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To Laugh in a Pluralistic Universe: William James and the Philosophy of Humor

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to enlist the work of the American philosopher and psychologist William James in order to investigate the deeper significance of humor. It is neither James's character nor anything he states directly about humor or laughter that is under discussion here, but the cosmos as grasped through his bold metaphysics and rich phenomenological observations. The thought of James, it is argued, discloses our inherence within a universe rife with ambiguity, complexity, and incongruity. I explore how these features of reality, particularly when illuminated through James's lush prose, may cause us to laugh. In addition, the insights of James are employed to examine the close relationship between humor and certain forms of religious experience, as well as with horror.

Keywords: William James, philosophy of humor, Zen Buddhism, religious experience, horror

1 Introduction: A Bad Trip

Whenever attending a conference in classical American philosophy, it is without fail that I am able to wean a few giggles from my colleagues with the following anecdote: William James had to take nitrous oxide in order to fully appreciate the thought of G.W.F. Hegel (James 1956, 294–98).[1] The very idea that such a lauded philosopher and psychologist would need to take drugs in order to complete his understanding of another thinker is humorous enough. What is even funnier is that what begins with a flow of insights, even a little sympathy for the great German idealist, soon devolves into something of a bad trip. James's mental state turns from bliss to horror as he begins to feel suffocated by a vision of the cosmos that is not quite the identity-within-difference as suggested by Hegel, but that of a vacant and all-consuming unity, a bottomless void with no ulterior meaning and no escape. If hearing of this story alone is enough to get a few of us to smirk, there is nothing quite like reading it: a train of incomplete senten-

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1 From a long note to "On Some Hegelians," in James 1956.

https://doi.org/10.1515/phhumyb-2020-0010

ces and bizarre notes shows us what the venerable author of *The Principles of Psychology* is capable of imagining when under the influence.

What may mitigate the humor of this story just a bit is the widely recognized fact that James regularly sought truth from every possible angle and experience, even those typically ignored or looked down upon by the scientific and intellectual establishments of his time (and ours). This is, in addition to his heightened and occasionally unconventional capacity for observation, a trait John Morreall locates in common between the very best stand-up comics and philosophers (Morreall 2014, 126–28). In one colorful and well-known study of James's thought and personality, we are told of an episode wherein he and his pupils pass by an individual completely absorbed in his thoughts. After one of the students made a remark about the typical "absent-minded professor," James quickly responds that what she really means is that "he is present-minded somewhere else" (Barzun 1983, 6).

James joins Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and others for whom biography and philosophy overlap. And yet, the mission of this article is not to focus upon the manner in which humor was embodied in the figure whom Alfred North Whitehead famously called an "adorable genius" (Whitehead 1925, 2).[2] Nor is it anything James has to *say* about humor or laughter that is relevant for our purposes.

Much of what follows articulates the unique manner in which the universe, apprehended through a Jamesean metaphysical lens, may come across as *funny* —at least as much as it can appear opaque, puzzling, and even frightening. More specifically, I employ a variant and combination of some classic theories of humor in order to examine a picture of the cosmos as it is captured in the thought of James. The latter is one that is fluid, infinitely textured, and continually elusive to the intellect's hungry need for categorical mastery and conceptual closure. While sometimes it is James's prose that is amusing (as will be repeatedly evident below), I suggest that it is the elements of reality he so effectively captures which can be said to be humorous.

My central mission is to employ the thought of James in order to explore the philosophical significance of humor. This is similar to the manner in which the existentialists elucidate the meanings of dread, anxiety, and other emotions.[3]

2 One insightful account of how James's form of humor encapsulated what he labeled the "sympathetic" as opposed to the "cynical temper" in *A Pluralistic Universe* is Ramón Del Castillo 2012.
3 Morreall may have had existentialist literature at least partly in mind when he wrote: "It is a curious fact that although thousands of books and articles have appeared in our century dealing with human emotions and related phenomena, by far the greater number of these have been

But one sharp difference between my account of the meaning of humor and the investigations of Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre into moods like dread or vertigo is that the reader is here confronted with something far broader than the structure of the self.

The main body of this article unfolds the Jamesean cosmos respectively as: (1) one in which no permanent thinker or self can be found as independent from or prior to our successive flow of thoughts; (2) one in which experience is the basic element of the entire cosmos, and not merely the medium of our connection to it; (3) a sloppy, rough, and uneven universe in which the ruptures and disconnections are just as real as the connections; and (4) an open-ended metaphysics that refuses all synoptic points of view and all-encompassing abstractions—in short, one that resists all attempts at *totalization*.

James's experimentation with nitrous oxide coincided and occasionally combined with his life-long infatuation with first-hand religious insight.[4] A bit of the intimate relationship between the comical and the religious will be touched upon below—particularly the Buddhist tradition, of which James was cognizant, but admittedly not well versed. Finally, bad experiences—drug trips, exposure to certain visions of reality—can be psychologically and emotionally damaging. James's own drug experience turned from ecstasy to terror. Yet another aspect of humor illuminated by our study of James is the close connection between what can make us laugh and what may fill us with horror, dread, or nausea.

But first, a brief summary of the major theories of humor is necessary before we proceed.

2 Three Theories of Funny

Why do we find something funny? In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall outlines three historically influential explanations.

First, we laugh because we perceive someone or something as inferior to ourselves (Morreall 1983, 4–14). This is the *superiority* theory. For instance, on hearing that James employed nitrous oxide to deepen his knowledge of Hegel, it is conceivable one might laugh at the American philosopher for requiring drugs

concerned with such things as fear and anger and anxiety. Relatively little has been said about more positive phenomena like laughter" (Morreall 1983, ix).

4 His first intuitions after taking it to grasp Hegel have a quasi-spiritual feel, and James's very last published essay, an appreciation of a self-styled philosopher and fellow laughing-gas enthusiast Benjamin Paul Blood, is titled "A Pluralistic Mystic" (James 1978). Experiences with nitrous oxide are also referred to in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 2004, 335–38).

to enhance his understanding of another thinker. Of course, for those who appreciate James, this is highly unlikely: As I have pointed out above, James's championing of direct personal experience and refusal to eschew even the most radical means of accessing the real are part of his charm.

Second, an experience is amusing if it confounds or jolts our expectations, or if it juxtaposes two or more things or elements which do not ordinarily go together (Morreall 1983, 15 – 19). This is the *incongruity* theory. We laugh at the image of James taking nitrous oxide, for example, because it places two incommensurable ideas within a single perspective: the professional philosopher's assessment of another thinker's ideas on the one hand—a process which entails careful reading, fine-grained analysis, dialectical or linear reasoning—and the use of drugs on the other. And not just *any* intoxicants, but *laughing gas*, something many of us have encountered as small children in a dentist's office. This is not the sort of drug which is today associated with the expansion of consciousness (i. e., LSD, marijuana, or psychedelic mushrooms). Hence, it is the confluence of high and low—the philosophical search for insight and the most ridiculous form of drugs—that gives us amusement.

Third, a situation is funny if it entails the release of pent-up energies (Morreall 1983, 20 – 37). This is the *relief* theory. Academic conferences can be stuffy, an intensely concentrated and sterile environment where attendees are expecting to sit through a series of carefully honed and abstract arguments. To begin a conference paper with the image of a major philosopher taking laughing gas and writing down a slew of incoherent phrases is to offer a sudden reprieve—an irreverent aside amid all of the seriousness of hyper-cerebral and coldly intellectual setting (not to mention a competitive one). The anecdote is the ultimate ice-breaker: audience members bracing themselves and honing their attention are here allowed, even encouraged, to throw down their guard. It should be made clear, however, this irreverence is only apparent. As a contribution to the philosophy of humor, the entire purpose of this article is to show that funniness possesses a revelatory nature, and that humor is, well, no laughing matter (pun intended).

In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall proceeds to offer his own general and inclusive theory of humor (Morreall 1983, 38 – 59). But the three accounts above will suffice for our purposes. While the superiority theory does make an appearance in the subsequent pages, the incongruity and relief theories play a far more central role.

3 The Thought Is the Thinker

One of the most vibrant pictures of laughter I have ever seen is a drawing of a Zen monk undergoing *satori* or sudden awakening. His arms stretched upward, his head cocked back and eyes closed, mouth as wide open as it can possibly be —one can almost hear peals of joy and delight rising off the page. Depicted as seated upon the palm of a gigantic open hand, the image is included in a classic illustrated book on daily life in a Zen monastery. Besides affirming that "no further comment is called for," the annotation beneath also insists that "each person must experience this for himself, at least once in his life" (Soto and Nishimura 1973, panel 92).

The role of what can pass as funny in Zen Buddhism is well-known, from koans and parables designed to overturn the categorizing tendencies of the mind, to the dynamics of the Roshi-student relationship (Morreall 1999, 58 – 62; Berger 1997, 39 – 43). And yet, as a discipline aimed at overcoming the binary approach to things, including the illusion of a separation between an inner self and an external environment, Zen is serious business. As Zen Master Keido Fukushima explains to the author of a study in his life and teaching: "Zen has no humor. It appears humorous to those who live dualistically" (Harris 2004, 90). For those of us mired in a world of dualities, the "laughing Buddha" comes across as humorous indeed. Earlier in his study of Fukushima, Ishwar Harris recounts a ski trip he took with the Zen master. As both men stared up at the beauty of the mountain peak, Harris asked Fukushima if he brought his camera. Smiling, Fukushima replied, "Ishwar-san, I am the mountain. I don't need to take the picture" (Harris 2004, xxii).

It is the moment of enlightenment, however, which interests me from a Jamesean and a philosophy of humor standpoint. The Buddha-nature, our acolyte typically discovers, is neither above nor beneath the realm of our day to day lives. Wrapping our minds around the earnestness of a monk pushing himself or herself to extraordinary limits in order to encounter what has never been absent to begin with—like the comical cliché of a man searching frantically for the pair of glasses he was wearing the entire time—leads to a sense of amusement because of the sheer incongruity involved. The force of the monk's effort sits uneasily and discordantly with the homeliness (but certainly not the banality) of the realization. Buddhism's rejection of the sort of unchanging transcendental ground found in Hinduism in favor of the impermanent and conditioned nature of all that exists is why Morreall deems the former religion as more comic than

the latter.[5] Switching from a cognitive to an experiential perspective, or at least one borrowed from so many first-hand accounts of enlightenment: as the narrow walls of the grasping and suffering self come crashing down, the transition from a state of constant strain to one of complete and utter release is typically sensed as the ultimate form of relief, one in which ecstasy and laughter are so often the immediate expression.[6]

A dear friend of mine, after increasing his Zen practice, once excitedly paraphrased James to me without knowing who he was. There is no permanent ego-identity sitting at the base of our thoughts, my friend happily explained. Rather as one "great psychologist" once said, he continued, *the thought is the thinker!* (James 1950, 342).[7] The notion of the "I" as not some Cartesian soul-substance abiding beneath the fluctuations of our experience but a succession of passing thoughts, each appropriating content from the one before, comes out of the tenth chapter of *The Principles of Psychology.* Finding it akin to the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* or no permanent self (a rejection of the Hindu notion of the eternal soul or *atman*), my friend understandably perceived what he had heard from James as spiritually exalting. When held firmly in mind, the very concept may help displace us from our more egoic concerns, defenses, and attachments. While I am not immune from these same feelings, being informed on how the question of personal identity actually develops in *The Principles* leads me to another emotional response.

Earlier in this same chapter, James offers some rather artful descriptions of how we appear to ourselves, or the "me." Searching after the most presumably interior of these forms of the *me*, the spiritual self—namely the seat of our con-

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5 Morreall here outlines three ways in which conceptual thinking is perceived as limiting from within a Zen perspective. First, an understanding through concepts is mediated while Zen seeks direct experience; second, concepts are static, while reality is in flux; and third, concepts work by distinctions, while "reality is essentially a unity" (Morreall 1999, 59). There are several things here which parallel the mature thought of James. While James grants conceptual thought an indispensable role in our dealings with the world (see chapters IV through VI in *Some Problems of Philosophy*), first-hand experience and the dynamic nature of reality are core to a Jamesean metaphysics. As for the unitary character of the Zen cosmos (according to Morreall), James argues for recognizing *both* the connections and disconnections which comprise the universe. Much of this is outlined in more detail below.

6 In his introduction to Nishimura's text, Bardwell Smith articulates the complex tensions found in Soto's wonderful images of Zen monastic life (Smith 1973, xiii–xxvii). It is not surprising that "seriousness and humor" are among these, along with "monastery and town" and "sounds and silence." The image of our monk experiencing *satori*, in particular, is singled out by Smith as an example of how the blissful culmination of enlightenment only makes sense against the harsh noise within and around him as its backdrop and prior condition (Smith 1973, xxvi).

7 "The passing Thought then seems to be the Thinker…"

science and our values—James does find something rather specific. Turning inward as best as he can, the great psychologist and explorer of our lived experience discovers nothing less than the movements of his eyeballs "rolling outwards and upwards," the "opening and closing" of the glottis or vocal chords, the fluctuations of his eyebrows and eyelids (James 1950, 300–1). In short: "*the 'Self of selves,' when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat*" (James 1950, 301; italics in the original). It seems that our attempted voyage to the depths brings us merely more surface, albeit that part of the surface that is our body, or what James labels as the *material* self (James 1950, 292–93).

Each and every time I read through these passages I envision a close-up of James's face: the look of the pious and passionately dedicated philosopher glowing off his every feature—and yet all the while he is circulating his eye-balls behind their lids, repeatedly swallowing in order to feel his throat, creasing and relaxing his forehead... etc. It is not merely the imagery of *The Principles* that is funny, but the general incongruity between the hunt for some deep essence to our being and what we actually find. We may also laugh with a sense of relief: the gearing up for some high-flown profundity reaches a certain pitch, only to suddenly end with what we see and feel each and every morning while staring into our bathroom mirror.

That James was not fully satisfied with his conclusions in *The Principles* is evident in the many different ways he returned to the topic throughout the rest of his authorship. Creative as some of these approaches are (although arguably less amusing), he never settled upon a viable picture of a substantial or unchanging "I" or ego-self.[8]

4 Pure Experience

If in *The Principles* the mind is a forward train of overlapping moments of consciousness—a "stream of thought" as defined in its ninth chapter—James's mature metaphysical vision broadens this picture far beyond the contents of our psyche (Lamberth 1999, 61–96). The procedural core of James's later thought, his *radical empiricism*, includes not only a certain hyper-attentiveness toward

8 For a few accounts of James's struggles with this question, see Richard Gale's appendix to *The Divided Self of William James* (Gale 1999), and Gerald Myers chapter on "The Self" From *William James: His Life and Thought* (Myers 1986).

that which we can see and feel, but something far more radical.[9] This is his notion of *pure experience:* an understanding of experience as not some kind of third substance connecting our thinking selves to an external and material environment, but in fact the *one* complex substance out of which mind and world, subject and object, are but momentary configurations (James 1996a, 1–91).

At the table next to me a woman bites lovingly into a chocolate scone. It is only derivatively and on reflection that this event is understood as comprised of two aspects: the felt-sensation of tasting and a piece of confectionary being tasted. Taken in its purity and immediacy there is simply an experience called *tasting*—with both taster and the tasted as merely that single experience grasped from two different contexts of interpretation. Seen from one direction, there is a guilty pleasure by which to break up the monotony of the workday; glimpsed from another, a combination of dough and sugar is being consumed and digested.

It should be noted that James's doctrine of pure experience should by no means be conceived as a leveling down or banalizing of metaphysical complexity and texture. I will discuss in a later section how James's ontology of experience, despite how it may seem at first, defies the tendency of some metaphysicians to capture the totality of things under one all-inclusive concept or point of view. For now it should be noted that experience for the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* includes the life-transforming raptures of the mystic no less than the enjoyment of a chocolate scone. Hence, to insist upon it as "the *material prima* of everything," is to witness not only surface all the way down (looking for our spiritual core only to find our "material self") but to see depth all the way up (James 1996a, 138).

And one form of depth in our experience is the value and emotionally-colored judgements we make in our day to day lives. In light of James's radical empiricism, such judgements should never be conceived as only mental—as they typically are in our inherited and common sense model of the world. As they are actually found within our immediate experience, such "affectional facts" defy any clean subject-object demarcation. To offer a recent experience of mine modeled after James's own examples: Stepping into a subway after a heated argument between a few passengers, one can speak of either an atmosphere which *makes* us tense, or having just walked straight into a *tense atmosphere*

9 Radical empiricism is at once a method of taking into consideration all that is experienced, of including nothing that is not found within our experience, and the position that the relations held by common sense as operating between events are not projections from our mind (i. e., Humean generalizations from previous experiences) but are as real as the experiences they connect. For a succinct summary of this, see James 1975, 172–73.

(James 1996a, 137–54). In a quick list of such affectional facts that have been unjustly relegated to the subjective, James includes "the comical." Just as certain situations make us laugh because they are perceived by us as humorous; I want to run with James's insights and speak equally about *humorous situations*.

For instance: In one of my favorite biographies of James there are two successive photographs of him seated next to his colleague and intellectual adversary, Josiah Royce. Taken by his daughter Peggy, the second photo shows James pointing impishly at the great American idealist, who is now laughing. The caption beneath explains that as soon as the first click of the camera was heard, James suddenly shouted: "Royce, you're being photographed! Look out! I say *Damn the Absolute!*" (Richardson 2006).[10]

As capturing an actual and historical moment of playful irreverence on the part of James, one can claim that the photographs are simply funny. At the same time, what is funny here is not something sitting separately and collected before us, like an object to a subject. For the very image of Royce's face appearing even more cherubic as he laughs draws out delight from within me each and every time I look at it. As an affectional fact, the *funny* is therefore neither a property of ourselves nor the photograph, neither a product of our minds nor an isolatable part of the world. As intrinsic to the entire situation, it underlies and resonates through every corner and pole of the experience.

Life does not just fill us with amusement; life *is*, from a certain angle, simply comical—as much as it is sad, disappointing, and much else. It is arguably one of the missions of the arts to disclose these varied dimensions, something for which the perceptive acuity of a comedian is well-suited. In his study of how James's form of humor embodies the "sympathetic" as opposed to the "cynical" temper as outlined in *A Pluralistic Universe*—an attitude of openness and intimacy as opposed to one of detachment and irony—Ramón Del Castillo grants a measure of revelatory status to comedians. In comparison with the mystic, however, this is a revelation "only in a derivative sense, since they don't really reveal some truer world beyond this world. They reveal what we always had before the eyes" (Del Castillo 2012, 86). And yet compare this to Dewey's observation from *Art as Experience* that the arts point toward "a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of this world in which we live in our ordinary experiences" (Del Castillo 1934, 202). Dewey concentrates upon the fine arts, but we see now that from a Jamesean perspective he could have equally included the antics of the humorist, the professional purveyors of the comical. Indeed, in connecting the intuitive powers of the comic with the quest of the philosopher, Mor-

10 This is found in the second set of pictures, between pages 334 and 335, in Richardson 2006.

reall quotes James from his last and unfinished text. Philosophy, suggests James in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, "sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar" (Morreall 2014, 127; James 1996c, 7).

For James, experience is not a window or mode of access to the real. Experience *is* the real. As in the previous section, this is a break from common sense which may strike some as amusing. For a strong sense of incongruity results when our search for metaphysical truth ends not with some supernal reality over and beyond us, but with what we already have—indeed for what envelops and includes us, for what we already *are*.

5 A Sorry Appearance

The depiction of reality as a web of overlapping relations can have a tremendous appeal for some. Besides side-stepping a few of the seemingly intractable problems besetting the history of ideas (i.e., the mind-body dualism haunting metaphysics, and the subject-object split lying behind the puzzles of epistemology), there is parsimony and elegance to such an ontology, one which speaks powerfully to the philosopher and contemplative's craving for a unitary and integrative picture of existence. Moreover, an organic and relational understanding of the cosmos is often perceived as possessing kinship with some of the most favored concepts of the East. This includes, foremost, the Mahayana Buddhist notion of *sunyata* or the void: namely the idea that since everything is causally and ontologically connected to everything else, nothing possesses a strictly independent existence. It is, therefore, not surprising that James's concept of pure experience was an influence on Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto school of Buddhist philosophy (Kazashi 2011).

It is precisely because of this temptation to associate James's mature metaphysics with such holistic ontologies that I relish pointing out their crucial differences. And for this purpose, I made use of one of my favorite of James's analogies.

In "A World of Pure Experience," James compares the absolute idealists, the philosophies of Oneness predominant in his time, to a crystal globe in which fish are swimming. This is an image which highlights the thoroughly transparent and rational character of a universe in which every part connects with every other. By contrast, the metaphysics of pure experience, James explains, can be likened instead "to one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks of Borneo deck their lodges." James adds a few more details: "The skull forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendices of every

description float and dangle from it, and, save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one another" (James 1996a, 46–47).

The philosophical point is that to take into account *all* of our experiences, along with the relations between them, we must include the *disconnections* as well as the connections. The Jamesean cosmos is not, finally, some great unity lying beneath the surface chaos of things. Rather, it *includes* rather than cancels out all of the gritty, discordant, and messy aspects of the world we slog and suffer through on a daily basis. Pure experience must speak for the banal and the unsightly no less than the spiritual. And the unsightly, as James draws our attention to it, causes me to laugh every time I read his later work.

There is rich incongruity here. The minds of many intellectuals, particularly of a metaphysical cast, tend to veer toward certain standards—the interests of symmetry and unity among them.[11] Led along by the idea of reality as composed of a field of interrelated events, the promise of such a pleasing ontology only increases this desire. To have our anticipations suddenly met with the image of a shrunken head along with all of the loosely distributed feathers, beads and other components mentioned by James, could not be a sharper break from our expectations. Even now as I write, I envision the shriveled skin, the matted hair, the pursed lips sowed shut, and perhaps an indescribable expression fixed on its face. And elsewhere, James's descriptions are no less vivid. In comparison with the metaphysics of absolute idealism, we are warned that the ontology defended in *A Pluralistic Universe* "offers but a sorry appearance. It is a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility" (James 1996b, 45).

Ontologies which deny or relativize the complexities and ambiguities of this concrete world are labeled by James pejoratively as a "thin" universe, and as an insult to the "thick" cosmos of our actual experience (James 1996b, 136, 174–76). It is for this reason that James prefers the dwelling of the "sick soul" on the horrors of life over their denial by the acolytes of "healthy-minded" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 2004, 148). Such a thin metaphysics is also one where evil and failure is ultimately an illusion, or at least guaranteed to not be the final story. This permits what James calls "a moral holiday" for human beings, a reprieve from our struggles for the good (James 1975, 290). While desirable on occasion as a kind of rest, such holidays should never be made permanent. For this reason, even God for James is neither an all-powerful being nor an

11 Although this theme is found repeatedly in James, it is useful to begin with his contrast between the "tough" and "tender minded" in the first lecture of *Pragmatism* (James 1975), and his essay "The Sentiment of Rationality" found in the *Will to Believe* (James 1956).

all-encompassing ground, but a finite deity with whom we are active partners in the improvement of the cosmos.[12] Taking all of this in, we may affirm that the first step in a battle against the uglier and unfinished aspects of the universe, those which might resemble the dried skin and dangling beads of a shrunken head, is to recognize that they exist.

Conveyed in his picturesque and eminently readable prose, James's depictions of the difficult and disjointed aspects of life can demonstrate the tenuous line between the aesthetically pleasing, including what some find funny, and the unnerving.

As we have seen, according to the incongruity theory of humor it is the contrasting juxtaposition between things or sequences of events which causes us amusement. In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall explains that it is a certain distance and "practical engagement" from such incongruities which enable us to appreciate them aesthetically or in terms of their value for humor. When practical and urgent issues rise to the forefront, particularly those which pertain to our immediate survival, what appears as interesting or silly quickly becomes scary (Morreall 1983, 91–92). Sitting in a movie theater or in front of Netflix to watch a horror film, there is little to no physical risk. But a talented film director knows how to combine sound and image in order to evoke just such a feeling of vulnerability in us, from moments of sudden fright to what some of us see as far more effective: a slowly mounting sense of apprehension and danger.

This accords well with Noël Carroll's observations on the commonalities and differences between what amuses and terrifies us. The appearance and antics of a clown, to borrow one of Carroll's central examples in "Humor and Horror," shirks our expectations concerning normal behavior and evades our usual labels (Carroll 1999, 155–56). While recognizably humanoid in appearance, its peculiar makeup, ill-fitted clothes, and ability to withstand abuse rebukes our ordinary notion of what a human is.[13] It is a human but *not quite*. Whether laughing as a clown collapses on his face at a carnival or covering our eyes after seeing him suddenly materialize in front of his next victim in scary movie, in both cases we respond to something which transgresses the usual categories which shape our model of the world. The main difference is that the second clown is depicted as a *danger*, and we therefore share in the dread of the film's victims.

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12 James's most developed statement on this is found in the "Conclusions" to *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1996b).

13 Carroll: "It is a fantastic being, one possessed of an alternate biology, a biology that can withstand blows to the head by hammers and bricks that would be deadly for any mere human, and the clown can sustain falls that would result in serious injury for the rest of us" (Carroll 1999, 155).

As formulated at its most concise by Carroll: "Horror equals categorical transgression or jamming plus fear; incongruity humor equals, in part, categorical transgression of jamming minus fear" (Carroll 1999, 157).

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James illustrates the phenomena of "panic fear" with the record of an hallucinatory-like experience allegedly translated from the French—although the sufferer of this terrible experience is acknowledged to be none other than a disguise for James himself.[14] The author writes of suddenly envisioning an epileptic patient he had previously seen at an asylum, a sick and disfigured youth in a semi-catatonic state: "He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human" (James 2004, 146). But what fills the author with true fright is not a memory taken simply as a memory, but one key observation: "*That shape am I*, I felt, potentially." Had the author of this passage only read about a young man who resembled a Peruvian mummy, he may have experienced a purely intellectual interest, a feeling of sympathy, or even amusement. It is the direct threat to his own personhood and state of being that is the true source of the author's terror. To refer once more to Carroll, it is incongruity—a break from our ordinary categories—with a sense of danger added.

Seen in this light, it makes perfect sense that James's ontology, along with his unique manner of expressing it, can tweak our interest and even our amusement from one angle, and profound disquiet and unease from another. And in some places, perhaps closer to what James actually wanted us to take away from his thought, it may reinvigorate us for a stronger and more heroic engagement with life, what James calls the "strenuous mood" (James 1956, 214).

6 White-Chokered and Clean-Shaven

It is difficult to match anything as sharp and scathing in the history of philosophical humor as Kierkegaard's caricature of the speculative thinker. The metaphysicians of the nineteenth century who presumed to incorporate the human being into their grand systems are lampooned by Kierkegaard as bumbling professors who confuse themselves with a paragraph in their books, as Munchausen-like figures who attempt to lift themselves up by their bootstraps, as dreamers who defy the laws of gravity, and so on (Kierkegaard 1992, 93, 124, 145). Human existence, for the father of existentialism, is dynamic and unfinished,

14 See Wayne Proudfoot's note 8 to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Proudfoot 2014, 451).

while abstractions are static. It is a fantastic delusion, according to Kierkegaard, to fit the open-ended nature of the former into the closed structures of the latter. Regardless of the pretenses of the Hegelian dialectic to include change and development into a form of logic, the attempt to subsume the self in all of its modes into a rational framework of any kind is treated by the Danish philosopher with unrelenting ridicule.

In a reply to a critic of his radical empiricism, James draws upon the work of a colleague to cite one of Kierkegaard's most celebrated dictums "that we live forwards, but we understand backwards" (James 1996a, 238).[15] The critic's core misunderstanding, as James explains it, is to apply fixed categories to a reality that is inherently fluid. Something of the form of Kierkegaard's polemic against the speculative thinker is paralleled by James's mature ontology, but here applied to all of reality and not merely the self. To those ontologists who want to conceive of existence as an "all form," as a single and definable totality, James affirms a pluralistic and elusive cosmos—an endless horizon of "each-forms" in which the "substance of reality may never get totally collected" (James 1996b, 34).

It should be stressed that in articulating the essential fabric of the cosmos as pure experience, James takes care to avoid the error of collapsing into a flattened monism or some other form of philosophical totalization: "Although for fluency's sake I myself spoke early in this article of pure experience, I have now to say there is no *general* stuff of which experience at large is made. There are as many stuffs as there are 'natures' in the things experienced" (James 1996a, 34). Such a metaphysical pluralism will not permit being captured into any final point of view or formula: "Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it" (James 1996a, 277–78).

Del Castillo astutely observes that James's notion of "intimacy" in *A Pluralistic Universe*, namely our sense of continuity with the universe, does not abrogate the fundamental difference between the cosmos and our mental pictures of it. "A world lived as a background of intimacy," explains Del Castillo, "is still an opaque and ultimately unfathomable world" (Del Castillo 2012, 78). In one striking analogy, James depicts the philosophical monism and idealism held by so many of his contemporaries as "too buttoned-up and white-chokered and clean-shaven a thing to speak for the vast slow-breathing unconscious Kosmos with its dread abysses and it unknown tides" (James 1996a, 277–78). James here compares the metaphysics of the intellectuals to an overly cloistered and

15 For one version of the original, see Kierkegaard 1996, 161 (43 IV A 164).

uptight clergyman, a character fashioned to satire the intellectuals who typically formulate this kind of philosophy. Such a parody could have just as easily been found in the works of Kierkegaard, and James's tone can be just as acerbic. "Certainly, to my personal knowledge," states James, "all Hegelians are not prigs, but I somehow feel as if all prigs ought to end, if developed, by becoming Hegelians" (James 1996a, 277).

James might be a bit uncharitable to the absolute idealists of his time, but it is with some enjoyment that I imagine how he sees these champions of just such a neat and graspable cosmos. The joke of the academic who can explain how the road is built but is bound to be hit by a car as he or she stumbles across it is nothing next to such a presumptuous figure. The sheer incongruity between the ambitions of our "white-chokered" philosopher and the endless magnitude of our cosmos—something a little bigger than a road—may fill us with amusement. Perhaps in laughing at the silliness and arrogance of his or her pretenses we find a vindication of the superiority theory of humor after all. This would be outright cruel if we did not also recognize in such an individual our own earlier selves, and most likely from a time when we had everything "all figured out." Finally, whenever I internalize the impossibility of ever attaining a god's eye view on the nature of things, I am made to laugh with a sense of relief. There is a certain *letting go* that occurs once we recognize our cognitive and categorical limitations. This is not so much a giving up of the quest to continually advance our understanding, but only a recognition of the ultimate ineffability of a cosmos that will always exceed our definitions of it.

7 Conclusion: A Phenomenological Perspective

We have seen that in the thought of James the search for a transcendental self yields only a succession of experiences; that the universe just *is* experience in all of its heterogeneity and complexity; that the ugly and the unseemly is as real as the exalting and the elegant; and that the cosmos can never be captured within a single and final perspective. James states in *A Pluralistic Universe:* "I myself find no good warrant for even suspecting the existence of any reality of a higher denomination than that distributed and strung-along and flowing sort of reality which we finite beings swim in" (James 1996b, 213). We have seen that even James's God is a finite entity; a consciousness which, although greater than ourselves, faces an "external environment" of its own (James 1996b, 310 – 12).

Whether one may find the humor in all of this or not, a question arises: why should we accept James's metaphysical vision as the truth to begin with? Per-

haps James is mistaken, and there is indeed an Absolute or ultimate reality undergirding or pervading this pluralistic world—one perfect and all-inclusive. Perhaps James's rationalist and Hegelian adversaries may yet have their vindication.

While a full struggle with this question takes us far beyond the scope of this article, I will only draw upon one philosophical discipline upon which James was an important influence. From a purely *phenomenological* perspective—an attentiveness to our direct and first-hand perception of the world regardless our prior metaphysical preferences and commitments—the author of *The Principles of Psychology* and the creator of radical empiricism offers us an uncannily effective and subtle depiction of human experience.[16] It is, after all, the "thick" universe we actually inhabit in our daily lives that is of supreme importance for the great majority of human beings. Del Castillo may be correct in attributing a merely derivative revelatory power to the humorist in comparison with the mystic. And yet so many contemplative traditions, in Buddhism as well as within other religions, seek to disclose the sacred as it is found *within* this seemingly ordinary and everyday realm. In this way, to discern what is funny about this concrete world of which we are a part, no less than the horror of it, might still be considered a form of genuine insight—one on par with the satori of a Zen monk or whatever illuminations may come by the use of mind-expanding agents like nitrous oxide. That is, if we can withstand the possible bad trip.[17]

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16 See Wilshire 1968 and Edie 1987 on James's relationship to phenomenology (including his influence upon the thought of Edmund Husserl).

17 I would like to thank Stephen Wolf and Ellen Thomas of Berkeley College, New York City, for proof-reading a few earlier drafts of this article.

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