Why Is Swearing (Sometimes) Funny?

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Abstract
Philosophers have attempted to explain humour in various ways over the years. Drawing on the main philosophical theories of humour – the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory – along with the psychological theory of benign violation, I elucidate what makes swearing (sometimes) funny. I argue that each of these theories has something to contribute to understanding swearing's funniness and that, in addition, its funniness also likely derives from two other factors. One of these factors is the glee that many of us came to attach to uttering naughty words when we were children. The other factor is the emotion-intensifying unpredictability ('Whatever will happen next?') introduced by the breaking of norms that occurs when someone swears inappropriately, which – provided that the norm-breaking does not introduce a threat – provokes amusement.

1. Introduction

The most famous routine of the American comedian George Carlin is 'Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television', also known as his 'seven words' or 'filthy words' routine (Carlin, 1972). The seven words in question are *shit*, *piss*, *fuck*, *cunt*, *cocksucker*, *motherfucker*, and *tits*. This monologue got Carlin arrested in 1972, and a 1973 radio broadcast of it led to a landmark decision in US free speech law, *FCC v Pacifica Foundation*, which granted the US broadcasting regulator, the Federal Communications Commission, the power to prohibit 'indecent' language and to fine broadcasters who do not comply (Fairman, 2006). Less formally, it cemented George Carlin's place in the public's consciousness, and – along with the similarly foul-mouthed routines of people like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor – the place of rude words in comedy.

But we don't need to look to professional comedians for evidence of a link between obscenity and what's funny. As any weary parent or schoolteacher knows, children delight in taboo words, whether repeating the ones that they know or learning new ones. When, shortly before my children and I were due to take a 4-hour trip in a non-air-conditioned car in the middle of summer, I learned that my 11-year-old son had written a story about a superhero named Dildo (a name that he thought he'd made up) for a homework

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assignment, I found myself confronted with a dilemma: I wanted him to change the superhero's name before submitting the story to his teacher, but I also wanted to avoid alerting him to the fact that he had unwittingly discovered a taboo word that he could explore at length during our sweltering road trip. As we grow up, our sense of humour tends to develop beyond bald repetition of rude words, but we still retain a delight in taboo language. We find evidence of this in the enduring popularity of news stories about public figures swearing when they shouldn't – like the widely reported 2015 request by the late Prince Philip to 'Just take the fucking picture' during an otherwise mundane photoshoot – as well, of course, as the longevity of Carlin's 'filthy words' skit. As the linguist John McWhorter remarked, 'some of us would be hard-pressed to remember anything else Carlin said' (McWhorter, 2021, p. 2). What explains this delight? Specifically: why is swearing (often) funny?

2. Funniness Explained

2.1 Superiority

Over the centuries, philosophers have devised several theories in attempt to explain what makes things funny. For many years, the dominant view was that we are amused when we feel superior to someone. Humour, on this view, expresses scorn. We find this understanding of humour in Plato's *Philebus*: exploring the nature of comedy, Plato disapprovingly classifies it as a form of scorn, and remarks that 'the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice' (Plato, 1978, pp. 48–50). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells us that 'a jest is a kind of mockery' (Aristotle, 1941, IV.8). And in the Bible, God 'laughs … to scorn' the rulers of the earth (Psalm 2: 2–5). This view of humour as involving scorn – which, in recent decades, has become known as the superiority theory of humour – persisted until a couple of centuries ago. Thomas Hobbes, for example, wrote in *Leviathan* that people's laughter 'is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves' (Hobbes, 1651, part 1, ch. 6). And in *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes claims that when we encounter 'some small evil in a person whom we consider to be deserving of it; we have hatred for this evil, we have joy in seeing it in him who is deserving of it; and when that comes upon

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us unexpectedly, the surprise of wonder is the cause of our bursting into laughter' (Descartes, 1649, art. 178–79).

Despite its enduring popularity, the superiority theory offers a pretty narrow account of what we find funny, covering only that aspect of humour that today we would call *laughing-at*; a concept that we often contrast with the (rather more kind) *laughing-with*. The superiority theory is little help with explaining our laughter at swearing. We don't feel scornful of George Carlin when we laugh at his sweary routine. We certainly didn't feel superior to Prince Philip when we laugh at his foul-mouthed remarks; on the contrary, the amusement that many of us feel when we encounter members of royalty (and other upstanding community members) swearing seems largely due to their being, in a sense, superior to *us* – at least in terms of their social status, traditionally conceived. And the superiority theory is ill-equipped to explain the hilarity that children derive from discovering rude words and repeating them *ad nauseum*.

2.2 Relief

Philosophy offers two other theories of humour, both of which began to take shape in the 18th century. One is the relief theory, according to which laughter involves a release of pressure. An early example is found in Lord Shaftesbury's 'Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour' (1709):

> The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers. (Shaftesbury, 1709/1711)

Freud famously had his own version of the relief theory: he tells us in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* that, when we laugh, we give vent to psychic energy that would otherwise – depending on what sort of laughter we're engaging in – be put to use repressing emotions, understanding the world, or experiencing emotions (Freud, 1905).

There is a couple of reasons why the relief theory is regarded as unsatisfactory. One is that – as has been observed by Noël Carroll – it rests on sketchy science: we humans do not in fact generate animal spirits or psychic energy that build up like steam in a pressure cooker as we move through the world, until they find release in amused laughter (or else, versatile as they are, they end up fulfilling

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some other function instead) (Carroll, 2014). The other is that the relief theory is chiefly an explanation of *laughter*, rather than humour, or at least of the sort of humour that moves us to laughter; so it is of limited use if our interest lies in understanding why only *funny* things produce this effect, and why not all funny things are funny enough to provoke laughter. More generally, despite the obvious link between them, humour and laughter are not the same thing: not all humour involves laughter, and not all laughter involves humour (being tickled can make us laugh, but it does not involve us experiencing humour).

Admittedly, there remains an intuitive appeal to the relief theory despite its dubious mechanics. Sometimes, amused laughter – and perhaps especially laughter at inappropriate swearing and other breaches of etiquette – does seem to involve a venting of *something*. When I was 12 or 13, I was in a class where the teacher was reading a passage of a book with us. The passage contained something that was, to us students, extremely funny. (I forget the details, but it involved rude words.) The entire class was trembling with suppressed amusement until our eye-rolling teacher announced that we had exactly one minute to get whatever it was out of our systems, after which she expected us to settle down and focus. Everyone exploded into laughter. When our time was up, our laughter had tailed off to more manageable levels.

Whatever is going on physiologically in situations like this, it really does feel like a release of pressure. The language we commonly use to describe this sort of containment and then release is consonant with the relief theory's model of the increase and eventual release of pressure: we often speak of struggling to *keep a lid on it*, of *exploding* in laughter, and – in the example I just described – of needing to *get it out of our system*.

It's not just laughter that can feel like venting, either. Sneezing or scratching an itch, especially after a period of time spent trying to suppress the need to do so, can feel like a release of pressure too. Similarly, for those with Tourette syndrome, trying to suppress a tic has been compared to trying to suppress a sneeze or an itch (CDC, 2023). The fact that it is helpful to *describe* experiences like these in terms of pressure does not entail that the physiological explanation of scratches, sneezes, and tics involves a literal increase and then release of pressure. Talk of pressure is simply a metaphor. Something similar might be true of laughter – at least in those cases where laughter feels like a release.

The relief theory, it seems, is not complete rubbish. But the questions remain: what is it about *funny* things that (sometimes) provokes

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this sort of response in us? And if, as I've observed, experiences other than laughter also feel like a release of pressure, what makes laughing at something funny different from (say) sneezing?

2.3 Incongruity

An answer is provided by the incongruity theory of humour, which – like the relief theory – emerged in the 18th century, and which is the dominant theory of humour today. According to this account, things are funny when they are incongruous; that is, when they are contrary to what we expect, when they violate some norm or other, when they simply don't make sense. As James Beattie put it in the 18th century, humour consists in 'two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them' (Beattie, 1778, p. 347). Versions of the incongruity theory are found in Immanuel Kant, who remarked that '[i]n everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd' (Kant, 1790, part 1 sec. 54); and in Arthur Schopenhauer, who wrote that '[t]he cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity' (Schopenhauer 1818/1844, book 1, sec. 13). As John Morreall has observed, the contemporary pairing in comedy of the 'set-up' and the 'punchline' is designed to provoke laughter through generating incongruity: the set-up sets expectations and the punchline violates them (Morreall, 2023). Not everything that is funny has been designed to be so, of course: there are plenty of instances of what Carroll calls *found* humour, which are also funny because of their incongruity. This happens, for example, when a large and tough-looking person turns out to be very soft-spoken, or when we see faces in everyday objects (a phenomenon documented in the popular 'Faces in Things' social media feeds), or simply when we encounter something that strikes us as bizarre due to a lack of contextual information (consider 'no context' memes). Incongruity does a good job of explaining why swearing is sometimes funny: swearing is often contrary to – and therefore incongruous with – the norms that govern a particular situation, and the funniest examples tend to be *highly* incongruous. This helps explain why swearing by royalty tends to be especially newsworthy.

The incongruity theory – like the other theories we've considered – faces problems. As Carroll observes, not every incongruous thing is

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funny. Returning home to find one's house ablaze, getting unexpectedly dumped by a romantic partner, finding that one's car will not start as normal, and being arrested for a crime that one did not commit are all examples of things that are incongruous but very far from funny. And much of the time, swearing that is contrary to the norms of a given situation is threatening rather than funny. Perhaps all funny things are incongruous in some way – although, as is also noted by Carroll, the term *incongruous* is pretty loose and nebulous, and it's not clear how well it would stand up to attempts to define it more precisely – but something else is required to explain why only some incongruous things are funny.

Carroll, drawing on Aristotle, suggests that the incongruity theory needs to be supplemented with a requirement that, in order to be funny, incongruity needs not to be threatening. More specifically, 'it must occur in a context from which fear for ourselves and those we care about—including fictional characters—has been banished. Comic incongruities, in other words, must be non-threatening, or, at least, what is potentially threatening, frightening, or anxiety producing about them must be deflected and/or marginalized' (Carroll, 2014, p. 30).

2.4 Benign violation

The idea of explaining humour as incongruity-without-threat has been developed and tested by psychologists at the University of Colorado. Led by Peter McGraw, the Humor Research Lab (HuRL) takes as its starting point the *benign violation theory*, which is based on the claim that 'humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously' (HuRL, 2023). Condition (1) is, basically, the claim that funny situations must involve incongruity, and (2) reflects Carroll's observation that humorous situations are non-threatening.[1] Specifically,

[1] I'm comparing the benign violation theory to the incongruity theory, but, curiously, Peter McGraw and Joel Warner contrast the two theories in their 2014 book on humour (McGraw and Warner, 2014, p. 7). To get to the bottom of exactly how the two theories complement each other and how they contrast, it is probably necessary to clarify what is meant by 'incongruity'; since, as Carroll has observed, it is a pretty loose concept. The concept of a benign violation has also been criticised for being ill defined: McGraw and Warner quote the linguist Victor Raskin's remark that the theory is a 'very loose and vague metaphor' (McGraw and Warner, 2014, p. 13).

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> Research in HuRL has highlighted three ways that a violation can seem benign: 1) Alternative norms (e.g., one meaning of a phrase in a pun doesn't make sense, but the other meaning does), 2) commitment to a violated norm (e.g., men find sexist jokes funnier than women do), and 3) psychological distance (e.g., 'comedy is tragedy plus time'). (HuRL, 2023)

Interestingly, HuRL takes the benign violation theory to explain not only humour, but also other experiences that tend to provoke laughter: 'play fighting and tickling, which produce laughter in humans (and other primates), are benign violations because they are physically threatening but harmless attacks' (HuRL, 2023).

The benign violation theory, like more traditional versions of the incongruity theory, does not completely account for what makes things funny. Some things satisfy all three conditions of the theory yet fail to be funny. Consider, for example, the mundane experience of finding a typo (that is, a violation) in an email you have just drafted, which you are able to correct quickly and easily before sending the email (making the violation benign). And suppose, too, that your perception of the typo and your perception of the ease with which you can correct it occur simultaneously. This experience ought to be funny, according to the benign violation theory. But, unfortunately for careless emailers everywhere, it's not.

3. Swearing and Theories of Humour

Were our purpose here to understand what, in general terms, makes funny things funny, we would need to grapple with the problems that arise for our chosen theory of humour, and try to develop a coherent account. Luckily for us, we're just interested in trying to understand why swearing is (sometimes) funny: a narrower, more specific question that enables us to remain agnostic about which theory of humour is the correct one. Instead, we can draw on all of these theories to cast light on swearing's funniness.[2]

Of the three theories we've considered, the relief theory and the incongruity theory look best placed to explain what makes swearing

[2] Perhaps it's worth remarking that, even if our mission here *were* to provide a general theory of what makes things funny, it's not obvious that there is one (and only one) correct theory that explains all cases of humour. It might be that different funny things have different explanations of what makes them funny, meaning that there might be more than one correct theory of humour.

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funny, in cases where it is funny. Very often, when people swear, they do so against a background of norms against swearing. This makes swearing incongruous. And the release – often vicarious, as when we witness another person's swearing – from those norms can give rise to a sense of relief. We'll return for a more detailed look at these aspects of swearing in a moment. First, though, I want to consider (and then set aside) what we might make of swearing's funniness according to the superiority theory. It seems to me that feelings of superiority do not account for swearing's funniness in most cases. But they sometimes do. Consider James Frey's description of Matty, a friend who is trying to stop swearing, in his semi-fictional 2003 account of his recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, *A Million Little Pieces*:

> We spend the rest of lunch laughing more, mostly at Matty, who is still struggling to stop swearing. Every third or fourth word he speaks is either goddamn or fuck and is immediately followed by a string of other curses which are directed at himself. Eventually he just stops speaking entirely. (Frey, 2003, p. 303)

A sense of superiority underlies the funniness of Matty's swearing: unlike James and the rest of the group, Matty is unable to control his swearing, and every new sweary utterance is evidence of Matty's failure to overcome his problem. Interestingly, the element of meanness often associated with cases of laughing-at is absent here: Matty is a valued member of the friendship group, and the context – in which a group of rehab patients who have become friends dine together and chat, as they do every mealtime – makes clear that Matty is loved and respected by those who are laughing at him, even while they are laughing at him. A sense of superiority likely also explains why coprolalia – a vocal tic that results in uncontrollable swearing, and which affects a minority of people with Tourette syndrome – is often very funny to witness. (To be sure, there is an element of incongruity here too. An inability to stop uttering taboo words, which most people are able to avoid uttering, is incongruous.)

But superiority doesn't explain the whole picture here. People who don't smoke or compulsively bite their nails have reason to feel similarly superior to smokers and nail-biters, but this does not lead to their finding uncontrollable smoking or nail-biting funny. In the case of Matty, and in cases of coprolalia, the funniness arises from the fact that it's *swear words in particular* that are being uncontrollably uttered. The superiority theory doesn't help us understand what swearing adds to the funniness here.

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We also, of course, need an explanation of what makes swearing funny in those cases that can't be explained in terms of relief – because there are such cases. Take George Carlin's filthy words routine. If you watch a recording of his performance (which you can easily do online) you might notice that the audience laughs throughout the routine. If laughing really is comparable to a release of pressure, we could expect the laughter to subside after the initial release. Something like this is true of the other pressure-venting experiences I described above: usually, when we scratch an itch or sneeze, we don't need to continue to do so. Once is enough, until the next time we get a tickle in our nose or feel an itch. But Carlin's audience laughs the first time he swears, and then they continue to laugh. It's relatively easy to explain the initial burst of laughter in terms of a (metaphorical) release of pressure, but this explanation works less well if we want to know why the audience is still laughing twenty seconds, or a minute, or five minutes later.

Perhaps, then, we can look to the incongruity theory to plug the gaps left in the explanation for swearing's funniness by the superiority and relief theories. Cases of funny swearing are invariably incongruous, since they involve swearing in contexts where prevailing norms dictate that we should avoid swearing. We don't, after all, laugh at swearing when it happens in typically sweary contexts, like sports matches and late-night bars. Not all cases of norm-breaking swearing are funny, of course; some are shocking or threatening or otherwise unpleasant. The benign violation theory can help us understand the difference here. A threatening or disrespectful outburst is not benign; at least, not if we (or someone we care about) is the target of the threat or disrespect. But if there's no threat or disrespect involved, or if we feel sufficiently distant from it, then we might find swearing funny.

According to one view of swearing, swearing is *for* benign violation. In her book, *Swearing Is Good for You*, Emma Byrne argues that swearing 'forestalls violence'. She explains: 'Without swearing, we'd have to resort to the biting, gouging, and shit flinging that our other primate cousins use to keep their societies in check' (2017, p. 203). She points, for support, to the work of Professor Roger Fouts, who adopted chimpanzees, taught them sign language, and studied how they communicate. It turned out that the chimps would use the sign for shit in much the same way that we humans use the word shit; in other words, not just to refer to shit, but also non-literally as an insult and to express emotion. 'Unlike their wild cousins,' Byrne remarks, 'these chimpanzees would throw the notion of excrement instead of throwing the stuff itself' (2017,

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p. 204). If this is right, then our capacity to swear functions as an emotional pressure valve and enables us to express the anger and frustration that we might otherwise vent through violence. It does this, presumably, by managing to be a Goldilocks of violations: naughty enough to make the norm-breaking satisfying, but not so serious a matter as to cause any lasting damage.

Even so, though, are all cases of funny swearing really incongruous? Suppose that reading this article inspires you to look up George Carlin's routine about swear words. Even if you haven't seen it before, you know exactly what to expect, because I've told you about it. What you end up watching on YouTube conforms exactly to your expectations. Where, then, is the incongruity? And what about all those fans of creative swearing who looked forward to appearances by Malcolm Tucker in *The Thick Of It*, and then laughed at outbursts like 'Your dress is way too loud, I'm getting fucking tinnitus here' and 'Feet off the furniture you Oxbridge twat, you're not in a punt now' despite their being precisely what was expected? Again, those watching got exactly what they expected. So, what makes them incongruous, or violations? Are instances like these even violations, given that they are also conformations (to expectations)?

Here we find ourselves pushing up against the limitations of the incongruity theory and the benign violation theory. To answer these questions, we need more information about exactly what counts as an incongruity or a benign violation. Without that, neither theory is especially helpful. The ambiguity in each theory enables us to construct post-hoc explanations for why a particular instance of swearing that we in fact found funny was funny (since we can cast about for some way or other that the instance involved incongruity or a benign violation), but this ambiguity also means that a research group comprising curious aliens would have trouble predicting in advance exactly what sorts of incongruities/violations humans will find funny.

Even if we were to tighten up these theories, though, we might still face problems explaining exactly what makes swearing funny. In the cases of George Carlin and Malcolm Tucker, it's not the swearing alone that makes us laugh. Neither of them appears before us, rattles off a list of rude words, and then leaves (and if that was all they did, it wouldn't be especially funny, at least not for very long). Instead, they deliver material written by talented comedy writers whose skill in making audiences laugh is not limited to their knowledge of swearing. George Carlin does not merely swear; he also provides an insightful and thought-provoking commentary about the

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cultural role of the swear words he talks about. And Malcolm Tucker's swearing occurs in the context of a cleverly developed character who says and does things that most of us would never dare say or do. Our laughter in these cases is not due to swearing alone. And in fact, although it's sometimes possible to provoke laughter simply by swearing, doing so is not regarded as a particularly sophisticated form of comedy, but instead as a cheap laugh: a lazy technique of using a reliable and unoriginal formula to provoke laughter without putting in much thought or effort.

Many of the best-known examples of swearing in comedy are, like Carlin and Tucker, full of what scientists call confounders: features other than swearing that provoke laughter. This doesn't help us when we're trying to separate out that aspect of our laughter that is provoked by swearing from those aspects provoked by other aspects of comedy. Turns out it was a bad idea to look to good-quality comedy for this. Instead, let's return to the idea of lazily using swearing for cheap laughs. *Why* is swearing such a reliable tool for eliciting laughter? The answer might hold the key to uncovering exactly what makes swearing funny (sometimes).

4. A Rough Sketch of Sweary Humour

Perhaps part of the answer harks back to our childhoods. Children, after all, often enjoy uttering rude words, and will happily discuss toilet- and (later) sex-related topics for hours, or at least until asked by an adult to desist. Their glee at doing this can turn a bad day into a good one; something I managed to put to use a few years ago when I devised a game designed to cheer up my son during our walks to and from school on days when he was really glum. In the 'rude word game', as we called it, we would take turns to whisper swear words to each other – the ruder the better. After 30 seconds of this, he would be grinning broadly. I suspect (although I haven't experimented with this) that part of his delight arose from his being permitted *by an adult* to say rude words, and that playing this game with another child would not have been quite so exciting. The suspension of norms that were usually enforced, by a member of the group (i.e., adults) that usually enforces them, was especially enjoyable, and led to a sense of 'I'm free!!!' Maybe something similar happens when we laugh at swearing: we vicariously enjoy someone else being naughty, and that naughtiness involves doing something that we enjoyed doing as children but were usually prevented from doing.

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Something else may be going on too. In his huge work exploring the nature of offensiveness, *Offense to Others*, the legal philosopher Joel Feinberg theorises that one reason that offensive behaviour can be so alarming is that people become unpredictable when they act offensively. We end up wondering, '[w]ho knows … what this gross vulgarian may do next?' (Feinberg, 1985, p. 280). The result is 'fear and anxiety'. But we feel fearful and anxious in these cases only when we feel *threatened* by the person whose behaviour has become unpredictable; i.e., only in cases when we think that the person might cause us harm. Perhaps it is this unpredictability – this sense of 'What's going to happen next?' – combined with a lack of fear and anxiety, that contributes to swearing's funniness. This sort of unpredictability is a form of uncertainty, and uncertainty can have the effect of intensifying emotions. This is both a familiar observation – spoilers are called 'spoilers' because they spoil our enjoyment of things like stories, jokes, and movies by removing our uncertainty about how they will turn out – and something that has been demonstrated scientifically. In 2005, the psychologist Timothy D. Wilson and colleagues gave students hanging around a university campus a gift of a dollar coin with a note attached. In some cases, the note explained why the gift had been offered (the 'certain' condition), while in other cases it was difficult to make sense of what was written (the 'uncertain' condition). Everyone was happy to receive the gift, but those in the uncertain condition experienced more pleasure than those in the certain condition. When we find swearing funny, then, this might be due to the pleasure we feel at the benign breach of a norm, combined with the pleasure of indulging a childlike fondness for rude words, with all this pleasure being magnified by our uncertainty about what might happen next. This framework also helps explain why over-reliance on swearing to get laughs in comedy is frowned upon: uttering swear words doesn't require any comedic skill, and while the breaching of the 'do not swear' norm leads to exciting uncertainty about what might happen next, we are left disappointed and unsatisfied when it turns out that nothing of interest follows. In this sense, swearing in comedy is a form of IOU: we are willing to forgive it, or even welcome it, when it foretells clever comedic material; but when that promise is not delivered, we feel cheated.

As well as showing that uncertainty enhances pleasure, Wilson and his colleagues also found that 'people are generally unaware of this effect of uncertainty' (Wilson *et al.*, 2005, p. 5). In the experiment, people *wanted* to be able to decipher the note accompanying the gift, even though doing so would (as it turned out) reduce their

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pleasure. If something similar applies to our amusement at swearing, this helps explain why we find swearing's funniness mysterious. Our uncertainty about what might happen next, now that norms have been unthreateningly breached, increases our glee and provokes laughter; but if it's also true that we're unaware of the enhancing effect of uncertainty on pleasure, it's understandable that we may end up puzzled about why we are laughing.

The role of uncertainty also helps explain the puzzle I described above: why do we laugh at George Carlin's routine even after any initial pressure has been released (i.e., even after the relief theory has exhausted its explanatory power), and even when we know what to expect (i.e., even after the incongruity theory has exhausted its explanatory power)? The 'whatever next?' sort of excitement we feel when norms have been unthreateningly breached is anticipatory: we laugh in part because we are excited about what's to come. We can explain George Carlin's audience's continued laughter as due to their anticipatory excitement about what he might say next – an excitement that continues even after any relief or incongruity has run its course. Something similar happens with laughter resulting from tickling. Anyone who has ever tickled a child will have noticed that they continue to laugh even after the tickling has stopped, at least while they remain uncertain about whether or not the tickling is about to resume. Only after they are confident that the game is over does their anticipatory excitement – and their laughter – truly subside.

5. Conclusion

The theories of humour that philosophers and psychologists have offered over the years all have something to contribute to understanding why swearing is funny. Each, too, has limitations, leaving questions about swearing's funniness unanswered. We can go a little further towards answering these questions by noting some features of funny swearing. First, it taps into a childlike glee about rude words, and the sense of freedom at being permitted to utter them. Second, breaching norms around swearing creates unpredictability; and while unpredictability can create fear and anxiety in cases where we feel threatened, it can lead to amusement in cases where threat is absent. Third, this non-threatening unpredictability creates uncertainty, which enhances pleasure; as a result, the glee and excitement we feel at witnessing norms (against swearing) being unthreateningly breached result in laughter.

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