

Kindly Scandal: A Mimetic Theory of Humor

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“The structural patterns of the comic . . . deny the sovereignty of the individual.”—René Girard¹

Introduction

The question of the nature of humor is not new. Many have applied themselves to understanding it in both general and specific ways, and because of the widespread interest in the subject, humor research is not limited to any one discipline or theory, although many available humor theories conform to the concerns of particular paradigms. Given the inevitable and pervasive pluralism around humor, there is no dominant perspective on how it can best be understood. Each theory that sheds light on the phenomenon may be valuable in its own way, although clearly some theories are better than others.

Thomas Veach is a recent thinker who has presented a theory of humor that many have subsequently praised for its comprehensiveness and explanatory reach.² His theory appears to provide a scientific view on humor that is simple, yet seemingly

¹. René Girard, “Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis,” *MLN: Comparative Literature* 87, no. 7 (1972): 811–26.

². Thomas C. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” *Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies* 11, no. 2 (1998): 161–216.

complete. Any useful theory of humor ought to be able to explain both why people are amused and not amused, and Veach's theory does this more convincingly than other prevailing theories. Given that humor takes many forms, varies tremendously across cultures, is at the mercy of the vicissitudes of rapidly fluctuating contemporary values and ideas, and can be divided into almost innumerable categorical distinctions, this is no mean feat.

Still, as Veach himself suggests, "While subtle aspects of the theory may be improved upon, I believe [my theory] presently forms the most useful available framework for understanding humor and the minds and feelings of laughing people."³ I hope here to provide a new perspective on this most "useful available framework" for understanding humor perception—to improve and go beyond it. I do this by first reframing Veach's original ideas in terms of René Girard's mimetic theory, and then by exploring how mimetic theory can contribute to our understanding of humor perception. As I show, some aspects of Veach's theory are not airtight, given certain philosophical and phenomenological considerations.

This article is an example of a theory that fits within what Veach names as "the concerns of a 'disciplinarily-restricted' audience,"⁴ while also aiming to supply something more universal to fit the interdisciplinary nature of mimetic theory itself. In what follows, I first summarize Veach's theory before building on it and testing it to construct a mimetic theory of humor. This theory-building makes use of the strengths of Veach's thinking while also offering correctives and modifications to it. In the process, my argument shows, first, that mimetic theory makes ample room for

³. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 162.

⁴. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 162.

understanding the perception of humor, and second, that this use of mimetic theory accounts for certain facets of humor better than Veach's theory does.

In offering this theory of humor, however, my aim is not to supplant Veach's theory, which still has validity under certain interpretive conditions. Still, I want to make clearer than Veach does the significance of the fact that the perception of humor is not primarily an individual or subjective concern but has a great deal more to do with how desire, and thus perception,⁵ is intersubjectively mediated. Once the core argument has been made, and after briefly unpacking how my theory relates to Girard's thinking on comedy, I conclude with some brief thoughts on demythologization and positive reciprocity, since these are fundamental conditions of possibility for humor.

Thomas Veach's Theory of Humor

Veach begins with the postulation "that there exists a *certain psychological state which tends to produce laughter*."⁶ The core of his theory has to do with what André Jolles calls a peculiar "mental disposition."⁷ Veach's postulation directs the reader's attention to an understanding of humor as a mental event or subjective experience, rather than simply as that which produces laughter. The issue is not just a matter of a so-called objective structure, as if humor has to do with clearly definable objective conditions, but rather has to do with how any so-called objective structure may relate

⁵. See Pablo Bandera, *Reflection in the Waves* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019), 75.

⁶. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 162.

⁷. André Jolles, *Simple Forms*, trans. Peter J. Schwartz (London: Verso, 2017), 301.

to subjective apperception and perception. It is also not just about whether it is evident to others that a person finds something funny, since sometimes a thing can be perceived as funny without it producing laughter or any other outwardly noticeable response. Even in such cases, the psychological state that is receptive to humor remains in play.

Veatch suggests that “humor and humor perception are the same.”⁸ This categorical parallel is one that I retain here. Where humor is mentioned in isolation, humor perception is implied. However, as Veatch notes, the word *perception* is tricky because of its multiple, often contradictory, connotations in philosophy and psychology. What matters for Veatch’s theory, as I understand it, is the phenomenological dimension of perception. Humor is what is experienced, often involuntarily, given certain conditions of possibility, both external and internal to us. Nevertheless, the distinction between the external and internal cannot be delineated with any certainty.

With this in mind, Veatch explains how his theory consists of three “necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions.”⁹ The word *necessary* means that “if any of the conditions is absent, then humor perception will also be absent.”¹⁰ The idea that these conditions are *jointly sufficient* implies that “if all of the conditions are present, then humor perception will be present.”¹¹ Veatch writes:

⁸. Veatch, “A Theory of Humor,” 162–63.

⁹. Veatch, “A Theory of Humor,” 163.

¹⁰. Veatch, “A Theory of Humor,” 163.

¹¹. Veatch, “A Theory of Humor,” 163.

The theory is scientifically adequate only if necessity and joint sufficiency are in fact properties of the three conditions. If there is a case of humor which lacks any of the three conditions, then the theory "undergenerates" and is false: the missing condition is not in fact necessary. If there is a case of nonhumor which contains all three of the conditions, then the theory "overgenerates" and is also false: the three conditions together are not sufficient. A scientifically adequate theory of humor must get all the cases right: It must both include the humorous cases and exclude the nonhumorous cases.¹²

Having noted this, Veach explains that the "three necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions" for the perception of humor are (1) a perceived violation (V) of a "subjective moral principle," (2) an overriding perception that the situation being perceived is still normal (N), and (3) the simultaneity of both the violation (V) and the sense of normality (N). Thus, "humor occurs when it seems that things are normal (N) while at the same time something seems wrong (V)."¹³ Put otherwise, in an apparent paradox, "humor is (emotional) pain (V) that does not hurt (N)."¹⁴ This is putting it too strongly, though. It is possible, as I argue in the following, for humor to be perceived without the high contrast between V and N—that is, without an exaggerated paradox between wrong and right; and, indeed, humor perception can

¹². Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 163.

¹³. As elaborated in the following, the issue here turns out to be less an issue of wrongness, as Veach articulates it, than of a less-than-strict conformity to a particular social pattern instituted by mimetic desire.

¹⁴. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 164.

occur without V at all—although the contrast offered by V is often what intensifies the perception of humor, or at least the sense that one has perceived something humorous. The presence of a violation is nevertheless common in humor, and certainly it makes it easier to test under laboratory-like circumstances.

Building on Veach's thinking, it is precisely such testing, involving a number of people, that Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren have done.¹⁵ They refer to the preceding as the "benign-violation hypothesis."¹⁶ This helps to qualify the paradox Veach is working with. The perception of humor, thus framed, involves a violation of some kind, but the violation has to be regarded as sufficiently benign for humor perception to occur. Additionally, at least as far as the theory goes, if there is no violation at all—that is, if there is a perception only of normality—humor will be absent. The issue is thus, in Veach's theory, about the proportions between two views of a situation represented by N and V, which is an idea I return to and modify in the following in the context of mimetic theory. It is according to a receptivity to specific proportions of N and V that humor can also be predicted, if only approximately.

To clarify the preceding, Veach notes that "both N and V are 'views of the situation' which carry emotional or affective content."¹⁷ This helps qualify how V represents a contravention of a subjective moral principle. For Veach, a moral theory is not at issue here per se, but rather an apprehension of a particular pattern of

¹⁵. A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, "Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny," *Psychological Science* 21 no. 8 (2010): 1141–49.

¹⁶. McGraw and Warren, "Benign Violations," 1142.

¹⁷. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 165.

subjectively held values, although this pattern of values may only be “partially-specified.”¹⁸ While clear cognitive categories are likely to be in play in the perception of humor, there is also likely to be a great deal in what is humorous that one would not be able to articulate properly, as I explore further in the following. The values-patterns that guide our perceptions of what is normal are profoundly complex and cannot be reduced without the possibility that the affective content that allows for humor will be lost in the process.

Veach notes that V “is a function of both the situation and the perceiver.”¹⁹ What is perceptibly amusing is therefore dependent on the dialogue between the world of meaning and the subject who dwells within that world. This means that “humor perception is doubly subjective, not only in that it is a psychological event in a subjective perceiver, but also in that different subjects may differ in their perceptions.”²⁰ A vital aspect of this insight, not stressed enough by Veach as far as mimetic theory is concerned, is that subjects are not strictly autonomous in their perceptions. One could therefore emphasize, as I do in the following, how this double subjectivity is better understood as intersubjectivity, especially if we are to understand why humor emerges and is perceived differently depending on who is present. The same qualification needs to be added to properly understand what is perceived as normal (N). What is perceived as normal (N), in concert with what is perceived as contravening that norm (V), would be very much dependent on the company one keeps and the consensus that emerges in the midst of others. As

¹⁸. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 165.

¹⁹. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 166.

²⁰. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 166.

Veach suggests, “If the situation cannot be interpreted as normal, then it cannot be funny.”²¹ Again, Veach presupposes the importance of that which contravenes the norm, and this may not be essential in humor perception.

Veach qualifies his notion of “simultaneity” by stressing that V and N ought not to merely happen in sequence but should occur at the same time, at least in the mind, for any surprising ambiguity to arise.²² Even if humor relies on chronological time to be understood, what matters most is the kairological dimension of the experience: What occurs in a sequence must still be experienced as happening simultaneously. It is this simultaneity that gives rise to a particular interpretive experience that allows what happens to be a contradiction of values to coexist in the consciousness of the perceiver,²³ without necessarily being reconciled. There is something almost dialectical in this, in which negation and affirmation appear without an obvious synthesis, although it is possible to argue that the synthesis is found in the mind that allows the coexistence of both N and V, and thus gives rise to the perception of humor. Still, following Veach’s theory, another way of thinking about this is to consider humor as that which appears when the perceived norm (N) provides the context for and mediation of the violation (V) without itself being overcome or driven out by the violation. This is not Veach’s formulation, but it predicts one of the ways that mimetic theory can modify his theory.

One final clarification necessary for understanding Veach’s theory is the question of what the violation of a subjective moral order entails. Veach explains that

²¹. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 166.

²². Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 166.

²³. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 167.

a “subjective moral violation” refers to “a violation of a moral principle that the perceiver cares about.”²⁴ He then explains that this “caring about” pertains to “a principle” believed by the perceiver that involves a sense of “the way things should be.”²⁵ This is supported by “some affective—that is to say, emotional—commitment, such as a propensity to anger, offense, or fear, when it [this principle] is violated.”²⁶ For Veach, “It seems reasonable to refer to this as the perceiver’s view of the ‘moral order’ of things, or the subjective moral order.”²⁷

Veach acknowledges that his use of the word *moral* may raise concerns, since it does not comply with what some regard as morality. To clarify, his idea is less about the nature of morality than it is about how moral principles function in the perception of humor. At the root of this is the human need and capacity to conform to the patterns of being and behavior adopted by others in one’s immediate circle, which gives rise to particular ways of evaluating the world and its contents.²⁸ Importantly, this does not mean that people are merely at the mercy of the pressure to mutually comply with others, but rather that interpretations of what the world is and should be are informed and shaped by personal interrelatedness. As Veach notes, “Much of what people like and dislike, much of the intricate patterning of human conduct, is learned from others through exposure to [the] reactions [of others].”²⁹

²⁴. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 167.

²⁵. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 167.

²⁶. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 167.

²⁷. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 167.

²⁸. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 168.

²⁹. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 168.

In the preceding, therefore, Veach lays out a constellation of phenomenological factors that make the perception of humor possible: (1) a particular context or consensus within which our evaluative interpretations are molded and grounded (a “system of opinions” that Veach calls “morality”),³⁰ (2) the intentionality, care, or attachment according to which we relate to this consensus, and (3) an intrusion into this consensus by something that does not conform to this attachment and yet also does not completely dislodge it either.³¹ In the preceding, Veach emphasizes the *subjective* for good reason. Incongruous things happen all the time, after all, yet not everyone would consider these comical. There are things that some will find funny while others will not. The perception of humor is, therefore, as Veach conceives of it, a matter of the individual’s relation to a consensus that he regards, loosely speaking, as moral. Moreover, in articulating his theory, he suggests the importance of considering how the subjective apprehension of humor occurs within moral systems. This opens the way for considering what mimetic theory may contribute to Veach’s original theory. Considering his theory’s apparent univocal absoluteness, and the way in which it obscures some of the more equivocal aspects of the humorous, mimetic theory offers important dimensions and provisos worth considering.

A Mimetic Theory of Humor

Following an examination of a basic mimetic theory of humor, I add further clarification of my thinking, including suggestions as to why my modifications to

³⁰. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 168.

³¹. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 169.

Veach's theory are helpful. As already stressed, my focus is not only on the subjective perception of humor, as standing alone or apart from the lives and laughter of others, but as always necessarily participating in a hermeneutical situation, grounded in the human capacity for mimesis—that is, for mimicry and rivalry. Adjusting to this means that my own mimetic theory of humor begins with four, rather than three, elements; three of these are essential components of humor perception and one, echoing Veach's benign violation (V), is merely common and thus often helpful as a catalyst in humor perception or enhancer of it. As much as this may seem to inelegantly add more than it needs to for the sake of academic pedantry, the reality is that at least one of the functions of the academic is to be a pedant. More importantly, however, it also goes to show that an often vital part of the root of many common forms of humor is mimetic desire itself—a fact that helps to clarify not only what is going on when humor is perceived, but also what may be at stake when a joke goes wrong.

Thus, this mimetic theory of humor holds that the typically necessary and jointly sufficient conditions required for the perception of humor are:

1a. a mimetic consensus (hereafter, simply consensus) involving external mediation,

2. a mimetic dissensus (hereafter, simply dissensus) that, through interacting with the consensus, highlights what I call a *kindly scandal*; this kindly scandal points to

3a. an experiential recognition or mimetic perception of external mediation in both the consensus and the dissensus, and

4a. the simultaneity of the above hermeneutic conditions.

I note above that these are the *typical* rather than *necessary* requirements for humor because humor perception often involves a situation in which mimetic perception subsumes or even totally replaces the dissensus even while allowing for the possibility of a dissensus, such that the second condition for humor may be omitted, and the first, third, and fourth conditions for humor may be modified slightly to mean that humor perception requires:

1b. a consensus involving external mediation, which allows for kindly scandal and opens up the possibility of dissensus without necessarily giving into it,

3b. an experiential recognition or mimetic perception of external mediation, and

4b. the simultaneity of the above two hermeneutic conditions (consensus and mimetic perception).

As previously noted and as I explain in the following, these modifications suggest the possibility that humor does not require a violation at all, and also that what Veach regards as a perception of things being normal (N) in the face of a violation (V) is less about the normality of the humorous situation than it is about its perceived constructedness. Humor, in the light of mimetic theory, becomes more a mode of awareness or an interface than a particular, strictly predictable calculus. It

becomes more a matter of formal causality³² than of efficient causality, which is the focus of Veach's theory.

That said, I do not think I am completely at odds with Veach. His theory holds insofar as it deals with humor perception that involves a violation and insofar as that violation is in fact involved in causing mimetic perception, which I have accounted for under points 3a and 4a. However, it does not account for a perception of humor in which no violation is apparent or where any present violation is not the cause of mimetic perception. It is, I will admit, my own experience that led me to question Veach's insistence on the presence of V in humor perception. I have frequently found myself in situations that I perceive to be amusing without there being an apparent violation. My quest therefore became to offer philosophically acceptable reasons for why this occurs. Any perception of humor that does not conform to one explanation, even one as apparently universal as Veach's, requires a different explanation. The same goes for my own proposed theory.

The First Condition for the Perception of Humor: Mimetic Consensus

It now becomes possible to begin to articulate, more fully, the conditions for the perception of humor, as I understand them now. As already noted, Veach has some reservations about his "extremely broad" use of the word "morality," and so qualifies his meaning as a matter of "the issues people actually care about."³³ In response, I think that assigning the word "morality" to this state of care creates an idiosyncratic

³². See Eric McLuhan and Marshall McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause* (Houston, TX: NeoPoeisis Press, 2011).

³³. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 170.

and puzzling meaning for the word. Notions of care, attachment, or concern would have sufficed to convey what Veach meant better than his selection of the word “morality” does. While a great deal of humor arises from benign violations of a moral nature, it is also true that a great deal of humor is in response to things that have no moral nature, at least insofar as morality is understood in its usual sense. It seems to me that Veach’s articulation has also created some confusion in McGraw and Warren’s testing of his theory in that the examples used are clearly constructed around specifically moral concerns, especially around the psychology of disgust researched by Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues.³⁴

What is most at issue, as I see it, is a particular perceptual field—a domain of care—and how this informs our “affective attachments.”³⁵ In mimetic theory, our desires and therefore also our affective attachments are mediated through others.³⁶ What we care about or value is not a matter of mere private or subjective selection or preference but is rather a matter of intersubjective mediation. Hermeneutically speaking, mediation takes precedence over what is mediated. This is even true within so-called private spheres of life. It is mimetic desire that shapes the consensus within which our evaluative interpretations are shaped and grounded. This consensus is the vital context within which humor perception can occur, and is often most evident in any given setup of a joke, which tends to construct and/or

³⁴. McGraw and Warren, “Benign Violations,” 1141.

³⁵. Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 170.

³⁶. William B. Hurlbut, “Neurobiology and the Psychology of Desire,” in Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford, eds., *How We Became Human: Mimetic Theory and the Science of Evolutionary Origins* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 102; Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), xix.

conform to a larger pattern that would be accepted as fairly run-of-the-mill, not merely by individual people but by people as they find themselves in the midst of others. What is offered to perception is not just an item on a list of possible items but something that represents an entire world of implicit meaning. What is called into play is not just a sign system or network of signifiers and referents, but an array of emotional resonances and values. This consensus can be thought of as the formal cause within which humor occurs and of which most people are not fully conscious.

Take, for example, the joke that begins with parents sincerely telling their small son that he should not feel so bad about the death of his dog, because it is now in heaven with God. This simple setup represents a world of values and meanings, including, in this case, an entire implied theology. To understand it involves a mimetic collaboration, albeit a largely unconscious one, rather than just the acceptance of a particular semantic construction of meaning. It is only once this mimetic consensus as invisible ground is established that it can be subverted by the boy's response, which happens to represent a different world of concerns, also mimetically established: "What the hell would God want with a dead dog?" Even if one does not find this particularly hysterical, the interpretation of the joke as a joke is nevertheless bound up in mimetic desire. The same goes for comedy in general. Mimetic desire is at the heart of the experience of the comical.

What I want to stress, more than Veach does, is the social dimension of humor, in which context is more significant than content.³⁷ What Veach calls a "system of opinions" must be, as mimetic theory highlights, less about an articulated

³⁷. Jonathan Waterlow, *It's Only A Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust and Everyday Life under Stalin* (Oxford: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2018), 5, 7.

set of principles and propositions than it is about what may be called the mimetic unconscious³⁸ or what I call here (to also include more conscious elements) the mimetic consensus.³⁹ While humor may sometimes have much to do with precise verbal formulations (as is the case of puns or the paradigm-reversal structure of verbal jokes such as the one just described), the primary level at which the perception of humor should be understood is at the level of what is unspoken; in other words, humor mostly occurs because of mimetic desire and the way that mimetic desire structures our relational worlds and hermeneutic horizons. Even anomalous verbal formulations become reflective reminders of normal or normalized ways of speaking—that is, ways of conforming to a consensus.

³⁸. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 300.

³⁹. To clarify, I recognize that for the consensus to work as a ground for humor perception, it must remain predominantly symbolic in its function. This is to say that implicit meaning is what generates the perception of humor rather than explicit meaning; in fact, bringing too much implicit meaning to the surface, as this very article does, is often what diminishes or even erases the impact of the comical. As Iain McGilchrist explains, “The strength of the symbol is in direct proportion to the power it has to convey an array of implicit meanings, which need to remain implicit to be powerful. In this it is like a joke that has several layers of meaning—explaining them destroys its power.” Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 51. It is nevertheless true that humor often results when one aspect of the mimetic consensus and/or disensus is made explicit, as intimated by Veach’s N and V interaction. The humor in this case, however, is caused by the mimetic perception of the symbolic realm itself, rather than merely by what has just been explicitly brought to one’s attention.

It is at the level of what may be understood as the forestructuring of understanding⁴⁰ by a mimetic consensus that the interpretive frame according to which humor may be perceived is therefore set up. Mimetic desire establishes an unconscious, intersubjective consensus by focusing our attention on a specific network of values, and thus offers a backdrop against which our evaluations are made and emotional responses are conditioned. It is the form and not merely the content that determines the perception of the humor, not—as is intimated in various theories of humor, including Veach’s—the specifics of ridicule, release, or incongruity. These values are patterned in a manner that the consensus establishes as normal (N). What Veach refers to as N is therefore a component of the mimetic consensus—something intimating a wider mimetic agreement without naming it. What I call the mimetic consensus is not merely a different name for what Veach refers to as normal (N), but suggests the social conditions according to which any particular thing would be perceived as normal. This is implied by Veach, but my argument is that this implied consensus is in fact more crucial to the perception of humor than what is overt—as is most evident in the subtler ways that humor can emerge from, and foster, social harmony.

With this in mind, it can therefore be observed that those values that do not conform to this consensus are, by definition, not normal, and imply not merely a single incongruity (V) but an entire dissensus that does not match or mirror the consensus. What is most telling here, however, is not that the dissensus is present, but that it is a way of highlighting the nature of the consensus as structured within

⁴⁰. Paolo Diego Bubbio, *Intellectual Sacrifice and Other Mimetic Paradoxes* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 185.

the understanding of the person as interindividual. Of course, it is possible for the mimetic consensus to be a fiction imagined by a person, rather than one actually adopted by a group of people. The mimetic consensus concerns not merely what is perceived but also refers to the entire apperceptive pattern—whether humorous or not—by which perception is framed and interpreted. In other words, it primarily concerns what is not articulated or articulable by the perceiving subject. Mimetic theory does not fail to recognize the filtering processes of specific subjects, but it remains true that our filtering processes are incapable of eradicating mimetic desire. Humor is perceived not by bounded individuals but by porous selves within a world of relations. The idea that there is a simple, direct relation between subject and object of perception is quite simply wrong.

Jean-Michel Oughourlian, who articulates Girard's theory in more overtly psychological terms, posits that the self is created by the desires of others.⁴¹ As Oughourlian notes, "Psychological actuality is located not in the tranquil opacity of a 'body' in the strict sense, or in the reassuring wholeness of any self, but rather in the mysterious transparency of the interindividual relation."⁴² Subjectively speaking, there is a misknowing or misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) in this.⁴³ In the process of being constituted by the desires of others, the self forgets that its desires are copied

⁴¹. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, "From Universal Mimesis to the Self Formed by Desire," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 46, 50.

⁴². Oughourlian, "From Universal Mimesis to the Self Formed by Desire," 50.

⁴³. See Paul Dumouchel, *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 209–23.

and maintains instead that those copied desires are really its own. Since mimetic desire is not *felt* or *experienced* in the way that, say, emotions are felt and experienced,⁴⁴ its functioning seems to require a lack of conscious awareness of how the desires of others have been appropriated. This lack of consciousness needs to be disrupted or overturned even slightly for humor perception to be possible. Still, it is likely that the effect of the desires of others on one's own apperception and perceptions will go unnoticed. In the presence of mediators, as shaped by their desires, we would probably regard our perceptions as uniquely our own—as subjective rather than as intersubjective. I mention this, not to adopt something like the anti-phenomenology of Freud, but to acknowledge that there are many dimensions to our experiences that evade conscious awareness. Indeed, arguably, it is precisely this unconsciousness that gives rise to the possibility of humor. Humor involves bringing to consciousness some of what has been unconscious.

A clear example of how a subject's perceptions can be shaped by others is in the Gregory Berns et al.⁴⁵ recreation of Solomon Asch's⁴⁶ famous conformity

⁴⁴. See Paul Dumouchel, "Emotions and Mimesis," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 75–86.

⁴⁵. Gregory S. Berns et al., eds., "Neurobiological Correlates of Social Conformity and Independence During Mental Rotation," *Biological Psychiatry* 58 (2005): 245–53; Gregory Berns, *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently* (Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2008), Kindle Locations 3468–69.

⁴⁶. Solomon E. Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments," in *Groups, Leadership and Men: Research in Human Relations*, ed. H. S. Guetzkow (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1951); Solomon E. Asch, *Social Psychology* (New York, NY: Prentice Hall, 1952);

experiment. Asch's original experiment tested how the views of groups would affect the views of specific individuals, and concluded that even when the thing being seen was unambiguous, group pressure would still cause individuals to waver in their opinions or even radically change their opinions to suit those of a group. Conformity to the consensus outweighed so-called individual perception. Asch's experiment, however, still adheres somewhat to an individual psychology, even if it hints at relational psychology; what emerges is the apparent revelation that others can sway the views of a single individual, as if the individual always has, to begin with, a clear choice to comply with the consensus.

In the Berns et al. modification of the Asch experiment, this conclusion has been challenged, because functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machines were used to check whether such shifts in viewpoint happened in the area of perceptual processes or in the regions of the brain that have to do with decision making. In other words, the idea was to determine whether the people in the experiment were deliberately choosing to conform to the pattern set by others or not. What the experiment determined was remarkable. In the midst of others—that is, in the midst of an intersubjectively informed perception of what others are perceiving and thinking—the activity of the decision-making areas of the brain decreased dramatically. The implication is this: It was the *actual* perceptions of the test subject that were altered. In other words, conformity to a mimetic consensus *literally* changed the way that the test subjects saw, without them even being aware that this was happening. Here, then, is a concrete example of how conformity is not primarily

and Solomon E. Asch, "Studies of Independence and Conformity: I. A Minority of One Against a Unanimous Majority," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied* 70, no. 9 (1956): 1–70.

a conscious choice, but has more to do with an unconscious pressure imposed by mimetic desire.

In terms of the parameters set out by mimetic theory, as well as various ongoing empirical studies on imitation in its relation to neurological systems and mirror neurons, this is precisely what one would expect. The self is somewhat evanescent and thus easily affected by the sway of any given mimetic consensus. Building on Veach's theory and in keeping with the idea of an evanescent self, mimetic theory also suggests the possibility of one's own sense of humor being in flux, depending on the specific mimetic consensus established at any given time or in any discrete situation. It depends, in other words, on the company one keeps.

The universality of this idea would need to account for a great deal of variation at the level of specific people and their emotional and cognitive dispositions, since some people are more likely to be swayed by immediate mimetic desires and pressures than others, as has been shown even in conformity experiments like Asch's and Stanley Milgram's.⁴⁷ Still, it is safe to stress, using mimetic theory as a window on what Veach refers to as a "perception of a situation as normal," that humor perception is better understood as an intersubjective phenomenon rather than as a subjective one. For instance, a person can watch a comedy with others and find it uproarious but in different company find the very same comedy decidedly unfunny and even offensive.

Many of us have had this experience, and not just in the case of humorous events. The classic case of parents choosing not to watch uncouth movies in the company of their children is just one example. The case of people joking differently

⁴⁷. See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2004).

in the company of different peer groups is another. We read the world differently in the light of any particular mimetic consensus. What constrains the norm is not merely some general, conscious sense of one's own subjectivity but also one's position, or unconscious sense of it, within a specific consensus. At least one of the functions of humor, as intimated by Simon Critchley,⁴⁸ is to return the subject to this consensus—a thought I return to in the following, in my discussion of how humor relates to the notion of scandal. However, this return is part of a feedback loop, and therefore requires a reflective consciousness: an ability to look back at the mimetic consensus within that consensus. It has to do with being both inside and outside a situation, both mimetically invested and not. The mimetic consensus is not just, therefore, a matter of intersubjective awareness but involves a degree of intrasubjective awareness, too.

All of this may be challenged in two obvious ways: first, by the question of what happens when one is alone and thus not apparently pressured to conform to any values pattern mediated by others, and second, by the question of what happens in people who, for whatever reason, have a very poor sense of their own stance in relation to a mimetic consensus. Since this article presents only a theoretical exploration, my responses to these challenges can only be brief, provisional, and speculative. To the first challenge, I would say that it seems there is nevertheless something stable in the person, even given the profound porosity of each person's subjectivity—something of a default state or preferential posture toward the world that returns when the perceiving subject is not compelled to accommodate the desires of others in any immediate way. The mimetic consensus

⁴⁸. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2011), 18.

that shapes one's concerns is not eradicated by the proposal of such a default state, since even when we are alone, our perceptions are still deeply affected by the desires of invisible others. The consensus remains a component of consciousness but is more likely to be shaped by an imaginative engagement with whatever the subject happens to be perceiving and/or experiencing at any given time.

An example of this would be when one sits alone watching a stand-up comedian perform on a screen; in such a mediated situation, the subject's desires and cares are focused through a collaboration of perceptions offered by the specific imagined community called into being when viewing those flickering pixels and listening to that digitally translated sound. It is unlikely, apart perhaps from a complete lack of socialization, that there is a conceivable situation that is not, in some way, informed by one or another mimetic consensus. One may even suggest, following Oughourlian, that the mimetic consensus remains tied to something like Jung's collective unconscious hypothesis that the discovery of mirror neurons has confirmed.

Oughourlian likens "universal mimesis" to a Mesmerist gravitational field that governs the movements of people,⁴⁹ which suggests that our capacity to desire according to the other has to do with the "stage presence" or magnetism of the other. As even common sense shows, some people are more compelling than others, just as some people are more easily influenced than others. The capacities of specific persons remain in play in the functioning of mimesis. As much psychological research has shown, however, emotional and cognitive contagion are not just bound

⁴⁹. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 81, 94.

to the literal presence of other human beings but can, in fact, be transferred by mere inference or implication, via text messages, gestures, and the like.⁵⁰ Our sense of the other does not disappear when we are not literally in their presence.

As for the challenge offered by those who do not find it easy to situate themselves within a particular mimetic consensus, my answer involves reformulating what has been said in the preceding. First, the mimetic consensus does not eradicate human subjectivity but rather affects it and directs it. Mimesis, after all, is not a disembodied phenomenon but an embodied one. Moreover, mimetic theory does not posit the absence of desire when others are not around; rather, it simply stresses that desire is mediated by others, whether present or not. Second, following on from this, the issue of the mimetic consensus is never just one of a direct equivalence between the perceptions of the subject and the perceptions of the crowd, even when the crowd is present. The self is not merely the disembodied, univocal aggregate of its others. The consensus is always, in a sense, imaginary and interpreted by a real subject, although this does not mean that it is necessarily illusory.⁵¹ As a consequence, variations on how the mimetic consensus is taken up by any single human being must necessarily abound, even if they cannot necessarily be quantified and tested.

⁵⁰. D. A. de Vries, A. M. Möller, M. S. Wieringa, A. W. Eigenraam, and K. Hamelink, "Social Comparison as the Thief of Joy: Emotional Consequences of Viewing Strangers' Instagram Posts," *Media Psychology* 21 no. 2 (2018): 227.

⁵¹. Here I offer that Oughourlian is putting it too strongly to say that mimetic desire is an "illusion." See Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, 4. To state this is to fall into a Cartesian nominalist mode that not even Oughourlian agrees with. Mimetic desire suggests the mediation and thus the filtering of desires, not merely the invention of them.

Still, it is this mimetic consensus that to a great extent informs what the interindividual subject experiences as normal. This is what situates the subject and shapes the interplay of conformity and mutual compliance according to which emotional evaluations are made, whether consciously or unconsciously. This applies not just to the moral sphere but also, perhaps more importantly, to the larger sphere of how meaning itself is constituted and deciphered. As the primary context within which humor can occur, the mimetic consensus is comprised not just of a “system of opinions”⁵² as in Veach’s estimation, but of a combination of both spoken and unspoken attachments and resonances created through the complex interactions of mimetic desires. Indeed, many of the experiences of humor by people have very little to do with what can consciously be articulated, given the constellation of factors that constitute human consciousness. What matters is how the subject’s intentionality is informed so that it can be abrogated or unbound to allow for alternate meanings to appear.⁵³ For a specific expectation to be challenged by a violation (V) that implies a dissensus, or for it merely to be recognized, it needs to first be established (in the form of an original consensus).⁵⁴

⁵². Veach, “A Theory of Humor,” 168.

⁵³. Jolles, *Simple Forms*, 303.

⁵⁴. One may think of the so-called anti-joke as a contravention of this, because what produces the perception of humor seems, at first, to be the fact that there is no overt interruption of the mimetic consensus. One example would be the joke asking, “What is brown and sticky?” The answer: a stick. Even if this is not outrageously funny, the perception of humor is still possible. The reason is simple: The consensus, set up in the first part, includes the very expectation that one is about to hear/read a joke, and in the end what one hears/reads does not conform to this consensus.

The Second Condition for the Perception of Humor: Mimetic Dissensus

Having explored the first typical condition for the perception of humor, we can now discuss the second, which, while commonly present in the perception of humor, is not actually a necessary condition for it. It often acts as a spark, instigator, interface, and enhancer for those conditions that are more vital, as I discuss in the following. To understand this second condition, it is helpful to notice, as in incongruity theory, for instance, that humor tends to require the simultaneous appearance of one form of mediation while also referring to another. One of the typical requirements for grasping humor is the subject's understanding of both fields of mediation—what I have called the mimetic consensus and mimetic dissensus. The perception of humor often requires not just the violation (V) of the consensus but concerns an entirely different mimetic consensus (that is, a dissensus), usually opposed to or apparently opposed to the original consensus. The dissensus is implied but not fully accounted for by what Veach calls V, and represents a values structure that apparently, but not necessarily, rivals the values structure of the consensus. The dissensus is not simply an incongruity in the sense of being an individual anomaly (V, in Veach's theory) within mediation provided by the given consensus. Instead, it involves a region of meanings that has been (perhaps but not necessarily incongruously) introduced within the context provided by the consensus, and therefore operates differently from the trajectory of desire suggested by that consensus. What concerns me is less the anomalous nature of V than simply the presence of some form of mimetic difference. The dissensus and V are analogous but not identical.

Like the mimetic consensus, the mimetic dissensus is interindividually constituted. It is related to the way that desires and attachments are mediated. Another way of thinking about this is via the notion of intertextuality. Humor is, by its

very nature, intertextual.⁵⁵ It relies on the perceiver's capacity to access another implied domain of meaning without losing access to the given context within which the general meaning of a thing may be understood. In other words, the porosity of being is something implied in the nature of the hermeneutic (humorous) experience. For humor to work, the clash between consensus and dissensus is common but not vital. Still, when such a clash is evident, it is not sensible to merely suggest that the consensus is open and without limits, or that the dissensus is equally open and without limits. Each is constrained, if only by implication, and it is the constraints of each that determine the possibility of a clash between them. Such constraints are apparent in language—specifically in intertextuality—but language itself is a sign of a

⁵⁵. Peter J. Leithart, "I Don't Get It: Humour and Hermeneutics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 4 (2007): 412–25. The intertextuality of jokes—that is, how humor involves two perceptual fields of meaning—can be shown in almost any example. My own theory here insists that intertextuality is not merely a matter of how specific surfaces (texts) refer to other surfaces (texts) but rather concerns how specific texts invoke entire fields of meaning, both conscious and unconscious, established and structured by mimetic desire. Here is one, though, in which the field of meanings from one mimetic consensus (Stalinist Russia) clashes with another field of meanings (suggested in the joke by the idea of Capitalism): "The writer and intellectual Arthur Koestler recorded hearing the following anecdote when visiting the USSR in 1932, while himself a devout Communist: Q: What does it mean when there is food in the town but no food in the country? A: A Left, Trotskyist deviation. Q: What does it mean when there is food in the country but not in the town? A: A Right, Bukharinite deviation. Q: What does it mean when there is no food in the country and no food in the town? A: The correct application of the general line. Q: What does it mean when there is food both in the country and in the town? A: The horrors of Capitalism." Quoted by Waterlow, *It's Only A Joke, Comrade!*, 88–89. As is evident in Waterlow's book, one of the reasons why many jokes from the Stalinist Russia flop now is because we do not have access to the mimetic consensus within which the jokes were told.

deeper form of mediation, which is mimetic.⁵⁶ In all intertextuality, what matters is not just that things are named but that there are people or mediators who name them.⁵⁷

In a merely open mimetic consensus, where precise edges are imperceptible and perhaps impossible to discern, it is likely that the perception of humor will disappear completely. Were this to occur, it would be only partly because the contrast between consensus and dissensus is not apparent to the perceiver. Importantly, as Girard's work explores, the absence of boundaries—that is, limits between different forms of mediation—does not necessarily imply peace but suggests mimetic crisis instead, in which rivalries and violence are likely eventualities. Boundaries are necessary but must be, to some extent, permeable for humor to be perceivable.⁵⁸ However, this is not to say that the consensus must always be contravened by a dissensus. The dissensus merely offers an opportunity for the boundaries of the consensus to be recognized—that is, for the person to become aware of the consensus as a frame within which meaning has been built. The dissensus highlights the edge of mimetic intentionality. This is the dissensus's primary function, although my claim is that it is possible for the consensus's boundaries to be perceptible even without the sharp contrast offered by a dissensus. The dissensus offers a lucky confirmation that the consensus's boundaries are both limited and permeable; it thus provides a sense of how the consensus propounds a pattern structured by mimetic desire. It is this function of the dissensus that we need

⁵⁶. Jeremiah Alberg, *Beneath the Veil of Strange Verses: Reading Scandalous Texts* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 10.

⁵⁷. Alberg, *Beneath the Veil of Strange Verses*, 10.

⁵⁸. Alberg, *Beneath the Veil of Strange Verses*, 414.

to pay particularly close attention to, since it fosters a better understanding of the third condition for humor perception discussed in the following.

An example of how this can happen is found in a very simple joke: “How do you stop a lawyer from drowning?” The answer: “Shoot him before he hits the water.” In the first line, we have a mimetic consensus, suggested by the desire to solve a particular problem, which involves, in this case, saving a human being. What matters, again, is not just the particular semantic construction but how it signals a unique consensus of care around problem solving and human life, to mention just two aspects. The second line represents an alternate desire that suggests an entirely different mimetic consensus; it involves the proposal of getting rid of the lawyer rather than saving him. The problem to be solved is not the “problem” that the lawyer will drown but the “problem” that he will not die fast enough.

Forgive me for murdering the joke, but I must continue. Here is a clear case of two different value systems operating in conflict—consensus and dissensus. However, what seems to be most significant in humor perception is less the fact that a moral principle has been violated than the fact that we have come to the edge of the consensus suggested by the question (and implied answers) offered by the first line of the joke. In Veach’s theory, question and answer can coexist because the violation is benign. And while this may be part of the story, I think it is more accurate to say that they can coexist because of a particular mode of desiring at play in the mimetic consensus (discussed in the following as taking the form of external mediation). This mode of desire is accompanied by an experiential recognition of what is really going on. In the end, we are able to reconcile ourselves to the conflict, in part, because the dissensus does not overwhelm or replace the consensus. What is unspoken in the punch line, namely, that no harm is meant, is often stated

explicitly by the nervous humorist whose joke has failed to land: “I am only joking.” Even this is less a statement about the violation than it is about the limits of the primary mimetic consensus, as yet unnoticed by the audience. Again, in the perception of humor, it matters immensely that it is not just about the lone subject’s point of view, but rather a collective, interindividual perception of values. Arguably, if a purely individual perception of humor were possible, to laugh entirely alone would be to experience a deep alienation, not merely because it involves a case of sense of humor failure, but because it has implications for the entire way we have imagined and experienced a network of values—a network that has been confirmed and structured by mimetic desire.

Girard proposes three possible ways in which desire may be mediated by the other. The desire may be the desire of the model, the rival, or the obstacle. For the purpose of this discussion, these different mediations have to do not only with the question of internal or external mediation, but with the possibility of accommodating different forms of mimesis. In particular, with the mimesis of the model, the subject is capable of detaching from one model’s desire and adopting another model’s desire. The subject is freest in this kind of mediation. When it comes to the mimesis of the rival and obstacle, this freedom begins to disappear. The subject begins to be locked into a struggle with the mediator over a shared desire. The mediator becomes a rival, not over differing desires but over the same desire—especially when the so-called object of that desire is perceived to be in limited supply. In extreme forms of mimesis, in what Girard terms “metaphysical desire,”⁵⁹ the object of desire

⁵⁹. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 65.

disappears completely and the being of the model becomes the sole concern of the perceiving subject.

Following the logic set up by Veach and supported by subsequent experiments by others, the perception of humor is likely to be severely diminished when rivalry increases. Derisive laughter may be possible in rivalry, but even for this to occur requires a compromise between two forms of mediation, namely, the mediation of the model and the mediation of the rival. In my mimetic theory of humor, a possibility presents itself that allows for a paradoxical coexistence of two forms of mediation: the mediation of the model, which allows for alternate models and thus alternate forms of mediation to coexist, and the mediation of the rival. Stated another way, a shared desire must link to the two forms of mediation (consensus and dissensus) for a clash—and thus one condition for the possibility of humor—to be perceived. This is the desire represented by V in Veach's theory. But the perceiving subject must also recognize in some way that there is freedom to adopt different models, especially within the consensus. V thus indicates a paradox: a rivalrous set of values (dissensus) that is ultimately not a threat to the values of the norm (consensus). Even in the presence of V and the implied dissensus, the consensus still holds sway.

This means that in most forms of humor there are in fact two different desires (two provinces of desire) at play. However, one of these desires (or provinces of desire) unifies and mediates the total hermeneutic experience that makes possible the perception of humor. If humor is perceived, after all, it must be because the desire of the rival is proportionally less pronounced than both the desire of the model and the openness of the model to the existence of alternate desires. In the perception of humor, the desire of the rival must also be recognized on some level

as a possible or possibly legitimate desire, rather than just as an oppositional force. In humor, the subject would need to be able to recognize the desire of the rival as also being either *already* a part of her or his own inner life or as being *potentially* part of her or his own inner life. To clarify this, it helps to introduce Girard's notion of scandal, especially since it offers a useful perspective on the role of mediation in the perception of humor. Scandal especially clears up the nature of the rivalry that is represented by V and the dissensus, as well as how this rivalry shapes perceptions and inheres in language to generate meaning.⁶⁰ It also clarifies why some jokes may flop and why some comical actions may fail to amuse.

Scandal, taken from the Greek *skandalon*, suggests an experience of something that is both attractive and repulsive—that is, both compelling and repellant. Put more strongly, a scandal is that which, as Jeremiah Alberg notes, attracts us “precisely to the degree that it repels us and vice versa.”⁶¹ Desire is at work in this but, as with considering any conditions within which humor can occur, it is important to not make the mistake of thinking that this concerns the objects of desire in themselves, as if it is merely their nature that is both alluring and repulsive. This paradoxical desire, which is captured in a milder form in humor perception, is present because of the mediating role of the other, whether real or imagined. The other, in the case of scandal, is perceived as both model *and* rival, a mediator whose presence utters a double injunction: “Imitate me!” *and* “Do not imitate me!” The mediator grants some access but the perceiving subject also finds access limited or blocked. In other words, the perceiving subject experiences some measure of

⁶⁰. Alberg, *Beneath the Veil of Strange Verses*, 3.

⁶¹. Alberg, *Beneath the Veil of Strange Verses*, 3.

interpretive understanding, but not all of it—at least, not all of what is desired.

Scandal involves being invited into a particular hermeneutic experience but, at the same time, being prevented from seeing the promise of the invitation fulfilled.

Ordinarily, scandal stresses the role of mimetic rivalry over and against nonrivalrous forms of mediation. However, there is something in the structure of scandal that mirrors the theory of humor put forward thus far. The consensus represents the mediation of desire, while the dissensus, metonymically implied by V, suggests the subversion of that mediation by means of an alternate mediation of desire—and thus an alternate region of meaning. This changes the way that the scandal is perceived. The difference in humor and its perception from a solemn experience of scandal is that the rivalry is decidedly nonthreatening. It is, in a sense, a nonrivalrous rivalry; it is what I like to call a *kindly scandal*. While scandal typically suggests something idolatrous, whereby one's powers become subservient to that which otherwise would not be master over them, or where one is placed somewhat at the mercy of the model/rival, the kindly scandal suggested by humor is one in which one's sense of self-possession remains intact, even while remaining mimetically situated. One may even say that idolatry is precisely what is subverted.

Thus, while humor operates along the lines of the theme of scandal, it presents us with a variation on the theme. Instead of being overtly scandalized by the interaction between mimetic consensus and (potential) mimetic dissensus, the perception of humor involves a recognition of mimesis itself. Humor perception involves a mode of awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that is somewhat inoculated against rivalry. In the tension between consensus and dissensus, the simultaneity of two apparently rivalrous desires gives way to a recognition, probably not overt, that rivalry is not the only way to solve or resolve the tension. What

appears to rival the mimetic consensus does not need to be taken too seriously since the rivalry is ultimately benign; it does not, in other words, threaten the identity—that is, the self-of-desire—of the perceiving subject.

Even in slapstick humor, one may find oneself mimetically aligned with the dignified businessman whose foot is about to meet the proverbial banana peel. In the setup, the mimetic consensus is established before being subverted when said banana peel interrupts the consensus and plants the man flat on the ground. Notably, the experience of the businessman (if he is real enough to have such an experience) is not necessarily one of perceiving humor, since his walking and slipping are all carried within the purview of a single desire or motivation, implied by his goal-directedness. The limits of the consensus as a perceptual field are not noticed in this desire. However, the perceiver of this moment of indignity is confronted with a splitting up of the field of desire into two distinct mimetic provinces of values, represented by the actions on display: the value of being dignified and upright (consensus) and the the antivalue of being brought low (dissensus). We may speculate that this can happen because the primary mimetic consensus is sustained in the mind of the perceiving subject in a way that is not allowed for in the mind the one whose posterior has met the pavement. I think that part of the subject's experience of humor has to do with the fact that his or her own experience is distinctly different from what has been intimated by the violation. This is at least to a great extent why a particular violation may be perceived as benign. The businessman may, of course, laugh at himself afterward on realizing he is not hurt, in which case the kindly scandal involves a nonrivalrous rivalry between himself and his former self-of-desire. And here would be a good example of a kind of reflective awareness or mimetic perception interwoven into this nonrivalrous rivalry.

Interestingly, if one empathizes too strongly with the plummeting businessman, one will come close to experiencing his fall as if it were one's own. In this case, the desire remains singular and totalizing, with no room left for taking that desire in a different direction, as something porous to alternate desires. The perception of or potential for rivalry stays, as no other manner of desiring is allowed; rather, the primary consensus remains intact. This is also what differentiates a typical scandal, as articulated by Girard and Alberg, for example, from the kindly scandal of humor perception. In the former, mimetic desire is singular and hegemonic—that is, functioning within a strict consensus, with imperceptible edges. Moreover, because it involves acquisitive mimesis, it is therefore inevitable, as is the paradoxical combination of allure and repulsion. In the kindly scandal of humor, as an intersubjective phenomenon, other desires and even ways of appropriating mimetic desire are allowed room to be. Differentiation—that is, mimetic difference—remains possible, given the presence of external mediation. In other words, there is room for positive reciprocity, about which I say more in the following.

In this theory of humor, though, the kindly scandal does not require the dissensus to be present even if it is more easily recognizable in the presence of the dissensus. What is merely required is the reflective consciousness or awareness that suggests the *possibility* of dissensus. Again, no violation or mimetic dissensus is absolutely required for humor perception to be possible. What is needed, rather, is the recognition that the consensus has limits, and that alternate ways of wanting and thus interpreting the world are conceivable. To put this in terms related to Veach's theory, humor perception requires a bare minimum of a situation that is normal (what he calls N, which is a metonym for what I have called the consensus, which includes N and its wider context) and the perception that the seeming normality of the

situation has been constructed within a network of resonances held together by external mediation. This is what mimetic perception entails, as I explain further in the following.

The Third Condition for the Perception of Humor: Mimetic Perception

If the preceding argument holds, what is foundational in the perception of humor is not merely the friendly clash between one mode of perceiving and another at the same time, but a subjective, or rather intersubjective, recognition that the primary mimetic consensus is precisely a consensus of *perceptions*, and thus at least is partially constructed and therefore also essentially contingent. The consensus does not account for everything and the perceiver of humor knows this. This is particularly evident in a great deal of (although not all) satire that merely involves the overstatement of the nature of the mimetic consensus. As soon as the mimetic consensus is recognized as having limits, the perception of humor occurs. Again, the presence of a dissensus or violation can help in this, but it is not crucial. This recognition is what I call mimetic perception or mimetic awareness, which mediates predominantly between the mimetic consensus and the self in terms of an awareness of the limits of the mimetic consensus, but also as that which mediates between the mimetic consensus and the mimetic dissensus. This mimetic perception is not something that a person would always be able to articulate; I mean it more as something felt or experienced than as something necessarily consciously grasped by the perceiver of humor.

This may be subtle and even go unrecognized apart from any form of personal reflection, but it seems to be an essential component of humor. Part of what gives rise to the perception of humor is not merely an involuntary response to the

appearance of the dissensus alongside the consensus, but an experiential understanding or interpretive experience, no matter how incomplete or momentary, that one's perceptual frame has been shaped by the consensus. The original forgetting of how the self has been constituted by mimetic desire, as is articulated by Oughourlian,⁶² is somewhat loosened. One recognizes, in a moment of kindly scandal, that one is not the master over what is perceived, nor master over the field of meaning. For humor perception to be possible, the *possibility* of alternate forms of mediation must exist for the perceiver, given the formerly hidden values pattern of the consensus.

The appearance of the dissensus, depending on the subject's posture toward it, can nevertheless give rise to a recognition that an alternate consensus is possible. Put more strongly, there is, in humor perception, a recognition that the consensus is a construct—one that happens to have been deconstructed by the dissensus before being reconciled in the experiential recognition of both the consensus and dissensus. As already noted, this may also involve an experiential recognition of external mediation alone. This is not quite a Hegelian dialectic of negating the original negation,⁶³ but rather suggests something more, namely, the priority of mediation over negation and self-mediation. This is because the result is not the return to immediate identity of dialectic but the opening up of identity to otherness—something

⁶². See Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, 39-48.

⁶³. Such a Hegelian gesture, by prioritizing self-mediation over any presentation of genuine equivocal otherness, would almost certainly result in the prevention of (the possibility of) humor perception.

along the lines of William Desmond's metaxology.⁶⁴ While this may not necessarily give rise to the personal insight that the consensus has been constructed through mimetic desire, the recognition that it is a construct nevertheless carries with it the potential that mimetic desire will be noticed. This last proviso is necessary, of course, since mimetic desire remains something that can only be studied and interpreted by inference.

Linked to this third condition for the perception of humor, three preliminary objections to the preceding theory may be offered. In addressing these objections, the theory I have already articulated can hopefully be clarified. One of these objections would be against Veach's and my own assumption that humor involves overturning a given consensus, when sometimes humor clearly involves starting from the point of view of a dissensus, before the consensus is reintroduced. What is important is not to be too rigid around the labels allocated, but rather to note that the consensus and dissensus—no matter what they refer to—mutually implicate each other. As Veach puts it, what matters is not so much the order in which the conditions for humor perception appear but the fact that they appear at the same time, as discussed more fully in the following.⁶⁵ Sometimes, for example, as in the case of something like rhetorical defamiliarization, the consensus intrudes into the dissensus, and what is perceived as strange is not the dissensus but rather the consensus. What is normal (N) or not (V) is therefore often simply a matter of how

⁶⁴. See William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); Duncan Reyburn, "Laughter and the Between: G. K. Chesterton and the Reconciliation of Theology and Hilarity," in *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3 no. 1 (2015): 18–51.

⁶⁵. Veach, "A Theory of Humor," 184.

the frame of the humor is set up.⁶⁶ However, in answering this potential objection, I must stress again that the juxtaposition of the consensus and the dissensus is not vital for humor, even though it remains common in many experiences of humor. What matters most is the perceptual awareness of the limits of any particular mimetic province of meaning, which is simply heightened and demonstrated by the confrontation between the consensus and the dissensus.

A second objection may be to the idea that often we often laugh or smile because the dissensus contradicts or opposes the consensus, even when cases can be found in which this does not occur in any overt manner; such is the case, for instance, with antijokes, where the usual setup of a joke is adopted but the deliberate implanting of a violation or dissensus into the joke form is resisted. This objection helps clarify both Veach's theory and my own theory, especially when the primary source of the perception of humor has to do with a mediation of the mimetic consensus as well as, occasionally, this and the mimetic dissensus, rather than, say, with surface concerns or a focus on the objects and their clash. When a priest, a rabbi, and a guru walk into a bar and end up having a lovely conversation because they are all really quite good friends, we may smile precisely because the consensus

⁶⁶. An example of this may be offered. In a classic *Addams Family* moment, the fact that the little girl Wednesday is chasing her brother around the house with a knife in her hand is not normal, but already a violation of the norm. When their mother Morticia accosts Wednesday, telling her to stop, we may feel relief—that is, until Morticia takes the knife from Wednesday and replaces it with an axe. The axe may be thought of as a violation of what is already a violation, and yet the scene itself can be perceived as humorous in part because a dissensus (Morticia stopping Wednesday) has intruded into the consensus (the rather dark frame offered by the film). Another way of reading this would be to notice how mimetic perception itself has been awakened and confronted through the scene before us.

sets up the expectation that this will be a joke while the dissensus seems to appear in the form of a subversion: This is not a joke at all—and *that* is why it is funny. Interpreting this differently, however, perhaps there is no dissensus after all—and yet humor perception can still take place. It is in the recognition or perception of the original expectation (the consensus) that humor is possible. What Veach names as the perception that the situation is normal is therefore not just a unified field of normality but also a perception that the norm has been constructed and therefore is not totalizing.

A third objection to the preceding relates to the second. Given the prevalence of a mimetic dissensus in humor, it is possible to argue that the mimetic perception required to notice the limits of the consensus operates as a kind of violation in and of itself, which is to say that the dissensus and mimetic perception can arguably be conflated. This would suggest that even in cases of very mild humor in which no apparent dissensus is evident, mimetic perception functions as the dissensus itself. Here, the dissensus would not be absent but merely present in a different form. To propose this, however, would potentially attribute the perception of humor more to the presence of specific objects than to subjective or intersubjective conditions, and this would undermine not only my own theory but Veach's as well. Even if this objection has some weight, it mistakenly erases the distinctions that Girard makes with regard to different forms of mediation. What matters, for this argument, is that a reflective consciousness is only possible when the form of mimesis allowed by the consensus is a mimesis of the model. In other words, humor perception requires a

consensus, and such a consensus would involve what Girard calls external mediation.⁶⁷

Part of what gives rise to humor is the subject's recognition that he or she has embraced a particular mimetic consensus without having sufficient information to complete that consensus. Desire has led the way. Subscribing to the consensus as a fixed consensus is exposed when the dissensus shows up, but only if mimetic perception is present. What this demonstrates is that the consensus is always implied, just as the dissensus is also implied by the various elements out of which the jest or funny situation is constructed. This fits well with our understanding of how mimetic desire structures human relationships. The consensus is not necessarily strictly prescribed and delineated. This is partly why it is possible for the subject to detach from it to accommodate a dissensus. If the subject's attachment to the consensus is sufficiently loose, there may yet be room for dissensus. In other words, if the consensus is delineated by external mediation, then the presence of dissensus cannot be perceived as threatening (i.e., rivalrous), and, finally, the experiential recognition of the presence of mimetic desire is therefore possible. To put the point more bluntly, mimetic perception takes priority over the dissensus, and in fact arguably humor perception may often be what makes dissensus, and thus also a benign violation, possible. In my theory, humor perception is often the *cause* for any violation or dissensus, not the effect.⁶⁸

⁶⁷. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 9.

⁶⁸. This somewhat inverted logic follows the insight that many comedians construct jokes by searching for a violation that confirms what they have already perceived to be humorous. Even in

Still, as in Veach's original theory, if a violation is not sufficiently benign (thus suggesting rivalrous desire) or is simply too benign (thus suggesting the impossibility of even a kindly scandal), humor perception is absent. Nevertheless, what I have suggested here is that a vital component of humor perception is not just the perception of something as being benign or the perception that the situation is still normal; rather, what is needed is the perception that one has been set up precisely to have that expectation. It is this setup, the mimetic consensus itself, that allows for any form of contravention. Only in a limited sense can one argue that every joke is on someone—and, in many cases, he whose laugh lasts is he who laughs at himself. Further clarity on this is offered in the following, where I discuss Girard's thinking on comedy.

The Fourth Condition for the Perception of Humor: The Simultaneity of Mimetic Consensus and Mimetic Perception

With the preceding in mind, it becomes clear that Jolles's contention that humor involves the undoing of something done is more emphatic than it needs to be—even if it is somewhat on the right track.⁶⁹ Humor perception requires that mimetic consensus and mimetic perception are simultaneously present in the mind of the subject, although it is sometimes the dissensus that acts as interface or co-conspirator with mimetic perception to encourage the doubled-back awareness of the consensus that gives rise to it. In the case of mimetic perception, the intermediation of desires between people and the intramediation of desires within the

slapstick humor, what is funny is not primarily that the businessman falls but that he thought himself incapable of such indignity.

⁶⁹. Jolles, *Simple Forms*, 308.

subject provide the key. Thus, for instance, if the dissensus fails to cooperate as interface or resonant interval and instead amounts merely to a kind of friction that undoes or perhaps overrides the consensus, the simultaneity required for humor perception would vanish; humor would therefore not be perceptible. The dissensus would, in a sense, dialectically supplant the mimetic consensus. Thus, as intimated earlier, the frame of mind required for the perception of humor is one in which the subject is capable of at least partially detaching from the mimetic consensus to recognize it as voluntary and/or to embrace the possibility and possible legitimacy of a mimetic dissensus. In humor perception, even under the sway of the consensus, the subject needs to be capable of conceiving of alternate desires, or even the mere possibility of some kind of dissensus, as having at least some meaning.

If dissensus is merely meaningless or incomprehensible, the consensus would not be perceived as having a limit.⁷⁰ This would be one reason why the dissensus, as suggested by Veach's theory, might violate the consensus in a disproportionate manner, with the result that the perception of humor is thwarted. However, more than this, it suggests that the subject does not fully appreciate the entire field of meaning (consensus and/or dissensus). This adds further clarity on how mimetic theory can extend Veach's theory. What is at issue here is not merely a matter of reformulating Veach's hypothesis to suit the terms of mimetic theory, but also the possibility of articulating the importance of understanding humor in terms of the fact that it involves the interplay, and the perception of this interplay, between

⁷⁰. This may not be true in all cases. Children especially will laugh earnestly when they perceive that there is a joke, even if they don't get the joke. It would seem that it is possible to perceive humor merely in the realization that there is humor. Such is especially the case where we fail to recognize the violation and yet find ourselves smiling.

two entirely different contexts of meaning structured by mimetic desire. The issue is fundamentally and not accidentally interindividual rather than individual.

One may suggest that this simultaneity—especially of consensus, dissensus, and mimetic perception—involves something of a mutual scapegoating of the consensus by the dissensus and vice versa, albeit perhaps more in a Burkean than Girardian sense.⁷¹ Often what is humorous regards a hermeneutical gap between the two forms of mediation represented by the consensus and the dissensus. If this is so, it would need to be conceived of as benign—that is, as a kindly scapegoating. However, my sense is that this would be taking the theory too far. What is crucial to humor is not ultimately scandal or scapegoating, but a form of acceptance; this often involves a return to a primary consensus, as suggested earlier. Most importantly, in humor, the grip of univocal meaning is loosened. For this reason, much of the preceding may be thought of as an extended reverie on Chesterton’s metaphorically stated insight: “Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.”⁷² In the context of this article, the point can be made as follows: Humor perception is possible in the perceiving subject’s awareness of his or her mimetic attachments. Humor is certainly shaped by the presence of others, but it nevertheless requires a perceiving subject.

⁷¹. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 15, 285.

⁷². G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 325.

Girard on Comedy

Before concluding, one final question needs answering, regarding how the preceding discussion relates to Girard's thinking around the comical. Girard's own comic hypothesis, in my view, is more a hermeneutic of laughter than a theory of humor perception, although humor perception is part of it. Thus, juxtaposing Girard's theory with mine is not, strictly speaking, going to result in comparing apples with apples. Still, since my axioms are rooted in Girard's theory, it is no surprise that he complements much of what I have already argued, even if he does not cover exactly the same ground. Most notably, my emphasis in the preceding is on mimetic desire itself, whereas Girard's ideas on laughter emphasize its sacrificial dimension, and especially the structural analogy between comedy and tragedy. By beginning in a different place, further back in the story of mimesis, I believe my theory ultimately accounts for more variations in the spectrum of humor perception than Girard's perspective on comedy does.

In his essay "Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis," Girard compares tragedy and comedy to highlight some important similarities between them, especially to do with how presumption constantly rebounds against the presumptuous, as well as our embodied responses to this. He suggests that tears experienced through tragedy and laughter experienced through comedy are both forms of catharsis. Indeed, experiences of tears and laughter sometimes reflect different degrees rather than different kinds of catharsis.⁷³ They are both experiences of purification, although laughter is the more socially acceptable of the

⁷³. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 813.

two.⁷⁴ “Laughter,” Girard writes, “seems to be asserting, exactly like tears, that [the body] must get rid of something; there is more of that something, and laughter must get rid of it more promptly than mere crying.”⁷⁵ By establishing the link between laughter and purification, Girard contends that laughter is impossible to separate from a “scapegoating” process and therefore also from sacrifice.⁷⁶

As an example, he refers to a story originally told by Molière of three teachers arguing about which of their disciplines is better. Girard writes, “According to the dancing master, music would not be much without dancing. According to the music master, dancing without music would not exist at all. According to the fencing master, even musicians and dancers need good fencing occasionally, in order not to cease to exist.”⁷⁷ A philosopher in residence interjects. He sees how ridiculous the whole situation is, so he steps in to settle the quarrel. He points out that each of the disciplines under discussion has its own merits, so arguing about which is better is inane. But then, he goes a step further. If the three teachers are looking for what is *really* the best discipline, they have to look no further. The obvious winner is philosophy! Thus, the would-be mediator, oblivious to his own mimetic desire, is pulled into the very battle of wills he judged as fruitless.⁷⁸

The foolish philosopher is a comical figure, and it is natural to laugh at him. But in doing so, we are, in a sense, sacrificing him. For Girard, we laugh because we

⁷⁴. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 814.

⁷⁵. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 815.

⁷⁶. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 814.

⁷⁷. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 811.

⁷⁸. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 811.

are trying to ward off a threat—the threat, in the case of the comedy here, of being sucked into playing the part of the victim.⁷⁹ To use my terminology, the philosopher is at the mercy of a mimetic dissensus, while we are still, mercifully, aligned with a consensus. At the beginning of the joke, the philosopher is in the same position as we are. However, he falls into the mimetic trap while we, for the moment, do not. Girard writes, “An individual is trying to assert upon his environment what he takes to be his own individual rule. We laugh when his pretension is suddenly and spectacularly shattered. Impersonal forces are taking over.”⁸⁰ Girard suggests therefore that the “pattern of the comic is more evident than in the tragic; the threat to the autonomy of the spectator is more urgent and serious.”⁸¹ This echoes what I have already suggested: In perceiving humor, the subject is able to retain some sense of self-possession, even while that self-possession remains mimetically coordinated. Girard suggests that “the structural patterns of the comic . . . deny the sovereignty of the individual more radically than either god or destiny.”⁸²

Girard uses another example, that of a man who loses his balance on ice. In Girard’s comic hypothesis, we laugh at him because we are not him. We have been saved *from* his humiliation and even *by* his humiliation. We can easily imagine a friend of his laughing at him while at the same time trying to help him up—until that friend loses his balance and falls too. “The second man is funnier than the first” and

⁷⁹. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 819.

⁸⁰. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 817.

⁸¹. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 819.

⁸². Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 816.

"[a] third one might be funnier still, unless of course, it is myself."⁸³ Sometimes a scene like this can be tinged with resentment or vindictiveness, relief or pity. Sometimes our laughter reflects our sense of superiority or our need for release,⁸⁴ although it may perhaps reflect empathy or inferiority. Sometimes our laughter, especially laughter of a uniquely uproarious kind, renders us nearly impotent; we are vulnerable in our laughter, held at gunpoint by the comedy before us.⁸⁵ Girard allows for a great deal of variation around laughter's motives, but a constant remains—a catharsis rooted in "the ultimate failure of all individualism, at least at a certain level."⁸⁶ Reciprocity and mimesis always play a part in the comical. And again, for Girard, sacrifice is a constant too. For him, laughter is always at someone's expense, even if it is at the expense of the humorist. To laugh is to be caught in a pattern that a victim is already part of, so laughter paradoxically "both welcomes and rejects the perception of the structure into which the object of his laughter is already caught." This structure might be designated as the mimetic dissensus. Girard explains that the one who laughs does so to ward off the threat to his autonomy, and "welcomes it insofar as it is someone else who is caught in it" while "he tries to keep it away from himself."⁸⁷

None of this contradicts my theory of humor perception, but Girard's own discussion of laughter does not account for all forms of humor perception in the way a theory of humor should. I have tried to keep in mind especially quieter forms of humor, even things like puns and antijokes, where no one is really scandalized or scapegoated, not even the joke teller. Mimesis and mimetic perception can still

⁸³. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 819.

⁸⁴. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 820.

⁸⁵. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 819.

⁸⁶. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 820.

⁸⁷. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 819.

coexist within the hermeneutic frame to produce humor perception even where the pattern of sacrifice or victimhood is not present. Humor does not have to necessarily involve purification or getting rid of something; it can and often does involve a posture of gracious acceptance and gratitude. Girard is not wrong, therefore, but he is exaggerating the reach of his claims on this specific subject. Thus, he writes:

A man will not laugh . . . unless there is an actual threat to his ability to control his environment and the people in it, even his own thoughts and his own desires. A man will not laugh, however, if that threat becomes too real. The conditions necessary for laughter are therefore contradictory. The threat must be both overwhelming and nil; the danger of being absorbed into the pattern which has already devoured the victims of our laughter must be both immediate and nonexistent. In order to "have a good laugh" we must always come out "on top" even as we are constantly threatened to "go under."⁸⁸

The hyperbolic terms here potentially obscure another possible perspective. In the preceding, the presumption that human beings fundamentally want a kind of autonomous control governs Girard's thinking around laughter. While this may account for some laughter, my earlier argument is that a sense of comfort with and within the mimetic consensus predominates, allowed for by external mediation. It is not principally discomfort with the pattern that creates humor but precisely the opposite. It is not necessary to come out on top or to be humiliated in perceiving humor, although a certain pervasive humility definitely helps to make room for healthy hilarity. A threat to a person's control and self-possession may be in play in some humor and laughter, as I have also argued, but it is not applicable as a rule. I agree with Girard, however, where he notices, as Veach does, that any threat hinted

⁸⁸. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 823.

at in what is comical should be nonthreatening for humor to occur, although I have also outlined why humor perception does not require a dissensus at all. People can and often do laugh for no reason, and in such cases humor perception is alive and well, even without a violation or threat on the hermeneutic horizon.

After stating the preceding, Girard then explains, “The main recipe, of course, for fulfilling these two contradictory conditions [the presence of the threatening and the non-threatening] is to provide us with real sacrificial victims.”⁸⁹ Laughter always costs something, in his view; it erupts at the expense of someone, whether oneself or another, so laughter and scapegoating are companions even if the degree of scapegoating is minimal.⁹⁰ With this, Girard contends that a distance is required that separates the perceiving subject from the customs of a foreigner; more than that, “the victim must suffer only unpleasantness” rather than “major catastrophe” since the latter will render the victim too close to the perceiving subject, and thus also too close to allow for his or her mirth.⁹¹

Again, I agree that this explains some humor, and in many respects echoes the preceding discussion. Humor often involves ridicule, which is something Alberg also stresses in discussing why Rousseau cannot laugh.⁹² Following Girard’s lead, Alberg especially highlights how humorlessness will be found in those who cannot

⁸⁹. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 823.

⁹⁰. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 822.

⁹¹. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 823.

⁹². Jeremiah Alberg, “Why Rousseau Cannot Laugh,” in *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2018), 139–61.

handle the loss of their own sense of autonomy and individuality,⁹³ and this is accounted for particularly in my discussion of mimetic perception. In one sense, this confirms what I have argued, namely, that humor emerges as a result of a mimetic awareness—a recognition of one’s entanglement in the lives and wants of others. I would be cautious about suggesting, however, that a failure to arrive at this mimetic perception always rests in an unwillingness to relinquish self-possession. A failure to laugh may just as easily result from being overly bound up in a group’s identity, or perhaps from a simple failure to get the joke—and this may have less to do with one’s mimetic capacities than with one’s ignorance. Tribalism is as humorless as egotism, and this is why I have argued that humor is a kind of mediation. In humor, one becomes present to and even embroiled in the equivocation between external mediation and scandal, where scandal can remain a kindly possibility rather than actualized rivalry. Given how difficult it is for people to sometimes dwell within tensions and equivocations, it is possible that the kindly scandal will give way to actual scandal, and thus to derisive laughter. Girard notices that laughter can have a light touch, of course, but he remains too emphatic about the negative element within it. I am only somewhat aligned with Girard, therefore, in his recognition of the role of “the spectator’s position.”⁹⁴

Girard rightly notes that comedy relies on the spectator’s position outside of the comedy, but he insists that it is always a position of superiority. We laugh, he suggests, to keep at bay the threat of being just like the one who is ridiculed: that is, the threat of being a victim of mimetic desire. This seems to contradict Alberg’s idea

⁹³. Alberg, “Why Rousseau Cannot Laugh,” 158.

⁹⁴. Girard, “Perilous Balance,” 818.

mentioned earlier. Where Alberg suggests that solemnity accompanies the one who wishes to avoid being mimetically entwined, Girard suggests that laughter preserves the autonomy of the spectator.⁹⁵ Both are, of course, correct, insofar as both possibilities may indeed be present where there is amusement. My focus, however, has been on the edge of the mimetic consensus—that is, on the idea that we have become aware of the consensus we are part of as something voluntarily adhered to; it is a contingent thing, not a necessary thing. We may laugh precisely because we are uncomfortable with this recognition, and our laughter may therefore be part of an attempt to ward off the threat that our familiar hermeneutic horizon is about to collapse. But we may smile, too, or chuckle, or simply, silently, and happily note that what we have perceived as humorous is a perception and not an absolute reality.⁹⁶ We may laugh because our attention is drawn to our belonging and togetherness. In laughter, as Girard intimates, we find our prejudices simultaneously confirmed and challenged.⁹⁷

⁹⁵. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 819.

⁹⁶. During the COVID-19 pandemic, my colleague Fatima Cassim who is a masterful punster referred to her creations in a text message as a "pundemic." The thought made me smile. It is an example of delicate humor, where no one is scapegoated or scandalized. In reading that simple pun, I became a co-conspirator in the mimetic consensus, aware of kindly scandal through mimetic perception. That is, I became aware, albeit in a way that could be described as low-resolution, that we had gone beyond the usual bounds of the mimetic consensus without leaving it completely. This particular pun can perhaps be explained by Veach's benign violation theory, but it is also an example of how humor perception relies on our being brought to the edge of a perceptual frame.

⁹⁷. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 821.

Where I am most in agreement with Girard, therefore, is in his observation that laughter is a reciprocal gesture and also profoundly communal. When I laugh, I repeat the comedy before me; in my chortling, giggling, or howling, I am both at the mercy of the mimetic consensus and outside it; in a certain sense, I am both master and servant, victor and failure. I am a distinctive subject—a unique instantiation of being—and yet I feel myself given over to otherness. It is an otherness both beyond me, in interdividuality, and within me, in intradividuality. I feel porous to this otherness. If I find things funny, I do so because of my inbuilt capacity for mimetic desire.

Conclusion

So why, again, would one refer to this as kindly scandal, especially given that dissensus is not always part of the comedic frame? The reason is simple enough. There is always something gently or overtly scandalous in humor. As the study of humor perception shows continually, humor invites exploration and understanding, and yet access always seems to be blocked. We see so far and no further. It is arguably for this reason that the study of humor persists. It is arguably why this article exists. There is always more to understand, because even in getting the joke, we feel that we have not gotten it completely. Yet where humor is recognizable, the scandal really is kindly—although, as I have noted, this can give way to the less-than-humorous, that is, to actual scandal and rivalry.

Still, if there is rivalry in humor, it is, to state the obvious, not serious. While there are forms of humor that present themselves as overtly rivalrous and even as malicious, to perceive humor requires a sense that one is safe; it is to perceive that in the end, any apparent threat is not overwhelming. In this way, humor, to use

Girard's sense of the word, *demythologizes*. It exposes the threat—the threat of scandal itself—only to render it nonthreatening. If it sometimes appears to set up scapegoats, as noted earlier, in the end, those scapegoats are not harmed. If anything, what is expelled (the consensus or dissensus) is received back (in mimetic perception). In a perception of humor, reciprocity remains predominantly positive. Humor is therefore always an act of defamiliarizing the familiar and encountering it anew. It is arguably, therefore, only possible within a framework of positive reciprocity: that is, within a framework within which the positive desires of others are imitated or left to simply be. It is a positive atmosphere that allows us to take ourselves lightly enough to be able to recognize the limits of our own perceptions, which I have argued is central to the experience of hilarity. To say this is not to resolve the question of how humor works, although I think this does add some insights that are needed regarding a properly interindividual articulation of humor perception. I have argued that humor perception typically requires the simultaneity of a mimetic consensus and mimetic perception, often, although not always, interfaced by a mimetic dissensus; sometimes, I have suggested, it is mimetic perception itself that allows for mimetic dissensus. This implies that humor perception is always affected in important ways not just by our capacity for mimesis but also by our capacity to recognize it.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ I want to especially thank my father Lindsay Reyburn for his invaluable editorial help.

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