

Humor and the Theory of Mind

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1. It is generally acknowledged that cognitive and cultural factors must be taken into consideration for explaining the production, understanding, and appreciation of humor. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of the particular human cognitive competence known as “theory of mind” for the creation and interpretation of humorous events and situations. TOM (theory of mind) refers to the evolved mental capacity of an organism for representing the state of mind of another organism and acting accordingly. It has been extensively studied in evolutionary and developmental psychology. Although this ability appears to be present in rudimentary forms in some animals such as apes, it is generally considered a defining feature of human social cognition. Intuiting the points of view and intentions of others and thus being able to strategically anticipate their actions is a crucial adaptation for the development of social life. It is the cognitive resource that makes possible Machiavellian manipulation. In any game situation, being able to imagine the perception and reasoning of an opponent, and the likely decision this opponent will make is a marked advantage. Ascribing TOM to irrelevant organisms and material objects, though, often turns out to be maladaptive but it can generate humor when the stakes are not too high. This paper endeavors to demonstrate this process by drawing from the cognitive resources provided by the theory of mind to examine comic acts observed in the

circus, which involve clowns and domestic animals. It will show how the natural or trained behavior of these animals can be construed as humorous thanks to their framing within a contrived discourse which pretends to assume that these animals understand human language and are themselves endowed with their own theory of mind competence. This is at least what the audience is made to believe and it is their theory of mind assumptions which account for the humorous quality of these performances.

2. Let me start with the description of a goat act I observed in the summer of 2015 in a Polish circus (Cyrk Zalewski) in Warsaw. When you do circus ethnography, it is necessary to observe a performance more than once. Furthermore, you must be both the observer and the observed since the reaction of the audience is an important part of a performance and you are also part of this audience. With respect to clown acts, it is crucial to test whether you laugh or not and how collective is the laughing triggered by the gags performed by the clowns. The clown Mirco (Mirco Bogut) appeared first in the program in a classical gag that establishes his credential as a trickster. After the show has begun, he appears in the circus from the audience entrance and takes a seat among the spectators. The ringmaster notices his presence and asks him if he has bought a ticket. "Of course", says Mirco. The ring master wants to see the ticket because if he cannot produce the proof that he paid for his seat, he will be kicked out from the circus. Discreetly, Mirco asks the lady next to him to lend him her ticket. She complies. Thus, when the ringmaster arrives in front of him, Mirco can show him a

legitimate ticket. “So, what would you have done to me if I had been unable to show you my ticket?” Mirco asks. The ring master gives a vivid description of how he would have picked him up by his trousers and shirt and thrown him violently out of the circus. Mirco laughs and asks in a falsely innocent tone of voice: “Could you ask this lady if she can show her ticket?” The public bursts into laughter.

3. Mirco, then, walks down to the circus arena, sits down on the border of the ring, takes a newspaper out of his pocket and unfolds it. While he seems to be absorbed reading the newspaper, a goat enters the ring and gets close to Mirco from the back. We soon notice that this goat starts eating the newspaper. He cracks a joke about the goat being news hungry or starving for information. This was the beginning of the goat act trained and presented by Mirco.

Five goats are taken to their stools which are lined up on a row. They are followed by a small young goat that moves around freely. Obviously, these goats have undergone only a minimal training. Mirco drives them through their routines one after the other by enticing them with a piece of food or pulling them with a leash. For instance, climbing on top of a high stool, or walking on a beam from one stool to another, or jumping from one stool to another, or rising on their hind legs. In the meantime, the small goat explores erratically the space of the arena but from time to time, Mirco pays attention to it and pretends to guide it through movements that the animal performs spontaneously. At face value, in terms of circus animal training, all this can hardly qualify as an act that demonstrates a

particularly spectacular training skill. However, it turns out to be a success because the audience keeps laughing. The key to understanding this success is that Mirco never stops talking to the goats or to the public.

If a goat is reluctant to follow the pull of the leash that will bring it to stand on a stool, Mirco tells the animal that “yes, I know that we are not well paid by the owner of the circus, but please help me because I also need to eat”. As soon as he has managed to put the goat in place, he thanks the animal by kissing it on the nose. Its reluctance to climb on the stool was thus retroactively construed as a deliberate action and its eventual compliance as good-will gesture.

When the small goat starts running around, he tells it that he understand that it is eager to work but it must wait for its turn. Then he addresses the public: “they are so nice, my goats, so ready to help and perform extraordinary tricks!”

When he drives a goat on a stool and orders it to jump on another about one meter away, the goat simply leisurely walks slowly from one spot to the other. He then declares: “Ah! this was a good joke!” And to the public: “You see, Angela is very humorous. She always plays jokes on me. A big cheer for Angela, the daring jumping goat! You know, she can jump if she wants. Last month she made a big one. She brought the house down”.

4. While the goats are pushed, pulled, held into positions, or do pretty well what they fancy in the ring, Mirco never stop interpreting their movements as if they were intentional with respect to the situation that he has built to frame the actions. This requires a real talent of improvisation since the animals are only to a certain

extent predictable. But, guided by the verbal cues, the audience is prone to interpret the movements of the goats as fully intentional as if they were driven to ridicule their master.

From one performance to the other, I observed some differences in the goats' behavior but these variations (within some limits because the animals are trained to enter the ring and feel comfortable with the props even if they have to be pulled or pushed most of the times through their paces) are integrated into Mirco's dialogue that represents their movements as strategically significant actions. He alternatively places himself from the individual goat's point of view and from his own point of view. Occasionally, he adopts the point of view of the audience expressing scepticism about his training skill but he immediately counter-argues by opportunistically construing a goat's motion or action as demonstrating their understanding of the situation and making up for their initially devious strategy. The perception of patterns, either visual or behavioral, often depends on verbal cues. Most psychology textbooks feature a picture that seems at first to be nothing but random black dots on a white background. But as soon the word "dog" is uttered or shown onlookers immediately perceive a Dalmatian dog in a snowy landscape. Similarly, the mere fact of hinting that a goat is scheming to ridicule its trainer will cause the audience to clearly perceive intentional planning in behaviors that are purely instinctive or random.

5. The theory of mind, which is a natural endowment of human cognition, is at the root of conspiracy theories. It explains the ease with which the goats are perceived

as performing actors. The success of this humorous act cannot be ascribed to the public's admiration for the performance of the animals or the skill of the trainer but to the appreciation of the goats' intentional ridiculing of the clown. Such a perception would not survive, of course, the slightest moment of attentive scrutiny but the clown's tempo is fast enough for not allowing any gap in the action and the chance to reflect.

If, as I have attempted to show in my book on the semiotics of clowns and clowning, a gag is structured on the model of an argument whose conclusion is not congruent with the premise and thus delivers a maximum of information, the whole goat act described above can be understood as a mockery of the very process of animal training. It reveals the vanity of human imposition of culture upon nature. "Since we do not understand these phenomena, let us pretend that we organize them". It reverses the very process of domestication. It shows that the trainer is naked as he/she can only pretend to transform the natural behavior of animals into some form of human-like cultural behavior.

6. Let me conclude with another example that demonstrates this process with still more clarity.

This act involves a man and his dog. It has been produced in several versions by different trainers during the last hundred years (perhaps more). My reference is the act presented by Douglas Kossmayer in the 1980s.

Formally dressed as a British gentleman, the trainer announces his partner, the sexy Lola Bassett. After a few seconds of suspense, a female basset hound slowly

enters the ring. She has been adorned with a diamond-studded collar and her face has received a touch of make-up that enhances the lovely expressive eyes of this breed of dog. She walks slowly toward the trainer who stands next to a table that has been brought into the center of the ring. He speaks fast and excitingly about the marvellous acrobatics that his partner is going to perform. First he holds a hoop above the dog and orders her to jump. She looks at him with adoring eyes but does not move. He lowers the height of the hoop to no effect. Eventually, the hoop rests on the ground and she slowly walks through. He prompts the audience to give her a big applause. The next trick consists of ordering her to jump on the top of the table. He has to give her a hand by lifting her half way until she gets her front paws holding the edge. She hangs like that for a while, hardly paying any attention to his verbal encouragements. Inch by inch, he pushes her up until she stands on the table. He keeps giving orders but has to manipulate her postures as she refuses to comply and remains motionless, still looking at him with adoring eyes. She is then ordered to jump down. But the same process continues while the trainer comments non-stop about her fantastic acrobatics. At the end the trainer takes his bow toward the audience, holding the hoop behind his back. Suddenly the dog jumps twice, quite energetically, through the hoop behind his back.

7. Empirical studies have shown that human empathy with animals is triggered by perceived shared features or properties, even by minimal ones such as having a personal name. The struggle and destiny of a cockroach named Thomas, for instance, suffices to cause some degree of attention and sympathy. Once this

threshold is crossed, attributing feelings and intentions to that insect is a natural human instinct. The theory of mind, that is: the assumption that the cockroach has a mind similar to ours, prompts us to interpret its movements, or its lack of movement, as intentional with respect to the anthropomorphic context we imagine. This phenomenon is redundantly activated in the case of Lola Bassett because, besides having a name that carries many cultural connotations, her expressive face and eyes, her long hanging ears that evoke flowing hair, her jewels and make-up construe her gender persona and social role. The stage name of the trainer is Eddie Windsor, a supplementary sign for those familiar with 20th-century British history. The dog has been trained to remain motionless and hold the positions in which the presenter puts her. Actually, as is usually the case with this kind of act, the trainer has two identical dogs so that he cannot be out of work if one gets sick or dies. But during the act, the performing dog is one of a kind and the audience interprets her behavior as fully manipulative. She lets the trainer do all the work and comes through as a kept woman. If there were any doubt about this, she demonstrates at the end of the act that she was fully capable of performing all the tricks if she had wanted to do so.

8.

On the symbolic level of this kind of act, the animals (let them be goats or dog like my examples) comes through as the real trainers which make the man work hard. The premise of the gag is the apparent mastery that the trainer claims to hold over the animals. Its conclusion enacts the reversal of this relation.