The Moral Value of Humor and Suffering...

The last two critical resources represented by the spokes of the wheel model relate to the tragic and comic realities of life and to how they affect moral evaluation. Tragedy and comedy are more closely allied than most people think and together they offer valuable interpretations of human behavior. They contain direct revelations filled with ethical meaning. First, we will turn to the comic mode of moral insight and then to the tragic.

The history of ethics shows that humor (a term that we are using interchangeably with comedy) has not been given a prominent place in the systematic study of morality. It is not that comedy has been
ignored by all philosophers. The bibliography of J. Y. Greig’s Psychology of Laughter and Comedy mentions 363 works devoted wholly or partially to the subject. The authors range from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Bergson, and Freud. Still, the interest in humor has not led to its inclusion as an integral part of ethical method. This absence indicates a serious omission. There are many modes of moral consciousness and one of them is humor. Humor has the delightful talent of being able to penetrate issues in nonthreatening ways. By briefly explaining what humor is and what it achieves, we can show its significant role as an evaluational resource.

Humor, among other things, involves a creative response to incongruity and surprise. As a way of seeing and relating to things, it provides insight and implies a sympathetic understanding of human nature. Humor easily moves us to a laughter that is pleasant and engaging. Laughter, caused by the comic and the humorous, is a relaxing phenomenon that can ease tensions and break down artificial barriers between persons. Paradoxically, humor can also allow distance. By stepping back and taking serious things less seriously, you can laugh at yourself or another without losing anything. You may even succeed in drawing attention to things more sharply than would a dour judgment. Humor, in other words, lends insight. What will be gained is a different angle of vision that can make all the difference in human understanding. A comic response might discover and communicate more than tedious analytical discourses.

Humor and laughter are achieved by humans alone. In fact, the word “humor” is distinctively human. In medieval physiology, it originally referred to the theory of the four liquids or dispositions of the human body and eventually came exclusively to mean that particular disposition or humor that relates to the comic perception of life. The hyena may make laughing sounds but we would not say that it is displaying humor. It cannot become amused. Humor presupposes intelligent perception and evokes laughter and a happy amusement. Whatever it is that humor has that causes laughter is debatable, but most theories agree that laughter is provoked by some incongruity or inconsistency. Humor, from childish jokes to sophisticated witticisms, lives on surprise and discrepancy. Humor involves an intellectual reaction and represents an appraisal of incongruities within human experience.

The fact that we are the unique subjects and objects of laughter should have sent initial signals to ethics. We laugh at what is human and human-like. Ethics is concerned with the human. It should, therefore, be fully alert to any reaction that is wholly centered on humanness. This fact alone raises intriguing suspicions of relevance. No specific intellectual and affective manifestation (such as humor and
laughter) should be ignored by the art/science that seeks to understand and evaluate the whole phenomenon of humanness.

Along with incongruity, humor involves surprise or the unexpected. It can give a new twist to something that is familiar. The surprise element is visible all the way from the peekaboo laughter of the baby to the comments of an accomplished satirist. A good example of the moral edge in humor can be found in a remark by Mark Twain: "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three un-speakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." The initial piety of the comment sets us up for the surprising ending. The humor comes from the inconsistency between the professed love of freedom and the fear of using it. The incongruity and the unexpected factors are of the essence of humor. The repeated joke fails and the joke that has to be explained takes away the surprising newness.

Humor is also a work of creativity and, as such, it includes a sensitivity to proper timing (kairos). The creative mind perceives connections and similarities that are missed in the more literal and blunt views of the facts of life, and it knows how and when to express that perception. Because of creative achievement, the humorist gives us more than a good laugh. We achieve a better understanding of reality. The following passage, found in Literary History of the United States, speaks directly to our concerns here: "More effectively even than folklore — from which it has persistently borrowed — American humor from colonial days to the present has acted as a catalytic agent for the changes in our expanding nation and its mingled peoples." Our growth as a nation, like that of any nation, has been awkward and uneven and humor has always been there too in its unique role.

There is creative imagination behind humor and further serious reflection of an enlightening nature might take place because of it. Humor is more than just one of the respectable and normal avenues for the growth of moral awareness. It may at times be the only avenue open to moral insight and imagination. To bypass the use of this resource, because it does not suit our pompous rationalistic conceptions of how proper ethics should be done, is unintelligent. There may be no setting where humor is out of place.

The comic insight expresses a definite attitude toward life. It is a celebration of values that arouse an awareness of human possibilities. Humor is necessary moral equipment. It adds a different and often needed tone to reality. It is a positive experience that offers a possible way of resolving conflict as well as being one that engenders hope and healing. Norman Cousins, in his book Anatomy of an Illness, gives vivid and convincing evidence of the therapeutic role of humor and laughter. "I made the joyous discovery," he writes, "that ten minutes of genuine

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belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep. . . . I was greatly elated by the discovery that there is a physiologic basis for the ancient theory that laughter is good medicine.” The comic response to life is an affirmative resource and ought not be a forgotten aspect of ethics.

Humor can be a manifestation of a hope that is potentially recreative and never destructive. Derisory and perverted humor, of course, can represent despair because its purpose is vindictive. Humor and laughter are among the appropriate responses to reality, and that has to be reassuring because it suggests that tragedy does not have the final and only word. Hope perdures in humor, a fact that is at once delightful and relevant to ethics.

There is some truth in the saying that life is a tragedy for those who think and a comedy for those who feel. There is also some error in it, since tragedy and comedy can no more be separated than can thought and feeling. The truth of the saying, however, is in the linkage of humor and feeling. Humor is as much an affective response to value as it is an intellectual one and it is as much a conduit of moral truth as character and feelings are. Comedy embodies a hopeful judgment about life.

To assist further in showing how the spoke comedy is germane to ethical evaluation, we can look to one of the problems confronting critical thinking, the problem of false absolutes. A major goal in ethics is to counter this problem, and humor is an important force in achieving this goal. Humor serves a relativizing function in the face of apparent absolutisms such as, for example, rationalism and power. A humorous mindset comports a habit of anticipating newness and surprise. In a mind where it is at home there will be less rigidity and more suppleness of spirit, qualities that well befit a “living intellect.”

Humor thrives on paradox and on the recognition that there are times when we simply cannot “get it together,” when we are left with the likeness of truth on both horns of an intellectual dilemma. Rationalism wants to explain everything. Humor knows that that cannot be done and that there is understanding that surpasses rational explanation. Humor is a healthy reminder of how variegated and ultimately mysterious understanding is. It is thus a force for modesty and intellectual realism. It does not fight rationalism by going against reason but by enlightening it. Humor is not antirational. It presents another way of viewing the same facts; thus humor is a native and primordial source for the expansion of the mind.

Humor can play an active role in adding a needed dimension to positions of power. When power is absolutized and cut off from the essential human task of building community among persons, it can easily corrupt those in positions of authority. Political and social cartoonists, for example, relativize power by putting it into a comic perspective that
illuminates its limits. The power that operates among persons must be intertwined with other human values and never become an end in itself. Power and authority are to remain means validated and balanced by their service to human ends. The comic influence should be present in such centers as Congress, the White House, the Kremlin, and the Board Room. The medievals were wise when they insistently installed the jester in all the halls of power. The lord, the prince, and the bishop were all the institutionalized prey of the jester’s taming wit. There is a place for humor in every professional setting. Indeed, a sense of humor is a prerequisite for anyone in a position of leadership and authority.

When Humor Goes Amuck...

An ancient saying tells us: “The corruption of that which is best, is the worst” (Corruptio optimi pessima). Humor is among the best of our human characteristics. Thus the ways in which it can go awry must not be missed. For one thing, strained humor might be a work of despair and resignation. We ought not laugh when we should weep or when we should be indignant. Such humor trivializes human value.

Further, laughter can be an expression of ridicule or derision, but that laughter is contemptuous and closer to hostility than humor. It is the laughter of Iago in Shakespeare’s Othello. Many of our skewed valuations are driven into us by derision and ridicule. There are negative, as well as positive, social forces at work in the way we learn to perceive others. Sexism and racism, for example, are re-enforced through a demeaning humor and deviations from such attitudes are often mocked and ridiculed. Sometimes laughter is not always in keeping with moral value. Derisive humor used by those in authority can be cruel and counterproductive. But there are kinds of humor where the humorous spirit plays on the border line not only between jest and earnest but also between comedy and tragedy without belittling people.

The Positive Value of Tragedy...

We have listed tragedy as one of the spokes of the ethical wheel model because it has a potentially positive value for the expansion of moral consciousness. Each spoke represents a personal or cultural resource through which moral understanding is advanced.

It may seem impossible to speak in praise of suffering without lapsing into sadism or masochism. Yet we know that suffering seems intrinsic to living. It also seems to be a crucible from which significant experiences can influence the growth of moral consciousness. We are not suggesting that we ought not try to do away with suffering. Medical science, for example, has eliminated many forms of suffering and tragedies from life. This fact is an obvious good. Whenever we can,
it is our moral duty to contain and prevent tragedy. Suffering has no intrinsic value.

Whether suffering contributes positively to our moral growth depends entirely on our response to it. What is special about persons is their ability to transcend suffering and to transform it into something good. Tragedy can expand moral awareness by giving us greater moral sensitivity. To any discernible degree, other animals do not have this capacity. A horse, for instance, that becomes deaf and blind early in its life would be best put to death. Helen Keller, however, had these disabilities and yet she was able to transcend them and bring fulfillment to herself and hope to others. Her greatness related to her tragedy. There is moral growth in Helen Keller’s response to this suffering. It sharpens appreciation of our human capacities of caring and loving. Our consciousness is drawn more deeply into the foundational moral experience of the value of persons.

One way of sensing the potential value of tragedy is to consult our own experience of the positive things it can do to people. H. Richard Niebuhr addresses this point in his book *The Responsible Self*, where he says that “everyone with any experience of life is aware of the extent to which the characters of people he has known have been given their particular forms by the sufferings through which they have passed.” Niebuhr insists that what changes people is due more to how they respond to what happens than to the event that occurs. He asserts that “it is in the response to suffering that many and perhaps all [people], individually and in their groups, define themselves, take on character, develop their ethos.” It would seem to be within the experience of all of us that deep suffering can bring greater depth and sensitivity to persons who were, before that, overly self-assured and superficial. It is also true, of course, that suffering can break a person, and this too is revealed by even a little of life’s experience.

What is being said here in terms of ethical method is that our response to suffering can bring moral depth to our character and can make our affective response to moral truth more sensitive. As we discussed in reference to the spoke affectivity, it is within character that the truth of moral experience resonates. The affective and characterological orientation wrought by well-met tragedy provides a deeper compassion, an essential component of moral knowing. The character of individuals and of groups or of whole nations can be fashioned not so much by the professed ideals of these individuals or groups, as by the way they meet situations in which suffering cannot be avoided. To know how a person or a society has responded to suffering is to know much of the good or the bad of that person, of that society. This knowledge also helps in analyzing the individual and group experiences that must be consulted in a moral method. In a hospital setting, patients (the
word comes from the Latin meaning "one who suffers") have a lot to teach the hospital staff about humane medicine. Their suffering gives them a podium from which to speak. Attention to the tragic elements in individual and group histories is important and the question must be asked whether the suffering has embittered or ennobled the sufferer. These are important reasons why tragedy can be listed as one of the spokes of ethical method.

How Can the Tragic Be Good?

Some suggestion can be made about how our response to suffering may have a positive effect on our moral character and consciousness. In speaking of tragedy or suffering, we refer to a painful experience that is not of our own choosing, one that thwarts our plans and hopes, and one that we would avoid if at all possible. What good, then, could such a thing as suffering possibly do? And, why would we look to tragedy for positive contributions?

To understand something of how suffering can be beneficial to moral growth, it is well to know what suffering is not. First, suffering is not unhappiness any more than pleasure is happiness. Suffering, of course, can lead to unhappiness and depression, in which event it submerges the powers of the person and crushes the mind and spirit. Here, suffering becomes overwhelming and absolute. If there is meaning that endures in spite of the suffering, then the tragic dimension will not blot out hope or stifle the processes of moral growth. If tragedy produces only unhappiness, we could expect the gradual extinction of the personal powers of the sufferer. Second, the positive evaluation of suffering is not a collapse into masochism. Ethical method takes a positive view of tragedy because persons can and may become more compassionate and humane in response to suffering. Personal and cognitive growth might occur during the suffering and because of it. The value is in the sufferer and not in the suffering itself. Masochism, on the contrary, involves a perverted and debasing glorification of pain. The possibility of persons to advance during the worst of times and to bring value from the apparently valueless gives tragedy the potential to offer a positive perspective in moral evaluation.

Tragedy intensifies awareness of reality as process and ultimately as unpredictable. It can also strike directly at a moral blind spot where one does not perceive value until suffering occurs. Tragedy shakes the foundations of the mind and can produce a more humble attitude. Nothing is quite the same after a tragedy. It cannot but touch our complacent and misguided patterns of interpretation because it always involves a shocking recognition of how terrible something can be. Tragedy stuns our smugness. It is a powerful reminder that not all is as we imagine
or expect. Even if we, to some degree, were to anticipate a tragedy, we would still be shocked by it. Tragedy is not experienced by anticipation.

Because in tragedy we learn that life can produce the shock of pain and suffering, we are less disposed to circumscribe reality or to trust our conceptions of what reality truly is. The tragic experience introduces new horizons as it forces itself into the center of our conscious existence. It brings us into contact with struggles that confront the full measure of our humanity. The change in consciousness, however, that follows tragedy is not necessarily for the better. One's view can be distorted by pain and an opportunity for growth can be missed. But tragedy, if borne well, can open moral perspective in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Again, to apply this to the world of medicine, nurses and doctors who have had intimate professional contact with various forms of suffering have done a kind of ethics that should be fed into hospital policies. The patients, or the parents of patients, who have had the tragic experience of some illness, are indispensable witnesses for the ethics of caring for victims of that disease. The same is true for other fields. What journalist would be considered mature and seasoned who had not weathered tough times and learned from the experience? Though we sensibly would like to avoid it when possible, it remains a stubborn fact of life that some learning occurs only in challenging and suffering situations. Those who suffer through the agonies of business, medicine, and politics should have special insights, but, of course, they may also have their blind spots.

*Tragedy in Relation to Other Spokes…*

The spoke on tragedy relates especially to two other spokes on the wheel model, *affectivity* and *creative imagination*. Tragedy can spark challenge and challenge can stimulate our responsive feelings and creativity. It also summons courage. "Fear has large eyes," says a Russian proverb. It sees with painful keeness all that is a threat. But courage has larger eyes. It sees beyond the circumstances of distress and suffering and reaches for the possibilities that the fearful do not perceive. The courageous mind can be affective and creative. Courage represents a flourishing of the human spirit and a morally commanding response of persons beset by tragic experience. Suffering calls forth affective sensitivity and creative response. Anyone who loves and attempts great things will not be unacquainted with suffering. Love extends our vulnerability and expands the area in which we face and feel risk. The persecution of excellence, in particular, of moral excellence, is a prominent, persistent, and sad theme in human history. If someone would move sensitively and creatively, i.e., morally, in society to work for justice and criticize injustice, tragedy and suffering are to be expected.
Society does not readily entertain challenges to low standards of justice and fairness.

**In Conclusion...**

We have completed our discussion of the nine spokes of the wheel model regarding ethical method. Through these evaluational resources our consciousness is enhanced when facing moral issues. It should be clear that the several spokes are diverse in nature. In assessing a particular problem, it is not possible to sit down and summon these evaluational elements as one might call in a group of witnesses, each in an assigned turn. Some of these spokes may have limited use in certain morally adjudicable cases. There are, for example, heroic situations that call for unique and instant solutions for which no principles can adequately prescribe. Sometimes when principles seem to collide irreconcilably, we are cast more upon affective appreciations. Similarly, there are situations of impasse where old solutions clearly will not do and creative imagination must strain to find the answer.

There is, of course, no implication here that when persons are faced with a sudden moral decision they will withdraw, sketch out the wheel model of ethics, and plod from point to point. Such immediate decisions are made by conscience, by the morally conscious self attuned to values as they emerge in the concrete situation. The reaction of conscience is often “on the spot” when there may be virtually no time for reflection. The nature of conscience will be discussed in the next chapter, but here it is mentioned to note its distinction from detached ethical reflection. Reflection always requires time, whereas conscience must normally respond to the urgency of action. Conscience, however, is always nourished in reflection, and ethics, as a reflective way of knowing moral value, is one of its sources.

Still, it is possible to press the mind in a fairly systematic way to turn to seven of the evaluational modes that we discussed. We can insist upon attention to the potential contribution of *creative imagination, affectivity, reason and analysis, authority, principles, individual and group experience*. We can check for neglect in each of these areas and seek to avoid the pitfalls of a one-sided approach. We cannot in an equally systematic way invoke the *tragic* and the *comic* perception while assessing a particular case of moral concern. Awareness of the positive aspects of comedy and tragedy in one’s worldview, however, can introduce perspective. They are potential avenues of moral insight. A sense of the significance of the comic and tragic views can function influentially at the level of presupposition. Openness to their evaluative role can create a mental climate that leaves us less likely prey to an incompleteness that deters the processes of knowing. Awareness of all the ways in which we know is the essence of moral sophistication.
It should also be noted that one’s method may not be explicit in all cases of ethical analysis. Method is not technique or tactic. The delineation of a method is a way of charting out with self-conscious modesty the manifold aspects of the phenomenon of knowing. Following the method suggested here does not mean that when we study some moral problem we always need to have bobbing at the surface every one of its explicated elements. The validity of this method should be detectably implicit in all our particular analyses of normative issues. We should always “do ethics” with alertness to the various ways in which moral truth is attained. One need not stop and say: “See, I have not forgotten spoke number four in my discussion of this or that issue.” But when the discussion is completed, it should not show neglect of what the spokes represent in our knowing potential.

We will turn next to a discussion of the very important notion of conscience and to its role in moral judgments.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

Re: The Evaluational Phase

1. Explain the purpose of the evaluational phase of ethical method and how it relates to the reality-revealing questions. Are the spokes always to be trusted? Show how each spoke could betray or assist you in making moral decisions.

Re: Creative Imagination

2. Discuss the growth of moral imagination and the conditions for moral creativity. Pick one professional setting and show how the conditions for moral creativity would transform and improve the situation.

3. How does creative imagination relate to viable alternatives? How would you creatively structure an international “strike force” to react to oil spills anywhere on earth within a short period?

4. Creative ways are needed to solve many of our problems. How would you best analyze the options for waste disposal? The industrialized nations are now attempting to “dump” their wastes on third world nations. Discuss the problem of corporations exporting jobs to third world nations because of the extremely low wage schedules there. What moral and creative options do these corporations have? Comment.

5. How do creative movements spawn other creative movements? Give some examples. Why are creative people often persecuted?

Re: Affectivity

7. How do feelings enter into moral evaluation right from the start? In what ways do feelings bring insight? Can one’s affective response to a moral issue be wrong? Explain. Give some examples of how your feelings have been right, have been wrong.

8. To what extent is character part of our own choosing? Is a person’s moral character due more to nature, nurture, or choice?

9. Give some examples of how modern life has given us a greater need for acknowledging affectivity and its legitimate role? Explain. Is affectivity more stunted in men than in women? Do men and women tend to have the same approach to moral value questions? Give examples from your own experience.

Re: Reason and Analysis

10. Can reason ever be “purified” of all prejudice and self-interest? Explain.

11. Explain the expression: “Fortune favors the prepared mind.”

Re: Authority

12. Why does authority have such an influence on moral thinking and decision making? How free can you be or should you be from authorities?

13. “Religion” refers to a sense of the sacred. Explain how nationalism and patriotism are imbued with religious authority.

Re: Principles

14. Moral principles have residual effects. They can live on through our institutions and attitudes. Discuss some of the residual effects of the principles that supported certain forms of behavior that we as a nation have now come to reject, behavior such as slavery and the denial of voting rights for women.

15. How can good principles have exceptions? How valid is the domino theory, that one exception leads to another and so on until exceptions become the norm? Give an evaluation. Is the moral truth of a principle relevant for everybody in every situation? Can principles collide with one another? Should a nurse or physician or journalist always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Are there no exceptions to this principle? Does a businessperson have an obligation to tell everything about a product?

16. Discuss, evaluate, and give some examples of the following statement: The truth of a principle may come to light only when one is ready for it, when one has acquired the experiential and moral maturity to understand it. Might you not understand some values and principles as a parent that you did not see clearly prior to the experience of parenthood?
Re: Individual and Group Experience

17. Discuss the powers and perils of peer authority. What happens if you accept peer authority too much, too little?

18. Give some examples of how group experience can correct individual experience and of how individual experience can correct group thinking on moral issues.

19. Give examples of how we often seem to rely on group experience even when we may know in our hearts that our own experience is morally defensible?

20. Show how small group experience can enlighten the minds of individuals and of society. Explain how small groups, like the handicapped, can instruct the larger society. Can you think of other examples?

Re: Comedy and Tragedy

21. Clarify the terms “comedy” and “tragedy.” In what ways can comedy and tragedy promote a fuller sense of the moral and the human? Comedy and tragedy seem like opposites, but what similar results do they have?

22. Show how humor can relativize and lend insight into human situations. Give examples.