

“What’s So Funny About a Joke?” Hesburgh Lecture presented by Prof. Mark Roche, 3-23-17

I'm Father Charlie Gordon and I'm wearing two hats tonight. On one hand, with Dr. Karen Eifler, we direct the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Studies, American- American Culture. Sorry, it's a very long name. [LAUGH] Here at the University of Portland. On the other hand, I'm the chaplain of the Notre Dame Club of Portland.

And both of those are relevant tonight, because tonight is the annual Hesburgh Lecture, named after one of the greatest university presidents of the 20th century, the great Holy Cross priest Father Ted Hesburgh who was president of Notre Dame for about 40 very tumultuous years. And the Hesburgh lectures afford each Notre Dame alumni club in the United States the opportunity of having a Notre Dame academic visit and give them a talk.

And so, that's the occasion that that we're gathered for here this evening, and in Portland that the club works in collaboration with the Garaventa Center to make this possible. So with both hats, I'm delighted to welcome you all here this evening. Our speaker this evening is Professor Mark Roche of the faculty of the University of Notre Dame.

A distinguished scholar of German language and culture who also, for an extended period was the dean of the college of, it's arts and sciences here, it's arts and letters at Notre Dame. The dean of the College of Art and Letters at the University of Notre Dame. In fact, he was my dean when I was teaching at the University of Notre Dame.

But during that time of being an administrator, he never ceased to be a scholar. He pulled off that extremely rare feat of meeting the rigorous demands of academic administration while continuing to pursue his scholarly vocation. This evening's talk is called, What's so Funny About a Joke? And rather than me telling you about it, why don't we hear about it from our guest?

So please, let's welcome this evening Professor Mark Roche. [APPLAUSE] I'd like to begin by thanking you all for being here this evening, I know there are many competing events. And thanking my hosts, both from University of Portland and the Notre Dame Alumni Club, above all, Charlie who is, as he said, the bridge between them.

This semester I've been working on a book on aesthetics that has nothing to do with jokes. So I feel as I haven't been as focused on this topic as maybe I should be, I confess I'm not fully prepared for this talk. And it reminds me, actually, my unpreparedness reminds me of the story of the priest who was busy preparing his homily late one Saturday night and he received an unexpected visit from a friend.

They talk into the early hours of the morning, and when leaving, the friend wishes the priest well in completing his homily. I'm much too tired to continue, he says. The Holy Spirit will guide me, I'm sure. The next day after mass the priest turns to his friend. Well, how was I?

You were quite good, says the friend. But the Holy Spirit was a bit weak. [LAUGH] I pray the Holy Spirit will be good this evening. What makes me not only unprepared, but also unqualified to talk about jokes is that I am a German professor. [LAUGH] [LAUGH] The joke when I was a student in Germany was that the best exam topic would be German comedy.

[LAUGH] Because then one only had to prepare three works, two of which were actually Austrian. [LAUGH] So my talking about jokes is also a bit surprising. In fact, at breakfast this morning, I said to

my wife, in your wildest dreams, did you imagine that I, a German Professor would be flown across the country to give a talk on jokes?

She looked up from her coffee, smiled, and said, Mark, you're not even in my wildest dreams!
[LAUGH] Today, I want to ask, why do we tell and enjoy jokes, and how are the most complex jokes structured? The most famous essay ever written on jokes is by Sigmund Freud. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.

[BLANK_AUDIO] He wrote it in 1905. I want to begin with Freud outlining his theory of jokes and commenting on its greatness and its limits. I then explore the ways in which jokes play with contradictions and incongruities. We can analyze jokes not only by their relation to the unconscious but also by their relation to reason.

Jokes and their relation to reason could be the title of my talk. Freud's thesis runs something like this. Jokes function like dreams. Both have manifest and latent meanings. We can describe what happens in a dream, but in order to understand its hidden meaning we need to dig deeper. Similarly, jokes have a superficial and a deeper meaning.

The reason for the latent meaning is that both dreams and jokes overcome or circumvent the inhibitions of an internal censor. Both explore unconscious desires, urges, and thoughts that otherwise would not make the light of day. For example, sexual jokes reveal what we are otherwise not allowed to say what in other contexts we would repress.

Freud also notes differences between dreams and jokes. A dream's hidden meaning is often too difficult to decipher. The indirect meaning may transcend our ability to comprehend it. A good joke is always understandable to those in the know. And whereas a dream is for the most part uninteresting to others, jokes are a way of creating social bonds.

For Freud, jokes covered two basic topics, sex and aggression. Whereby aggression is to be understood widely and includes not only political criticism, but also aggression against persons, institutions, moral values, world views, religion and even one's own fears, including the fear of death. Sexual jokes allow us to engage in innuendo that would otherwise break decorum and make us feel ashamed.

Aggression allows us to criticize in a way that might otherwise be inappropriate or impolitic. Jokes give us license to be more truthful, and more open to break through the censor. Let me give you a few examples of political jokes that fit this model. Pravda was the official party newspaper in the Soviet Union.

In Russian, Pravda means truth. And the story goes, that the newspaper always printed the truth, though on its own way. [LAUGH] In the heroic age, population didn't always fight one another, sometimes the leaders would get together on one battle with the winner taking all the spoils, a ruminant of this idea surfaced when President Kennedy challenge [UNKNOWN] to compete in a 100 meter dash to determine which superpower was superior.

Not surprisingly Kennedy won. The next day, Pravda printed the following truth, in a race of world leaders, comrade Nikita Khrushchev, after a tremendous effort, earns second place was the American president Kennedy had to content himself with next to last. [LAUGH] [LAUGH] Often political jokes integrate sex. German chancellor Helmut Kohl was on his way to New York.

His advisors told him to be extremely cautious with the clever American journalist. At JFK a hoard of journalists approach him, one yells out Chancellor Cao when you're in New York, will you visit any

strip tease bars? Cao reflects for a moment, he sees this is a trap, and with some level of self satisfaction He responds, does New York even have strip tease bars?

The next day, the paper's headline reads, calls first question in America. [LAUGH] Does New York has strip tease bars? [LAUGH] [LAUGH] Shortly before the Berlin wall came down, East Germany's final leader, Eagan Crans, visits a State agriculture commune called, Happy Future. A photo is taken for the party newspaper, Neues Deutschland.

In the evening, the journalists sit together to come up with the appropriate caption. One of them suggests Eagan Crans among pigs, the editor says are you crazy we can't print that. They go to the department head who studies the photo a while and suggests Eagan Crans surrounded by pigs.

No, that's not quite either they say so they go to the editor in chief, for final suggestion, after much back and forth they settle on Eagan Crans fourth from the left. [LAUGH] Even the Nazi era had its jokes. In 1933, a Jew walks into a German town hall and requests a name change, the clerk.

Normally, we don't allow name changes but perhaps you have a good reason, what's your name? Adolf Shtinkfuus. Shtinkfuus means smelly foot. I understand. What would you like to be called? Morris Shtinkfuus. [LAUGH] [LAUGH] In repressive societies, scarcity is often a topic of jokes. Before Castro took over in Cuba, there was a sign at the zoo, please don't feed the animals.

After the revolution in 1959, the sign was changed: please do not take the animals' food. After the subsidies from Russia dried up in 1991, the sign read, please do not eat the animals. [LAUGH] Not only politics but also sexuality is a realm where jokes allow us to push envelope.

To what am I referring? Trump has a short one, Schwarzenegger a long one, married couples share one, a bachelor keeps his to himself, Madonna doesn't have one and the Pope never uses his. [LAUGH] What is it? A last name, of course. [LAUGH] Jokes release us from inhibitions by offering innuendo, but also restore inhibitions via the double meaning.

Some aggressive jokes address stereotypes, a guy walks into the store and says to the clerk and says I'd like some Polish sausage. The clerk looks at him and says, are you Polish? The guy says, yes, I am. But if I ask for German sausage, would you ask me if I'm German?

Or if I asked for Italian sausage, would you ask me if I'm Italian. Or if I asked for a taco, would you ask me if I'm Mexican? The clerk says, well, no. The guys says, well, why do you ask me if I'm Polish just because I asked for Polish sausage?

The clerk says, because this is a hardware store. [LAUGH] Some aggressive jokes cut both ways. A new faculty member joins the history department at Harvard. And his wife is invited to the faculty club by an older faculty spouse. Where are you from, the elderly woman asked. We're from Iowa.

Oh My dear, in Boston we pronounce that Ohio. [LAUGH] Religious jokes allow doubts to come forward. A rabbi and a bishop are invited to dine in the governor's mansion. The bishop turns to the rabbi, when will you finally become tolerant and eat some tasty pork roast? At your wedding, your eminence.

[LAUGH] At times, sex and religion come together. Moses comes down from the mountain in order to deliver the God's message to the waiting faithful. Okay everyone, I have good news and bad news. The good news is I bargained them down to ten, the bad news is adultery is still one of them.

[LAUGH] Frequently jokes address more than one topic. Gary met Bill in the clubhouse one day and said, I understand you experienced a great tragedy last week. Bill sipped his drink and nodded, his eyes growing dark with the memory. I was playing a twosome with Larry, he said, and the poor fellow dropped dead at the ninth hole.

I understand you carried him back to the clubhouse. That must have been difficult. He weighed almost 200 pounds. Oh, It wasn't the carrying that was hard. It was putting him down at every stroke and picking him up again. [LAUGH] The joke is not only reductio ad absurdum of our obsession with hobbies, it also deflates death by making it somehow seem unrealistic.

And then, there are of course jokes that integrate politics and religion. Two Irishmen are walking along the countryside. They see someone coming out of the woods. Protestant or Catholic they yell out. Atheist he says. Fine. One of them response, catholic or protestant? [LAUGH] Jokes allowed dislikes to emerge with Lee.

Here is a joke from Freud, two business on a fortune through unethical means. When they open an ostentatious new office, they have a famous artist paint portraits of each of them, which are placed on the wall beside each other. When the new building is dedicated, they invite the local art critic to the opening.

[BLANK_AUDIO] The critic looks at the pictures for a while. Shakes his head as if something is missing. Points to the space between and asks, and where is the Messiah? The subtle joke plays on the idea that Christ was crucified between two criminals. [LAUGH] Freud's analysis of jokes is brilliant.

As in other realms, he rightly recognizes that much in our waking and sleeping lives is driven by hidden meaning. Jokes are often very much about the double entendres that allow us to break barriers. And yet Freud's theory has its weaknesses. First, not all jokes have an internal censor to overcome, as is evident in many childhood jokes.

For example, what do Alexander the Great and Winnie the Pooh have in common? They have the same middle name. [LAUGH] Second, Freud speaks of aggression which is partly correct, but jokes of aggression are often deeply ambiguous. Many don't just challenge authority, they help us cope with life. Often they represent rebellion and resignation at one in the same time.

It is this additional dimension that makes them so complex. Third, Freud suggests that jokes free the unconscious and unburden us of the compulsions or rationality. But by offering critiques of injustice and by helping us cope with our inner selves including our fears, jokes serve a very rational purpose. And as Freud himself recognized, their format is often cleverly rational, playing on paradoxes, dialectical structures, and the like.

Although jokes overcome some rational restrictions they also embody and open up other aspects of reason. Fourth, Freud approaches jokes in a value neutral way. He has no concept that jokes are subject normative reflection. Some jokes are not funny or to be more precise if we laugh at them, our laughter is not intelligent.

For it includes many deeply discriminatory jokes, especially about women and East European Jews without recognizing the issue. Related he doesn't define the concept of a joke and even more importantly has no clear criteria for what makes a joke great. Parenthetically, I would define a joke as a brief story or exchange with a comic punchline.

That is a joke involves a clever play with language that breaks a horizon of expectations. The surprise or comic punchline must be slightly veiled or indirect, that is it requires a modest level of deciphering. And I would elevate four elements in evaluating the greatness of a joke. First, the depth and validity of what the joke reveals.

Second, the cleverness of the jokes structure. Third, the appropriateness of the context in which is told. One has to know how to wind jokes into a conversation. And fourth, the effectiveness of the telling. Note that the first covers content. The second form and the third and fourth pragmatics, or the context.

Fifth Freud doesn't reflect at any length on some jokes being universal whereas others are culturally specific. At times jokes are bound to their context, be it cultural, social, political or linguistic. In my German classes, I sometimes wind in jokes that thematize specific aspects of German society or that draws so closely on the German language that few Americans would get them.

The relation of the universal and the culturally specific is neglected in Freud's study. Sixth, Freud focus is entirely on the production context of jokes and there inner structures. Beyond noting the jokes are social, he ignores the important question of reception which seems essential to a jokes success. We take pleasure in deciphering a joke, exhibiting to ourselves as well as others that we are intelligent enough to enjoy it and to get it.

Seventh, Freud divides jokes into those on the one hand that are characterized by their intrinsic value, and those on the other hand that serve instrumental purposes. But many jokes have both intrinsic and instrumental value. Even aggressive jokes which have instrumental value, can be enjoyed not only for their aggression but also for their pure playfulness and cleverness.

And jokes that serve no deeper purpose beyond their intrinsic value, may paradoxically precisely because they have no external end serve a hidden purpose. In an age when almost everything is reduced to technical and instrumental rationality, as supposed to intrinsic value, such jokes like an art work that it's enjoyed for its own sake provide release for the prevailing instrumental tendencies of the age.

Finally Freud discusses various types of jokes, some of which are quite interesting and meaningful, such as jokes characterized by double entendres or by category mistakes, or by meaning and apparent meaninglessness. But his typology has no systematic order. He simply collects a bit of this and that and offer categories without any overarching organic connections.

Today, in the short time I have for the second part of my talk, I cannot offer a systematic theory of jokes. But moving in this direction, I want to suggest that some jokes could be related to reason, and that such jokes follow clear patterns. In my attempt to supplement Freud, I want to focus first on contradictions.

Not all jokes involve contradictions, but since laughter is always based on an incongruity of one kind or another. Often an incongruity between our expectations and the result. Contradictions are both frequent in jokes and of course philosophically intriguing. Recognizing contradictions is essential in the path to truth. Truth often emerges as the result of refuting, competing positions.

That is by pointing out contradictions in opposed positions. Let me begin by introducing the concept of a semantic contradiction. A semantic contradiction functions on the propositional level deriving from the two parts of a single statement. Such contradictions function according to the pattern A and non-A it is raining, it is not raining.

They may be simple or slightly more complex. And as in Lord Henry's quip in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I can resist everything except temptation. Semantic contradictions are normally the least comic forms of contradictions. They tend to be obvious and jokes require a surprise. The comic does surface when the contradiction is a bit hidden as with Wilde's quip or when the hero of Arthur [UNKNOWN] comedy [UNKNOWN] promises eternal love while simultaneously discussing the conditions of a possible breakup.

[LAUGH] Also fitting the mode of a semantic contradiction would be a dichotomy between consciousness and self consciousness. So for example, the man who slams his fist down on the table and asserts there are two things I can't stand, national prejudice and Germans. [LAUGH] Semantic contradictions are rarely complex, but they can be.

An old Jewish joke will serve as an example. A Rabbi is requested to settle a dispute between two merchants. The first merchant explains his case in great detail. The Rabbi strokes his beard and says, you're right. The second merchant gives his version of events, a diametrically opposed story. The rabbi turns to him, again strokes his beard, and opines, hmm, you are right.

The rabbi's wife, who is sitting in the back of the room, intervenes with a question. You have heard totally different accounts of the same events. Is it not impossible for both of them to be right? The rabbi nods once more, strokes his beard and says to his wife, you're also right.

[LAUGH] A semantic contradiction can also be subtle. Such as the suggestion that there are three kinds of people. Those who can count and those who can't. [LAUGH] The second form of contradiction I want to address are pragmatic contradictions. Where semantics focuses on the meaning of an utterance, pragmatics addresses the context in which an utterance is made.

Pragmatic contradictions are contradictions between what is said and what is pre-supposed in the act of saying what is said. Consider the proposition, there is no truth. The statement denies truth even as the act of making the statement presupposes truth. The contradiction lies between the statement made and what is presupposed in the act of making the statement.

We cannot, without refuting ourselves, assert as true the claim that nothing is true. Consider also the pragmatic contradiction in the statement, I am modest. I am one of the most modest people I know. Modesty is the virtue of not drawing attention to your virtues. So as soon as I say I am modest, I am no longer modest.

I am allowed to say I am modest only when I don't say it. [LAUGH] To say that I am modest is to embroil myself in a pragmatic contradiction. [LAUGH] Pragmatic contradictions are essential in the search for truth. For a necessary condition of truth is coherence. Consider the contradiction of the character who advocates in reasoned debate with others the primacy of egoism over fairness and power over justice, as does Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*.

Plato skillfully depicts such a character as an imposter, contradicting his ideas by the way he delivers them. [BLANK_AUDIO] Another interesting parallel between jokes and the search for truth beyond the common focus on contradictions, is that both presuppose a certain breaking of taboos. Socrates presents himself in *The Apology* and *the Gorgias* as an *agroikos*, a man from the hicks, a country bumpkin without vanity.

Part of vanity is not asking certain questions which can expose one's ignorance. In polite society, one doesn't raise the kinds of questions that Socrates asks. Socrates is shameless in that sense. And he

praises Callicles in the Gorgias for also dropping his mask, which makes debating truths easier. Socrates asks blunt questions and comes across as impolitic and impolite, but he doesn't care.

All he cares about is truth. The Socratic strategy is to entertain an alternative position, show it's in a contradiction, and thereby refute it. In the often comic Socratic dialogues, we see then a link between comedy and truth. Including a lack of pretensions and internal sensors, and a focus on contradictions and their unraveling.

Which uncovers hidden depths. Many truths are reached via self-cancellation or double negation. Including as we've seen the self-refuting structure of the claims there is no truth, or, I am modest. The following riddle underscores the importance of double negation for the recognition of truth. A figure tired of the deception and corruption of society decides to abandon the city and venture to one of two legendary and neighboring villages.

In the one village, everyone tells the truth. In the other, only liars live. The traveler meets someone just before the road splits into two smaller paths. One of which leads to the village of truth tellers, the other to the village of liars. The traveler doesn't know from which direction the other person has come.

And is allowed only one question with which to ascertain the path, the truth as opposed to falsehood. What question does the traveler ask? Since truth derives from a double negation, whether the other person is a liar or an honest person, the traveler will get the correct answer if he asks.

If I had asked you the way to the village of truth tellers 20 minutes ago, in which direction would you have pointed? The truth teller will be consistent and the liar will negate his previous lie. They will both point to the village of truth tellers. Pragmatic contradictions are often comic because more subtle, and therefore more surprising.

Being more complex they are also more multiple in their variations. An Irish sailor takes a trip to South America and sends a telegram back to his wife. Ship sunk. Everyone drowned. Have a nice life. Your husband, ****. [LAUGH] The physicist Niels Bohr is seen with a rabbit's foot and is asked incredulously, you don't believe in rabbit's feet, do you?

He responds, no of course not. I'm a scientist. But the great thing about rabbit's feet is that even if you don't believe in them, they still work for you. [LAUGH] Consider also the ancient story of the visitor who comes to a house and asks to speak to the master.

The master answers, I'm not home. The visitor states that he doesn't believe him. The master shouts back, this is outrageous, you'd believe my servant if he said this but not me. [LAUGH] Or the joke about the sadist and the masochist. [LAUGH] The masochist says, beat me, and the sadist says no.

[LAUGH] The joke continues, for the masochist has the final word, thank you. [LAUGH] Yeah, on a more philosophical level is the following contradiction, also unwittingly humorous. A post modernist tries to convince others that the purpose of discourse is not consensual agreement, but antagonistic discord. Also built on a pragmatic contradiction is the following political joke.

An East German finds that his phone line has been severed. He complains to the officials and asks for their reasons. You slandered the Stasi. I, in what way? Asks the East German. You repeatedly said on the telephone that the Stasi had tapped your phone. [LAUGH] [INAUDIBLE] It is fitting that many jokes play with pragmatics, since pragmatics is essential to a good joke.

When one tells a joke, to whom one tells it, and how one tells it. A new prisoner was puzzled when his fellow inmates laughed, whenever one of them called out a number. He was told that the numbers were code for specific jokes which being well-known, did not need to be repeated in full.

[LAUGH] Intrigued, the prisoner called out 38, only to be met with total silence. Later, his cell mate explained to him that everything depends on how the joke is told. [LAUGH] Some pragmatic contradictions are not immediately comic, but they do have an implicit comic dimension that could be developed. For example, language necessarily fails.

Or, the only true sentences are those of the natural sciences. To communicate effectively that language fails, pre-supposes that language works. If the only true sentences are those of the natural sciences, then the sentence The only true sentences are those of the natural sciences is not true. The statement cancels itself.

Likewise, pragmatically contradictory are the following dogmas one should never generalize. [LAUGH] And one should never make evaluative judgments. [LAUGH] The means by which a victim is presented, can comically undermine the message when a contradiction between content and mode of presentation is evident. Obviously contradictory in this way, are the following stylistic guidelines.

Understatement is always the best stylistic device. [LAUGH] Don't be redundant, don't use more words than are necessarily required, doing so is utterly superfluous. [LAUGH] Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Emerson Waldo once said " I despise quotations, tell me what you know". [LAUGH] Pragmatic contradictions can involve not only speech but also actions.

Consider the drunk who resolves to pass by the pub, without entering and after passing it announces his intention to go in, to reward himself for having passed it. [LAUGH] Antinomies often enact pragmatic contradictions. For example, the command, don't obey me. It is impossible to fulfill this command without contradicting it.

[BLANK_AUDIO] I want to introduce now, a third kind of contradiction, Nomological contradictions. These are contradictions between what is said and the state of affairs, to which the statement would refer when the statement is unrealizable, because of the laws of nature. Semantic contradictions are also unrealizable. It is raining, it is not raining.

But these cannot be realized, because of a logical contradiction. In the case of nomological contradictions, we see not a logically impossible state of affairs, but a nomological impossibility. That is the idea contradicts the laws of nature. Consider the person who says, he wishes he could know where he's going to die.

Why would you want to know that? Because I'd never go there. [LAUGH] The contradiction is not semantic, nor is it a contradiction between statement and what's presupposed in the act of speaking. The contradiction lies between the statement and the world to which it would refer. The hero's intentions are unrealizable, mortality cannot be avoided.

A further example, this time from Yogi Berra. If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours. [LAUGH] Nomological contradictions arise between statement and reality, whereby the laws of nature render the statement unrealizable or incoherent. Carl Sandburg's quip about a man being so tall, that he needs a ladder to shave himself.

[LAUGH] Fulfills the conditions of a nomological joke. It cannot correspond to any real situation. The trial lawyers question to a doctor, is an example of a nomological contradiction. Now doctor, isn't it true that when a person dies in his sleep, he doesn't know about it til the next morning?

[LAUGH] [BLANK_AUDIO] A thought process that corresponds to no sensible reality, is the core of such contradictions. Consider the young American on his first trip to Europe, who's surprised at how small the bones are in the crypt of a king who ruled for over four decades. After reflecting on the issue for some time, he remarks to his friend.

They must be the bond from when he was a child. [LAUGH] A slippage of temporal conditions is frequently at the core of such nomological contradictions. Consider the Irish man who reflecting on leap year, suggested the extra day be added on in June rather than February, when the weather is so much warmer.

[LAUGH] His friend, struck by the idea suggested moving the whole month of February to the summer. [LAUGH] Impossibility could come in many varieties, even if it is often about death. But why do you want an autopsy made on your body when you die, the lawyer asked Fitzpatrick as he was preparing his will.

So then I'll know what killed me of course. This is an example of the so called Irish bull, a seemingly reasonable idea that is at its core, absurd. Also illustrating the Irish bull, and evoking the impossible is the following. Mary, wrote McCafferty. This is the third time I've written to you asking you to be my wife.

If you won't do it, then return this letter unopened. [LAUGH] Such contradictions. Sometimes employed as a device to dupe others. Sometimes the speaker's oblivious to the contradiction. Besides the three kinds of contradictions I've introduced, semantic, pragmatic, and nomological, I want to introduce two more comic structures which I call pragmatic tensions and pragmatic symmetries, or more precisely pragmatic instantiations.

A pragmatic tension, is an inappropriate relationship between statement and world, between semantic and pragmatic levels. Pragmatic tensions are looser forms of incongruities than those above. We don't see a direct contradiction, nor is the statement incoherent or unrealizable. Nonetheless, semantic and pragmatic levels are at odds with one another. These tension rely on ambiguities and slippage substituting in many cases, are wrong but comet meaning removed from reality or appropriateness.

[BLANK_AUDIO] The elderly Mrs. Jones sidled up to a guest at her daughter's social gathering, after she heard him referred to as doctor." Doctor, may I ask you a question"." Certainly", he said. The lately, the woman said, " I've been having a funny pain right here under the heart". The guest interrupted uncomfortably and said, " I'm terribly sorry Mrs. Jones, but the truth is I'm a doctor of philosophy".

"Oh", said Mrs. Jones. " I'm sorry". She turned away, but then overcome with curiosity, she turned back." Just one more question doctor. Tell me, what kind of disease is philosophy?". [LAUGH] The underlying strength of this joke is of course, it's hint that she may have at least an ounce of truth in her question.

[LAUGH] A pragmatic tension is evident when I answer in a way that is inappropriate to the situation when realistic expectations are thwarted. Consider the joke about the zoology student who's written a seminar paper on worms and that his oral exam receives a question about elephants. The student response, the elephant is an interesting animal, unique about the elephant is the trunk, which recalls the worm.

Worms can be divided into five types. [LAUGH] Another such example is the following. Oh Poor Mr Jones, mourned Mrs Smith. Did you hear what happened to him? He tripped at the top of the stairs, fell down the whole flight, banged his head, and died. Died, said Mrs Robinson, shocked.

Died, repeated Mrs Smith with emphasis. Broke his glasses, too. [LAUGH] Such an example reinforces [UNKNOWN] famous claim that we laugh at rigid or autonomous behavior. And that our laughter reinforces our values by exposing deviations from them. Passion for something, whether a hobby or profession, can make one oblivious to what is commonly understood as with the golf joke above which illustrates a pragmatic tension.

Also stupidity can be revealed in pragmatic tensions. Erich Honecker, the party Chairman of East Germany, held a speech on the development of socialism. Dear comrades, he announces with confidence, the development of socialism cannot be stopped. Today, socialism covers a fifth of the earth. Soon it will be a sixth.

Then a seventh. [LAUGH] An eighth, a ninth, a tenth. [LAUGH] In a speech celebrating the East German nation, Honecker says, 30 years ago we stood in front of a great abyss, since then we have taken a major step forward. [LAUGH] What in the US are Polish jokes are in Germany East Friesian jokes.

Two East Friesians are in a conversation. Look, I have some money in my fist. If you can guess how much it is, the two euros are yours. [LAUGH] Oh, Why should I rack my brain over a measly two euros? [LAUGH] A young man on vacation calls home and speaks to his brother.

How's Oscar the cat? The cat's dead, died this morning. That's terrible! You know how attached I was to him. Couldn't you have broken the news more gently? How? You coulda said that he's on the roof. Then the next time I call, you coulda said that you hadn't been able to get him down.

And gradually like that you could have broken the news. Okay, I see, sorry. Anyway, how's mom? She's on the roof. [LAUGH] Beyond pragmatic tensions is the idea of a hidden and unexpected coherence between statement and pragmatic context. I call these pragmatic instantiations. What results is consistent with what was requested or implied.

Yet what makes these fascinating is that the result is not at all expected. At times, these involve witty repartees. Student, is it true that Jesuits always answer a question with another question? Jesuit, who told you that? [LAUGH] The retort is witty not because the Jesuit enacts what was theorized to do, but because he answers the question affirmatively by refusing to answer it.

Question. How do you keep an idiot in suspense? Answer. I will tell you tomorrow. [LAUGH] In truth the respondent tells the interlocutor right away that he's an idiot, but does of course indirectly. It was a standing challenge to try to persuade the laconic President Coolidge to talk. One female guest at a dinner sidled up to him and said, I've made a wager, Mr President, that I can make you say at least three words.

You lose, said Coolidge. [LAUGH] Less brutal are unintended correspondences or instantiations. The teacher says to a dozing student, name two pronouns. The student wakes up and utters, who me? [LAUGH] The joke plays on the unintended coherence of semantics and pragmatics. The answer fulfills the teacher's request but it does so without the student meaning to answer the question.

The response is therefore both an instantiation and a surprise. The well-known Oedipus joke also relies on ignorance. Bella was terribly upset. Her fiance Marvin had been to a clinical psychologist and the results had been not entirely consoling. She said to her mother, I'm not sure the marriage would be happy Ma, the psychologist says Marvin tests out to have a pronounced Oedipus complex.

Her mother shrugged and said don't listen to that fancy talk, I've watched Marvin, I tell you he's all right. Look how he loves his mother. [LAUGH] Another example. Doctor, you have to help me, I forget everything. How long have you had this problem? What problem? [LAUGH] The forgetting here fulfills the self-diagnosis, still, it is hardly expected.

Also the Polish joke, because this is a hardware store, is an unexpected pragmatic instantiation. The joke offers an interesting confluence of coherence and contradiction which adds to its complexity and appeal. The Pole is angry, because he thinks he's being singled out. And we understand only at the end that he's rightly singled out, even if not for the reason that he thinks he is.

So we have here both a correspondence, the Pole instantiates the expectation. And a contradiction between the Pole's expectation of illegitimate bias and the reality of legitimate bias. And the med attention between the correspondents and the contradiction is what makes the joke so fascinating. My final joke, a philosophical one, also fits this structure of a pragmatic instantiation.

The philosophical position called critical rationalism that demands that a theory be disproved only if it is logically contradictory, or refute it through verifiable sense experience. [BLANK_AUDIO] The critical rationalist suspects that his wife may be cheating on him. So when he goes away to a convention, he asks his friend and neighbor to keep watch on his wife for three days.

The husband returns to hear his friend's report, and the friend informs him That on the first two days he noticed nothing unusual, he continues. Then on the third day she took a taxi to the far end of town, walked up two side streets to a small hotel where she met a man in the lobby.

Really, what happened next? They went to the desk and registered for a room. I followed them up to the third floor. What happened then? They went into the room together, and I looked at them through the keyhole. What did you see? They started kissing each other and embracing. What then?

They disrobed and fondled one another. What then? Then they got into the big bed together. What then? Then they turn the light out. This wretched uncertainty. [LAUGH] [LAUGH] We see here a coherence of idea and reality but one that is so absurd, we can't help but laugh. Even as we see the instantiation, we also see the tension between expected behavior and the following of a limited but consistent logic oblivious to the larger context.

And often, lamented pragmatic tension is the turgid study of laughter that lacks levity. I hope by having integrated a few jokes into my talk this evening to have at least avoided that one contradiction. I hope also to have drawn your attention to the greatness and limits of Freud's theory of jokes and to the hidden harmony between jokes and reason.

Thank you. [APPLAUSE] Professor Roach is willing to entertain a few questions, or jokes. [LAUGH] Yes. Why did the chicken cross the road? [LAUGH] That's a childhood joke. [LAUGH] And it's still involves the unexpected to answer, because it's so simple to get to the other side. And it is a surprise at the level of the child's humor.

It is a good child's joke, these knock-knock jokes. I have a knock-knock joke. Go ahead and start. Knock-knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who? Orange you glad that I- [LAUGH] The joke was that [LAUGH] [LAUGH] The reverse of the role huh? Not to be stereotypical but German, Germany and Germans are thought to be somewhat serious and the Irish perhaps not so much.

So you've been exposed to many, a lot of Irish humor, [INAUDIBLE] Germany, they are humor and jokes just as common in Germany. As there are in- Yeah, it's a great question. And I thought about this some. I honestly don't know of a substantial anthropological study of the relation of jokes in subcultures.

But in my own intuition on this, I'll share with you three thoughts. The first is I believe oppressed cultures use jokes for two reasons. To create that social bond in community because are not identifying with say the larger state. And they create jokes because it is, as Freud said, an opportunity for aggression and coping, I would add the coping.

So you have tremendous culture of joke telling in the Jewish and Yiddish cultures. Same in the Irish cultures. Both of which by the way are also very strongly oral traditions. This is another dimension, perhaps should add. I believe joke telling is not as prominent now as it was a generation earlier, or two or three generations earlier.

Obviously we have more a print culture and memory starts to fail. Plato laments at the end of the Phaedrus, the revolution from an oral to a written culture. And the reason that he laments it, is that memory will be weakened. Memory is very important not only telling jokes but for philosophy.

Comes up in many of the Platonic dialogues and the reason is you have to remember what you said earlier because you can't contradict yourself. You can't say one position and then another and try to find the truth that way. So that's the first, I think oppressed cultures in a certain sense have experienced it in that way.

Then the second point would be [INAUDIBLE] related. Any culture, whether they have this tradition or not, the Germans are not known for their humor, will rise to the occasion. The number of East German jokes is rather stunning. I taught once a course at Notre Dame called, I wanted to teach satire and comedy both.

And then I on a whim, just called it Satire Jokes in Comedy. And so they read Freudian jokes, and I had them all find a joke, a joke of German culture. And then I have an arsenal that's pretty long and then divide into the groups. The East Germans were very good because they had a difficult environment.

And one of the things they invented, which I find really fascinating, is that the culture was so awkward. In terms of not knowing who might be spying on whom and we know it was even worse than they suspected in some ways. And when in East Germany you would tell a joke, it would always begin it by saying currently I'm siding against the following joke.

And then you tell the joke. That protected you from the sensor in a sense. So that would be a second point. Any repressive culture, whether they're oriented toward jokes or not, I think will rise to the occasion. Russia does fairly well with this joke culture. The third point is a broader one that has to do with laughter, comedy, and tragedy.

I've developed a theory that there is a different relationship to tragedy and comedy depending on whether a culture is primarily Protestant or Catholic. [LAUGH] Think about the Scandinavian countries, there's not a lot of comedy there. They have [INAUDIBLE], it's not so much a tragedy. The joke about Germany applies.

Northern Germany being mainly Protestant and Prussian. The comedy is coming from the Austrian culture namely Austria, if you look at Italy Catholic culture, France a Catholic culture, Spain a Catholic culture, the comic tradition is really quite extraordinary there. Why is that the case? Comedy is very much about community and that's related to jokes being socially binding.

But it's also about mocking the individual who takes himself too seriously. So Shakespeare's comedies end with multiple marriages. And as comedy of reaffirmation of community, whereas tragedy is about the one great individual. What was the Reformation? It was about the autonomous individual, individual's private relations with God, individual read the Bible him or herself.

So tragedy developed much more strongly in the Protestant cultures, comedy much more stronger in collective cultures, where Catholicism elevates the collective. So how do we explain Shakespeare? The answer there is the Anglican Church is as close as you get to the Catholic Church, so that probably explains Shakespeare. Shakespeare, it's believed by some might have had a father who is Catholic.

So he comes potentially out of a partly Catholic culture within England. And if you think of the great writers from the British traditions, [UNKNOWN], Swift, Goldsmith, Shaw, Wilde, they're all Anglo-Irish. So they were Protestants living in a Catholic environment. So they had also that. So those are sort of my three thoughts on the culture and joke relationship jump.

Well, that was a, first of all thank you Mark for a wonderful presentation. And what struck me is that a number of the jokes which we all laughed probably would not have elicited that kind of response without the framing, without your performance. And so what I wanted to do is see if we can link what you [inaudible] physically explained about Catholic responses in the collectiveness as opposed to Protestant responses.

So, the performance of a joke is critical. Without that performance even a very good show, even the one about the hardware. I think that would work even without the incorporation. But some of the others would not. So when I was growing up it was commonplace to tell jokes about spics and micks and everybody had you were Ukrainian, you were German, you were Polish.

We had all of these different identities and we all had our favorite jokes. We've lost that. I'm thinking that maybe what was happening back then, was that there was a collective consciousness, because in most of these instances, 90% of the time, these were all Catholics, just coming from different ethnic backgrounds.

Cultural backgrounds. And so that was one way to bridge the difference. Yeah. But there's that fine line which is if you then begin to laugh at someone else's expense, that's not longer a joke, right? And you didn't mention any of that in your talk tonight. It was always about that, it was a rational approach to jokes.

So I'm wondering is there this, is there a connection between the ethnic diversity which still exists today Yeah. but the seemingly lack of frequency of jokes being made among those lines. Because something has been lost within the fabric of the collective. There's a lot at play in that question, John.

And the first about the performance aspect. When I was suggesting there are four criteria to evaluate a joke. The third was the context in which you tell it. So a joke works much better in my eyes. When you don't say hey I heard a great joke, and you say it.

Or people are telling jokes around the table. It's when someone is talking about a particular topic, let's say memory. And then you wind in the joke about the person saying doctor you have to help me I forget everything, because it comes right out of the context and the issue which is seriously taken existentially part of the conversation is then seen from another perspective.

So I think that's a huge piece of the performance and probably when you were young in that ethnically diverse environment, these were existential questions relating to people from other cultures. I think there are two issues at play. One is there has been a change in the culture. The negative term for it is political correctness.

But the positive spin on it is politeness, and becoming more cultured, more aware of the rights of others. Jokes that would oppress women, you didn't hear jokes like that because it just wouldn't fit today, I don't consider them to be intelligent jokes, nor notice that I make jokes about the Irish, I'm myself Irish.

And the only joke that pushes the envelope little bit is the Polish joke, but I feel it's okay to tell the Polish joke because the Poles are now integrated and doing fine. If I had told the jokes about Mexicans or Syrians, I think it would have been unintelligent if you had laughed, or unintelligent of me to tell such a joke.

So, I do think that's part of the pragmatic context. You are telling jokes to bring people together, in my eyes, not to push them aside. There are three different theories of jokes, one theory of jokes is Freud's theory that jokes represent a release from restraint. You are circumventing the censor so you are releasing your psychic energies and that happens both for the producer and the recipient who you have the sexual innuendo.

A second theory is the one I think is the correct one in congruity theory. The third is called the superiority theory when someone slips on the banana, you laugh. That comes from Hobbes. And the superior theory would fit jokes about other people that you might want to disparage. My reason for elevating the incongruity theory is it is the only one about the structure of the joke.

The others are about the production and reception context. And I believe you want to work with the work itself and elevate that. That is the only way that you can tell whether the joke is valid. It doesn't exclude the other context. But if you say in a particular context, this particular job is going to be hurtful or it's gonna be discriminatory in a way that is painful.

You don't tell it. Aristotle has a theory of tragedy, and he talks about comedy in only a few paragraphs, but what he says is excellent. He says, the comic mask must be ugly, so it's something negative. You're laughing at, so the superiority element plays a role. But there cannot be pain for it to remain comic.

So when you are telling a joke today about Mexicans or Syrians, you are being discriminatory. You are causing pain. You are creating fissures in society. You aren't bringing people together. I think we're much more aware of that. There are other aspects to the memory, etc., but I think that all plays a role.

Growing up, I used to love to tell Polish and Italian jokes and I have a Polish background. Yeah. Cuz your Polish jokes are excellent. There's part of the reason that joke works, is it's hanging on the stereotype of Polish people. It's like carrying forth a stereotype that is in a sense hurtful.

It isn't yet. It questions the stereotype, because you'll feel the justification. And then, as I said, If I had to take out two jokes, I know now which two. I'm not taking out the Polish joke yet, cuz you haven't convinced me. It's one of the best jokes. Only joke you didn't really laugh at, [LAUGH] I noticed at was the Cuban joke, and please don't eat the animals, about scarcity.

[INAUDIBLE] And that's just hurtful. You both know in the reference, the animals, and then the idea of the scarcity. I took out last night a joke just before it which also didn't get a great reception the last time I said it. I think that was because it was too complex but let me try it with you.

[LAUGH] [UNKNOWN]. Well, let's see how intelligent you are. [CROSSTALK] Force that laughter, East German. So scarcity, it's a scarcity thing. An East German walks into a store, don't you have here and he runs. He says no here we don't have any shoes, go up another flight, there you'll find [INAUDIBLE]

[LAUGH] [LAUGH] It only worked because I prepped you [CROSSTALK] [LAUGH]. [LAUGH] Completely out but you're right about the Polish joke, it's kinda fun because it does question the cliché. And you kind of identify with the Pole, but the hardware store brings it back. And it's just too good not to have, but as I say, Poles do pretty well, and it doesn't fit the Irish because the Irish mode isn't different, mode of humor.

It's more of a absurdity and contradiction, the Pole's more about not knowing how things work. So, does the Pole know? [LAUGH] I once had a friend who was Polish, who went to Notre Dame, and went on to [UNKNOWN] In Chicago. And he said, she doesn't mind Polish jokes. Yeah.

She finds that the best Polish jokes have a punchline in Polish. And, so, at that time, when I graduated in the 60's or 70's, it was really, it made me think and I traveled from England, New England and the southern part of the states, to the Dakota's, where you have, and I found that every place I went.

There were the same type of jokes but all you did was plug in the minority. [CROSSTALK] What you're talking about the superiority, and so the same joke about this particular person is so lazy, it's the same thing over here, and when I was in Viet Nam, the same joke applied mountain guards who are like

The oppressed people are the Vietnamese. I find that, that's an interesting thing. Yeah. Those kinds of things, I find interesting [UNKNOWN]. You're absolutely right. There are structures to jokes and the joke that Freud told, re-surfaced as an anti-joke in the school, in that area, there is a picture of Hitler and the picture of Goring.

And the teacher says to the students, who else should be here? Waiting for Gurbels, or Hindenburg or someone, and the young catholic student says, our savior. [LAUGH] [INAUDIBLE] Okay, it was one more question perhaps or not. Okay, well let's stop there but before we go I would like to introduce Cecilia Brown who's an officer of the Notre Dame Club of Portland, who'd like to offer a few words of thanks.

So my name's Cecilia, I'm class of 1992 Notre Dame and want to thank all of you for coming out we have a Hesburgh Lecture every year here at University of Portland and typically this is when I give a gift to our speaker but of course I left it at home.

[LAUGH] Cause I thought that would be funny. [LAUGH] But, anyway, usually we give some kind of insulated water bottle. And this year I found one that had a picture, it was a piece of graphic art of the the raven in the Northwestern native tradition and of course, the raven is the jokester and the trickster of the folklore of this region.

And of course, the raven is also the smartest. And also a DVD of one of the seasons of Portlandia, so he can find out what we are nothing like. [LAUGH] Thank you very much. [APPLAUSE] If you are a K through 12 teacher of any description, you can sign the form outside the door here and get free PDUs for attending this event this evening, if you're a K through 12 teacher you know what a PDU is.

[LAUGH] We have some lovely snacks at the back of the room that we hope folks will indulge in before hitting the road this evening. Thanks so much for being with us. I'll see you next time. [APPLAUSE].