CHIT CHAT CLUB
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"Jokes from Cicero and Ancient Rome to the Present"

Like everyone else these days, my mental outlook has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. So it occurred to me that for this essay, instead of one of my usual topics – like, say, Otto von Bismarck's policies at the 1878 Congress of Berlin -- I should talk about something lighter. That topic, I decided, should be the subject of jokes themselves, which are something we all need to hear more of in the present day.

In addition to collecting a lot of jokes that you will hear later in this essay, I did some research into the history of jokes. One of the most intriguing things I found was a new translation of an essay on jokes by Marcus Tullius Cicero – yes, that Cicero – which is entitled "How to Tell a Joke", and which is taken from one of Cicero's masterworks entitled *On the Ideal Orator*.[1] In addition to being a famous Roman politician, Cicero was a renowned trial lawyer, who had what we would call today a white-collar criminal defense practice. As the essay indicates, Cicero put his abilities as a jokester to good use in his trial practice, although less well in his private life. The same new translation contains an essay written nearly a century after Cicero's entitled "On the Art of Humor," by a renowned scholar named Quintilian. He was born in Roman Spain about 80 years after Cicero's death, and by the end of his career had risen to occupy the world's first chair of Latin rhetoric in Rome. Quintilian's masterwork is entitled "The Education of the Orator," from which his essay on humor is taken.

Interestingly, no other work on the theory of humor apparently appeared again until the Renaissance. My research didn't delve into Renaissance texts, but resumed with quips uttered in the British parliament. A book by a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, Ted Cohen, took me into the field of Jewish humor, which has long intrigued Americans and is the subject of much that is written about humor today. Cohen's book is entitled *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, and I will have a good deal to say about it later.

In keeping with my original purpose in exploring everyday humor, I have attempted to limit the analytical material here so as to leave more time to tell the jokes themselves.

Cicero's and Quintilian's Observations and Advice on Jokes

Let us begin at the beginning, with Cicero. In his translation of *How to Tell a Joke*, Michael Fontaine points out that Cicero and Quintilian were not interested in jokes in the way they had traditionally been used in Rome:

[1] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *How to Tell a Joke: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Humor* (Michael Fontaine, translator), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). Hereinafter, this book is referred to as "Cicero on Jokes".

> They are interested not in jokes as entertainment, but as weapons of war. The trial and the election are their battleground, and their soldier is the "orator," or professional public speaker. As Plutarch [who wrote a biography of Cicero] explains,
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> > Cicero would ignore protocol at trials and kid around, using irony to laugh away serious arguments. The point was to win.[2]

In keeping with this observation, a lot of the jokes presented in Cicero's essay have a mean or sarcastic edge. For example,

> We'd lost [the town of] Tarentum, but Livius had still managed to hold on to its citadel, and he then used it as a base for launching a number of glorious battles. Some years later Maximus took the town back, and Salinator asked him, "Will you remember that it's thanks to *my* efforts that you took Tarentum back?" "Forget, how could I?" Maximus asked.
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> > "I never could've taken it back if you hadn't lost it."[3]

However, as an experienced trail lawyer, Cicero also emphasizes the importance when in trial of avoiding tempting opportunities to make a wisecrack, and the danger of being too clever at the expense of a sympathetic party. For example,

> A midget witness waddles up. "Mind if I ask you something?" says Philippus. "Keep it short," snaps the judge. "No problem," he replies,
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> > "I just have a tiny bit to ask."
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> Boom! – Sitting in the jury box . . . was a member of the jury who was even *shorter* than the witness! All the laughter turned on him, and the joke came across as a total stand-up.[4]

Apart from his trial advice, a lot of Cicero's observations about effective humor hold up well today. For example, he explained why comebacks are generally more effective than put-downs:

> In general, our comebacks are more impressive than our unprovoked cut-downs, for two reasons: (1) the quickness of a person's mind appears greater in a response, and (2) comebacks are indicative of good manners, since they suggest we never would've said anything if we hadn't been attacked. For example, [in a speech Cicero was discussing], practically every quip Crassus made was a comeback to some attack. The colleague he

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[2] Cicero on Jokes, p. xvi (footnote omitted).

[3] *Id.* at 109 (emphasis in original).

[4] *Id.* at 53 (emphasis in original).

was speaking against was such an authoritative, impressive figure that humor evidently stood a better chance of trivializing his allegations than arguments did of refuting them.[5]

Other points Cicero made that still are valid are (1) that jokes arise either from things (including funny situations) or from language, (2) that people admire clever puns more than they laugh at them, and (3) that taking something literally instead of the way it is clearly meant can be very funny.[6]

In his essay, Quintilian appears to borrow heavily from Cicero, and much of his advice is also directed at lawyers. It was important to him to avoid cruelty in one's jokes, and he agreed with Cicero that a comeback is better than a quip, which he thought often sounded rehearsed. Here is one example of Quintilian's jokes:

> A nice joke is one that criticizes less than it could. For example, a man running for office told Afer, "I've always cherished your family." Afer could have simply denied it, but he quipped,
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> > "I believe it – just like the truth."[7]

This brief survey of ancient Roman humor must close on a sad note. After being elected and serving for one year as Consul of Rome (in 63 B.C.E.), Cicero resumed his law practice and wrote several widely-admired philosophical treatises (as well as *On the Ideal Orator*) over the next two decades. However, he ran afoul of Mark Antony, Cleopatra's lover, for a series of speeches called *The Philippics*.[8] As a result of the savage attacks in these speeches, Mark Antony had Cicero assassinated in 43 B.C.E. The thugs Mark Antony sent to do the deed cut off Cicero's head and hands and hung them up for display in the Forum, to serve as a warning to all.[9]

Savage British Humor

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[5] *Id.* at 27.

[6] *Id.* at 43-45, 69-73, 41-43 and 83-85.

[7] *Id.* at 247.

[8] In his introduction to "How to Tell a Joke," Michael Fontaine says the following about Cicero's joking:

> [J]okes can backfire. People don't like being embarrassed in public and they don't forget it. Cicero considered himself a smartass. Others considered him a jackass, and reacted accordingly. Plutarch regarded Cicero's inability to resist a sick burn a causal factor in his downfall and eventual murder; that inability is a refrain in his *Life of Cicero*. The funny thing is, Cicero *himself* knew this. (*Id.* at 18; emphasis in original.)

[9] *Id.* at xi, xxi and 140.

Although nearly two millennia separate them, some of the best comebacks of the kind Cicero admired occurred in Great Britain during the 19th and 20th Centuries. Winston Churchill was especially well-known for his quips, which often had a savage tone. One of the best-known was his response to Nancy Astor, who once said that if he were her husband, she would give him poison. His response was "Madam, if I were your husband, I'd take it!" Less well-known was his compliment to Sir Stafford Cripps, who served as Chancellor of the Exchequer during Britain's postwar Labour government. Sir Winston said at one point that Sir Stafford was "a craftsman." When Cripps thanked him for this compliment, Churchill replied, "Craft is common to deceit as well as to skill"!

But perhaps the best comeback ever occurred during a heated parliamentary debate between William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli in the 19th Century. At one point an exasperated Gladstone said to Disraeli, "Sir, you will either die upon the gallows or of a loathsome disease." Disraeli shot back, "That depends, Sir, on whether I embrace your mistress or your principles." Try to top that one!

What Neuroscience Has to Teach Us About Humor

During the past 50 years, neuroscientists have devoted a great deal of effort to the study of humor, and why we as humans react the way we do to jokes and cartoons. A good overview of this work appeared in a 2013 article in *The American Scholar* quarterly by a neurologist and neuropsychiatrist named Richard Restak.[10]

Restak begins his article with a description of the physiological benefits of humor, which include the reduction of stress hormones such as cortisol, and which are thought to enhance our immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems. Laughter also provides a workout for some of our muscles. A joke can raise a person's spirits, or ease his tension. If a person is able to laugh during a stressful situation, it can put psychological distance the person and the stress. [11]

Restak also offers a concise explanation of how humor works in the brain:

> Humor is associated with . . . brain networks involving the temporal and frontal lobes in the cerebral cortex. Located near the top of the brain, these cortical areas are related to speech, general information, and the appreciation of contradiction and illogicality. Obviously we can't appreciate a joke in a language we can't speak, or a cartoon that relies heavily on cultural norms or information foreign to us. Within these cortical areas the joke or cartoon is parsed.
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> All humor involves playing with what linguists call scripts . . . Basically, scripts are hypotheses about the world and how it works based on our previous life experiences

[10] Richard Restak, "Laughter and the Brain: Can Humor Help Us Better Understand the Most Complex and Enigmatic Organ in the Human Body?" *The American Scholar* (Summer 2013), pp. 18-27. Hereinafter, this article is referred to as "Laughter and the Brain".

[11] Laughter and the Brain, p. 20.

> [such as dining in a restaurant] . . . [B]ecause our scripts *are* so generalized and compressed, we tend to make unwarranted assumptions based on them. Humor takes advantage of this tendency.
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> It is the brain's frontal lobes that make sense of the discrepancy between the script and the situation described by the joke or illustrated by the cartoon. This ability is unique to our species. Though apes can engage in play and tease each other by initiating false alarm calls accompanied by laughter, they cannot shift back and forth between multiple interpretations of a situation. Only we can do this because – thanks to the larger size of our frontal lobes compared with other species – we are the only creatures that possess a highly evolved working memory, which by creating and storing scripts allows us to appreciate sophisticated and subtle forms of humor.[12]

Restak then points out that in psychology, there are three general theories about how humor works, and these theories go a long way toward explaining most of the jokes we will hear later. The first of the three is the "tension release" theory, in which

> . . . we experience, for a brief period after hearing a joke or looking at a cartoon, a tension that counterbalances what we assume about the situation being described or illustrated against what the comedian or cartoonist intends to convey. The tension is released only when the joke or cartoon is understood.[13]

According to Restak, the second most popular theory of humor is the so-called "incongruity resolution model," which involves

> . . . the solving of a paradox or incongruity in a playful context. This theory is based on the deep relationship that exists in the human brain between the laughable and the illogical. As a species, we place great value on logic. Even so, we will playfully accept a situation that is highly unlikely or even impossible . . . as long as the scenario depicted . . . is coherent and logically consistent with its theme . . . Incongruity resolution usually takes a little longer than tension release and occurs in two stages. First, expectations about the meaning of a joke or cartoon are jarringly undermined by the punchline of the joke or the caption of the cartoon. This leads to a form of problem solving aimed at reconciling the discrepancy. When we solve the problem, the pieces fall into place and we experience the joy that accompanies insight.[14]

Finally, Restak explains that the third theory of humor is the so-called "superiority theory," which

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[12] *Id.* at 21-22.

[13] *Id.* at 22.

[14] *Id.* at 23.

> . . . emphasizes how mirth and laughter so often involve a focus on someone else's mistakes, misfortune, or stupidity. In Plato's dialogue *Philebus*, Socrates says, "When we laugh at the ridiculous aspects of our friends, the admixture of pleasure in our malice produces a mixture of pleasure and distress. For we agreed some time ago that malice was a form of distress; but laughter is enjoyable, and on these occasions both occur simultaneously." The superiority theory lends itself especially to an explanation of cruel or hostile humor: the situation depicted in the joke or cartoon could never happen to us, hence our amusement. In a word, we feel superior to the person suffering misfortune.[15]

Modern Philosophical Reflections on Jokes

Even though Michael Fontaine, the translator of Cicero's guide to humor, argues that joke-telling is properly characterized as a form of rhetoric rather than philosophy, that view hasn't stopped modern philosophers from holding forth on jokes. One of them was Ted Cohen (1939-2014), who was a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago.

One of the most important insights in Cohen's book, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, is that joke-telling is a form of promoting intimacy among people, and usually assumes that the teller of the joke and the listener share some amount of knowledge or belief. What Cohen calls *hermetic* jokes, for example, require that the teller and the listener share some specialized knowledge. Here is a joke from my teenage years that I think illustrates Cohen's point well:

> Two French poodles were talking. The first said to the second, "My name is Mimi, M-i-m-i." The second dog said "My name is Fifi, F-i-f-i." At that point a mutt walked up to them both and said, "My name is Fido, P-h-y-d-e-a-u-x."

You have to know a little French to appreciate this, but it certainly puts the poodles in their place!

Another example Cohen gives is what he calls an *affective* joke, which "depend[s] upon feelings in the audience, likes and dislikes, and preferences." [16] He gives a well-known example involving Germans, of which I like Dick Cavett's version the best:

> The trouble with eating at a Chinese-German restaurant is that a half-hour after you've finished, you're hungry again – for power!

Another type of hermetic joke is one that uses enduring stereotypes, which – Cohen notes – need only be understood, not necessarily believed in. Here is a good example:

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[15] *Id.*

[16] Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 21. Hereinafter, this book is referred to as "Cohen on Jokes".

> A group of Jews decided to take up competitive rowing, and so they formed a crew and began practicing. Months later they had competed several times, and always they not only lost, but came in so far behind that they thought something must be wrong with their approach. They sent one of their number off to England to observe the Oxford/Cambridge race, and then to the Ivy League to see the rowers there. When he returned, he was asked if indeed these other crews had a different technique.
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> "Well," he reported, "they have *one* guy *yelling*, and *eight* guys *rowing*."[17]

The foregoing naturally brings us to the subject of Jewish jokes. Cohen devotes a good deal of his book to these jokes, which he says are often characterized by a "crazy logic" and an "insane rationality."[18] A simple joke from another source illustrates that point well:

> A grasshopper walks into a bar and orders a drink. The bartender looks at him and says, "You know, we have a drink named after you." The grasshopper replies: "Really? You have a drink named Stanley?" [19]

On a more serious level, Cohen notes that although it can't be precisely defined, Jewish humor has always appealed to Americans, and he offers the following explanation for why:

> Jews have no monopoly on jokes, nor on good jokes, nor even on jokes of a particular kind, and yet there is a characteristic association of Jews with a certain joking spirit, and that spirit has become an aspect of American joking . . . It is surely not possible to *define* Jewish humor, but it may be possible to say something about what it is, and I will risk two very general observations: (1) it is the humor of *outsiders*; (2) it exploits a deep and lasting concern with logic and language.[20]

This makes sense. Except for Native Americans, the United States is a country composed of people whose ancestors were all originally outsiders, and -- as we have seen – language has always been central to joking, even in Roman times. As ultimate examples of the idea, Cohen discusses the jokes in the Marx Brothers films, with which I think we are all familiar.

Another aspect of Jewish humor that Cohen discusses is its focus on the absurd. Here is an example:

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[17] Cohen on Jokes at 42 (emphasis in original).

[18] *Id.* at 46.

[19] Sam Hoffman with Eric Spiegelman, *Old Jews Telling Jokes* (New York: Villard Books, 2010), back cover. Hereinafter, this book is referred to as "Old Jews Telling Jokes."

[20] Cohen on Jokes at 60 (emphasis in original).

Abe visits his doctor for a routine examination and gets the devastating news that he is mortally ill, with no treatment possible, and that he will die within a day. He goes home, tells his wife, Sarah, and after they have absorbed the shock of the terrible news, Abe says to Sarah,

"Since it is my last night, Sarah, do you think we could go to bed and fool around?"

"Of course," says Sarah. And so they do.

Later, at about 1 A.M., Abe wakes up, prods Sarah, and asks, "Do you think we could do it again?"

"Certainly, Abe, it's your last night." And so they do.

At 3 A.M., Abe is awake again, and again he asks Sarah for her attentions.

"For God's sake, Abe, *you* don't have to get up in the morning." [21]

Noting that "a human response to absurdity is laughter," Cohen considers this joke to be a good example of both absurdity and the incomprehensibility of death.

Ethnic, Political, and Other Types of Jokes

Up to now, most of the jokes we have considered have had a large philosophical component or have directly illustrated one of the theories I've been presenting. Now, I would like to move on to jokes for jokes' sake, if you will, but the theories we have been discussing are apparent in many of them.

One of the categories of jokes one doesn't hear much anymore because of peoples' heightened sensitivities is what we used to call ethnic jokes. Not many decades ago, a fair number of these were so-called "Polish jokes," jokes that make fun of Polish people. In his book, philosopher Ted Cohen gives the following example:

A Polish man walks up to a counter and says, "I want to buy some sausage."

"You want Polish sausage?" asks the clerk. "Kielbasa?"

"Why do you think I want Polish sausage?" replies the man indignantly. "Why wouldn't I want Italian sausage, or Jewish sausage? Do I look Polish? What makes you think I'm Polish?"

The clerk responds, "This is a hardware store." [22]

[21] *Id.* at 41.

[22] *Id.* at 73.

Another joke Cohen presents is one he considers Polish, but which I think is more geopolitical:

> In the days of the Cold War, long before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a Polish man let it be known to his friends that he kept his life savings, one hundred thousand zlotys, in his bed, under the mattress.
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> In horror one of his friends objected, "It isn't safe there. You must put it in the bank.
>
> "Oh?" said the man, "and what if the bank fails?'
>
> "How could the bank fail? It is supported by the Polish government."
>
> "Oh?" said the man, "and what if the Polish government fails?"
>
> "How could our government fail? It is kept in place by the Soviet Union."
>
> "Oh?" said the man, "and what if the Soviet Union collapses?"
>
> "Wouldn't that be worth 100,000 zlotys?"[23]

This takes us into American political jokes, which in good years present an embarrassment of riches. The following are a few of my favorites. What is striking about many of them is that you can substitute the names of politicians from the other party and they hold up almost as well:

> During August vacation, Newt Gingrich walks into a hardware store in rural Montana with what appears to be a cobra coiled on top of his head. The clerk asks, "Is he poisonous?", and the snake says, "I sure hope not."
>
> Q: If Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Hopkins and Tommy Corcoran were all in a boat and the boat was sinking, who would be saved? A: The country!
>
> Will Rogers: "I'm not a member of any organized political party. I'm a Democrat."

Another category of joke one can't end this essay without discussing is lawyer jokes. Lawyers may be among the most despised of professions in this country (until, of course, you need one!), but they have given rise to some very good jokes. Here are a few favorites:

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[23] *Id.* at 72.

A 50-year-old lawyer who had been practicing since he was 25 passed away and arrived at the Pearly Gates for judgment. The lawyer said to St. Peter, "There must be some mistake! I'm only 50 years old, and that's far too young to die." St. Peter frowned and consulted his book. "That's funny, when we add up your billing records, you should be at least 83 by now!"

A man was sent to hell for his sins. As he was being led into the pits for an eternity of torment, he saw a lawyer passionately kissing a beautiful woman. "What a joke!" he said. "I have to roast in flames for all eternity and that lawyer gets to spend it with that beautiful woman." Satan jabbed the man with his pitchfork and snarled, "Who are you to question that woman's punishment?"

A young lawyer, defending a businessman in a lawsuit, feared he was losing the case and asked his senior partner if he should send a box of cigars to the judge to curry favor. The senior partner was horrified. "The judge is an honorable man," he said, "If you do that, I guarantee you'll lose the case!" Eventually, the judge ruled in the young lawyer's favor. "Aren't you glad you didn't send those cigars?" the senior partner asked. "Oh, I did send them," the younger lawyer replied. "I just enclosed my opponent's business card with them."

A doctor vacationing on the Riviera met an old lawyer friend and asked him what he was doing there.
The lawyer replied, "Remember that lousy real estate I bought? Well, it caught fire, so here I am with the fire insurance proceeds. What are you doing here?"
The doctor replied, "Remember that lousy real estate I had in Mississippi? Well, the river overflowed, and here I am with the flood insurance proceeds."
The lawyer looked puzzled. "Gee," he asked, "how did you start the flood?"

Finally, I would like to end this essay with the single most clever joke I found in my research:

Some years ago, they were celebrating Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon. It was the thirtieth anniversary, and they said, "Mr. Armstrong, it's amazing – the feat that you did, and how you went down in history. Especially that wonderful quote: 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.'"

And Neil Armstrong says, "I never said that."

"What are you talking about? Everybody knows you said that. It was all over the news! On television! It's recorded! It's taught in schools!"

He says, "That may be, but I never said that."

"Well, what did you say?"

"I said, 'One small step for man, one giant leap for Manny Klein.'"

A pause. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Well, where did that come from?"

And Neil Armstrong says, "When I was growing up in Brooklyn, our family lived next door to the Kleins – Manny Klein and his wife. The walls were very thin, and I used to hear Manny begging all the time that his wife should give him oral sex.

"And she would always say, 'Manny, when a man walks on the moon . . .'" [24]

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[24] Old Jews Telling Jokes, p. 159.