

# *Incongruity, vagueness and pertinence. A defence of Noël Carroll's incongruity theory of humour*

Article

Accepted Version

Bariselli, M. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6901-8298> (2024) Incongruity, vagueness and pertinence. A defence of Noël Carroll's incongruity theory of humour. *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics*, 61 (2). pp. 95-109. ISSN 2571-0915 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/116199/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/journal-detail?id=441>

Publisher: Helsinki University Press

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](https://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

# Incongruity, Vagueness and Pertinence. A Defence of Noël Carroll's Incongruity Theory of Humour

## **Abstract:**

This article defends Noël Carroll's incongruity theory of humour from the pressing criticism that his articulation of incongruity is too vague to serve as a key notion of the theory. I first distinguish between two versions of the criticism of vagueness: (i) the claim that Carroll's notion of incongruity is vacuous, and (ii) the claim that Carroll's notion allows for shoehorning. To reject (i), I put Carroll's notion of incongruity to the test by analysing complex comic texts, demonstrating that it is not vacuous as it allows for capturing their similarities and differences. In response to (ii), I claim that Carroll's notion of incongruity should be amended adding a *pertinence condition*, which requires that the element establishing the incongruity are part of the same context. Finally, I show that the pertinence condition helps Carroll replying to a set of counterexamples moved to his sufficiency conditions too.

**Competing interests:** The author has no competing interests to declare.

## **I. The Notion of Incongruity and the Criticism of Vagueness**

The key claim of the incongruity theory is that the perception of an incongruity is necessary for comic amusement. Philosophers have offered different types of definitions of incongruity. Some have offered a narrow definition of incongruity, where the incongruity relevant for comic amusement is very specific. Schopenhauer, for example, describes incongruity as a conceptual mistake.<sup>1</sup> Others have offered an extended definition of incongruity, consisting of a list of paradigmatic incongruities.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Hutcheson, for example, ascribes the cause of laughter to '[the] contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity'. Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon The Fable of the Bees* (Glasgow: R. Urie, 1750), 19.

Contemporary incongruity theorists prefer to endorse formal definitions, which provide an outline of the formal object of comic amusement, as for example the violations of norms or expectations.

Formal definitions are considered more flexible and able to account for a wider range of comic instances.<sup>3</sup>

Incongruity theories endorsing formal definitions are nevertheless charged with three standard criticisms. A first criticism challenges the necessity claim. Counterexamples, including caricatures, imitations and repetitions of jokes are offered to show that the perception of an incongruity is not necessary for comic amusement.<sup>4</sup> A second criticism is that incongruity is not sufficient for comic amusement. We perceive incongruities when faced with riddles or when watching horror movies, but we respond with puzzlement and fear rather than comic amusement.<sup>5</sup> Finally, a third criticism is that the notion of incongruity is vague, it is not informative and precise enough to be a viable notion.<sup>6</sup> The

---

<sup>3</sup> Formal notions are, for example, offered by Michael Clark, 'Humour and Incongruity,' *Philosophy* 45, no. 171 (1970); John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 50-52; Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18; Tom Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,' *BJA* 57, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Roger Scruton and Peter Jones, 'Laughter,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 56 (1982); John Lippitt, 'Humour and Incongruity,' *Cogito* 8, no. 2 (1994); Joshua Shaw, 'Philosophy of Humor,' *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 2 (2010): 116; Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 50-51; Alan Roberts, *A Philosophy of Humour* (Palgrave Pivot, 2019), 46-49.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mike W. Martin, 'Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities,' *BJA* 23, no. 1 (1983): 77-79; Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, 13; Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 57-58; Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,' 56-58.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Scruton and Jones, 'Laughter,' 202; Lippitt, 'Humour and Incongruity.'; Robert L. Latta, *The Basic Humor Process: A Cognitive-Shift Theory and the Case against Incongruity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 107; Noël Carroll, 'On Jokes,' in *Beyond Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 317; Noël Carroll, 'Two Comic Plots,' in *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 426-27; Shaw, 'Philosophy of

third criticism presents a more serious threat to incongruity accounts of humour than the first two.

Whilst the first two criticisms target the ability of the incongruity theory to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for comic amusement, the third criticism objects that there is a viable theory to be discussed. This article defends Noël Carroll's formal notion of incongruity from this third type of criticism.

Carroll's influential account<sup>7</sup> of the incongruity theory consists of a necessary condition and additional jointly sufficient conditions that are meant to eschew these three criticisms. Carroll provides a formal notion of incongruity, describing it as 'a comparative notion. It presupposes that something is discordant with something else. With respect to the comic amusement, that something else is how the world is or should be'.<sup>8</sup> On Carroll's account, an incongruity is a violation of general norms and expectations. Further to the necessary condition, Carroll provides additional conditions to account for the fact that we often perceive incongruities without being amused. To exclude incongruities found in horror movies or that would lead to fear, anxiety, or disturbance, Carroll claims that comic amusement requires the perception of an incongruity 'as non-threatening or otherwise anxiety producing'. In addition, Carroll claims that an incongruity should not be perceived as 'annoying'.<sup>9</sup> For example, a person who minds that they are impeccably dressed would be disturbed and not amused by finding out

---

Humor,' 117; Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,' 53; Roberts, *A Philosophy of Humour*, 51-54; Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (Yale University Press, 2019), 73.

<sup>7</sup> Carroll's account has influenced debates within philosophy, as we shall see in this article, and beyond philosophy. For example, cf Lena Straßburger, 'How to kill with a smile – how to smile about a kill: violent clowns as double incongruity,' *Comedy Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020); Ryo Okazawa, 'Resisting categorization in interaction: Membership categorization analysis of sitcom humor,' *Journal of Pragmatics* 186 (2021); Clément Cannone, 'Improv, Stand-Up, and Comedy,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, ed. Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta (New York: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 50.

that they are wearing two different socks.<sup>10</sup> Finally, he adds that incongruities should not ‘enlist genuine problem-solving attitudes’, and should ‘give rise to the enjoyment of precisely the pertinent incongruity’ and ‘to an experience of levity’.<sup>11</sup> These conditions exclude puzzles or riddles where the attitude required is of looking for a solution, and the enjoyment derives from finding one that dispels the incongruity.<sup>12</sup> According to Carroll, all these conditions, together with the necessary condition, are jointly sufficient for comic amusement.

Carroll’s theory has been met with criticism. Whilst it could be argued that Carroll’s definition of incongruity is flexible enough to respond to counterexamples to previous definitions of incongruity,<sup>13</sup> the objections against his sufficiency conditions and against the vagueness of his definition are still live.<sup>14</sup> The latter criticism is the most pressing for Carroll’s theory. The vagueness of Carroll’s definition lies in its extreme generality, which, however, is what allows for its flexibility. Thus, what appears to be a strength (flexibility), might turn out to be a severe weakness (vagueness). If the criticism of vagueness is correct, Carroll’s account of incongruity theory should be rejected, as its key notion would provide little, if any, insight into comic instances. Given the serious threat that the criticism of vagueness poses to the viability of Carroll’s theory, this article provides a response to it. Although this article does not address the criticism against Carroll’s sufficiency conditions, some suggestions on how to approach that criticism will be provided.

Carroll anticipated that his account could be open to the criticism of vagueness that targeted previous versions of the incongruity theory. Far from replying to the criticism,<sup>15</sup> he acknowledged that there might be ‘some justice to the claim that the notion of incongruity is ‘too vague of a concept to be much of a use’. Consequently, he deflated the strength of his notion, and made the modest

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Cochrane, ‘No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour.’; Roberts, *A Philosophy of Humour*, 45-54.

<sup>15</sup> At best of my knowledge, Carroll has not provided a response in print to this criticism yet.

recommendation to ‘embrace the incongruity theory provisionally as the best way to advance the discussion’, as a ‘heuristic which, though slippery, is not vacuous’. His invitation is to ‘apply it to a wide number of cases in the hope of isolating, as exactly as possible, the pertinent recurring variables in the leading structure of humour’.<sup>16</sup> In response to Carroll’s invitation, in this article, I put the notion of incongruity to use to respond to the criticism of vagueness and, at the same time, to further refine it.

To defend Carroll’s notion of incongruity, it is crucial to understand the exact charge that has been moved to it. I maintain that there are different versions of this criticism, which are yet to be distinguished. Carroll’s notion of incongruity has been targeted with two versions of the criticism of vagueness. The first version criticises the notion of incongruity for being (i) vacuous and not informative about the object of comic amusement. The second version criticises the notion of incongruity for allowing for (ii) shoehorning, that is to say that the notion of incongruity allows for tailoring an incongruity around any given element. There is a third version of the criticism of vagueness, which criticises extended notions of incongruity to be open-ended.<sup>17</sup> However, Carroll’s notion, being a formal notion of incongruity, is not liable to the third version of the criticism.

In section II, I reject version (i) of the criticism of vagueness, and I claim that Carroll’s notion should not be abandoned on the ground that it is uninformative. To support this, I demonstrate that it is informative by analysing examples of humour taken from texts by Samuel Beckett and Lawrence Sterne. Carroll’s notion allows for capturing crucial differences between these texts, which account for their different comedy styles. Starting from section II, the philosophical discussion alternates with, and

---

<sup>16</sup> Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Robert L. Latta provides this version of the criticism of vagueness targeting McGhee’s articulation of the notion of incongruity as ‘something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, exaggerated, and so forth’. Paul E. McGhee, *Humor: its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979), 10. This articulation, Latta claims, is ‘indefinitely extended’: “and so forth” leaves the definition of incongruity indeterminate. Latta, *The Basic Humor Process: A Cognitive-Shift Theory and the Case against Incongruity*, 107.

it is supported by, a piecemeal literary analysis. In section III, I spell out version (ii) of the criticism of vagueness, and I claim that Carroll's notion should be amended to address it. I then assess and reject Tom Cochrane's amendment to the notion of incongruity. In section IV, I provide my own amendment to Carroll's notion of incongruity, adding a *pertinence condition* to it. This condition requires that the norms, or the expectations violated are pertinent or part of the same context of the element that violates them. Finally, in section V, I deal with objections and counterexamples, and in section VI, I show that the pertinence condition helps Carroll replying some of the criticisms to his sufficiency conditions.

## II. The Criticism of Vagueness as Vacuous

The first version of the criticism of vagueness targets Carroll's notion of incongruity for being (i) vacuous. According to this criticism, the notion of incongruity is uninformative: one would not know much about a comic instance if one had only this analytical tool. This point is voiced by Alan Roberts, who criticises Carroll's articulation of incongruity for being redundant: Carroll presents incongruity as an infringement of what we take to be normal, which equals to saying that there is something incongruous. Although the perception of an incongruity is necessary for comic amusement, Roberts says, Carroll's articulation of the notion of incongruity does not provide a description of what counts as an incongruity,<sup>18</sup> and the theory is in need for a more precise articulation.<sup>19</sup>

There are reasons, however, to be sceptical of the criticism of vacuity moved to Carroll's articulation of incongruity. Although Carroll's articulation is quite broad, it is not redundant or uninformative. Carroll's articulation describes what constitutes an incongruity: it is a 'discordant relation' between two terms. One of the two terms is our expectations on 'how the world is or should be', and the other

---

<sup>18</sup> Although Carroll's sufficiency conditions provide restrictions on what incongruities count as humorous, they do not offer guidance on what counts as an incongruity.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts, *A Philosophy of Humour*, 51-54. This version of the vagueness criticism was moved to earlier incongruity accounts too. See, Scruton and Jones, 'Laughter.'; Lippitt, 'Humour and Incongruity.'

term violates these norms or expectations.<sup>20</sup> This is perhaps a minimal definition of incongruity, but it is one that amounts to something. When used in an analysis of comic instances, this notion helps identifying the elements responsible for comic amusement insofar it requires indicating a pattern of norms or expectations and an element that infringes them.<sup>21</sup>

Consider, for example, passages (1) – (2) below. A piecemeal analysis of these passages demonstrate that Carroll's notion of incongruity is informative. By looking at which patterns of norms or expectations are breached in each passage, it is possible to individuate similarities and differences in their comedy. In (1) and (2), taken from two of Samuel Beckett's works, the comedy is dependent on the narrator's interruptions of their own narration. In (1), from 'The End', the narrator interrupts his story to rectify what he just said, creating the comic effect of a clumsy narrator. In (2), from *Molloy*, the narrator interrupts his story to express his distaste for what is being narrated, creating the comic effect of an annoyed narrator.<sup>22</sup>

(1) So I got a tin and hung it from a button of my greatcoat, **what's the matter with me**, of my coat, at pubis level.<sup>23</sup>

(2) **I will not tell what followed, for I am weary of this place, I want to go.** It was late afternoon when they told me I could go.<sup>24</sup>

The similarity between the comedy of (1) and (2) can be identified by looking at expectations or norms that are breached in both passages: the narrator's intervention establishes a same comic incongruity.

---

<sup>20</sup> Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Notice that this section does not aim to show that an incongruity is necessary for comic amusement, but rather to investigate whether there is a viable notion of incongruity.

<sup>22</sup> Henceforth, emphasis are mine.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'The End,' in *The Expelled/The Calmative/The End with First Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 50.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 21.

The explicit rectifying and deplored of one's narrative is incongruous with what one expects from a well-formed written narration. While one expects the process of narration to follow that of careful planification and drafting, these stories appear to be drafted while narrated, giving their narrator, respectively, a clumsy and an annoyed look. The comedy of passages like (1) and (2) is, at least in part,<sup>25</sup> the result of the violation of these expectations.

Looking at expectations and norms breached helps identifying the difference in the comedy of (1) and (2) too. Notice that only the intervention of the annoyed narrator in (2), and not that of the clumsy narrator in (1) leaves the reader doubting the meaningfulness and truthfulness of the story narrated. This is because (2), but not (1), breaches our expectations that each episode narrated in a story should be truthful and relevant. On the one hand, the narrator's expression of weariness and the decision to not 'tell what followed', call into question the relevance of the episode narrated. On the other hand, the truthfulness of the narration is doubted due to the sudden and suspicious change of setting, which appears as a stipulation of how the story developed. By contrast, the narrator's intervention in (1) does not generate any incongruity related to relevance and faithfulness. If anything, it lends more credence to the narrator and more importance to his words: the correction appears as an attempt to report the story as accurately as possible, where each word matters.

The difference and similarity between comic effects in (1) and (2) can thus be captured by identifying norms and expectations that are breached. This shows that Carroll's notion of incongruity is informative, despite being broad. The analysis of (3) and (4) below – taken respectively from *The Life*

---

<sup>25</sup> Of course, there are other elements that contribute to the overall comedy of the two passages. For example, part of the comedy of (1) depends on the self-deprecating tone of 'what's the matter with me', and on the fact that the tin hangs at the 'pubis level'. However, one can devise a passage without these comic elements, where the comedy would be still generated by the correction and absent mindedness of the narrator. Consider for example (1\*).

(1\*) So I got a tin and hung it from a button of my greatcoat, pardon, of my coat.

and *Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, and from *Watt* by Samuel Beckett – further illustrates this point. A key comic motif for both novels is the constant stalling of narration.

(3) He was four years totally confined, - part of it to his bed, and all of it to his room; and in the course of his cure, which was all that time in hand, suffer'd unspeakable miseries, - owing to a succession of exfoliations from the *oss pubis*, and the outward edge of that part of the *coxendix* called the *oss ileum*, - both which bones were dismally crush'd, as much by the irregularity of the stone, which I told you was broke off the parapet, - as by its size, - (though it was pretty large) [...].<sup>26</sup>

(4) Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott, at this period. Not that Watt was ever to have any direct dealings with Mr Knott, for he was not. But he thought, at this period, that the time would come when he would have direct dealings with Mr Knott, on the first floor. Yes, he thought that time would come for him, as he had thought it had ended for Arsene, and for Erskine just begun.<sup>27</sup>

Looking at expectations and norms breached help identifying the similarity between (3) and (4). In both passages, the narrators supposedly aim to tell a story, but their continuous digressions and clarifications tease readers by frustrating their expectations of narrative progress. Passage (3) consists in a single sentence, where numerous dashes, commas, and semicolons keep opening asides and adding clauses. Although each clause appears to contribute to the overall description of Uncle Toby's suffering, in effect they keep this description open, deferring its completeness. A similar effect is achieved in (4), where each new sentence clarifies or corrects a previous one, deferring the completeness of the description of Watt's dealing with Mr Knott. The incongruity at the heart of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 62.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 55.

comedy of (3) and (4) lies in this sense of deferment: where we would expect descriptions to progress with the addition of information, each new clause in (3), or new sentence in (4) defer their completion.

The difference in the comedy of (3) and (4) can be individuated by looking at expectations breached in (4), but not in (3). In addition to the stretching out of the narrative, the comedy in (4) is also generated by the hesitancy and faltering of the narrative. Whereas in (3) each clause adds a new piece of information, no matter how trivial or pedantic, in (4) each addition modifies and corrects previous claims. The first sentence of (4) begins with an absolute statement ('Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott'), which is swiftly corrected into a time-relative statement by the addition of 'at this period', leaving open the possibility that Watt could eventually deal with Mr Knott. The second sentence ('not that Watt was ever to have any dealing with Mr Knott'), however, undoes the correction and closes that possibility. The third sentence introduces yet another correction. If 'at this period' was a temporal modifier in the first sentence, its repetition sets the entire passage into Watt's perspective at that time. The continuous corrections violate the expectation that each new sentence of a description provides additional information. In (4), each new sentence modifies and almost cancels what was said by previous ones.

Once again employing Carroll's notion of incongruity has proved to be fruitful. It guided the identification of expectations or norms breached, enabling us to account for similarities and differences in the comedy of (3) and (4). Their similarity is due to a similar incongruous stalling of the description, and their difference is due to the faltering effect that the addition of information generates in (4) but not in (3). The analysis of the four passages demonstrates that, although being broad, Carroll's notion of incongruity is not vacuous, and therefore version (i) of the criticism of vagueness should be rejected.

### **III. The Criticism of Vagueness as Shoehorning**

The second version of the criticism of vagueness – the (ii) shoehorning criticism – claims that the vagueness of Carroll's notion of incongruity allows for shoehorning incongruities into any putative example of humour. This criticism is expressed by Tom Cochrane who says that the vagueness of the

notion is such that ‘for any putative counter-example, we will always be able to find something incongruous about it from some point of view’.<sup>28</sup> A notion of incongruity that allows for this, Cochrane says, ‘could make the theory unfalsifiable’, and, I add, should be discarded as such. Admittedly, Carroll’s notion of incongruity does not contain elements that could save it from criticism (ii). It is true that given any element (a), it is possible to find or construe norms and expectations (b) violated by (a). To avoid this, some restrictions regarding (a) or (b) should be added to Carroll’s notion.<sup>29</sup>

Cochrane has provided his own amendment to the notion of incongruity in response to the criticism of shoehorning. His response consists of restricting the realm of norms apt for eliciting comic amusement. On his account, comic amusement requires the violation of rule-based norms – norms for ‘how something ought to be’ –, as opposed to the violation of statistical norms – norms on ‘how something generally is’.<sup>30</sup> In addition, comic amusement requires the violation of norms related to intentional actions or attitudes, as opposed to norms that are non-intentional, such as ‘the laws of physics or teleological norms regarding the morphology of living creatures’.<sup>31</sup> Cochrane’s articulation of the norm violation as a violation of intentional, rule-based norms is narrower than Carroll’s articulation. The latter includes the violation of ‘how the world is’,<sup>32</sup> that is of the statistical, teleological, and physical norms excluded by the former. Cochrane’s narrower articulation eschews the criticism of shoehorning, as it restricts the possibility of fitting any incongruity onto an example of humour.

---

<sup>28</sup> Cochrane, ‘No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,’ 53. Shaw expressed a similar worry towards incongruity theories in Shaw, ‘Philosophy of Humor,’ 117.

<sup>29</sup> Carroll’s sufficiency conditions cannot help here. They are restrictions on how incongruities should be perceived for comic amusement, and not restrictions on what should count as an incongruity in the first place.

<sup>30</sup> Cochrane, ‘No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,’ 54.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 18.

Carroll's broader notion of incongruity should, however, be preferred over Cochrane's narrower notion, which does not account for many comic instances. Let us start from his exclusion of non-intentional norms. Cochrane anticipates some counterexamples, discussing the cases of Wile E. Coyote's recurring violation of the law of gravity or the laughter caused by ugliness, which can be described as a teleological-norm violation. He dismisses these counterexamples by saying that, in addition to the violation of non-intentional norms, they involve the violation of intentional norms, and it is this latter violation which is comic. Wile E. Coyote's defiance of gravity, says Cochrane, would be perceived as miraculous, not as comic, if it were not for his mindless behaviour; ugliness is funny when it is the result of intentional behaviour, as when one pulls ugly faces. Yet, this response is not satisfying. Although it is true that many comic situations that involve the violation of non-intentional norms, also involve the violation of intentional norms, one may nonetheless laugh at both types of violation. Wile E. Coyote's mindless behaviour could well be the main reason we laugh, but this does not exclude the fact that we laugh at the violation of the law of gravity too. Consider as a case in point Nikolai Gogol's short story *The Nose*, which starts with the main character waking up to discover that he has lost his nose, and ends with him waking up few days later to find his nose back. It is certainly true that much of the comedy in this story depends on the character's attempts to recuperate his nose, which could be described as violations of intentional norms regarding appropriate behaviour. And it is true that in a different context a nose-less face would lead to a different reaction, for example terror if in a horror movie. But it is hard to deny that a key comic element in the short story is the absurd situation of losing and finding one's nose, which is a violation of non-intentional natural laws.

Cochrane's exclusion of statistical norms from the realm of norms apt for eliciting comic amusement should be questioned too, as it leaves unaccounted for another large set of comic situations. Pace Cochrane, the violation of statistical norms – which include norms set up by repetition –<sup>33</sup> is apt for

---

<sup>33</sup> Whilst Cochrane explains statistical norms as 'how something generally is', his discussion includes statistical norms set up by repetition. He discusses the Goran Nerhardt's experiment as an illustration of a violation of statistical norms. In this case, the norm is set by the repeated action of lifting identical weights, which is violated

comic amusement. In fact, it is a device exploited by comedy series which often contain sketches where laughter is caused by the subversion of a running gag. The repetition of a running gag sets up a statistical norm, which is subverted when the running gag is subverted. For example, a running gag in the animated series *The Simpsons* is related to Homer's imagination. Upon hearing something, Homer often uses his imagination to visualise a scene related to what he hears, and each time what he visualises is comically far from reality. However, at least one time Homer's imagination provides a correct visualisation, when in the Episode *E. Pluribus Wiggum* he correctly visualises a think tank. Homer correctly imagining a think tank is funny only as far as it breaks the statistical norm set up by the running gag. The comic breaking of the pattern is even emphasised by the other characters who look at Homer surprised, to which Homer responds by asking if he is not allowed to get one right.

Cochrane's narrower notion of norms is too restrictive and open to counterexamples to be a convincing response to the shoehorning criticism. In the remainder of this article, I offer my own refinement of Carroll's notion of incongruity, which aims to avoid the possibility of shoehorning, while maintaining the notion's flexibility and ability to explain a wide range of examples.

#### IV. The Pertinence Condition

In this section, I answer the shoehorning criticism by providing my own amendment to Carroll's version of the incongruity theory. Specifically, I add a *pertinence condition* to Carroll's notion of incongruity. This condition requires that the elements generating an incongruity are part of the same context, they are pertinent to the same context. This responds to the shoehorning worry that the notion of incongruity works in a wide range of contexts only because given any element (a), an incongruity theorist can easily fabricate an incongruous element (b) to prove the strength of their theory. According to the pertinence condition, not any incongruity is apt for eliciting comic amusement, only those where the incongruous elements (a) and (b) are part of the same context. An incongruity theorist, to explain an instance of humour, cannot appeal to any breaching of norms, but

---

by lifting a identical looking, but lighter, weight. Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,' 54.

must individuate an incongruity that is generated by breaching norms that are pertinent to the relevant context. Notice that this amendment to Carroll's notion of incongruity does not restrict the range of norms apt for eliciting comic amusement; it regulates whether a norm, in a given case and context, is relevant to the analysis of the comedy.

To illustrate and support my own refinement, I analyse examples where the same norms and expectations appear to be breached and to generate the same incongruity, but that lead to different reactions: where some generate comic amusement, others are estranging or fantastical. This difference, I shall show, is not captured by the sufficiency conditions outlined by Carroll to distinguish between humorous and non-humorous incongruities. I shall argue that this difference is explained by the pertinence condition. The nature of this demonstration requires, once again, piecemeal analysis.

Let us start by comparing passage (5) below, from Samuel Beckett's 'I'll Seen Ill Said', with passages (1) and (2) of section II. Recall our analysis: in (1) and (2) the comedy was generated by the narrators' interventions, who by stipulating and correcting their stories violated the rules of well-formed narrations. 'I'll Seen Ill Said' is punctuated by interventions too: the narrator intervenes to guide and craft the entire text. Passage (5) below – the opening passage of 'I'll Seen Ill Said' – provides an illustration of the use of this device in the text.

(5) From where she lies she sees Venus rise. **On.** From where she lies when the skies are clear she sees Venus rise followed by the sun. **On.** Then she rails at the source of all life. At evening when the skies are clear she savours its star's revenge. **At the other window.** Rigid upright on her old chair she watches for the radiant one.<sup>34</sup>

The narrator of (5) intervenes to urge the description to continue with the repeated 'On' and to order a change of setting by issuing the direction 'At the other window'. The result is a text that appears to be devised before our eyes. As in (1) and (2), the narrator's interventions generate an incongruity: a

---

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'I'll Seen Ill Said,' in *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 45.

narration that is devised before our eyes violates the rules of a well-formed narration, which dictate to leave out from the final version of the story anything that has to do with the process of devising it. However, notice the difference. The violation in (1) and (2) is comically amusing: it leads us to picture a narrator who is clumsy or annoyed, not up to the task. These are passages where the narration appears to go wrong. By contrast, in (5), and in 'Ill Seen Ill Said' generally, the violation of the rules of well-formed narration is estranging: we are no longer sure to be reading a narration, or at least a mere narration.

This difference is not accounted for by Carroll's conditions for comic amusement. Passage (5) checks all the conditions set by Carroll, and yet it is not amusing. The incongruity of (5) does not invite the reader to assume a genuine problem-solving attitude: it does not include elements to solve and dispel it. By contrast, it is devised to be aesthetically enjoyed and to be appreciated as an incongruity as far as it contributes to the aesthetic value of 'Ill Seen Ill Said'. Finally, the incongruity does not elicit negative emotion or anxiety: none of the elements present in the passage are threatening or disquieting.

By contrast, the difference in reactions can be captured by the pertinence condition. In all three passages (1), (2) and (5) the incongruity is generated by (a) the simultaneity of devising and narrating, which violates (b) the norms of a well-formed narration. However, only (1) and (2) belong to texts where the norms (b) are pertinent, this is because they belong to texts that are narrations: in 'The End' and *Molloy* narrators tell stories from their past. By contrast, (5) belongs to a text where the norms of well-formed narrations are not pertinent since its very beginning. 'Ill Seen Ill Said' is a text that records the process of forming a narrative.<sup>35</sup> This is not to deny that (5) violates the norms of well-formed narration; it certainly does. But these norms are external and not pertinent to 'Ill Seen Ill Said' insofar this is not a narrative. Given that rules of narration do not straightforwardly apply, readers are asked to reassess the nature of the text that they are reading, hence the estrangement.

---

<sup>35</sup> Susan Brienza, for example, describes 'Ill Seen Ill Said' as a recording of 'the immediate life of the author, the man writing'. Susan D. Brienza, *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 217.

A second set of examples, taken from a different comedy genre, offers a further illustration of the pertinence condition. Let us start by considering gags by *The Three Stooges* where objects appear to be animated. This is the case of a gag in the episode *Oily to Bed Oily to Rise*, where Curly's clumsy attempts to shut a waggon's door result in him being repeatedly hit by it. In one of these attempts, after having shut the door, Curly sticks his tongue out at the door and challenges it to hit him in the face.

Immediately, the door appears to take on the challenge and hits him in the face. There is a similar gag in the episode *Loco Boy Makes Good*. This time Curly is trying to lay out a carpet roll, which keeps rolling up. Exasperated, Curly commands the carpet to roll back in place. The carpet initially appears to respond to the command. However, as soon as Curly turns his back to it, the carpet rolls up and hits him. One of the comic elements at the heart of these gags is that objects appear to be animated and to have agency, thus comically breaching the everyday expectation that objects are inanimate.

Now consider animated movies such as *Beauty and the Beast*, or the children cartoon series *Bob the Builder*. There, objects are animated and have agency, thus breaching our everyday expectation about objects. However, this incongruity, rather than being comically amusing, is fantastical, it sets the stories in a fantasy world. Carroll's sufficiency conditions cannot capture this difference in reaction. In these animated works, the incongruity generated by animated objects is meant to be aesthetically enjoyed, and it is certainly not threatening or anxiety producing. Moreover, it is not meant to be engaged with a problem-solving attitude, as the viewer is asked to play along with it. By contrast, the pertinence condition accounts for the difference in reaction. Whilst in the case of *The Three Stooges*' gags the everyday norms and expectations that objects are not animated and do not have agency apply, these norms and expectations do not apply in the worlds of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Bob the Builder*. These are fantasy worlds where some of the everyday norms of reality are external and not pertinent.

The pertinence condition dispels the shoehorning criticism by making Carroll's account of incongruity theory more precise. Importantly, it does so without affecting the account's flexibility and ability to explain a wide range of examples. Moreover, this condition makes the incongruity theory falsifiable: it is possible to falsify and reject it by finding a counterexample where a comic instance depends on the violation of rules that are not pertinent.

## V. Objections and Counterexamples

Let us deal now with objections and counterexamples to the pertinence condition. A first objection could point out that the pertinence condition is vague since it requires incongruous terms to be part of the same context but gives no indication on how to identify the relevant context. Therefore, one could object, the pertinence condition does not dispel the shoehorning objection, but only moves it a step back. It is still possible to shoehorn an incongruity on any given comic element by adjusting the relevant context. For example, one could object to my analysis of *The Three Stooges* and of *Beauty and the Beast* that I arbitrarily decided that everyday norms and expectations on objects apply in the context of the former, but not of the latter. One could argue that objects in *The Three Stooges* should be regarded as animated and that is an attempt to shoehorn an incongruity into the example that of claiming that everyday norms apply in one case and not in the other.

However, this objection fails to show that the criticism of shoehorning applies to the pertinence condition. All it shows is that determining the relevant context might require discussing different interpretations and evaluating the most convincing. For example, the claim that everyday norms regarding objects apply in the case of *The Three Stooges*, but not in *Beauty and the Beast* is not arbitrary. It is supported by the observation that, in the scenes by *The Three Stooges* discussed in section IV, apart from the gags mentioned, objects are always inanimate. The same is not true for objects in *Beauty and the Beast*. If one wants to claim that everyday norms on objects apply in *Beauty and the Beast*, and to explain some of its comedy by claiming that these norms are breached, they need to provide a convincing interpretation. Simply adjusting the context to find an easy explanation for humour would not be persuasive.

Moving on to counterexamples, these consist in instances of humour that contain a comic incongruity where one of its terms is not pertinent. Particularly challenging for the pertinence condition can be caricatures, imitations, or parodies. To start with, consider the case of caricatures. The incongruity at the heart of caricatures lies between the true appearance of a person and their distorted image. For example, a caricaturised portrait of Barack Obama might exaggerate the size of his ears. The caricaturised portrait, obviously, would show the distorted image of Obama only. Given that the true

appearance of Obama is not in the caricature, one might argue that it is external or not pertinent to it. So described, the case of caricatures would be like that of passage (5), or to the case of animated movies: as much as the norms of well-formed narrations or everyday expectations around objects were external to those examples, the true appearance of the person – Obama's in our case – does not appear in the caricature, and as such is external to it. The same could be said for imitations and parodies, which consist in distorted representations, but need not contain an accurate representation of the subject of the parody or imitation.

The case of caricatures, imitations, and parodies, however, are only apparent counterexamples to the pertinence condition, which can account for these cases. Consider the caricature example above.

Although the true appearance of Obama is not depicted, to appreciate that caricature as a caricature *of* Obama, then the caricaturised image must be compared to its true appearance. Similarly, consider the *Saturday Night Live* sketches where Tina Fey imitates Sarah Palin. If one does not know who Sarah Palin is, they might appreciate those sketches for their jokes or for the exaggerated mannerism. However, to enjoy these sketches as imitations *of* Sarah Palin, one needs to compare Fey's distorted depiction with the real Palin. Whilst the image of the real Palin is not in the sketches, it is still pertinent for the imitation to be appreciated as such. This is where the difference with fantasy movies lies.

There, the audience is asked to leave aside the expectations that objects do not talk in real life, and fully immerse in the fantasy. By contrast, imitations, caricatures, and parody requires viewers to entertain in thought the true appearance of their targets and compare it to the distorted image they see. Thus, an appropriate context for appreciating these works is one where both the true appearance and the distorted image are pertinent, so that an incongruity can be established and appreciated.

## VI. An Additional Upshot for Carroll

The pertinence condition, beyond responding to the criticism of shoehorning, offers an additional upshot. Carroll's account of humour and, more in general, incongruity accounts of humour are often criticised for stipulating away counterexamples to the theory. Critics who would expect a theory of humour to explain why some incongruities are funny and some are not may think that the list of sufficiency conditions offered by Carroll do not say much more than the incongruities that are funny

are the not-unfunny ones. Whilst I do not wish to provide a full response to this criticism, I suggest that adopting the pertinence condition provides Carroll with a non-circular answer to some (but not all) counterexamples.<sup>36</sup>

Firstly, notice that in IV, I offered novel counterexamples to Carroll's sufficiency conditions. I showed that the incongruous interventions of the narrator in (5) from 'I'll Seen Ill Said', and the incongruity generated by animated objects in *Beast and the Beauty* and *Bob the Builder* are not comic, despite meeting all the conditions set out by Carroll. I argued that the pertinence condition can account for these cases: the norms supposedly breached in each case were not pertinent to the relevant context. The pertinence condition was used to show that what seemed potential counterexamples to Carroll's sufficiency conditions are not so insofar they are not candidates for being pertinent incongruities in the first place.

I think that the same response can be given to a counterexample that is standardly moved against the incongruity theory of humour and that has been moved to Carroll's account too. Incongruity accounts, including Carroll's, are criticised for not being able to account for surrealist art, which seems to check all the sufficiency conditions set out, yet they are not funny.<sup>37</sup> Carroll has rejected the criticism by pointing out that surrealist paintings are excluded because 'surrealist incongruities are intended to be unsettling. [...] They are designed to disturb – to elicit a haunting sense of enigma or mystery'.<sup>38</sup> As such, they are anxiety producing and therefore excluded as good candidates for comic amusement in Carroll's account.

---

<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging the exploration of the connection between the pertinence condition and the criticisms moved to the sufficiency conditions.

<sup>37</sup> Carroll's account is directly targeted by this criticism in Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour.' This line of criticism against incongruity theory, however, has a longer tradition, see Martin, 'Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities.' Carroll himself addresses this criticism as a possible issue for his view in: Noël Carroll, 'Comic Amusement, Emotion, and Cognition,' in *On Emotions: Philosophical Essays*, ed. John Deigh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, 52.

Carroll's answer strikes me as unsatisfying or at least too quick. Whilst it may be a good reply to the specific case that he examines, I do not think it can be generalised to all surrealist artworks. Carroll discusses Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) as a possible counterexample, and it might be fair to consider the depiction of melting watches and a melting face disquieting, as one might be prompted to imagine one's reality or one's own body melting away (metaphorically or not).<sup>39</sup>

Better counterexamples to the theory are some of Joan Miró paintings, such as *The Birth of Day* (1968) or *Figures and Dog in front of the Sun* (1949). These paintings are populated by shapes and figures that are incongruous with shapes and figures populating our ordinary world. Nonetheless, these shapes and figures do not seem to be intended to annoy or threaten, so Carroll's defence would not work here. They depict patches of colours that do not strike me as being particularly somber or gloomy. The paintings do not invite the viewer to find solutions to dispel the incongruities either. By contrast, they are to be appreciated and enjoyed. Whilst Carroll's sufficiency conditions cannot capture the case of Miró's paintings, the pertinence condition can. The incongruities individuated in these paintings would not be considered apt to elicit comic amusement by the pertinence condition. This is because the incongruities are between the figures and shapes in the paintings and the ordinary world. These shapes are incongruous as far as one compares them with our ordinary experience of reality. However, a full appreciation of these paintings requires a full immersion into their alternate dimension, where the rules that apply to ordinary reality are not pertinent.

One needs not agree with my description of Miró's paintings to concede the overall point that Carroll's list of sufficiency conditions might not be apt to deal with all cases of incongruities. The pertinence condition provides Carroll's account with an additional, non-circular, tool to respond to some threatening counterexamples.

---

<sup>39</sup> A similar answer could be easily offered to Cochrane's use of René Magritte's *Young Girl Eating Bird* (1927) as counterexample. It would not be hard for Carroll to argue that the sight of a young girl biting into a dead bird, with fresh blood around her mouth and teeth is disquieting. Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour,' 57.

## VII. Conclusion

This article has argued that Carroll's notion of incongruity, although quite general, is promising. Carroll's notion of incongruity can, and should, be made more precise. The criticisms made to this notion can help us to do so, if we understand the exact challenges that they pose to it and try to meet them. In this article I have done so by spelling out and distinguishing two versions of the criticism of vagueness. This article has rejected the first version of the criticism, which claims that Carroll's notion is too general to be informative, by demonstrating that, although general, this notion can guide our understanding of comic instances. The second version of the criticism of vagueness, the shoehorning version, is a greater challenge for Carroll's notion of incongruity. Carroll's notion presents incongruity as a violation of norms or expectations but does not pose any constraint on what norms or expectations are relevant. Because of this, it is always possible to construe an incongruity that would explain an instance of humour, making the theory unfalsifiable. I have argued that to meet this criticism, Carroll's notion of incongruity should be amended adding a condition of pertinence. This condition requires that the norms, or the expectations violated are pertinent or part of the same context of the element that violates them. Beyond disabling the possibility of shoehorning an incongruity into a comic instance, I have argued that the pertinence condition helps replying to some counterexamples moved to the sufficiency conditions. Thus, the pertinence condition makes the notion of incongruity more precise, and the incongruity theory of humour stronger.

## Bibliography

Beckett, Samuel. 'The End.' In *The Expelled/The Calmative/The End with First Love*, 35-57. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.

———. 'Ill Seen Ill Said.' In *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still*, 43-78. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.

———. *Molloy*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.

———. *Watt*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.

Brienza, Susan D. *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Cannone, Clément 'Improv, Stand-Up, and Comedy.' In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, edited by Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta, 530-43. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Carroll, Noël. 'Comic Amusement, Emotion, and Cognition.' In *On Emotions: Philosophical Essays*, edited by John Deigh, 77-98. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

———. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

———. 'On Jokes.' In *Beyond Aesthetic*, 317-35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———. 'Two Comic Plots.' In *Art in Three Dimensions*, 417-39. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Clark, Michael. 'Humour and Incongruity.' *Philosophy* 45, no. 171 (1970): 20-32.

Cochrane, Tom. 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour.' *BJA* 57, no. 1 (2017): 51-66.

Eagleton, Terry. *Humour*. Yale University Press, 2019.

Hutcheson, Francis. *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon The Fable of the Bees*. Glasgow: R. Urie, 1750.

Latta, Robert L. *The Basic Humor Process: A Cognitive-Shift Theory and the Case against Incongruity*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998.

Lippitt, John. 'Humour and Incongruity.' *Cogito* 8, no. 2 (1994): 147-53.

Martin, Mike W. 'Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities.' *BJA* 23, no. 1 (1983): 74-85.

McGhee, Paul E. *Humor: its Origin and Development*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979.

Morreall, John. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Okazawa, Ryo. 'Resisting categorization in interaction: Membership categorization analysis of sitcom humor.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 186 (2021): 33-44.

Roberts, Alan. *A Philosophy of Humour*. Palgrave Pivot, 2019.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. 2 vols. Vol. 1, New York: Dover Publications, 1969.

Scruton, Roger, and Peter Jones. 'Laughter.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 56 (1982): 197-228.

Shaw, Joshua. 'Philosophy of Humor.' *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 2 (2010): 112-26.

Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

Straßburger, Lena. 'How to kill with a smile – how to smile about a kill: violent clowns as double incongruity.' *Comedy Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 25-35.