical theory in a sense “predicts” – is that there isn’t always a *why* to the comic text. This is light-years away from the common reflex of literary critics and art historians who tease out some deterministic explanation for every tiny detail of the major works. Why “Niggerbaiter”? Perhaps the Pythons needed something to provide a contrast with the normality of the “cup of tea” – a normality ruptured by the explosion and then reinstated by the remark that things explode every day. But I see no precise reason for this particularly offensive name – except, perhaps, to say that the lack of reason is reason enough.

Unreasonableness is at the heart of the incongruity theory of humour – a theory which we might accept as the best version of what is happening in *one* of the most frequent forms of the comic – a pluralist can say no more.¹⁷ The Travel Agent sketch – also known as “Watney’s Red Barrel” – is a good example of the mixture of emotional imbalance and linguistic deformation. It starts with Eric Idle’s arrival in what is apparently a travel agency. After a few misunderstandings, we get the following dialogue between the tourist (Idle) and “Bounder” (Palin):

Bounder Anyway, you’re interested in one of our adventure holidays, eh?

Tourist Yes. I saw your advert in the bolour supplement.

Bounder The what?

Tourist The bolour supplement.

Bounder The colour supplement?

Tourist Yes. I’m sorry I can’t say the letter ‘B’.

Bounder C?

Tourist Yes that’s right. It’s all due to a trauma I suffered when I was a sboolboy. I was attacked by a bat.

Bounder A cat?

Tourist No a bat.

Bounder Can you say the letter ‘K’?

Tourist Oh yes, Khaki, king, kettle, Kuwait, Keble Bollege Oxford.

Bounder Why don’t you say the letter ‘K’ instead of the letter ‘C’?

¹⁷ For an overview of some of the different theories, one can consult Critchley, Berger, and John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, SUNY P, 1983.

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Tourist What you mean.....spell bolour with a K?

Bounder Yes.

Tourist Kolour. Oh that's very good, I never thought of that.

(*Just the Words*, II, 116)

When the tourist finally gets round to discussing his travel plans, he begins by underlining the inconveniences of holiday tours, and then keeps going on and on, complaining about:

Tourist ...being herded into endless Hotel Miramars and Bellvueses and Bontinentals with their international luxury modern roomettes and their Watney's Red Barrel and their swimming pools full of fat German businessmen pretending they're acrobats and forming pyramids and frightening the children and barging in to the queues and if you're not at your table spot on seven you miss your bowl of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup, the first item on the menu of International Cuisine, and every Thursday night there's a bloody cabaret in the bar featuring some tiny emaciated dago with nine-inch hips and some big fat bloated tart with her hair brylcreemed down and a big arse presenting Flamenco for Foreigners.

Bounder (*beginning to get fed up*) Yes, yes, now...

Of course, the tourist still keeps going on and on and on, and the travel agent, after telling him to shut up, ends up phoning the police:

Bounder Shut your bloody gob! I've had enough of this, I'm going to ring the police.

He dials and waits. Cut to a corner of a police station. One policeman is knitting, another is making a palm tree out of old newspapers. The phone rings.

Knitting Policeman Oh... take it off the hook. (*they do so*)

Now there are a lot of obvious things that could be said here about *logorrhoea* or *hypotaxis*.¹⁸ But perhaps it will suffice if I simply point out that the *demonstration* of these vagaries provides a social, moral, and linguistic experience rolled up into one.

Yet does this mean that the "emotions function cognitively" here? It is true that my knowledge of the emotions is what enables me

¹⁸ I'm using this last term in the slightly larger sense indicated by Mazaleyrat and Molinié in their *Vocabulaire de la Stylistique*, Paris, PUF, 1989.

to get the jokes, and it is also the case that responding to the sketches involves re-adjusting this knowledge and reacting to the more or less improbable worlds that the Pythons present to me. But these are indeed improbable worlds, and if my emotions help me perceive their improbability, that should not count as a full-fledged form of cognition. (Your retinas are two of the elements allowing you to perceive this print, but you wouldn't say that retinal perception is in itself the heart of understanding.) It seems to me more important to insist on the notion of *community* that emerges from this hermeneutic experience than to claim that I am actually deriving new knowledge from what is merely a skit. In her work on jokes, Mary Douglas makes much of a distinction drawn by Victor Turner between the social structure itself and a parallel sense of "community" that exists at another level: in the social structure itself everything is fixed, but in this idea of "community" – as Douglas puts it – "roles are ambiguous, lacking hierarchy, disorganised" (156). The metaethical effect of humour, one could say, is the production of a community in this sense.

5. Isolation and Community

So the emotions function cognitively in the following respect: any description of the Niggerbaiter sketch that fails to register the surprise we are meant to feel (surprise at the lack of emotion, to be precise) would be an inadequate reaction. Take the following summary: "Three people are engaging in discourse, one person explodes, the discourse continues between the two remaining people." Such a description is almost as curious as the sketch itself. Or, to put it more cryptically, if a Geiger counter could speak, it wouldn't understand what is so funny about the remark that things explode every day.

To say that our emotions are inextricably entrenched in our dealings with the world is not to say very much, and we should be careful not to let this concept of "cognitive emotion" talk us into believing that "true" cognition is an affair of the heart. It is because we are not Geiger counters that emotion is always inseparable from the sphere of knowledge – but this does not mean there is no

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conceptual distinction to be made between affectivity and the realm of logic and fact. Both the Vicarious Experience Theory and my own metaethical theory argue that aesthetic experience¹⁹ can produce a "refinement" of the emotions through the exploration of the "potential space" of our lives (Nussbaum) or (for me) through *the exploration of potentiality itself* (whether it be connected to realism or totally abstract in nature). If some advantage can be gained by calling this refinement *knowledge*, and if we can use the concept of "cognitive emotion" without making it a weapon in the "science wars" – then, why not?

The undeniable importance of the emotions is simply the result of the inescapable fact that all thought is inherently subjective; everything we do and are is embodied in our own personal phenomenology, there is no getting away from our separate individuality and feeling. Or, as Matthew Arnold put it in "To Marguerite": "We mortal millions live *alone*." But perhaps I might give the penultimate word on art and emotion to Gerard Manley Hopkins and to another, younger, Margaret:

SPRING AND FALL

to a young child

Margaret, are you grieving
 Over Goldengrove unleaving?
 Leaves, like the things of man, you
 With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
 Ah! as the heart grows older
 It will come to such sights colder
 By and by, nor spare a sigh
 Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
 And yet you *will* weep and know why.
 Now no matter, child, the name:
 Sorrow's springs are the same.
 Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
 What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
 It is the blight man was born for,
 It is Margaret you mourn for.²⁰

¹⁹ Here, as I'm sure the reader has noticed, I'm making humour a subcategory of the aesthetic.

²⁰ See G. M. Hopkins, *Poèmes*, J. G. Ritz (trad.), Paris, Aubier, 1980, 166.

Like all emotion, emotion in art is always *our* emotion, just as laughter is always *our* laughter. When leaves drop, or things explode, it is always Margaret that we mourn for. And this is why Nussbaum is right to insist that emotion has to do with the flourishing of the self, for the self is ultimately the only thing that we really have. In our common hermeneutic endeavours, however, in the communities we forge by means of those forms of life we strive to share (such as jokes or works of art), we do manage to transcend, at times, the isolation of our individual grieving.