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Does the God of classical theism have a sense of humour?



Abstract:

In this paper, I discuss whether the attribute of a sense of humour is compatible with the theistic conception of God, understood as an omnipotent, perfect and omniscient being. I begin by outlining the intuitions present in common language and in fiction regarding the attribution of humour to God. I then discuss popular theories of humour—superiority, release and incongruity—pointing out their incompatibility with a theistic conception of God. I conclude by asking why humans have a sense of humour, the answer to which marks the main thesis of the paper: although God knows what is funny, he does not have a sense of humour.



Keywords:

theism, philosophy of humour, laughter, philosophy of God



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Introduction

A consideration of God's sense of humour is best begun with a joke. However, so as not to deprive the subject of its proper weight, the joke I am going to quote will relate to serious matters. I hope I will not offend anyone.

A Holocaust survivor dies a natural death at an advanced age and goes to Heaven. There, he meets God and tells Him a joke about the Holocaust. Having heard the joke, God replies that He sees nothing funny in it. The survivor shrugs his shoulders and says: 'I guess you had to be there to get it.'

Although this story appears in many places simply as a joke (I couldn't find the author, but then again, do jokes need a bibliographical footnote?), it could be considered a philosophical parable, a thought experiment. The philosophical context of the story is the problem of evil and the attempt to construct a theodicy after the Holocaust. In the story, a person who experienced the Holocaust tells God a joke about it. Although the content of this particular joke is not known to us, jokes about the Holocaust are generally considered taboo, and God confirms this taboo by saying that He sees nothing funny in it. In response to this, the Survivor gives a condescending reply: God did not understand the joke because He did not experience the events that the joke is about.

Read in this way, the joke synthetically presents one version of theodical justification. God does not understand the joke because He did not experience the atrocities of the Holocaust, and having no knowledge of them, He is not responsible for allowing this evil. Such an answer, however, if taken seriously, is incompatible with the classical concept of theism, according to which God is an omniscient being. A consistent theist, wishing to save the classical conception of God, will have to admit that if God is all-knowing, then a joke is not funny to

Him, not because God does not understand the joke, but because the joke is simply not funny.¹

The theist's hypothetical answer seems to settle the title question. Since God can recognise and judge humour (in this case, negatively), God knows what is and what is not funny. But is having such knowledge or, in other words, having a true theory of humour the same as having a sense of humour? Does not the very attribution of some kind of sense to God contradict the theistic image of God? Perhaps, then, the very question of God's humour is not only non-serious but also misplaced?

I begin the paper with methodological remarks on understanding amusement and humour. I will then present popular intuitions about the attribution of humour to God present in common language and in fiction. In the next section, I will review the basic theories of humour—superiority, release and incongruity—pointing out their incompatibility with a theistic conception of God. Finally, I will consider why people need a sense of humour; the answer to this question will establish the main thesis of the article: God has no sense of humour.

Humour and laughter

It is worth distinguishing between two phenomena: amusement and humour. Laughter (amusement) is an emotional response that is not necessarily linked to a sense of humour, that is, to a disposition to recognise humour. Laughter is often a reaction to physiological stimuli (e.g. when tickled), it can be an expression of embarrassment (so-called nervous laughter), and in some people, it accompanies a sense of victory (triumphant laughter). We will not treat laughter (or amusement) of these kinds as a reaction to a comic situation.

¹ The theist, if he were to give such an answer, would save the attribute of omniscience in the classical conception of God from the charge that God did not understand the joke, but at the cost of becoming entangled in the much more difficult problem of evil.

Laughter can also be an indicator of what a person finds funny. In other words, what amuses us can reveal the nature of our sense of humour. For instance, if someone finds it funny when a person slips on a banana peel or finds scatological jokes amusing, we will say that they have an unrefined, infantile sense of humour. If someone tells racist or sexist jokes, they are unintentionally informing others of their prejudices. Paradoxical or self-deprecating humour is usually perceived as a sign of a cultivated sense of humour, humour is then said to be a sign of intelligence. Consequently, not getting a joke is sometimes perceived as a sign of naivety or lack of intelligence. On the other hand, a misunderstood joke can be explained to someone, which does not necessarily take away the comic potential of the joke. Hence, a sense of humour seems to be something that can be developed in oneself, similar to taste or gusto.

Let me make another distinction. It is one thing to know what is funny (that is, to have a theory of humour) and another to have a sense of humour (a disposition to experience a given piece of humour as funny). We can see that these are two different things when we ask someone why they are laughing. Most people have trouble immediately providing a coherent explanation of what actually makes them laugh. The most common answer indicates that the funny is something one simply feels. However, if one were to persistently inquire as to what is so funny here, after a moment's reflection there might be a (reluctant) attempt at an explanation. Someone, for example, might find it funny when a person of high social status has found himself in an unusual, mundane situation, e.g., when someone who previously stood higher than us in the social hierarchy suddenly finds himself lower. Someone else might find humour in the disparity between how we expected a situation to unfold and its actual, surprising outcome. These and similar explanations can be seen as the seeds of a theory of humour. Therefore, I assume that a sense of humour reflects the theory of humour that a person (not always consciously) embraces.

Common intuitions about God's sense of humour

It seems to be a common perception that God has a sense of humour, which, from a human point of view, is not always understandable. In everyday situations, unusual coincidences or mysterious, seemingly puzzling events with significant consequences are called manifestations of the divine sense of humour. The divine sense of humour is also inferred from the appearance of exotic animals or plants, in which case we hear that God must have a sense of humour if he created such species. Sometimes even the very existence of humans is taken as an example of God's humour. Kurt Vonnegut speculated in one of his short stories that God created man and endowed him with free will in order to provide himself with entertainment. A world governed by deterministic laws is predictable and boring to an omniscient being, whereas the existence of beings with free will would escape this predictability and introduce an element of surprise, and thus amusement, into the world.

Common intuitions also emphasise the fragility of man in the context of divine omniscience, as expressed by the saying that man plans and God laughs or, as Woody Allen stated in one of his aphorisms—if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans. In this context, God is seen as a being who derives pleasure from a sense of superiority and to whom human intentions and plans are amusing in their futility.

In the context of the Christian conception of God, it is easy to put forward the thesis that if God created man in his own image and likeness, then if man has a sense of humour, God also has one (See, for example, Peels, 2015). On the other hand, man possesses a great many properties that a classical theist would not be willing to attribute to God. From the thesis that humans were created in the likeness of God, the cautious conclusion is usually drawn that we are similarly rational, while whether other likenesses exist is left to speculation. Peels argues that if an action is not necessarily associated with moral evil, it cannot

be excluded that it is within the scope of God's acts. It merely follows that it is possible for God to have a sense of humour provided that His humor is exclusively morally good or at least neutral. However, it does not follow what such humor would consist of.

Common to these intuitions and folk proverbs is a sense of lack of control over the forces of nature, hence surprising and unpredictable phenomena have come to be known as tricks of fate. This, combined with the religious thesis of the similarity between humans and God, makes it tempting to apply the diagnostic function of humour to God. For if one accepts the existence of intentionality in the world, the subjective sense that the phenomena taking place is funny (even if it is black humour), prompts speculation about what kind of sense of humour the being responsible for it might have. The image present in anthropomorphic depictions of the supreme being is, however, difficult to reconcile with the image of God presented in classical theism, which assumes that God is a being of the highest moral goodness.

It seems that popular intuitions about God tell us more about human beliefs than about God himself, so I will try to approach the issue from a different angle. In the next section, I will present well-established theories of humour to see which is most compatible with a theistic conception of God.

Theories of humour

The first attempts to explain humour can already be found in Aristotle. Kant, Descartes, Bergson and Schopenhauer wrote about humour. The contemporary literature on the philosophy of humour mainly mentions three competing approaches: the superiority theory, the release theory, and the incongruity theory.

According to superiority theory, the pleasure associated with humour is based on a sense of superiority to others or to a past version of oneself (Scruton 1987). In this view, laughter derives from a sense of triumph or the satisfaction of being superior. If, on the

other hand, we assume that, in explaining the phenomenon of humour, we treat amusement as a reaction to recognised comedy, then, in the light of superiority theory, we would have to acknowledge that the feeling of superiority is not only pleasurable but also funny. However, superiority theory does not explain what is funny about triumph. This is the main reason why superiority theory is not very popular (Carroll 2014). Also from an ethical point of view, such triumphal amusement seems morally suspect. This kind of intuition is also present in sayings about God's laughter in response to human plans. Although it would be interesting to explore the origins of such representations of God in folk psychology, from the point of view of philosophical theism, it cannot be said of God that he has a superior sense of humour, that he rejoices in others' failings or that he compares himself with an inferior version of himself. This would contradict the traditional view that God is an unchanging being - unchangeably perfect and absolutely good.

According to the release theory, people release accumulated psychological tensions through laughter, just as a pressurised pot releases accumulated steam. Some scholars speculate that in the lost book of *Poetics*, Aristotle may have analysed comedy analogously to tragedy, indicating that it serves to achieve catharsis (Watson 2012). In this view, when we hear a joke, tension is created in our mind, which is only released by the punchline. The release of tension is accompanied by pleasure expressed as laughter. Critics of this theory point to an outdated 'hydraulic' understanding of the mind, in which mysterious 'mental tensions' would accumulate. Such problematic assumptions about the mind are the main reason for challenging the theory (Carroll 2014). However, one could defend a weakened version of this theory, on the grounds that it captures well the phenomenon of using humour to 'defuse' nervous social situations. Nevertheless, while the therapeutic or social functions of humour can be identified, the vision of a God who uses humour to relieve the tensions inherent in Him seems difficult to reconcile with the classical image of God. In classical theism, God is a simple and omnipotent being, which means there are no conflicting

tensions between different parts in Him, and He is never in a state of tension demanding resolution.

According to incongruity theory, the essence of humour, or the cause of amusement, is to perceive an incongruity between a certain state of affairs and our beliefs about what that state of affairs usually is or should be (Clark 1987). In this conception, laughter is a reaction of surprise in the face of an unusual situation. Of course, such a broad account of humour is vulnerable to counter-examples—one can point to plenty of situations in which surprise does not provoke laughter at all, but rather irritation (e.g. an unexpected flight cancellation). On the other hand, the important point is that any display of comedy can be interpreted as incongruity. Thus, although somewhat ‘leaky’ this account is at the same time the most general, because, with a single category, it provides an explanatory tool for all phenomena that are only partially explained by alternative theories (Carroll 2014).

Nowadays, the theory of incongruity has found strong support from the evolutionist perspective (Hurley, Dennett, Adams 2011) The similarity between humour and taste can be recalled here once again. Laughter is a pleasant sensation, just as sweetness is. However, from an evolutionist point of view, sugar has a pleasant taste not because it is sweet, but because it is beneficial to us. Our taste buds perceive the taste of sugar as pleasant because sugar is essential for our bodies—it provides us with energy. Similarly, the pleasurable reaction to comedy is not due to some fundamental funniness hidden in the joke, but rather laughter is a pleasurable sensation that accompanies the identification of an incongruity between what we see and what we were previously convinced of. In other words, laughter is the reward for spotting an error. And if the ability to identify errors and inconsistencies is beneficial to our survival, then a sense of humour, as a detector of inconsistencies, has an important cognitive function, too.

Nevertheless, while the theory of incongruity seems to best explain humour, it clearly does not fit into an analysis of God’s possible sense of humour. A God who finds delight in spotting mistakes will

not possess the attribute of omniscience. An omniscient being not only does not make mistakes, but nothing would surprise him. Thus, concluding the overview of theories of humour, we are left with the constation that since no theory of humour fits the theistic notion of God, until a better theory emerges the only possible conclusion is that God does not possess a sense of humour.

Conclusion

From an evolutionist perspective, the art of telling jokes has not only a social function but also a cognitive one—it develops the habit of finding errors in our beliefs. Perhaps this is a remnant from the old days when people, gathered around a campfire, and told each other various stories. The joke being told, much like the original myths, was heard somewhere before and is repeated in the hope that others will hear it for the first time.

The convention of the joke is that no one presents themselves as the author of the joke—the author is always unknown. Isaac Asimov, in his short story, ‘The Jokester’ plays with the idea that if a joke must have an author, and the chain of successive repetitions of a joke cannot run indefinitely, then the author of the first joke is necessarily God. The protagonists of the story attempt to recreate the first joke told by God, which they suspect was used by God to elevate the ape to the level of man. In Asimov’s story, the scientists solve the riddle, but with the knowledge of the first joke, the mystery of humour disappears—from then on, nothing is funny anymore.² In the context of the

² The reader of the story does not find out what the first joke sounded like, but Slavoj Žižek ironically points out that Christians would otherwise know what joke God told the first man, although it is not obvious what is so funny about it. This joke—that is, God’s first statement in the Bible addressed directly to man—would be: „You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Žižek, 1992).

incongruity theory, the punchline of this story sounds like a warning—as we lose the ability to wonder at the world, we may also lose the reasons to laugh.

The paper addressed the question of whether the God of classical theism has a sense of humour and a discussion of popular theories of humour led to a negative answer. The superiority theory is difficult to reconcile with God's perfection. The release theory does not fit with the assumption of God's simplicity and omnipotence. Likewise, the incongruity theory does not fit with the notion of God as an omniscient being. If we agree that the incongruity theory most convincingly explains the sense of humour, then it is clear that God does not need a 'detector of inconsistencies'—after all, nothing is surprising to an omniscient being.

On the other hand, a sense of humour and a theory of humour are two different things. A theory of humour not only explains a sense of humour but it also allows one to judge particular jokes as funny or not, just as a moral theory allows one to judge what is good. If the God of classical theism exists, then He (probably) has no sense of humour. But He knows what is and what is not funny. A surprising consequence of theism is that humour is objective. Telling jokes may be an exercise in the art of detecting falsehood, which is, after all, a prerequisite for knowledge. So humour, as a driving force of the mind, is a serious matter; after all, it concerns the question of truth. There is nothing to laugh at.

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