

Laughter in the Courts of Heaven? Chesterton and the Theology of Humor*

David Pickering

South Central Theological Education Institution; d.a.a.pickering@gmail.com

■ Abstract

This article relates Chesterton's theology, and that of other theologians, to existing theories of humor. It asks: With regard to the understanding of humor, what is offered by a theological perspective—especially by Chesterton's theology—that cannot be supplied by philosophical and psychological theories? The article situates Chesterton's work in relation to three theories of humor: the superiority theory, the release theory, and the incongruity theory. It then examines two important relationships: first, that between humor, worship, and joy; then, that between humor, cognition, and theology. While focusing on Chesterton's writing, it also considers relevant aspects of the work of other thinkers, including Ian Ker, Duncan Reyburn, Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, Peter Berger, Ingvid Sælid Gilhus, Terry Lindvall, and Brian Edgar. The article concludes by suggesting the beginnings of an outline of a theology of humor.

■ Keywords

humor, Chesterton, theology, incongruity, wit, satire, joy, cognition

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■ Introduction

Over the centuries, philosophers have created many theories of humor, and in recent times, psychologists have joined them in this pursuit. Already by 1923, J. Y. T. Greig could list eighty-eight such theories in his *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*.¹ The industrious efforts of many psychologists and philosophers since can only have increased that number.² I will attempt to contribute to this venerable discussion by exploring the theology of humor sketched out in the work of G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), a Christian apologist famous for the humorous nature of his writing. Rather than trying to construct yet another theory of humor, I will consider these questions: What does the specifically theological nature of Chesterton’s thinking add to the insights of philosophy and psychology with regard to the understanding of humor? What is offered by a theological perspective—especially by Chesterton’s theology—that cannot be supplied by philosophical and psychological theories?

I will structure my discussion by situating Chesterton’s work in relation to three theories of humor: the superiority theory, the release theory, and the incongruity theory. The first is the oldest of all such theories and was shaped by no less a philosopher than Plato; the second was propelled to substantial influence by the advocacy of Sigmund Freud; and the third is the most widely supported of all theories of humor. As John Morreall and Noël Carroll have noted, these are probably the most influential theories in the field, with the incongruity theory the most popular of all.³ No one theory can account for all the phenomena of humor (or the ongoing theoretical discussions of humor would be over), yet these three—with a focus on *how* humor operates—are able to account for a great many examples of humor and hence have had many advocates. In light of these theories, I will ask if Chesterton’s theology can help to qualify in a new way how “superiority,” “release,” and “incongruity” can be delimited with regard to understanding not only how humor functions but also its significance and meaning.

In scholarly discussions of this subject, terminology varies; for the purposes of this article, I will attempt as much as possible to stay on relatively common ground. I will deal only with those forms of laughter which are effects of humor, leaving aside discussion of other forms of laughter. As for definitions of humor and comedy, these are end-points too contested and too substantial for a brief article. Yet some form of a working understanding is needed for the discussion to progress, so I will draw on Carroll in referring to humor as the cause of “comic amusement” and on Morreall in treating comic amusement as, at least in part, “the enjoyment of a

¹ J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923) 225–79.

² See, for example, *The European Journal of Humour Research* (<https://europeanjournalofhumour.org/ejhr>).

³ John Morreall, “Introduction,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (ed. John Morreall; SUNY Series in Philosophy; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987) 5–7; Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 7–42.

conceptual shift.”⁴ I will refer to comedy as the style of discourse which embodies humor and effects comic amusement (with greater or lesser success), and I will not attempt to enter the debate as to whether humor should be classified as an emotion or not. I will treat wit, satire, and nonsense as sub-categories of humor and jokes as a sub-category of comedy.

In asking what Chesterton’s writing has to offer that is specifically theological and not to be found in philosophical and psychological theories, I will be attempting to deepen and develop an existing discussion. Ian Ker and Duncan Reyburn, in particular, have provided very fine contributions on the relationship between humor and theology in Chesterton’s writing, and I will be engaging with their work in the course of this article. Ker deliberately restricts the scope of his discussion, as he is primarily concerned with a defense of the claims made for Chesterton’s holiness,⁵ but Reyburn has discussed this area of Chesterton’s work at greater length and with considerable insight, beginning to bring it into dialogue with the three theories of humor listed above.⁶

In what follows, I will treat Chesterton’s work as a case study in relation to the three well-known theories outlined above, one which foregrounds certain theological approaches to humor and thereby presents them for examination. As I do, I will relate his ideas to those of a number of the theologians who have investigated aspects of the connection between humor and theology: Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, and Peter Berger, who have considered laughter and the comic from the viewpoint of philosophical theology; Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Terry Lindvall, who have taken a historical approach; and Brian Edgar, who has discussed humor in the light of spiritual and pastoral concerns.⁷ I will attempt to situate Chesterton’s contribution in relation to

⁴ Morreall, “Introduction,” 4–6; Carroll, *Humour*, 4–7.

⁵ Ian Ker, “Humour and Holiness in Chesterton,” in *The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton* (ed. William Oddie; Leominster: Gracewing, 2010) 36–53.

⁶ Duncan Reyburn, “Laughter and the Between: G. K. Chesterton and the Reconciliation of Theology and Hilarity,” *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Politics, Philosophy* 3 (2015) 18–51; idem, “The Beautiful Madness called Laughter: On the Role of Humour in Chesterton’s Philosophy,” *The Chesterton Review* 41 (2015) 473–84; idem, *Seeing Things as They Are: G. K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016). Reyburn’s book focuses on hermeneutics, not on theology as such, while the two articles deal more directly with the relationship between theology and humor.

⁷ Karl Rahner, “Laughter,” *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner’s Theological Writings* (ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt; New York: Crossroad, 1994) 148–52; Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997); Terry Lindvall, *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); Brian Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God: Restoring Laughter to its Central Role in Christian Faith and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019); Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2014); Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs* (ed. Alistair Hannay; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

the work of these authors. It should be noted that his theology of humor is largely implicit and implied, emerging in fragments in the course of occasional pieces and works of controversy, yet it is highly suggestive in certain areas, while leaving several very obvious gaps in its treatment of this topic. Nevertheless, it indicates certain potentially fruitful lines of enquiry for further research, to which I will return in the conclusion.

■ Chesterton and the Superiority Theory

Of all the many theories of humor, the superiority theory has the seniority: it dates back at least as far as Plato⁸ and was developed in a stronger form by Thomas Hobbes.⁹ This theory sees laughter as expressing scorn or disdain, and, in modern times, numerous theorists have pointed out that it applies only to certain forms of humor, those involving “laughing at” people rather than “laughing with” them. Yet this theory does seem to account for certain rather negative forms of humor, and it still has advocates who feel that it provides an underlying explanation for humor more widely. F. H. Buckley, for instance, while allowing a role for incongruity, still finds a sense of superiority a “necessary . . . condition of laughter.”¹⁰

In contrast to this theory, Chesterton insists that “humor is meant, in a literal sense, to make game of man; that is, to dethrone him from his official dignity and hunt him like game. . . . Joking is undignified; that is why it is good for one’s soul. Do not fancy you can be a detached wit and avoid being a buffoon; you cannot. If you are the Court Jester you must be the Court Fool.”¹¹ He affirms that “laughter has something in it in common with the ancient winds of faith and inspiration; it unfreezes pride . . . it makes men forget themselves in the presence of something greater than themselves.”¹² For Chesterton, “the secret of life lies in laughter and humility,”¹³ and he consistently insists that the two go together, that, in fact, humor is the friend of humility and the “chief antidote to pride.”¹⁴ This seems almost to invert the superiority theory. On what basis does Chesterton make such claims?

Chesterton’s characterization of humor is based on his highly egalitarian understanding of two Christian doctrines: creation in the image of God and original sin. He combines them thus: “In one way Man was to be haughtier than he had ever

⁸ Plato, *The Republic* (ed. and trans. R. E. Allen; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 388d–389b; idem, *Plato’s Philebus* (ed. and trans. R. Hackforth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 48a–50e.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (ed. Karl Schuhmann and G. A. J. Rogers; 2 vols.; London: Bloomsbury, 2006) 2:48; idem, *The Treatise on Human Nature and that on Liberty and Necessity, with a supplement* (ed. Philip Mallet; London: J. Johnson & Co., 1812) 64–66.

¹⁰ F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 191.

¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions* (London: Methuen, 1910) 200–201.

¹² G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950) 158.

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, “The Moods of Mr. George Moore,” in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (ed. George J. Marlin et al.; 23 vols.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 1:106–9.

¹⁴ Chesterton, “Humour,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11:883–85.

been before; in another way he was to be humbler than he had ever been before. In so far as I am Man I am the chief of creatures. In so far as I am a man I am the chief of sinners. . . . Man was a statue of God walking about the garden . . . not a beast, but a broken god.”¹⁵ Regarding original sin, he suggests that it is a profoundly democratic concept: “the doctrine of original sin . . . may also be described as the doctrine of the equality of men” because it decrees that “whatever primary and far-reaching moral dangers affect any man, affect all men.”¹⁶ He argues, therefore, that original sin, conceived of as a fact obvious to any unbiased observer, is the most egalitarian and democratic of doctrines and complements the idea of divine creation in those respects. As he puts it, in his usual vigorous fashion, “be a human being and look down on all the kings of the earth.”¹⁷ In other words, what unites human beings—creation in the image of God and original sin—is vastly more important than rank, ability, or anything else that might divide them.¹⁸

To see how this applies to humor, consider Chesterton’s question: “Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that man is the image of God. It is not funny that anything else should fall down. . . . Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, he combines reference to the fall with reference to creation in the image of God, writing:

If you really ask yourself why we laugh at a man sitting down suddenly in the street you will discover that the reason is not only recondite, but ultimately religious. All the jokes about men sitting down on their hats are really theological jokes; they are concerned with the Dual Nature of Man. They refer to the primary paradox that man is superior to all the things around him and yet is at their mercy.²⁰

Chesterton is suggesting that to laugh at any man or woman is to laugh at all men and women, including oneself, because the “dual nature of Man” unites all in a solidarity of created greatness and universal sinfulness. This perspective provides a theological corrective to any superiority theory of humor. If this complex, “dual” view of human nature is correct, then a person laughing may be said to be, at one and the same time, superior to and inferior to themselves and, most importantly, equal with the one laughed at. They are superior in that the image of God in a person is superior to the “broken god” of their present reality, inferior in that their sinfulness drags them below the person they were created to be, and equal in the

¹⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works*, 1:298.

¹⁶ Chesterton, “Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson,” in *Collected Works*, 1:122–31.

¹⁷ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works*, 1:223.

¹⁸ Reyburn has very briefly related Chesterton’s humor to the superiority theory. He asserts that the superiority theory is an “overly universal or impersonal reading of humor” and “terribly self-limiting” but does not develop his argument (Reyburn, “Laughter and the Between,” 44).

¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1915) 153–54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

sense that both creation in God's image and original sin imply a radical equality between human beings, one that transcends all their individual differences.²¹

In defiance of the superiority theory, Chesterton insists that the radical equality prescribed by Christian theology trumps any such ideas of superiority in the realm of humor as elsewhere. His theology does leave room, however, for two superiorities, which do not operate at a human level. Consider, first, his assertion that if a person

is mirthful he at once abandons dignity, which is another name for solemnity, which is another name for spiritual pride. . . . A laugh is like a love affair in that it carries a man completely off his feet; a laugh is like a creed or a church in that it asks that a man should trust himself to it. . . . A man must sacrifice himself to the God of Laughter, who has stricken him with a sacred madness. As a woman can make a fool of a man, so a joke makes a fool of a man. And a man must love a joke more than himself, or he will not surrender his pride for it.²²

At moments such as this one, Chesterton seems to treat humor and laughter in a mystical fashion, as superior forces to which humans must bow, forces which reform the soul; indeed, he refers to the "enlargement of the soul by laughter,"²³ implying that humor has a positive spiritual effect on human beings.

The other form of superiority which he acknowledges in the realm of humor can be seen in the celestial laughter at the end of *Orthodoxy*, where he suggests that "we sit perhaps in a starry chamber of silence, while the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear" and ends the book with the conclusion that "there was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth."²⁴ Here, he taps into a tradition of reference to divine laughter which goes back to the psalms.²⁵ Clearly, if there is a sovereign, perfect deity, and that deity has a capacity for laughter, then that deity's laughter cannot but express a superior form of humor, one which should inspire humility in humans.

Chesterton fills out the theological framework he is suggesting for humor when he writes, "wit corresponds to the divine virtue of justice, in so far as so dangerous a virtue can belong to man. Humor corresponds to the divine virtue of humility and is only more divine because it has, for the moment, more sense of the mysteries."²⁶ Here, he makes wit and satire instruments of "divine" justice, thus implying that

²¹ Ker very helpfully notes the central importance of humility in Chesterton's understanding of humor without investigating its basis in these central Christian doctrines, the importance of Chesterton's idiosyncratic exposition of these doctrines to his treatment of humor, or relating the role Chesterton assigns to humility to the superiority theory of humor (Ker, "Humour and Holiness," 44–48).

²² G. K. Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors: Essays on Books and Writers* (London; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953) 28–29.

²³ Chesterton, "Protests against the War," in *Collected Works*, 31:112–13.

²⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works*, 1:365–66.

²⁵ Ps 2:4; 37:13, 59:8 (NRSV)

²⁶ Chesterton, "Humor."

they are designed to be used in service of this higher power, however much their actual practice in human society may vary from that ideal. Insofar as his view is correct, it implies that the laughter caused by, for example, satire's discomfiture of the powerful and the pompous, is—or at least can be—the expression of rejoicing at the sight of justice being enacted (if only verbally) rather than the expression of a sense of personal superiority.²⁷

Alongside its role as an agent of justice, Chesterton, in this article, clearly argues that humor has an additional moral purpose as an agent of the virtue of humility. This is not to say that he does not recognize that some jokes are made with scorn and a sense of superiority, although he downplays the importance of such forms of humor; he objects strongly to the idea that “all laughter had its origin in a sort of cruelty,”²⁸ for example. His theology of human solidarity suggests, however, that such a sense of superiority is ill-founded and that such jokes are an abuse of the divinely granted gift of humor. This argument reveals a teleological aspect to the moral framework within which Chesterton situates humor as it sets out a moral purpose for humor as an agent of the virtues. This implies that humor which does not advance is humor misused; in other words, those who feel superiority when “laughing at” another person have misunderstood their own human nature and especially the solidarity inherent to divine creation and original sin discussed above. On the other hand, for those who rejoice to see justice figuratively done as the pride of the pompous and the powerful is verbally dethroned through wit and satire, and who feel humble solidarity with others as they laugh, their feelings are in accord with a true understanding of the human situation.

This theological perspective can be seen in remarks such as “no man has ever laughed at anything till he has laughed at himself.”²⁹ This is not a simple statement of fact; it is, rather, a statement of Chesterton's belief that, in the light of Christian theology, it is impossible to laugh at others without implicating oneself in what is causing the laughter because all are sinners, the “laugher” included. In other words, human solidarity, due both to creation in the image of God and to original sin, makes all human beings susceptible to being laughed at. While all humans may not provide the same actual causes for laughter—just as all humans do not commit the same actual sins—original sin still has a correlation with humor: as all are sinful, so all human beings have the potential to cause laughter in others. Thus, to laugh at others' flaws and errors is really to laugh in solidarity with them, because when we laugh at others' particular sins, and at the humorous effects of those sins, we laugh as fellow sinners, whose own sinfulness means that we ourselves are fully qualified to become the objects of laughter.

²⁷ It should be noted that Chesterton treats “wit” and “humor” as separate categories; this article, however, will follow more conventional schemes of classification and treat wit as a subcategory of humor.

²⁸ Chesterton, “Humor.”

²⁹ Chesterton, “The New Greek Revival,” in *Collected Works*, 29:546.

In relating humor and wit to the virtues of justice and humility, Chesterton relates his understanding to a tradition in Christian thought which sees humor as a virtue. As Carlo de Marchi has noted, the great authorities in this tradition are none other than Thomas Aquinas and, following in Aquinas's footsteps, Thomas More. Chesterton follows Aquinas in emphasizing the social nature of the virtue of humor; he differs in that both Aquinas and More, in de Marchi's words, see joy as "a manifestation of theological hope . . . [that] this human and supernatural joy will later be transfigured and fully realized in eternal life."³⁰ Chesterton's understanding of joy, however, is rooted first in his theology of creation, as we will see later in this article, and thus less closely tied to hope.

Duncan Reyburn suggests that, in addition to humility, honesty and hospitality are primary values for Chesterton and that these are also closely associated with humor in his work. The role of honesty is especially prominent in the case of satire and that of hospitality links closely to the social nature of humor; it can be argued that both honesty and hospitality stand alongside humility in opposition to the superiority theory. Their relationship to Chesterton's humor certainly merits further study, although lack of space precludes that study here.³¹

Overall, in relation to the superiority theory, Chesterton may be said to reconfigure it so radically that he inverts it and substitutes for it an embryonic humility and justice theory of humor. This theory implies that there can be right and wrong uses of humor: if humor is designed by the Creator to be used as an instrument of the "divine virtues" of justice and humility, one which builds solidarity between human beings, then jokes which attempt to assert superiority are in fact abuses rather than appropriate uses of humor. Thus, Chesterton presents a radical challenge to the superiority theory, suggesting that it is more a theory of humor misunderstood and misused than of the essential nature of humor itself. In making this challenge, he demonstrates that theological perspective can create the possibility of judgements in relation to humor which go beyond the limits of psychology and philosophy. Moreover, in this and the other aspects of his work which relate to, and challenge, the superiority theory—including his almost mystical attitude toward laughter and humor as spiritual forces and to "the laughter of the heavens" and divine "mirth"—Chesterton sketches out partial elements of a theological framework for the understanding of humor. At this point, it is still premature to critique this dimension of his theology of humor further until we have surveyed the rest of it and can make an assessment of the whole, not just one constituent part.

³⁰ Carlo de Marchi, "Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More and the Vindication of Humor as a Virtue: *Eutrapelia* and *Iucunditas*," *Moreana* 52 (2015) 95–107, at 104–5.

³¹ Reyburn, "Laughter and the Between," 41, 45–46.

■ Chesterton and the Release Theory

In contrast to the ancient superiority theory, the release theory is a modern invention, dating back only as far as Herbert Spencer in the late-nineteenth century³² and subsequently developed further by Sigmund Freud.³³ In John Morreall's words, this theory "takes a more physiological approach to laughter, treating it as the venting of excess nervous energy."³⁴ Chesterton does not engage directly with this theory, stating only, in the course of a discussion of humor, that "the speculations on the nature of any reaction to the risible belong to the larger and more elementary subject of laughter and are for the department of psychology; according to some, almost for that of physiology."³⁵ This seems to be an allusion to the theories of Spencer and Freud, which is not unexpected given that Chesterton was certainly very familiar with Herbert Spencer's work.³⁶

While Chesterton does not engage with the release theory directly, he does make claims about humor which, if humor and laughter are discussed together in the conventional fashion, place the physiological aspects of laughter—and indeed the release theory as a whole—within a metaphysical framework which would certainly have been foreign to Spencer and Freud. He declares that it is a "sublime spiritual certainty, that all men are comic."³⁷ Notwithstanding the differentiation he makes between humor and laughter above, he relates this "spiritual" certainty to laughter when he writes: "exhilaration is not a physical accident, but a mystical fact . . . exhilaration can be infinite, like sorrow . . . a joke can be so big that it breaks the roof of the stars."³⁸ In *Heretics*, he insists:

If we are to be truly gay, we must believe that there is some eternal gaiety in the nature of things. We cannot enjoy thoroughly even a pas-de-quatre at a subscription dance unless we believe that the stars are dancing to the same tune. No one can be really hilarious but the serious man. . . . The thing called high spirits is possible only to the spiritual. Ultimately a man cannot rejoice in anything except the nature of things. Ultimately a man can enjoy nothing except religion.³⁹

This is not, of course, to be taken literally: Chesterton exaggerates, as he so often does, to make the point that joy and humor are in the created "nature of things." In his essay "Rostand," he goes so far as to suggest that there is "nothing to which a

³² Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," *Macmillan's Magazine* (1860): 395–402.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Routledge Paperbacks 59; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960). There was a later development of the theory in Freud's paper "On Humor": see the unsigned "Review of Sigmund Freud's paper 'On Humor,'" *The Psychoanalytic Review* 15 (1928) 85–86.

³⁴ Morreall, "Introduction," 6.

³⁵ Chesterton, "Humor."

³⁶ Spencer is referenced dozens of times in Chesterton's *Collected Works*.

³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1946) 175–77.

³⁸ Chesterton, "The Dickens Period," in *Collected Works*, 15:50.

³⁹ Chesterton, "Omar and the Sacred Vine," in *Collected Works*, 1:96.

man must give himself up with more faith and self-abandonment than to genuine laughter . . . comedy is built upon everlasting foundations in the nature of things . . . it is not a thing too light to capture, but too deep to plumb.” In this essay he depicts humor as something with “cosmic and philosophic” dimensions and the “function of comedy” as “at once common and sublime.”⁴⁰ These very sweeping and very much theological claims seem to indicate something that might be called a sacramental view of humor: laughter and humor are depicted as external signs of “eternal gaiety in the nature of things,” rooted in “everlasting foundations,” joyful evidence of transcendence.

An argument which hangs on nothing less than “the nature of things” is so holistic that it depends upon the overall metaphysical (or other) view taken of reality as a whole; it stands or falls with its proponent’s entire philosophy and is difficult to argue for or against without engaging that entire philosophy. On a smaller scale, however, Chesterton does produce one piece of evidence for this point of view by pointing out that the poor, who might seem to have the least to laugh about, laugh just as much as the rich or, indeed, according to Chesterton’s observations, more. “The slums exist in one incessant state of satire,” he writes. “The most tragic part of our population is also the most comic part. Irony is the very atmosphere of the poor.”⁴¹ This suggests, at least, that humor is not dependent on material circumstances, although it supports his theories no further than that.

Overall, these examples illustrate the fact that Chesterton uses the language of religion at every turn when describing humor and comedy, in stark contrast to the proponents of the release theory. Chesterton places the physiological in the context of a spiritual and mystical approach. In brief, having radically reconfigured the superiority theory by situating humor in a moral framework as an agent of justice and humility, Chesterton situates the physiological approach of the release theory in a metaphysical framework. This framework, however, is certainly incomplete, and needs further development in dialogue with the work of other theologians.

For instance, Thomas Aquinas indicates further elements which a detailed theological framework for humor would be required to incorporate. He considers questions of humor under the heading of “play,” relates his discussion to questions of virtue, and takes it into the realm of what would today be called mental health when he asks: “Can there be a moral virtue engaged with play?” He answers this question in the affirmative, citing Aristotle, John the Evangelist, and Augustine in support of his conclusion. Aquinas notes that, with overwork, “a certain weariness of soul is born. . . . As bodily tiredness is eased by resting the body, so psychological tiredness is eased by resting the soul. . . . Pleasure is rest for the soul.” He adds that “words or deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul’s pleasure are called playful or humorous, and it is necessary to make use of them at times for solace

⁴⁰ Chesterton, “Rostand,” in *Twelve Types* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2003) 40–44.

⁴¹ Chesterton, “Creed and Deed,” in *Collected Works*, 27:389.

of soul.”⁴² Thus, he makes the “playful or humorous” necessary for the good of the soul, a virtuous role.

Aquinas goes further in answering the question, “Is too little playing sinful?” He affirms that this is a sin, stating:

It is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by never showing himself agreeable to others or being a kill-joy or wet blanket on their enjoyment. And so Seneca says, “Bear yourself with wit, lest you be regarded as sour or despised as dull.” Now those who lack playfulness are sinful, those who never do anything to make you smile, or are grumpy with those who do.⁴³

This answer foregrounds the communal nature of humor, suggesting that employing its power “to make you smile” is a moral obligation, a part of the duty we owe to others.

The arguments of Terry Lindvall and Peter Berger also complement Chesterton’s work and provide a great deal of evidence, with regard to the roles of satire and the comic, respectively, in support of Chesterton’s views. Lindvall, in his charming and itself very humorous history of religious satire, does discuss satire’s “moral purpose” and its ability to produce “sudden shifts in perspective,” but he does not bring his insights into dialogue with theories of humor more generally.⁴⁴ Berger, like Chesterton, finds in comedy a “manifestation of a sacramental universe—a universe that . . . contains visible signs of invisible grace.”⁴⁵ This sacramental aspect to humor may be underplayed by others, but Berger and Chesterton give it a structuring role in their analysis of humor. The insights of these theologians set those of Chesterton in a broader metaphysical perspective and should be kept in view as we continue our exploration of the understanding of humor that is developed in his work. Their arguments, and his, also speak against the somewhat negative conclusion of Ingvild Sælid Gilhus that the depths of laughter are “impenetrable for human thought,” suggesting that there is much more to be said.⁴⁶

■ Chesterton and the Incongruity Theory

The incongruity theory appears to owe a great deal to eighteenth-century Scotland, where Francis Hutcheson and James Beattie made important contributions to its initial formulation. Hutcheson attacked the superiority theory, noting that “laughter often arises without any imagined superiority of ourselves,” and he began to

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 168, a. 2 (trans. Thomas Gilby O.P. et al.; 61 vols.; London & New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode & McGraw-Hill, 1964–1973).

⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 168, a. 4.

⁴⁴ Lindvall, *God Mocks*, 267–71.

⁴⁵ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 199.

⁴⁶ Perhaps Gilhus’s investigation is handicapped by her attempt to structure her survey by means of a highly generalised history of religions framework for humor rather than a more precise and analytical theological approach. See Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 149.

develop an alternative theory.⁴⁷ Beattie further developed the concept, describing the incongruity theory thus: “Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.”⁴⁸ Since then, numerous authors, including Kant, Hazlitt, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer, have contributed to the development of various versions of this theory,⁴⁹ which covers a great deal of ground, in humorous terms, as incongruities abound in many forms of humor. It remains, as Morreall and Carroll note, the theory with the greatest following among philosophers and psychologists.⁵⁰ That is not to say that it is without problems or that it can explain all occurrences of humor, only that it occupies a central place in attempts to do so.

The incongruity theory is the only one of these three theories of humor to which Chesterton’s work relates in a largely positive way.⁵¹ Indeed, he begins his encyclopedia article on humor by stating that “humor, in the modern use of the term, signifies a perception of the comic or incongruous of a special sort.”⁵² Elsewhere, he describes laughter as “the power of uproarious reaction against ourselves and our own incongruities.”⁵³ He is clearly at home with the idea of incongruity as a part of the explanation for humor. Where he differs from philosophers such as Morreall and Carroll is in his determination to ground the surface incongruities of humor in Christian metaphysics. His insistence on situating humor within a metaphysical framework has already been noted with regard to the release theory. What is most distinctive about his treatment of incongruity is the use he makes of the doctrine of the fall and the concept of paradox.

Not many philosophers or theologians would turn to the Christian doctrine of the fall as a part of the explanation for the existence of humor in human life, but Chesterton does so willingly:

This humorous human quality can, as a matter of fact, be much more easily connected with this old idea of a fall of man than with the current and conventional ideas about the evolution of man. . . . the process which ends in a

⁴⁷ Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* (Glasgow: R.Urie, for Daniel Baxter, Bookseller, 1750) 7.

⁴⁸ James Beattie, *Essays on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism; on Poetry and Music, as They Affect the Mind; on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; and, on the Utility of Classical Learning* (Dublin: C. Jenkin, 1778) 303.

⁴⁹ See Morreall, “Introduction,” 6, 26–89, 139–55, 172–86.

⁵⁰ Carroll confidently asserts that “most philosophers and psychologists . . . find the incongruity theory (or some variant thereof) to be the most fruitful” hypothesis about the nature of humor (Carroll, *Humour*, 8).

⁵¹ Reyburn relates Chesterton’s understanding of humor to the incongruity theory, although only very briefly and without a substantial discussion. See Reyburn, “Laughter and the Between,” 26, 38; idem, “The Beautiful Madness called Laughter,” 474, 479–81.

⁵² Chesterton, “Humor.”

⁵³ Chesterton, “Moral Poison in Modern Fiction,” in *Collected Works*, 32:444.

joke necessarily begins with a certain idea of dignity . . . [with things incongruous with] the station or stature of humanity . . . this human standard. . . . All depends on this dim or fantastic tracing everywhere of the image of man; and I believe the key is somewhere in that mysterious oracle which identified it with the image of God.⁵⁴

Chesterton takes care to avoid any issues concerning the relation of this doctrine to history and science by striking a note of delicate suggestion and explanation, not dogmatic insistence on doctrines which must be believed, a technique he often uses. He characteristically refers to the fall in such terms as these: “The Fall is a view of life. It is not only the only enlightening, but the only encouraging view of life,”⁵⁵ treating it as a philosophy of life to distance it from biblical, scientific, or historical complications. Its significance for his understanding of incongruity in relation to humor can be seen by reference to his writing on the relationship between humor and the “dual nature of man,” as discussed previously. The doctrine of the fall connects the idea of the creation of human beings in the image of God with their current state as fallen sinners; “the dual nature of man” cannot but lead to constant incongruity in human life, as well as to Chesterton’s humility and justice theory of humor (for which, see above).

Thus, both humility and incongruity are, in Chesterton’s view, aspects of humor that are traceable back to the Christian doctrines of creation and fall. Hugh Kenner illustrates the relationship between fallen human nature and incongruity well when he writes: “Throughout Chesterton’s work, the symbol of that central paradox [the dual nature of Man], which Eden established and the incarnation restored, is laughter: for laughter is the sign of an incongruity perceived.”⁵⁶ Kenner does not develop this observation, as his concern is paradox, but his mention of the incarnation in relation to Chestertonian humor is significant, and we will return to the incarnation at a later point in this discussion.

The second metaphysical link Chesterton makes in his analysis of humor uses the device most often attached to his name: paradox. For Chesterton, the importance of paradox, in part, goes back to “the dual nature of man.” He writes: “Man himself is a joke in the sense of a paradox. That there is something very extraordinary about his position, and therefore presumably about his past, is the clearest sort of common sense. Alone of all creatures he is not self-sufficient, even while he is supreme.”⁵⁷ The reference to “his past” relates to the doctrine of the fall, and connects that doctrine to both “joke” and “paradox,” suggesting that all three are realities integral to human life.

⁵⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Orthodox* (ed. A. L. Maycock; London: D. Dobson, 1963) 84–86.

⁵⁵ Chesterton, “The Outline of the Fall,” in *Collected Works*, 3:311.

⁵⁶ Hugh Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton* (introd. by Herbert Marshall McLuhan; London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 92–93.

⁵⁷ Chesterton, *Man Who Was Orthodox*, 84.

Chesterton's sense of the role of paradox shapes his analysis of the social level of human life as well as his analysis of the individual: "Everybody takes it for granted that universal and ordinary arrangements, historic institutions, daily habits are reasonable. They are good, they are sensible, they are holy and splendid often enough, but they are not reasonable," he insists. "They are themselves paradoxes; paradox is built into the very foundations of human affairs."⁵⁸ Clearly, he is not using paradox to refer merely to wordplay but rather to a constituent characteristic of human life. He also argues for a link between paradox and religion in a defense of his paradoxes in *The Speaker*, where he writes:

The reason that paradox is continuous and ancient . . . is quite clear and sufficient. The reason is that there really is a strand of contradiction running through the universe. In proportion as men perceive it, they admit a contradiction; in proportion as men become honest they become paradoxical. . . . it was this ingrained paradox in the cosmos which led so many religions, wisely enough, to boast not that they had an explanation of the Universe, but that they had a pure, defiant paradox, like the Athanasian Creed.⁵⁹

He argues that paradox is a reality that can be observed to run "through the universe," that it is simply "honest" to acknowledge this, and that "many religions" take the same view. He goes even further in "Pope and the Art of Satire," where he declares that "an element of paradox runs through the whole of existence itself."⁶⁰ Kenner concurs, arguing that "the principle of metaphysical paradox is something inherently intractable in being itself."⁶¹ If existence itself is so paradoxical, this provides a possible explanation for the vast number of incongruities humans encounter in their lives. These incongruities appear on the surfaces of life as, at least in part, expressions of the paradoxical nature of the realities underlying those surfaces.

It is this emphasis on the integral role of paradox that enables Chesterton to utter remarks such as "I believe firmly in the value of all vulgar notions, especially of vulgar jokes. When once you have got hold of a vulgar joke, you may be certain that you have got hold of a subtle and spiritual idea. The men who made the joke saw something deep which they could not express except by something silly and emphatic."⁶² He can write this because he sees paradox, with its innate potential for humor, as running through reality, expressed in the form of constant incongruities. This is the result, in his view, of creation, fall, and original sin, with an additional layer added at the religious level by the other central Christian paradox: the incarnation.⁶³ In foregrounding the importance of paradox, Chesterton was, of

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵⁹ G. K. Chesterton, "Bacon and Beastliness," *The Speaker* (8 February 1902), qtd. in William Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874–1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189–90.

⁶⁰ Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 28.

⁶¹ Kenner, *Paradox*, 17.

⁶² Chesterton, "Popular Jokes and Vulgarity," in *Collected Works*, 28:66–67.

⁶³ Reyburn has related the importance of the incarnation to that of creation and fall in the

course, anticipated by Søren Kierkegaard.⁶⁴ Chesterton, however, seems to have developed his own theory of paradox independently, and it is idiosyncratically his own; the theology of creation, wonder, and joy which frames the role of paradox in his work makes it distinctly different from its role in Kierkegaard's writing. Chesterton's view of paradox is more closely related to his understanding of creation and the fall; the incarnation is, of course, also important to him in relation to paradox but not so dominant as it is for Kierkegaard.⁶⁵ It is nonetheless central, and Reyburn notes the link between the importance of the incarnation for Chesterton and the importance of surprise at the climax of a joke, suggesting that, in the incarnation: "the greatest divide—the divide between the divine and the human—is overcome in a punch line that knocks all other punch lines flat. It is a knock-knock joke through which we discover that God himself is at the door."⁶⁶ This illustrates the importance of surprise in both Chesterton's theology, with its emphasis on wonder, and his humor.

Chesterton's focus on paradox may point toward the resolution of a problem with the incongruity theory. As Roger Scruton has noted, certain forms of humor depend not on incongruity but on congruity. He adduces caricature as one example and "the action which is so much *in character* that we cannot but laugh" as another.⁶⁷ Reyburn points out that, in Chesterton's work, "the shock of the congruous" is an element of humor.⁶⁸ Perhaps Chesterton's work indicates that unexpected congruities are themselves, paradoxically, incongruities; that is to say, they are equivalent to incongruities in their difference from our expectations. This would imply support for a version of the incongruity theory which could accommodate unexpected congruity as a source of surprise caused by the defeat of our expectations in a manner equivalent to that of unexpected incongruity.

That element of surprise brings us back to the importance of surprise in Chesterton's theology: his theology of creation emphasizes wonder and surprise at every turn, as does his understanding of the incarnation.⁶⁹ In his youth in the mid-1890s, he developed his own "mystical theory" which was

background of Chesterton's thought and humor as part of his book-length study of Chesterton's hermeneutic. Because that book centers on hermeneutics, however, in it he addresses the theology-humor relationship indirectly, as a subsidiary aspect of his discussion. See, for example, Reyburn, *Seeing Things as They Are*, 172–85.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 179–96, 226–28, 244–46. See also Aaron Edwards, "The Paradox of Dialectic: Clarifying the Use and Scope of Dialectic in Theology," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77 (2016): 273–306, at 291–92.

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 182–83, 486–88.

⁶⁶ Reyburn, "The Beautiful Madness Called Laughter," 478, 481.

⁶⁷ Roger Scruton, "Laughter," the first part of Roger Scruton and Peter Jones, "Laughter," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (Supplementary Volumes)* 56 (1982) 197–228, at 197–212.

⁶⁸ Reyburn, "The Beautiful Madness Called Laughter," 473–84, at 480.

⁶⁹ See Oddie, *Chesterton*, 38–42, 121–25. I. T. Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 213–29.

substantially this: that even mere existence, reduced to its most primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. . . . At the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy.⁷⁰

As Michael Hurley puts it, “The frightfulness, the danger—and, always, the welcome necessity—of seeing the world afresh is a motif that runs throughout his writing.”⁷¹ This attunement to surprise is embodied in his style. In Hurley’s words, he “thinks through language,”⁷² and his style incarnates the sense of wonder in his thought, often in humorous forms. Because his theology is so attuned to surprise, it is ripe for expression in the form of humor, which relies so greatly on the surprise caused by difference from the recipient’s expectations. The humor that springs from Chesterton’s sense of wonder provokes its recipients to see “the world afresh,” and in this it provides a particularly clear working example of the surprise element in the mode of operation of the humor of incongruity.

In recent times, Chesterton’s propensity to surprise has been much discussed under the heading of “defamiliarization.” This term was coined by the Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky⁷³ and has been employed by both Alison Milbank⁷⁴ and Michael Hurley⁷⁵ in connection with the surprise, shock, and subversion that are such prominent features of Chesterton’s work. His use of paradox and humor relates closely to this concept: both humor and paradox involve surprise, and both may provoke their audience to see “the world afresh.” It should be noted that Shklovsky’s idea of the purpose of defamiliarization is “not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.”⁷⁶ Chestertonian defamiliarization, however, is very much concerned with making the reader “perceive meaning” and seeks to serve “as a means for knowing” by unveiling the true nature of what is perceived. His use of humor is one of the central means by which he achieves such defamiliarization, renewing his audience’s perception of being. This aspect of his humor is built upon his vision of the paradoxical nature of the reality experienced by fallen human beings in a fallen world. In *St. Thomas Aquinas*, he writes, “the

⁷⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (London: Hutchinson, 1936) 93–95. See also Garry Wills, *Chesterton, Man and Mask* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961) 24–26.

⁷¹ Michael D. Hurley, *G. K. Chesterton* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2012) 4.

⁷² Hurley, *Chesterton*, xiii.

⁷³ Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan; 3rd ed.; Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017) 8–15.

⁷⁴ Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (T&T Clark Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 31–39.

⁷⁵ Hurley, *Chesterton*, 5–6.

⁷⁶ Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 12.

use of paradox is to awaken the mind,⁷⁷ and its expression in humorous forms may serve that purpose.

Overall, it is clear that, for Chesterton, paradox is not just a verbal trick (although he does use it plentifully at that level); more importantly, it is a central theological reality. This is crucial for his understanding of humor because paradox implies incongruity: if an “element of paradox” is present in “existence itself,” then the incongruities to which humor reacts are one result of the paradoxical nature of reality as understood by Christian theology. This paradoxical nature itself relates back to the fall and the contradictions consequent upon the fall in human life and in existence more generally. Thus, the same central themes of Christian theology (creation, fall, original sin, the incarnation) shape the way Chesterton’s ideas relate negatively to the superiority theory of humor and more positively to the incongruity theory. The emphasis on paradox he draws from these theological themes is unusual and distinctive, as other theologians have held the same beliefs without drawing out the comic implications of Christian doctrines as Chesterton does.

■ Humor, Worship, and Joy

As noted earlier, the three theories of humor we have considered focus on *how* humor operates. What of a conceptually separate question: *Why* is it actually funny, why is it a positive experience, rather than painful or emotionally neutral?⁷⁸ Humor is widely found to have a positive effect on the spirits and to be good for mental health, and most human beings would not wish for a world without humor. Why should this be so? Why is human life enhanced by the “conceptual shifts” induced by incongruities when the empirical evidence of incongruity could be observed dispassionately? If we look for reasons beyond the physiological ones given by the proponents of the release theory, theology points us to the realm of metaphysics, and Chesterton’s principal contribution to this metaphysical discussion centers on another theological theme: joy.

Chesterton writes that “joy is . . . our reason for existing” and therefore the “notion that comic literature is in some sort of way superficial” is completely false. Instead, “the literature of joy is infinitely more difficult, more rare, and more triumphant than the black and white literature of pain,” and the joy of the works of comic literature “is older than sorrow, their extravagance is saner than wisdom,

⁷⁷ Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, in *Collected Works*, 2:513.

⁷⁸ René Girard has argued that pain is not far from laughter, and Thomas Veatch has described humor as “(emotional) pain that does not hurt”; notwithstanding the work of these authors, the predominant view of humor is of something that is usually enjoyable and is not normally closely related to pain (the same is largely true of laughter, with allowances made for its nature as an embodied phenomenon; tickling is a special case, as the laughter it causes is the result of physical stimulus not comic amusement). See René Girard, “*To Double Business Bound*”: *Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 121–35 and Thomas Veatch, “A Theory of Humor,” *Humor: The International Journal of Humor Research* 11 (1998) 161–215, at 164.

their love is stronger than death.”⁷⁹ “Praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul,” Chesterton claims in *Orthodoxy*. “Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labor by which all things live . . . by its [Christianity’s] creed joy becomes something gigantic . . . Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”⁸⁰ In light of his convictions about joy and wonder, he goes on to sketch out the beginnings of a theology of joy.

As Aidan Nichols has observed, for Chesterton, the wonder of creation implies an expanded role in theology for the idea of joy. He does not see joy as ultimately caused by particular created things; for him its source is deeper, coming from God and beginning with joy at God’s creation of existence. Nichols points out that Chesterton is original in using joy as an argument for God’s existence.⁸¹ In Chesterton’s thinking, joy is not just a marginal note in Christian theology but a major theological category. So how does his theology of joy relate to humor?

If we juxtapose this theological link between joy and humor with a claim of Romano Guardini about worship, we may find a suggestive resonance. Guardini asserts that worship “unites art and reality in a supernatural childhood before God. . . . [Worship] has one thing in common with the play of the child and the life of art—it has no purpose, but is full of profound meaning. It is not work, but play.”⁸² Guardini brings together four things: “profound meaning,” worship, “the play of the child and the life of art.” What he only hints at is the role of joy: where he mentions “a supernatural childhood before God” he points towards the joy of childhood, experienced by adults in the “supernatural childhood” of worship. Children often experience joy intensely and in much more uncomplicated ways than adults do. Guardini links worship with children’s play and “the life of art.” If we relate Guardini’s words to Chesterton’s theology of joy, we can extend Guardini’s claims about worship, play, and art to humor also: like those other three, “it has no purpose but is full of profound meaning.” This is not to say that every joke is on the surface profound but rather that a theological view of humor discerns profundity in the nature of humor because of the relationship between humor and the paradoxes of the human condition, as discussed above.

Chesterton’s implicit and implied theology of humor includes his recognition that there is a theological nexus between the four things mentioned in Guardini’s observation: “profound meaning,” worship, “the play of the child and the life of art.” He adds humor and paradox as bound together with them so that play, art, worship, humor, paradox, and profound meaning form aspects of a composite whole in his theology. He enthusiastically insists on the deep importance of these things

⁷⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (London: J. M. Dent, 1914) 124–27.

⁸⁰ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works*, 1:364–65.

⁸¹ Aidan Nichols, *G. K. Chesterton, Theologian* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009) 107–18. See also Ralph C. Wood, “The Argument from Joy: The Current State of Scholarship on G. K. Chesterton as Thinker and Theologian,” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 27 (2010) 85–92.

⁸² Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930) 102.

and indeed of nonsense (perhaps the most playful form of humor).⁸³ This nexus is formed around his theology of joy and wonder and expresses that theology. In his thinking, play, art, laughter, and worship should all be part of a natural response to creation, but the fall and sin have radically damaged and distorted the relationship between humans and their Creator, which means that paradox and the kinds of humor that spring from paradox are central to the current state of human existence. For Chesterton, none of these things are trivial; all express profound meaning because they demonstrate understanding, at some level, of either our created nature or the fallen and sinful current state of human life (or both).

In spite of the fallen state of humanity, however, joy and wonder remain central parts of human experience. Thus, according to Chesterton's theological thinking, joy is integral to human nature because it is part of God's design for human beings and remains a central part of human nature in spite of the fall. What happens when humans react to the incongruities of life with humor is that this joy breaks through the effects of the fall and original sin. This gives a theological explanation for the positive effects of humor in human experience: it means that—except when it is distorted by sin (as, for example, when humans “laugh at” rather than “laughing with” others)—humor acts as a positive, life-enhancing experience, bringing “enlargement of the soul by laughter” in accordance with the Creator's design.⁸⁴ Thus, Chesterton's theology of joy and his theology of humor are mutually reinforcing.

However, these two elements do need to be supplemented by the insights of other theologians. For instance, Karl Rahner's essay “Laughter” has several commonalities with Chesterton's thinking. Rahner is sure that laughter “should praise God,” and he locates the theological basis for laughter, first of all, in the fact that “we are created beings” so that laughter is simply a part of the created order. He does not, however, attend to the role of wonder and of original sin as Chesterton does, nor does he relate humor to incongruity. Instead, he, like Aquinas and unlike Chesterton, focuses on the eschatological aspect of earthly humor as an anticipation of heavenly joy: “Laughter is praise of God because it foretells the eternal praise of God at the end of time, when those who must weep here on earth shall laugh.”⁸⁵ Where Chesterton foregrounds the role of joy, humility, and justice in relation to humor, Rahner relates laughter closely to love, claiming that “laughter is a sign of love . . . it is a manifestation of the love of all things in God.”⁸⁶ Thus, his arguments complement Chesterton's, and each reveals how partial and fragmentary is the other's theological framework for the understanding of humor.

Brian Edgar, like Rahner, links laughter closely to love and, like Chesterton, emphasizes its fundamentally communal nature and its role in revealing truth. His

⁸³ Chesterton, *Defendant*, 61–70.

⁸⁴ Chesterton, “Protests against the War,” in *Collected Works*, 31:112–13.

⁸⁵ Rahner, *The Content of Faith*, 151.

⁸⁶ Rahner, *The Content of Faith*, 150.

focus is much narrower, however, in that he is concerned primarily with the role of laughter as “an essential, central dimension of the believer’s relationship with God” rather than with an understanding of humor in human life more generally. Within this more restricted perspective, he echoes Peter Berger’s view of humor as a part of “the human awareness of transcendence” and considers its role in the growth in holiness of the Christian believer.⁸⁷

Finally, Reinhold Niebuhr considers humor within a rather limited framework, seeing it as only “a prelude to faith” and laughter as “the beginning of prayer,” so that laughter is only heard “in the outer courts of religion,” but, in “the holy of holies,” “laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humor is fulfilled by faith.”⁸⁸ Chesterton’s relating of humor to joy, humility, and justice serves as a corrective here, when supplemented by Rahner’s and Edgar’s entwining of laughter and love: together they suggest that humor, because of that kinship with justice, humility, love and joy, has an honored place in all the “courts of religion,” all realms of reality as conceived by Christianity.

■ Humor, Cognition, and Theology

What of the relationship between humor and cognition? Chesterton’s theological epistemology relates humor and cognition in three principal ways. The first follows from his assertion that “the use of paradox is to awaken the mind.”⁸⁹ As we have seen in the discussion above, paradox and humor are closely related for Chesterton; therefore humor partakes, to a degree, in the awakening of the mind he refers to here. The comic element present in so many of his paradoxes triggers thought; to understand a joke, the recipient of the joke must make the necessary mental connections. Chesterton, therefore, has grounds for insisting that humor and paradox provoke thought. As he puts it, a joke is “always a thought; it is grave and formal writing that is quite literally thoughtless.”⁹⁰

Thus, Chesterton can claim that humor actually improves argument and enhances perception of truth. For instance:

If you can prove your philosophy from pigs and umbrellas, you have proved that it is a serious philosophy. If you have, let us say, a theory about man, and if you can only prove it by talking about Plato and George Washington, your theory may be a quite frivolous thing. But if you can prove it by talking about the butler or the postman, then it is serious, because it is universal. So far from it being irreverent to use silly metaphors on serious questions, it is one’s duty to use silly metaphors on serious questions. It is the test of one’s seriousness. It is the test of a responsible religion or theory whether it can take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter-tubs. It is the test of

⁸⁷ Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God*, 123–35.

⁸⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (ed. Robert McAfee Brown; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 49.

⁸⁹ Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, in *Collected Works*, 2:513.

⁹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity: A Book of Essays* (London: Methuen, 1920) 72.

a good philosophy whether you can defend it grotesquely. It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.⁹¹

Chesterton's idea that comedy is a "test" for religion and philosophy involves the claim that humor tests conceptual systems by exposing their incongruities; only robust philosophies and religions will come through this test with their credentials enhanced rather than undermined. A number of more recent writers have argued in a fashion which supports Chesterton's case here. For instance, the polymath Jonathan Miller suggests that recreation, including humor, "is in fact re-creation. It is the rehearsal, the re-establishment of concepts."⁹² Miller was among many other things a comedian, and knew, as Chesterton also knew, the capacity of comedy to cast a new light on things and concepts which the recipient of the joke might have felt they knew already. This "re-establishment of concepts" is part of the "test" humor offers: genuinely profound philosophies and religions will remain coherent when subjected to the "re-creation . . . rehearsal . . . re-establishment of concepts" that humor provides.

Secondly, and more specifically, Chesterton sees the value of humor in correcting errors in perception. We will consider two examples. First, he attempts to dispel prejudice against Roman Catholic priests, which he sees as irrational and unfounded, by means of humor:

I could never take seriously the fear of the priest, as of something unnatural and unholy; a dangerous man in the home. Why should a man who wanted to be wicked encumber himself with special and elaborate promises to be good? There might sometimes be a reason for a priest being a profligate. But what was the reason for a profligate being a priest? There are many more lucrative walks of life in which a person with such shining talents for vice and villainy might have made a brighter use of his gifts.⁹³

Humor serves a similar corrective function in his article "Jesus or Christ? A Reply to Mr. Roberts." In this essay, he seizes on Mr. Roberts's assertion that "If Jesus was God He knew that the people's belief in diabolic obsession was an error."⁹⁴ Chesterton points out that if Jesus was God, then Mr. Roberts is claiming to know the inner thoughts of the divinity. Chesterton humorously highlights the fact that this seems somewhat presumptuous, ending:

How, may I ask, does Mr. Roberts know exactly what God thinks about diabolic possession? To understand men or the most ordinary life is mystery enough for most of us; and here is an enlightened gentleman who not only knows about God, but knows God's private opinion upon the mystery of evil.

⁹¹ Chesterton, "Spiritualism and Frivolity," in *Collected Works*, 27:206.

⁹² Jonathan Miller, "Jokes and Joking: A Serious Laughing Matter," in *Laughing Matters: A Serious Look at Humour* (ed. John Durant & Jonathan Miller; Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1988) 5–16, at 15.

⁹³ Chesterton, "The Obvious Blunders," in *Collected Works*, 3:74.

⁹⁴ It would seem that this should read "possession" not "obsession"; "obsession" is the word used in Chesterton's original article where he may have misquoted Mr. Roberts.

One would think that the meditations of the Omniscient upon the subject of devils might reasonably be left undisturbed.⁹⁵

Numerous more recent writers on cognition would concur with Chesterton's general principles here, if not his specific examples. Marvin Minsky, for one, has argued that "humor plays a special role in learning and communicating about" the "malfunctions" of "common sense logic."⁹⁶ Chesterton's work exemplifies this role: he constantly uses humor to critique failures of reasoning, as in the texts cited above.

The third way Chesterton relates humor to cognition is both very general and very complex. He writes of what he calls "that darkest problem of metaphysics, the borderland between reason and unreason, and the nature of the most erratic of spiritual forces, humor, which eternally dances between the two."⁹⁷ Here, he gives humor a role in helping humans to navigate the relationship between reason on the one hand and imagination and emotion on the other. He sees a mystical and metaphysical background to this role for humor:

The Christian . . . puts the mystery into his philosophy. That mystery by its darkness enlightens all things. . . . It is not a question between mysticism and rationality. It is a question between mysticism and madness. For mysticism, and mysticism alone, has kept men sane from the beginning of the world. All the straight roads of logic lead to some Bedlam, to Anarchism or to passive obedience, to treating the universe as a clockwork of matter or else as a delusion of mind. It is only the Mystic, the man who accepts the contradictions, who can laugh and walk easily through the world.⁹⁸

When he says that "only the mystic . . . can laugh," he is not stating literal fact but suggesting that a philosophical or theological posture which allows space for mystery thereby creates space for humor. To write thus is to open up issues of theological epistemology and debates for which we do not have space here. Suffice it to say that Chesterton's understanding of knowledge sees imagination, reason, and emotion working closely together in cognition and places a high value on communal as well as individual knowledge.⁹⁹ He sees humor as having an important role to play in the negotiation of the complex relationship between reason, imagination, and emotion with respect to cognition. For this, and his other thinking about the relationship between humor and cognition, a modestly prophetic role might be

⁹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, "Jesus or Christ? A Reply to Mr. Roberts," *The Chesterton Review* 7 (1981) 95–107, at 104–5.

⁹⁶ Marvin Minsky, "Jokes and the Logic of the Collective Unconscious," in *Cognitive Constraints on Communication: Representations and Processes* (ed. Lucia Vaina and Jaakko Hintikka; Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1984) 175–200, at 176.

⁹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Lunacy and Letters* (London; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958) 26.

⁹⁸ Chesterton, "Why I Believe in Christianity," in *Collected Works*, 1:383–84.

⁹⁹ For instance, he suggests: the "man building up an intellectual system has to build like Nehemiah, with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. The imagination, the constructive quality, is the trowel, and argument is the sword" (Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 56).

claimed for Chesterton, as he sketched out a role for humor which was surprising in his own day but has become increasingly accepted since.

■ Conclusion

We return to the questions with which we began: What does the specifically theological nature of Chesterton's thinking add to the insights of philosophy and psychology with regard to the understanding of humor? What is offered by a theological perspective—especially by Chesterton's theology—that cannot be supplied by philosophical and psychological theories? We have seen that Chesterton's work provides a way of reconsidering the categories of "superiority," "release," and "incongruity" as they relate to humor. This reconsideration begins to suggest how very complex and profound a fully theological understanding of humor might be, indicating that theology may indeed situate humor in a richer field of meaning than philosophy and psychology can provide, revealing its significance more clearly.

The insights of the other theologians discussed in the course of this article place Chesterton's contribution in a broader perspective and demonstrate the limits of his thinking. His theology of humor is largely implied and implicit, and he sketches out his ideas in rather fragmentary fashion, usually in the course of controversies on other subjects. Yet certain significant themes emerge from his work. With regard to the release theory, he situates the physiological in relation to the idea of humor as a "metaphysical fact" and provides a basic outline of those metaphysics. With regard to the incongruity theory, he embraces the concept of incongruity and develops his metaphysical framework for humor in terms of the paradoxical nature of fallen reality implied by the central doctrines of Christianity, namely creation (particularly human creation in the image of God), fall, original sin, as well as the incarnation. His reliance on paradox also allows him to include unexpected congruities in his version of this theory: paradoxically, congruities can be incongruous where they differ from expectations and so provide forms of surprise equivalent to those provided by the incongruities which so often feature in comedy.

In all of this, Chesterton situates his understanding of humor in a theological framework that is clearly orthodox, however unconventionally expressed. Idiosyncratic though his writing is, the different elements of Chesterton's understanding of humor can be seen to be internally coherent and consistent with the broad outlines of the central Christian doctrines as conventionally conceived. Because his theology is so rooted in his sense of wonder, it foregrounds a constant sense of surprise and an urgent challenge to perceptions of reality which he sees as blunted by sin. This sense of surprise is also a key element in the perception of humor, which very often works through incongruities supplying difference from expectation; thus, Chesterton's theological emphasis on surprise and wonder correlates very naturally with expression in terms of humor. This part of Chesterton's work is complemented by his arguments concerning humor and

cognition. Consider his insistence that humor enhances cognition, is of value in critiquing error, and is important in relating reason and the non-rational elements of cognition: this relates closely to his treatment of humor and incongruity. His discussions of humor, cognition, and incongruity together outline the elements of a complex understanding of human cognition in which humor plays an important role, but, unfortunately, he only supplies partial fragments of a complete theory here and leaves much unclear. Nevertheless, his practice demonstrates the direction of travel of his theory: he uses humor as an instrument of theology to sharpen the appeal to imagination and emotion of his theological attempts to address issues such as “the problem of how men could be made to realize the wonder and splendor of being alive, in environments which their own daily criticism treated as dead-alive, and which their imagination had left for dead.”¹⁰⁰

In sum, with regard to the release and incongruity theories, Chesterton’s work demonstrates that theology can situate the explanations for humor provided by psychology and philosophy within a richer field of meaning. In relation to the superiority theory, Chesterton’s work sketches out an alternative perspective in which he indicates that, in the light of Christian theology, it can be argued that humor is designed to be an instrument of the virtues of justice and humility, not of superiority. While, as an empirical fact, people may experience feelings of superiority when they laugh at others, Chesterton provides a moral and metaphysical framework which indicates that such feelings of superiority are aberrations, and feelings associated with humility and justice are the appropriate accompaniments to comedy and humor. This theory involves a number of highly theological assumptions: that humor is part of a divine creation and can be said to have purpose and to be designed to be situated in a moral framework; and that it can be used or misused according to that design. Thus, Chesterton challenges the superiority theory with an embryonic humility and justice theory which makes thoroughly theological assertions about the purpose of humor.

The teleological shape of Chesterton’s thinking about humor is deepened by his argument for a central place for joy in the understanding of humor. There might be a conceivable form of humor which could act as an instrument of humility and justice without providing pleasure and uplifting the spirits. If joy, however, is “our reason for existing,” in Chesterton’s words, or at least a central part of that reason, then the joyful nature of humor is actually evidence of divine creation, breaking through the pain and gloom of the fallen state of the world in the form of humor. It is, in Peter Berger’s words, a “signal of transcendence.”¹⁰¹

If we combine, very briefly, Chesterton’s ideas with those of the other theologians discussed above, we can see the beginnings of an outline of a theology of humor which takes the following form: humor is a sign of transcendence stemming from a joy that is integral to human beings because of the goodness of the creation and

¹⁰⁰ Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton*, in *Collected Works*, 16:132.

¹⁰¹ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 199.

the creator. This joy is repressed by the fall, sin, and human suffering but surfaces nonetheless when triggered by the “conceptual shifts” caused by incongruities and paradoxes. Humor’s social nature enables it to be an instrument of love: the sharing of humor expresses love and brings “solace of soul,” in Aquinas’s phrase. It can also be a sign of hope in the face of the suffering of the world, where it is united with an eschatological faith in an end to that suffering. Properly understood, it embodies humility and builds solidarity between human beings, as the flaws we laugh at in others are part of a fallen sinfulness common to all people, including ourselves. It can, in the form of satire, be an instrument of justice. For those who misunderstand the human condition, however, the mechanisms of humor may be misunderstood and misused as an expression of superiority. Where philosophical and psychological theories of humor have focused on those mechanisms, Chesterton’s theological approach creates a moral and metaphysical framework which opens up new perspectives on the significance and meaning of humor.

It may be that Chesterton’s unsystematic, disordered, fragmentary insights may yet reward further research and prove to be of assistance to theologians concerned with discovering more of a distinctly theological understanding of humor. He certainly provides a considerable amount of material for scholars seeking to find where theology may lead them in relation to humor. Further research may also shed light on what Chesterton’s theology might offer to apologetics: if theologians, incorporating his ideas into their work, can provide insights on this subject which enable a fuller and more profound account of humor than do those of philosophers and psychologists, what significance does that have for those who defend the value of theology in a secular world? Oliver O’Donovan has made a “general claim about ethics and apologetics: the critical edge of the encounter between belief and unbelief often locates itself where faith displays an ability to comprehend the tasks of life.”¹⁰² In addition to those “tasks,” what of faith’s, and theology’s, ability to comprehend the pleasures and recreations of life, especially humor, comedy, and play? This is an area worthy of further exploration.

There is one final, highly personal dimension of Chesterton’s contribution to this discussion which we should consider before we end. This aspect relates humor to theology as much as theology to humor; it can perhaps best be conveyed through imagery rather than propositions and arguments as it concerns tone, style, flavor, the mode and mood of his writing, as well as its content. His style embodies his sense of wonder, of paradox, and of humor, and this has consequences for the picture he presents of his work as an apologist and, by extension, the picture he presents of the work of theologians more generally.

The attunement of his writing to humor brings with it a focus on the communal dimensions of knowledge; it is possible for a lone individual to enjoy a private joke, but humor is naturally social. Whereas some images of the apologist might be of the

¹⁰² Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), xv.

lonely scholar, working late in the library, or of the earnest controversialist, laboring over solemn and humorless arguments, Chesterton creates a very different image of the practice of apologetics. His writing builds a picture of apologetics as an act of friendship, a genial gathering in which sparring partners build understanding through debate, a cornucopia of shared discoveries, a joyful cascade of conversation fueled by endless laughter. In this, his theology of humor reshapes his practice of theology and reminds the reader that the mode, the medium, and the mood of theology, as well as its content, contribute to its meaning.