Sigmund Freud

JOKES AND THEIR RELATION TO THE UNCONSCIOUS

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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
New York - London
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SIGMUND FREUD: A BRIEF LIFE
by Peter Gay

It was Freud's fate, as he observed not without pride, to "agitare the sleep of mankind." Half a century after his death, it seems clear that he succeeded far better than he expected, though in ways he would not have appreciated. It is commonplace but true that we all speak Freud now, correctly or not. We casually refer to oedipal conflicts and sibling rivalry, narcissism and Freudian slips. But before we can speak that way with authority, we must read his writings attentively. They repay reading, with dividends.

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856, in the small Moravian town of Freiberg.1 His father, Jacob Freud, was an impecunious merchant; his mother, Amalia, was handsome, self-assertive, and young—twenty years her husband's junior and his third wife. Jacob Freud had two sons from his first marriage who were about Amalia Freud's age and lived nearby. One of these half brothers had a son, John, who, though Sigmund Freud's nephew, was older than his uncle.

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1His given names were Sigismund Schlomo, but he never used his middle name and, after experimenting with the shorter form for some time, definitively adopted the first name Sigmund—on occasion relapsing into the original formulation—in the early 1890s, when he was a medical student at the University of Vienna. Freiberg, now in Czechoslovakia, bears the Czech name “Pribor.”
We can now start out from an assured knowledge of the sources of the peculiar pleasure given us by jokes. We are aware that we may be deceived into confusing our enjoyment of the intellectual content of what is stated with the pleasure proper to jokes; but we know that that pleasure itself has at bottom two sources—the technique and the purposes of jokes. What we now want to discover is the way in which the pleasure arises from these sources, the mechanism of the pleasurable effect.

We shall, I think, find the explanation we are in search of far easier from tendentious jokes than from innocent ones. We will therefore begin with the former.

The pleasure in the case of a tendentious joke arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place. That a satisfaction such as this is a source of pleasure calls for no further remark. But the manner in which a joke leads to this satisfaction is linked with particular conditions, from which we may perhaps arrive at some further information. Two cases are to be distinguished
here. The simpler one is where the satisfaction of the purpose is opposed by an external obstacle which is evaded by the joke. We found this, for instance, in the reply received by Serenissimus to his question of whether the mother of the man he was speaking to had ever lived in the Palace [p. 79 f.] and in the critic's rejoinder to the two rich rascals who showed him their portraits: 'But where's the Saviour?' [P. 87.] In the former case the purpose was to answer one insult by another, and in the latter it was to hand across an insult instead of the assessment that had been asked for. What opposed the purpose were purely external factors—the powerful position of the people at whom the insults were directed. It may nevertheless strike us that, however much these and analogous jokes of a tendentious nature may satisfy us, they are not able to provoke much laughter.

It is otherwise when what stands in the way of the direct realization of the purpose is not an external factor but an internal obstacle, when an internal impulse opposes the purpose. This condition would seem, on our hypothesis, to be fulfilled in the jokes of Herr N., in whom a strong inclination to invective is held in check by a highly developed aesthetic culture. By the help of a joke, this internal resistance is overcome in the particular case and the inhibition lifted. By that means, as in the instance of the external obstacle, the satisfaction of the purpose is made possible and its suppression, together with the 'psychical damming-up' that this would involve, is avoided. To that extent the mechanism of the generation of pleasure would be the same in the two cases.

Nevertheless, we are inclined here to go more deeply into the distinctions between the psychological situation in the cases of an external and an internal obstacle, for we have a

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1[The phrase is from Lipps (1898, 72, etc.). See below, p. 189.]

2[I.e. expenditure of psychical energy (p. 180 ff.).]
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secret of the pleasurable effect of tendentious jokes, and pass on to the mechanism of pleasure in innocent jokes.

On the basis of suitable specimens of innocent jokes, in which there was no fear of our judgement being disturbed by their content or purpose, we were driven to conclude that the techniques of jokes are themselves sources of pleasure; and we shall now try to discover whether it may perhaps be possible to trace that pleasure back to economy in psychological expenditure. In one group of these jokes (play upon words) the technique consisted in focusing our psychical attitude upon the sound of the word instead of upon its meaning—in making the (acoustic) word-presentation itself take the place of its significance as given by its relations to thing-presentations. It may really be suspected that in doing so we are bringing about a great relief in psychical work and that when we make serious use of words we are obliged to hold ourselves back with a certain effort from this comfortable procedure. We can observe how pathological states of thought-activity, in which the possibility of concentrating psychical expenditure on a particular point is probably restricted, do in fact give this sort of sound-presentation of the word greater prominence than its meaning, and that sufferers in such states proceed in their speech on the lines (as the formula runs) of the ‘external’ instead of the ‘internal’ associations of the word-presentation. We notice, too, that chil-

4[Cf. a passage in Chapter VI, Section A, of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Standard Ed., 4, 303. An example of this phenomenon is given in the 'Little Hans' case history (1909), ibid., 10, 59 n.]

5[If I may be allowed to anticipate the exposition in the text, I can at this point throw light on the condition which seems to determine whether a joke is to be called a 'good' or a 'bad' one. If, by means of a word with two meanings or a word that is only slightly modified, I take a short cut from one circle of ideas to another, and if there is not at the same time a link between those circles of ideas which has a significant sense, then I shall have made a 'bad' joke. In a bad joke like this the only existing link between the two disparate ideas is the one word—the 'point' of the joke. The example of 'Home-Roullard' quoted above is a joke of this kind. A 'good' joke, on the other hand, comes about when what children expect [see above, p. 147] proves correct and the similarity between the words is shown to be really accompanied by another, important similarity in their sense. Such, for instance, is the example 'Tradutore—Traditore' (p. 45). The two disparate ideas, which are here linked by an external association, are also united in a significant relation which indicates an essential kinship between them. The external association merely takes the place of the internal connection; it serves to point it out or make it clear. A 'translator' is not
In a second group of technical methods used in jokes—unification, similarity of sound, multiple use, modification of familiar phrases, allusions to quotations—we can single out as their common characteristic the fact that in each of them something familiar is rediscovered, where might instead have expected something new. This rediscovery of what is familiar is pleasurable, and once more it is not difficult for us to recognize this pleasure as a pleasure in economy and to relate it to economy in psychical expenditure.

It seems to be generally agreed that the rediscovery of what is familiar, 'recognition', is pleasurable. Groos (1899, 153) writes: 'Recognition is always, unless it is too much mechanized (as, for instance, in dressing, . . .), linked with feelings of pleasure. The mere quality of familiarity is easily accompanied by the quiet sense of comfort which Faust felt when, after an uncanny encounter, he entered his study once again [Faust, Part I, Scene 3]. If the act of recognition thus gives rise to pleasure, we might expect that men would hit on the idea of exercising this capacity for its own sake—that is, would experiment with it in play. And in fact Aristotle regarded joy in recognition as the basis of the enjoyment of art, and it cannot be disputed that this principle should not be overlooked, even if it does not possess such far-reaching significance as Aristotle attributes to it.

Groos goes on to discuss games whose characteristic lies in the fact that they intensify the joy in recognition by putting obstacles in its way—that is to say, by creating a

only called by a similar name to a 'traitor'; he actually is a kind of traitor and bears the name, as it were by right.

The distinction that is here developed coincides with the one which is to be introduced later (p. 158 f.) between a 'fetch' and a 'joke'. But it would be unjust to exclude examples like 'Homer-Rouard' from the discussion of the nature of jokes. As soon as we take into consideration the peculiar pleasure derived from jokes, we find that the 'bad' jokes are by no means bad as jokes—that is, unsuitable for producing pleasure.

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'psychical damming up', which is got rid of by the act of recognition. His attempt at an explanation, however, abandons the hypothesis that recognition is pleasurable in itself, since, by referring to these games, he is tracing back the enjoyment of recognition to a joy in power, a joy in the overcoming of a difficulty. I regard the latter factor as secondary, and I see no reason to depart from the simpler view that recognition is pleasurable in itself—that is, through relieving psychical expenditure—and that the games founded on this pleasure make use of the mechanism of damming up only in order to increase the amount of such pleasure.

It is also generally acknowledged that rhymes, alliterations, refrains, and other forms of repeating similar verbal sounds which occur in verse, make use of the same source of pleasure—the rediscovery of something familiar. The 'sense of power' plays no perceptible part in these techniques, which show so much similarity to that of 'multiple use' in the case of jokes.

In view of the close connection between recognizing and remembering, it is not rash to suppose that there may also be a pleasure in remembering—that the act of remembering is in itself accompanied by a feeling of pleasure of similar origin. Groos seems not to be averse to such a hypothesis, but he derives it once again from the 'sense of power', to which he attributes (wrongly, in my view) the chief reason for enjoyment in almost all games.

The 'rediscovery of what is familiar' is the basis for the use of another technical resource in jokes, which we have not yet mentioned. I refer to the factor of 'topicality', which is a fertile source of pleasure in a great many jokes and which explains a few of the peculiarities in the life-history of jokes. There are jokes which are completely independent of this condition, and in a monograph on jokes we are obliged to make almost exclusive use of examples of that kind. But we
cannot forget that, in comparison with these perennial jokes, we have perhaps laughed even more heartily at others which it is difficult for us to use now because they would call for long commentaries and even with such help would not produce their original effect. These latter jokes contained allusions to people and events which at the time were ‘topical’, which had aroused general interest and still kept it alive. When this interest had ceased and the business in question had been settled, these jokes too lost a part of their pleasurable effect and indeed a very considerable part. For instance, the joke made by my friendly host when he called a pudding that was being served a ‘Home-Rouard’ [p. 112] does not seem to me to-day nearly so good as it did at the time, when ‘Home Rule’ provided a standing head-line in the political columns of our daily papers. In attempting to estimate the merits of this joke I now attribute them to the fact that a single word has transported us, with the economy of a long détour in thought, from the circle of ideas of the kitchen to the remote one of politics. But at the time my account would have had to be different, and I should have said that this word transported us from the circle of ideas of the kitchen to that of politics, which was remote from it but was certain of our lively interest because we were constantly concerned with it. Another joke, ‘This girl reminds me of Dreyfus; the army doesn’t believe in her innocence’ [p. 44], has also faded to-day, though its technical methods must have remained unaltered. The bewilderment caused by the comparison and the double-entendre in the word ‘innocence’ cannot compensate for the fact that the allusion, which at the time touched on an event cathetised with fresh excitement, to-day recalls a question that is settled. Here is a joke which is still topical: ‘The Crown Princess Louise approached the crematorium in Gotha with the question of how much a Verbrunnung [cremation] costs. The management replied: “Five thousand marks normally; but we will only charge you three thousand as you have been durchgebrannt [literally ‘been burnt through’—slang for ‘eloped’] once already.’ A joke like this sounds irresistible to-day; in a short time it will have sunk very considerably in our estimation; and some time later still, in spite of its good play upon words, it will lose its effect entirely, for it will be impossible to repeat it without adding a commentary to explain who Princess Louise was and the sense in which she was durchgebrannt. 6

Thus a great number of the jokes in circulation have a certain length of life: their life runs a course made up of a period of flowering and a period of decay and it ends in complete oblivion. The need which men feel for deriving pleasure from their processes of thought is therefore constantly creating new jokes based on the new interests of the day. The vital force of topical jokes is not their own; it is borrowed, by the method of allusion, from those other interests, the expiry of which determines the fate of the joke as well. The factor of topicality is a source of pleasure, ephemeral it is true but particularly abundant, which supplements the sources inherent in the joke itself. It cannot be simply equated with the rediscovery of what is familiar. It is concerned rather with a particular category of what is familiar, which must in addition possess the characteristic of being fresh, recent and untouched by forgetting. In the formation of dreams, too, we come across a special preference for what is recent7 and we cannot escape a suspicion that association with what is recent is rewarded, and so facilitated, by a peculiar bonus of pleasure.

Unification, which is after all no more than repetition in

6[It must accordingly be explained that Princess Louise was the Crown Princess of Saxony who left her husband in 1903. For an account of the strange circumstances, see her autobiography (1911).]
7[See The Interpretation of Dreams, e.g. Standard Ed., 4.179–81 and 5, 562–4.]
the sphere of thought-connections instead of in that of subject-matter, was given special recognition by Fechner as a source of the pleasure in jokes. He writes (Fechner, 1897, 3, Chapter XVII): 'In my opinion the chief part in the field we are now considering is played by the principle of the unified linking of multiplicities; it requires support, however, from auxiliary determinants in order that the enjoyment which can be derived from these cases, with its peculiar character, may be carried over the threshold.'

In all these cases of repeating the same connections or the same subject-matter in the words, or of rediscovering what is familiar or recent, it seems impossible to avoid deriving the pleasure felt in them from economy in psychical expenditure—provided that this line of approach turns out to be fruitful in throwing light on details and in arriving at new generalities. We are aware that we have still to make it clear how the economy comes about and what the meaning is of the expression 'psychical expenditure'.

The third group of techniques of jokes—for the most part of conceptual jokes—which comprises faulty thinking, displacements, absurdity, representation by the opposite, etc., may at first glance seem to bear a special impress and to betray no kinship with the techniques of rediscovery of what is familiar or the replacement of object-associations by word-associations. Nevertheless it is particularly easy here to bring into play the theory of economy or relief in psychical expenditure.

It cannot be doubted that it is easier and more convenient to diverge from a line of thought we have embarked on than to keep to it, to jumble up things that are different rather than to contrast them—and, indeed, that it **is** conveniently to admit as valid methods of inference that are rejected by logic and, lastly, to put words or thoughts together without regard to the condition that they ought also to make sense. This cannot be doubted; and these are precisely the things that are done by the joke-techniques which we are discussing. But the hypothesis that behaviour of this kind by the joke-work provides a source of pleasure will strike us as strange, since apart from jokes all such inefficient intellectual functioning produces in us nothing but unpleasurable defensive feelings.

'Pleasure in nonsense', as we may call it for short, is concealed in serious life to a vanishing point. In order to demonstrate it we must investigate two cases—one in which it is still visible and one in which it becomes visible again: the behavior of a child in learning, and that of an adult in a toxically altered state of mind.

During the period in which a child is learning how to handle the vocabulary of his mother-tongue, it gives him obvious pleasure to 'experiment with it in play', to use Grove's words [p. 148]. And he puts words together without regard to the condition that they should make sense, in order to obtain from them the pleasurable effect of rhythm or rhyme. Little by little he is forbidden this enjoyment, till all that remains permitted to him are significant combinations of words. But when he is older attempts still emerge at disregarding the restrictions that have been learnt on the use of words. Words are disfigured by particular little additions being made to them, their forms are altered by certain manipulations (e.g. by reduplications or 'Zittersprache'\(^9\)), or

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\(^{9}\)The title of Chapter XVII is 'On significant and joking similes, play upon words and other cases which bear the character of being amusing, funny or ridiculous.'

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\(^{9}\)This was a particular form of secret language in which the sound 'zitter' played a part. The topic had been touched on by Freud in the passage in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a), Standard Ed., 4, 303, already referred to (p. 147n.).]
a private language may even be constructed for use among playmates. These attempts are found again among certain categories of mental patients.

Whatever the motive may have been which led the child to begin these games, I believe that in his later development he gives himself up to them with the consciousness that they are nonsensical, and that he finds enjoyment in the attraction of what is forbidden by reason. He now uses games in order to withdraw from the pressure of critical reason. But there is far more potency in the restrictions which must establish themselves in the course of a child's education in logical thinking and in distinguishing between what is true and false in reality; and for this reason the rebellion against the compulsion of logic and reality is deep-going and long-lasting. Even the phenomena of imaginative activity must be included in this [rebellious] category. The power of criticism has increased so greatly in the later part of childhood and in the period of learning which extends over puberty that the pleasure in 'liberated nonsense' only seldom dare to show itself directly. One does not venture to say anything absurd. But the characteristic tendency of boys to do absurd or silly things seems to me to be directly derived from the pleasure in nonsense. In pathological cases we often see this tendency so far intensified that once more it dominates the schoolboy's talk and answers. I have been able to convince myself in the case of a few boys of secondary school age who had developed neuroses that the unconscious working of their pleasure in the nonsense they produced played no less a part in their inefficiency than did their real ignorance.

Nor, later on, does the University student cease these demonstrations against the compulsion of logic and reality, the dominance of which, however, he feels growing ever more intolerant and unrestricted. A large amount of student 'rags' are a part of this reaction. For man is a 'tireless plea-
sure-seeker'—I forget where I came across this happy expression—and any renunciation of a pleasure he has once enjoyed comes hard to him. With the cheerful nonsense of his Bierschweifel,10 for instance, the student tries to rescue his pleasure in freedom of thinking, of which he is being more and more deprived by the schooling of academic instruction. Much later still, indeed, when as a grown man he meets others in scientific congresses and once more feels himself a learner, after the meeting is over there comes the Kneipzeitung,11 which distorts the new discoveries into nonsense, and offers him a compensation for the fresh addition to his intellectual inhibition.

The Bierschweifel and the Kneipzeitung give evidence by their names to the fact that the criticism which has repressed pleasure in nonsense has already grown so powerful that it cannot be put aside even temporarily without toxic assistance. A change in mood is the most precious thing that alcohol achieves for mankind, and on that account this 'poison' is not equally indispensable for everyone. A cheerful mood, whether it is produced endogenously or toxically, reduces the inhibiting forces, criticism among them, and makes accessible once again sources of pleasure which were under the weight of suppression. It is most instructive to observe how the standards of joking sink as spirits rise. For high spirits replace jokes, just as jokes must try to replace high spirits, in which possibilities of enjoyment which are otherwise inhibited—among them the pleasure in nonsense—can come into their own: 'Mit wenig Witz und viel Behagen.'12 Under the influence of alcohol the grown man once more becomes a child, who finds pleasure in having the

10 [Bierschweifel: ridiculous speech delivered at a beer party.]
11 [A comic set of minutes. Literally, 'tavern newspaper.]
12 [With little wit and much enjoyment.' (Mephistopheles in Auerbach's Cellar Faust, Part 1, Scene 5.)]
course of his thoughts freely at his disposal without paying regard to the compulsion of logic.

I hope I have now also shown that the absurdity-techniques of jokes are a source of pleasure. It need only be repeated that this pleasure arises from an economy in psychical expenditure or a relief from the compulsion of criticism.

If we look back once more at the three separate groups of joke-techniques, we see that the first and third of these groups—the replacement of thing-associations by word-associations and the use of absurdity—can be brought together as re-establishing old liberties and getting rid of the burden of intellectual upbringing; they are psychical reliefs, which can in a sense be contrasted with the economizing which constitutes the technique of the second group. Relief from psychical expenditure that is already there and economizing in psychical expenditure that is only about to be called for—from these two principles all the techniques of jokes, and accordingly all pleasure from these techniques, are derived. The two species of technique and of obtaining pleasure coincide—in the main at all events—with the distinction between verbal and conceptual jokes.

The preceding discussion has given us unawares an insight into the evolution or psychogenesis of jokes, which we will now examine more closely. We have made the acquaintance of preliminary stages of jokes, and their development into tendentious jokes will probably uncover fresh relations between the various characteristics of jokes. Before there is such a thing as a joke, there is something that we may describe as 'play' or as 'a jest'.

13 'The pleasure taken by children in repetition (to which there is a further reference below, p. 261, and on which Freud has already commented in a footnote to The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a), Standard Ed., 4, 368) is a subject to which Freud recurred much later, in his discussion of his hypothesis of a 'compulsion to repeat' in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920a), Standard Ed., 18, 35.]
mood, and the further development towards jokes is governed by the two endeavours: to avoid criticism and to find a substitute for the mood.

And with this the second preliminary stage of jokes sets in—the jest. It is now a question of prolonging the yield of pleasure from play, but at the same time of silencing the objections raised by criticism which would not allow the pleasurable feeling to emerge. There is only one way of reaching this end: the meaningless combination of words or the absurd putting together of thoughts must nevertheless have a meaning. The whole ingenuity of the joke-work is summoned up in order to find words and aggregations of thoughts in which this condition is fulfilled. All the technical methods of jokes are already employed here—in jests; moreover linguistic usage draws no consistent line between a jest and a joke. What distinguishes a jest from a joke is that the meaning of the sentence which escapes criticism need not be valuable or new or even good; it need merely be permissible to say the thing in this way, even though it is unusual, unnecessary or useless to say it in this way. In jests what stands in the foreground is the satisfaction of having made possible what was forbidden by criticism.

It is, for instance, simply a jest when Schleiermacher [see p. 37] defines Eifersucht [jealousy] as the Leidenschaft [passion] which mit Eifer sucht [with eagerness seeks] what Leiden schafft [causes pain]. It was a jest when Professor Kästner, who taught physics (and made jokes) at Göttingen in the eighteenth century, asked a student named Kriegl, when he was enrolling himself for his lectures, how old he was. ‘Thirty years old’ was the reply, whereupon Kästner remarked: ‘Ahh! so I have the honour of meeting the Thirty Years’ War [Krieg].’ (Klempau, 1890.) It was with a jest that the great Rokitansky\(^\text{15}\) replied to the question of what were the professions of his four sons: ‘Two heilen [heal] and two heulen [howl]’ (two doctors and two singers). The information was correct and therefore not open to criticism; but it added nothing to what might have been expressed in the words in brackets. There can be no mistaking the fact that the answer was given the other form only on account of the pleasure which was produced by the unification and the similar sound of the two words.

I think now at length we see our way clearly. All through our consideration of the techniques of jokes we have been disturbed by the fact that they were not proper to jokes only; and yet the essence of jokes seemed to depend on them, since when they were got rid of by reduction the characteristics and the pleasure of the joke were lost. We now see that what we have described as the techniques of jokes—and we must in a certain sense continue to describe them so—are rather the sources from which jokes provide pleasure; and we feel that there is nothing strange in other procedures drawing from the same sources for the same end. The technique which is characteristic of jokes and peculiar to them, however, consists in their procedure for safeguarding the use of these methods of providing pleasure against the objections raised by criticism which would put an end to the pleasure. There is little that we can say in general about this procedure. The joke-work, as we have already remarked, shows itself in a choice of verbal material and conceptual situations which will allow the old play with words and thoughts to withstand the scrutiny of criticism; and with that end in view every peculiarity of vocabulary and every combination of thought-sequences must be exploited in the most inge-

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nious possible way. We may be in a position later to characterize the joke-work by a particular property; for the moment it remains unexplained how the selection favourable for jokes can be made. The purpose and function of jokes, however—namely, the protection of sequences of words and thoughts from criticism—can already be seen in jests as their essential feature. Their function consists from the first in lifting internal inhibitions and in making sources of pleasure fertile which have been rendered inaccessible by those inhibitions; and we shall find that they remain loyal to this characteristic throughout their development.

We are also in a position now to assign its correct place to the factor of 'sense in nonsense' (cf. the introduction, p. 8), to which the authorities attribute such great importance as a distinguishing mark of jokes and as an explanation of their pleasurable effect. The two fixed points in what determines the nature of jokes— their purpose of continuing pleasurable play and their effort to protect it from the criticism of reason— immediately explain why an individual joke, though it may seem senseless from one point of view, must appear sensible, or at least allowable, from another. How it does so remains the affair of the joke-work; if it fails to do so, it is simply rejected as 'nonsense'. But there is no necessity for us to derive the pleasurable effect of jokes from the conflict between the feelings which arise (whether directly or along the path of 'bewilderment and enlightenment' [p. 8f.]) from the simultaneous sense and nonsense of jokes. Nor have we any need to enter further into the question of how pleasure could arise from the alternation between 'thinking it senseless' and 'recognizing it as sensible'. The psychogenesis of jokes has taught us that the pleasure in a joke is derived from play with words or from the liberation of nonsense, and that the meaning of the joke is merely intended to protect that pleasure from being done away with by criticism.

In this way the problem of the essential character of jokes is already explained in jests. We may now turn to the further development of jests, to the point at which they reach their height in tendentious jokes. Jests still give the foremost place to the purpose of giving us enjoyment, and are content if what they say does not appear senseless or completely devoid of substance. If what a jest says possesses substance and value, it turns into a joke. A thought which would deserve our interest even if it were expressed in the most unpretentious form is now clothed in a form which must give us enjoyment on its own account. A combination like this can certainly not, we must suppose, have come about unintentionally; and we must try to discover the intention underlying the construction of the joke. An observation which we made earlier (in passing, as it seemed) will put us on the track. We said above (p. 111) that a good joke makes, as it were, a total impression of enjoyment on us, without our being able to decide at once what share of the pleasure arises from its joking form and what share from its apt thought-content. We are constantly making mistakes in this apportionment. Sometimes we over-estimate the goodness

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As an example which shows the difference between a jest and a joke proper we may take the excellent joking remark with which a member of the 'Bürger' Ministry in Austria answered a question about the cabinet's solidarity: 'How can we einstellen [stand up] for one another if we can't ausstehen [stand] one another? Technique: use of the same material with slight (contrary) modification. Logical and apposite thought: there can be no solidarity without mutual understanding. The contrary nature of the modification (ein in—aus [out]) corresponds to the incompatibility asserted in the thought and serves as a representation of it.—The 'Bürger' (Middle-Class) Ministry took office after the new Austrian constitution was established in 1867, but owing to internal disharmony only lasted for a couple of years. Cf. The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Ed., 4, 193.]
of the joke on account of our admiration of the thought it contains; another time, on the contrary, we over-estimate the value of the thought on account of the enjoyment given us by its joking envelope. We do not know what is giving us enjoyment and what we are laughing at. This uncertainty in our judgement, which must be assumed to be a fact, may have provided the motive for the construction of jokes in the proper sense of the word. The thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke because in that way it recommends itself to our attention and can seem more significant and more valuable, but above all because this wrapping bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them. We are inclined to give the thought the benefit of what has pleased us in the form of the joke; and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure. If the joke has made us laugh, moreover, a disposition most unfavorable for criticism will have been established in us; for in that case something will have forced us into the mood which play has previously sufficed to produce, and for which the joke has tried by every possible means to make itself a substitute. Even though we have earlier asserted that such jokes are to be described as innocent and not yet tendentious, we must not forget that strictly speaking only jests are non-tendentious—that is, serve solely the aim of producing pleasure. Jokes, even if the thought contained in them is non-tendentious and thus only serves theoretical intellectual interests, are in fact never non-tendentious. They pursue the second aim: to promote the thought by augmenting it and guarding it against criticism. Here they are once again expressing their original nature by setting themselves up against an inhibiting and restricting power—which is now the critical judgement.

This, the first use of jokes that goes beyond the production of pleasure, points the way to their further uses. A joke is now seen to be a psychical factor possessed of power: its weight, thrown into one scale or the other, can be decisive. The major purposes and instincts of mental life employ it for their own ends. The originally non-tendentious joke, which began as play, is secondarily brought into relation with purposes from which nothing that takes form in the mind can ultimately keep away. We know already what it is able to achieve in the service of the purpose of exposure, and of hostile, cynical and sceptical purposes. In the case of obscene jokes, which are derived from smut, it turns the third person who originally interfered with the sexual situation into an ally, before whom the woman must feel shame, by bribing him with the gift of its yield of pleasure. In the case of aggressive purposes it employs the same method in order to turn the hearer, who was indifferent to begin with, into a co-hater or co-despiser, and creates for the enemy a host of opponents where at first there was only one. In the first case it overcomes the inhibitions of shame and respectability by means of the bonus of pleasure which it offers; in the second it upsets the critical judgement which would otherwise have examined the dispute. In the third and fourth cases, in the service of cynical and sceptical purposes, it shatters respect for institutions and truths in which the hearer has believed, on the one hand by reinforcing the argument, but on the other by practising a new species of attack. Where argument tries to draw the hearer's criticism over on to its side, the joke endeavours to push the criticism out of sight. There is no doubt that the joke has chosen the method which is psychologically the more effective.

In this survey of the achievements of tendentious jokes, most prominence has been assumed by—what is more easily seen—the effect of jokes on the person who hears them. More important, however, from the point of view of our understanding, are the functions accomplished by jokes in
the mind of the person who makes them or, to put it in the only correct way, the person to whom they occur. We have already proposed [p. 118]—and here we have occasion to repeat the notion—that we should try to study the psychical phenomena of jokes with reference to their distribution between two people. We will make a provisional suggestion that the psychical process provoked by the joke in the hearer is in most cases modelled on that which occurs in its creator. The external obstacle which is to be overcome in the hearer corresponds to an internal inhibition in the maker of the joke. At the least the expectation of an external obstacle is present in the latter as an inhibiting idea. In certain cases the internal obstacle which is overcome by the tendentious joke is obvious; in Herr N.'s jokes, for instance, we were able to assume (p. 123) that not only did they make it possible for their hearers to enjoy aggressiveness in the form of insults, but that above all they made it possible for him to produce them. Among the various kinds of internal inhibition or suppression there is one which deserves our special interest, because it is the most far-reaching. It is given the name of 'repression', and is recognized by its function of preventing the impulses subjected to it, and their derivatives, from becoming conscious. Tendentious jokes, as we shall see, are able to release pleasure even from sources that have undergone repression. If, as has been suggested above, the overcoming of external obstacles can in this way be traced back to the overcoming of internal inhibitions and repressions, we may say that tendentious jokes exhibit the main characteristic of the joke-work—that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions—more clearly than any other of the developmental stages of jokes. Either they strengthen the purposes which they serve, by bringing assistance to them from impulses that are kept suppressed, or they put themselves entirely at the service of suppressed purposes.

We may be ready to admit that this is what tendentious jokes achieve; yet we must bear in mind that we do not understand how they are able to put these achievements into effect. Their power lies in the yield of pleasure that they draw from the sources of play upon words and of liberated nonsense; but if we are to judge by the impressions gained from non-tendentious jests, we cannot possibly think the amount of this pleasure great enough to attribute to it the strength to lift deeply-rooted inhibitions and repressions. What we have before us here is in fact no simple effect of force but a more complex situation of release. Instead of setting out the long détour by which I reached an understanding of this situation, I will try to give a short synthetic exposition of it.

Fechner (1867, 1, Chapter V) has put forward a 'principle of aesthetic assistance or intensification', which he has expressed as follows: 'If determinants of pleasure that in themselves produce little effect converge without mutual contradiction, there results a greater, and often a much greater, outcome of pleasure than corresponds to the pleasure-value of the separate determinants—a greater pleasure than could be explained as the sum of the separate effects. Indeed, a convergence of this kind can even lead to a positive resultant of pleasure and the threshold of pleasure may be crossed, where the separate factors are too weak to do so: though they must, in comparison with others, show a perceptible advantage in enjoyableness.' (Ibid., 51. The italics are Fechner's.)

The topic of jokes does not, I think, give us much opportunity of confirming the correctness of this principle, which can be shown to hold good in many other aesthetic structures. As regards jokes we have learnt something else, which
at least fringes upon this principle: namely, that where several pleasure-giving factors operate together we are not able to attribute to each of them the share it has really taken in bringing about the result. (See p. 111.) We can, however, vary the situation that is assumed in the 'principle of assistance' and, as a result of these fresh conditions, arrive at a number of questions which would deserve reply. What happens in general if, in a combination, determinants of pleasure and determinants of displeasure converge? On what does the outcome depend and what decides whether that outcome is in pleasure or displeasure?

The case of tendentious jokes is a special one among these possibilities. An impulse or urge is present which seeks to release pleasure from a particular source and, if it were allowed free play, would release it. Besides this, another urge is present which works against this generation of pleasure—hinders it, that is, or suppresses it. The suppressing current must, as the outcome shows, be a certain amount stronger than the suppressed one, which, however, is not on that account abolished. Now let us suppose that yet another urge makes its appearance which would release pleasure through the same process, though from other sources, and which thus operates in the same sense as the suppressed urge. What can the result be in such a case?

An example will give us our bearings better than this schematic discussion. Let us assume that there is an urge to insult a certain person; but this is so strongly opposed by feelings of propriety or of aesthetic culture that the insult cannot take place. If, for instance, it were able to break through as a result of some change of emotional condition or mood, this breakthrough by the insulting purpose would be felt subsequently with displeasure. Thus the insult does not take place. Let us now suppose, however, that the possibility is presented of deriving a good joke from the material of the words and thoughts used for the insult—the possibility, that is, of releasing pleasure from other sources which are not obstructed by the same suppression. This second development of pleasure could, nevertheless, not occur unless the insult were permitted; but as soon as the latter is permitted the new release of pleasure is also joined to it. Experience with tendentious jokes shows that in such circumstances the suppressed purpose can, with the assistance of the pleasure from the joke, gain sufficient strength to overcome the inhibition, which would otherwise be stronger than it. The insult takes place, because the joke is thus made possible. But the enjoyment obtained is not only that produced by the joke: it is incomparably greater. It is so much greater than the pleasure from the joke that we must suspect that the hitherto suppressed purpose has succeeded in making its way through, perhaps without any diminution whatever. It is in such circumstances that the tendentious joke is received with the heartiest laughter.17

An examination of the determinants of laughing will perhaps lead us to a plainer idea of what happens when a joke affords assistance against suppression. [Cf. p. 178 ff. below.] Even now, however, we can see that the case of tendentious jokes is a special case of the 'principle of assistance'. A possibility of generating pleasure supervenes in a situation in which another possibility of pleasure is obstructed so that, as far as the latter alone is concerned, no pleasure would arise. The result is a generation of pleasure far greater than that offered by the supervening possibility. This has acted, as it were, as an incentive bonus; with the assistance of the offer of a small amount of pleasure, a much greater one,

17[Freud had already propounded a parallel theory, to explain the often exaggerated amount of affect experienced in dreams, in Chapter VI, Section H, of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a), Standard Ed., 5, 478 ff.]
which would otherwise have been hard to achieve, has been gained. I have good reason to suspect that this principle corresponds with an arrangement that holds good in many widely separated departments of mental life and it will, I think, be expedient to describe the pleasure that serves to initiate the large release of pleasure as 'fore-pleasure', and the principle as the 'fore-pleasure principle'.

We are now able to state the formula for the mode of operation of tendentious jokes. They put themselves at the service of purposes in order that, by means of using the pleasure from jokes as a fore-pleasure, they may produce new pleasure by lifting suppressions and repressions. If now we survey the course of development of the joke, we may say that from its beginning to its perfecting it remains true to its essential nature. It begins as play, in order to derive pleasure from the free use of words and thoughts. As soon as the strengthening of reasoning puts an end to this play with words as being senseless, and with thoughts as being nonsensical, it changes into a jest, in order that it may retain these sources of pleasure and be able to achieve fresh pleasure from the liberation of nonsense. Next, as a joke proper, but still a non-tendentious one, it gives its assistance to thoughts and strengthens them against the challenge of critical judgement, a process in which the 'principle of confusion of sources of pleasure' is of use to it. And finally it comes to the help of major purposes which are combating suppression, in order to lift their internal inhibitions by the

'principle of fore-pleasure'. Reason, critical judgement, suppression—these are the forces against which it fights in succession; it holds fast to the original sources of verbal pleasure and, from the stage of the jest onwards, opens new sources of pleasure for itself by lifting inhibitions. The pleasure that it produces, whether it is pleasure in play or pleasure in lifting inhibitions, can invariably be traced back to economy in psychical expenditure, provided that this view does not contradict the essential nature of pleasure and that it proves itself fruitful in other directions.

Nonsense jokes, which have not had due attention paid to them in my account, deserve some supplementary consideration.

The importance which our views attach to the factor of 'sense in nonsense' might lead to a demand that every joke must be a nonsense joke. But this is not necessary, because it is only playing with thoughts that inevitably leads to nonsense; the other source of pleasure in jokes, playing with words, only gives that impression occasionally and does not invariably provoke the implied criticism. The twofold root of the pleasure in jokes—from playing with words and playing with thoughts, which corresponds to the very important distinction between verbal and conceptual jokes—makes it perceptibly more difficult to arrive at a concise formulation of general statements about jokes. Playing with words produces manifest pleasure as a result of the factors that have been enumerated above (recognition, and so on), and is consequently only to a small degree liable to suppression. Playing with thoughts cannot have its motive in this kind of pleasure; it meets with very energetic suppression, and the pleasure which it can yield is only pleasure in the lifting of an inhibition. It can accordingly be said that the pleasure in jokes exhibits a core of original pleasure in play and a casing of pleasure in lifting inhibitions. We naturally do not perceive that our pleasure in a nonsense joke arises from our having succeeded in liberating a piece of nonsense in spite of its suppression; whereas we see directly that playing with words has given us pleasure. The nonsense that still remains in a conceptual joke acquires secondarily the function of increasing our attention by bewildering us. It serves as a means of intensifying the effect of the joke, but only when it acts obstructively, so that the bewilderment can hurry ahead of the understanding by a perceptible moment of time. The examples on p. 64 ff. have shown that in addition to this, nonsense in a joke can be used to represent a judgement contained in the thought. But this, too, is not the primary significance of nonsense in jokes.

[Added 1912: A number of productions resembling jokes can be classed
alongside of nonsense jokes. There is no appropriate name for them, but they might well be described as 'idiocy masquerading as a joke'. There are countless numbers of them, and I will only select two samples:

'A man at the dinner table who was being handed fish dipped his two hands twice in the mayonnaise and then ran them through his hair. When his neighbour looked at him in astonishment, he seemed to notice his mistake and apologized: "I'm so sorry, I thought it was spinach."'

Or: "Life is a suspension bridge", said one man. — "Why is that?" asked the other. — "How should I know?" was the reply.

These extreme examples have an effect because they rouse the expectation of a joke, so that one tries to find a concealed sense behind the nonsense. But one finds none: they really are nonsense. The pretence makes it possible for a moment to liberate the pleasure in nonsense. These jokes are not entirely without a purpose; they are a 'take-in', and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in misleading and annoying his hearer. The latter then damps down his annoyance by determining to tell them himself later on.

The Motives of Jokes—Jokes as a Social Process

It might seem superfluous to talk about the motives of jokes, since the aim of getting pleasure must be recognized as a sufficient motive for the joke-work. But on the one hand the possibility cannot be excluded of other motives as well having a share in the production of jokes, and on the other hand, bearing in mind some familiar experiences, we must raise the general question of the subjective determinants of jokes.

Two facts in particular make this necessary. Although the joke-work is an excellent method of getting pleasure out of psychical processes, it is nevertheless evident that not everyone is equally capable of making use of that method, the joke-work is not at everyone's command, and altogether only a few people have a plentiful amount of it, and these are distinguished by being spoken of as having 'wit' [Witz].

'Wit' appears in this connection as a special capacity—rather in the class of the old mental 'faculties'; and it seems to emerge fairly independently of the others, such as intelligence, imagination, memory, etc. We must therefore presume the presence in these 'witty' people of special inherited

1[See the Editor's Preface, p. xxxi.]
dispositions or psychical determinants which permit or favour the joke-work.

I fear that we shall not get very far in exploring this question. We can only succeed here and there in advancing from an understanding of a particular joke to a knowledge of the subjective determinants in the mind of the person who made it. It is a remarkable coincidence that precisely the example of the joke on which we began our investigations of the technique of jokes also gives us a glimpse into the subjective determinants of jokes. I refer to Heine’s joke, which has also been considered by Heymans and Lipps [p. 17]:

‘... I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal—quite famillionaire.’ (‘Bäder von Lucca.’)

Heine puts this remark into the mouth of a comic character, Hirsch-Hyacinth, a Hamburg lottery-agent, extractor of corns and professional valuer, the valet of the aristocratic Baron Cristoforo Gumpelino (formerly Gumpel). The poet evidently takes the greatest satisfaction in this creation of his, for he makes Hirsch-Hyacinth into a great talker and gives him the most amusing and plain-spoken speeches, and even lets him display the practical philosophy of a Sancho Panza. It is a pity that Heine, who seems to have had no taste for dramatic construction, dropped this delightful character so soon. There are not a few passages in which the poet himself seems to be speaking, under a thin disguise, through the mouth of Hirsch-Hyacinth, and it soon becomes a certainty that this character is only a self-parody. Hirsch explains his reasons for having given up his former name and why he now calls himself ‘Hyacinth’. He goes on: ‘There’s the further advantage that I already have an “H” on my signet, so that I don’t need to have a new one cut.’ But Heine himself effected the same economy when, at his baptism,² he changed his first name from ‘Harry’ to ‘Heinrich’. Everyone, too, who is familiar with the poet’s biography, will recall that Heine had an uncle of the same name in Hamburg (a place which provides another connection with the figure of Hirsch-Hyacinth) who, as the rich man of the family, played a large part in his life. This uncle was also called ‘Salomon’, just like the old Rothschild who treated Hirsch so famillionaire. What seemed in Hirsch-Hyacinth’s mouth no more than a jest soon reveals a background of serious bitterness if we ascribe it to the nephew, Harry-Heinrich. After all, he was one of the family, and we know that he had a burning wish to marry a daughter of this uncle’s; but his cousin rejected him, and his uncle always treated him a little famillionaire, as a poor relation. His rich cousins in Hamburg never took him seriously. I recall a story told by an old aunt of my own, who had married into the Heine family, how one day, when she was an attractive young woman, she found sitting next her at the family dinner-table a person who struck her as uninviting and whom the rest of the company treated contemptuously. She herself felt no reason to be any more affable towards him. It was only many years later that she realized that this negligent and neglected cousin had been the poet Heinrich Heine. There is not a little evidence to show how much Heine suffered both in his youth and later from this rejection by his rich relations. It was from the soil of this subjective emotion that the ‘famillionaire’ joke sprung.

The presence of similar subjective determinants may be suspected in some other of the great scoffer’s jokes; but I know of no other one in which this can be demonstrated so convincingly. For this reason it is not easy to try to make any more definite statement about the nature of these personal

²[Heine was baptized a Christian at the age of 27.]
the comic. If I come across something comic, I myself can laugh heartily at it, though it is true that I am also pleased if I can make someone else laugh by telling it to him. But I myself cannot laugh at a joke that has occurred to me, that I have made, in spite of the unmistakable enjoyment that the joke gives me. It is possible that my need to communicate the joke to someone else is in some way connected with the laughter produced by it, which is denied to me but is manifest in the other person.

Why is it, then, that I do not laugh at a joke of my own? And what part is played in this by the other person?

Let us take the second question first. In the case of the comic, two persons are in general concerned: besides myself, the person in whom I find something comic. If inanimate things seem to me comic, that is on account of a kind of personification which is not of rare occurrence in our ideational life. The comic process is content with these two persons: the self and the person who is the object; a third person may come into it, but is not essential. Joking as a play with one's own words and thoughts is to begin with without a person as an object. But already at the preliminary stage of the jest, if it has succeeded in making play and nonsense safe from the protests of reason, it demands another person to whom it can communicate its result. But this second person in the case of jokes does not correspond to the person who is the object, but to the third person, the 'other' person in the case of the comic. It seems as though in the case of a jest the other person has the decision passed over to him on whether the joke-work has succeeded in its task—as though the self did not feel certain in its judgement on the point. Innocent jokes, too, jokes that serve to reinforce a thought, require another person to test whether they have attained their aim. If a joke enters the service of the purpose of exposing or of a hostile purpose, it may be described as a psychical process between three persons, who are the same as in the case of the comic, though the part played by the third person is different; the psychical process in jokes is accomplished between the first person (the self) and the third (the outside person) and not, as in the case of the comic, between the self and the person who is the object.

Jokes are confronted by subjective determinants in the case of the third person too, and these may make their aim of producing pleasurable excitation unattainable. As Shakespeare (Love’s Labour’s Lost, V, 2) reminds us:

A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes it . . .

A person who is dominated by a mood concerned with serious thoughts is not fitted to confirm the fact that a jest has succeeded in rescuing the verbal pleasure. He must himself be in a cheerful or at least in an indifferent state of feeling in order to act as the jest’s third person. The same obstacle applies to innocent and to tendentious jokes; but in the latter there is a further obstacle in the form of opposition to the purpose which the joke is trying to serve. The third person cannot be ready to laugh at an excellent obscene joke if the exposure applies to a highly respected relative of his own; before a gathering of priests and ministers no one would venture to produce Heine’s comparison of catholic and protestant clerics to retail tradesmen and employees of a wholesale business [p. 103]; and an audience composed of my opponent’s devoted friends would receive my most successful pieces of joking invective against him not as jokes but
as invective, and would meet them with indignation and not with pleasure. Some degree of benevolence or a kind of neutrality, an absence of any factor that could provoke feelings opposed to the purpose of the joke, is an indispensable condition if the third person is to collaborate in the completion of the process of making the joke.

Where there are no such obstacles to the operation of the joke, the phenomenon which is now the subject of our enquiry emerges: the pleasure which the joke has produced is more evident in the third person than in the creator of the joke. We must be content to say more ‘evident’ where we should be inclined to ask whether the hearer’s pleasure is not more ‘intense’ than that of the maker of the joke, since we naturally have no means of measuring and comparing. We see, however, that the hearer gives evidence of his pleasure with a burst of laughter, after the first person has as a rule produced the joke with a tensely serious look. If I repeat a joke that I have heard myself, I must, if I am not to spoil its effect, behave in telling it exactly like the person who made it. The question now arises whether we can draw any conclusions about the psychical process of constructing jokes from this factor of laughing at jokes.

It cannot be our design to consider at this point all that has been propounded and published on the nature of laughter. We may well be deterred from any such plan by the remarks with which Dugas, a pupil of Ribot’s, prefaced his book *La psychologie du rire* (1902, 1): ‘Il n’est pas de fait plus banal et plus étudié que le rire; il n’en est pas qui ait eu le don d’exciter davantage la curiosité du vulgaire et celle des philosophes; il n’en est pas sur lequel on ait recueilli plus d’observations et bâti plus de théories, et avec cela il n’en est pas qui demeure plus inexplicable. On serait tenté de dire avec les sceptiques qu’il faut être content de rire et de ne pas chercher à savoir pourquoi on rit, d’autant que peut-être la réflexion tue le rire, et qu’il serait alors contradictoire qu’elle en découvrirait les causes.’

On the other hand we shall not miss the opportunity of making use for our purposes of an opinion on the mechanism of laughter which fits in excellently with our own line of thought. I have in mind the attempt at an explanation made by Herbert Spencer in his essay on “The Physiology of Laughter” (1866). According to Spencer, laughter is a phenomenon of the discharge of mental excitation and a proof that the psychical employment of this excitation has suddenly come up against an obstacle. He describes the psychological situation which ends in laughter in the following words: ‘Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small —only when there is what we may call a descending incongruity.’

4“There is no action that is more commonplace or that has been more widely studied than laughter. There is none that has succeeded more in exciting the curiosity both of ordinary people and of philosophers. There is none on which more observations have been collected and more theories built. But at the same time there is none that remains more unexplained. It would be tempting to say with the sceptics that we must be content to laugh and not try to know why we laugh, since it may be that reflection kills laughter and it would thus be a contradiction to think that it could discover its causes.”

5Various points in this definition would call for detailed examination in an investigation of comic pleasure; this has already been undertaken by other authors and in any case does not concern us here.—I do not think Spencer has been happy in his explanation of why the discharge takes the particular paths whose excitation produces the somatic picture of laughter. The theme of the physiological explanation of laughter—that is, the tracing back or interpretation of the muscular actions characteristic of laughter—has been treated at length both before and since Darwin, but has still not been finally cleared up. I have one contribution to make to this theme. So far as I know, the grimace characteristic of smiling, which twists up the corners of the mouth, appears first in an infant at the breast when it is satisfied and satiated and lets go of the breast as it falls asleep. Here it is a genuine expression of the emotions, for it corresponds to a decision to
In a quite similar sense French authors (e.g. Dugas) describe laughter as a ‘détente’, a phenomenon of relaxation of tension. So too the formula proposed by Bain [1865, 250]—‘laughter a release from constraint’—seems to me to diverge from Spencer’s view much less than some authorities would have us believe.

Nevertheless, we feel a need to modify Spencer’s notion, in part to give a more definite form to the ideas contained in it and in part to change them. We should say that laughter arises if a quota of psychical energy which has earlier been used for the cathexis of particular psychical paths has become unusable, so that it can find free discharge. We are well aware what ‘evil looks’ we are inviting with such a hypothesis; but we will venture to quote in our defence an apocryphal sentence from Lipps’s book *Komik und Humor* (1898, 71), from which illumination is to be derived on more subjects than that of the comic and humour: ‘Finally, specific psychological problems always lead fairly deep into psychology, so that at bottom no psychological problem can be treated in isolation.’ The concepts of ‘psychical energy’ and ‘discharge’ and the treatment of psychical energy as a quantity have become habitual in my thoughts since I began to arrange the facts of psychopathology philosophically, and already in my *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a) I tried (in the same sense as Lipps) to establish the fact that what are really psychically effective are psychical processes which are unconscious in themselves, not the contents of consciousness. It is only when I speak of the ‘cathexis of psychical paths’ that I seem to depart from the analogies commonly used by Lipps. My experiences of the displacability of psychical energy along certain paths of association, and of the almost indestructible persistence of the traces of psychical processes, have in fact suggested to me an attempt at picturing the unknown in some such way. To avoid misunderstanding, I must add that I am making no attempt to proclaim that the cells and nerve fibres, or the systems of neurones which are taking their place to-day, are these psychical paths, even though it would have to be possible in some manner which cannot yet be indicated to represent such paths by organic elements of the nervous system.

In laughter, therefore, on our hypothesis, the conditions are present under which a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis is allowed free discharge. And since laughter—not all laughter, it is true, but certainly laughter at a joke—is an indication of pleasure, we shall be inclined to relate this pleasure to the lifting of the cathexis which has previously been present. If we see that the hearer of a joke laughs but that its creator cannot laugh, this may amount to telling us that in the hearer a cathetic expenditure has been lifted and discharged, while in the construction of the joke there have been obstacles either to the

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*Factors of psychical life are not the contents of consciousness but the psychical processes which are in themselves unconscious. The task of psychology, if it does not merely wish to describe the contents of consciousness, must therefore consist in inferring the nature of these unconscious processes from the character of the contents of consciousness and their temporal connections. Psychology must be a theory of these processes. But a psychology of this kind will very soon find that there are quite a number of characteristics of these processes which are not represented in the corresponding contents of consciousness. (Lipps, *ibid.*, 123–4.) See also Chapter VII of my *Interpretation of Dreams* [Standard Ed., 5, 611–14].

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*Some ten years earlier Freud had in fact made an elaborate but abortive attempt to prove precisely this in his posthumously published ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’ (Freud, 1950a).*
lifting or to the possibility of discharge. The psychical process in the hearer, the joke’s third person, can scarcely be more aptly described than by stressing the fact that he has bought the pleasure of the joke with very small expenditure on his own part. He might be said to have been presented with it. The words of the joke he hears necessarily bring about in him the idea or train of thought to the construction of which great internal inhibitions were opposed in him too. He would have had to make an effort of his own in order to bring it about spontaneously as the first person, he would have had to use at least as much psychical expenditure on doing so as would correspond to the strength of the inhibition, suppression or repression of the idea. He has saved this psychical expenditure. On the basis of our earlier discussions (p. 145) we should say that his pleasure corresponds to this economy. Our insight into the mechanism of laughter leads us rather to say that, owing to the introduction of the proscribed idea by means of an auditory perception, the cathetic energy used for the inhibition has now suddenly become superfluous and has been lifted, and is therefore now ready to be discharged by laughter. The two ways of expressing the facts amount to the same thing in essentials, since the expenditure economized corresponds exactly to the inhibition that has become superfluous. But the second method of expression is the more illuminating, since it allows us to say that the hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychical energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off.

If the person in whom the joke is formed cannot laugh, this, as we have already said [p. 181], points to a divergence from what happens in the third person that lies either in the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis or in the possibility of its discharge. But the first of these alternatives will not meet the case, as we shall see at once. The inhibitory cathexis must have been lifted in the first person as well, or otherwise no joke would have come about, since its formation was precisely in order to overcome a resistance of that kind; otherwise, too, it would be impossible for the first person to feel the pleasure in the joke which we have been obliged to trace back precisely to the lifting of the inhibition. All that remains, then, is the other alternative, namely that the first person cannot laugh, although he feels pleasure, because there is an interference with the possibility of discharge. An interference of this kind with the possibility of discharge, which is a necessary precondition of laughter, may arise from the liberated cathetic energy being immediately applied to some other endopsychic use. It is a good thing that our attention has been drawn to that possibility; and our interest in it will very soon be further engaged. Another condition, however, leading to the same result, may be realized in the first person of a joke. It is possible that no quota of energy at all that is capable of being manifested may be liberated, in spite of the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis. In the first person of a joke the joke-work is performed, which must correspond to a certain quota of new psychical expenditure. Thus the first person himself produces the force which lifts the inhibition. This no doubt results in a yield of pleasure for him, and even, in the case of tendentious jokes, a very considerable one, since the fore-pleasure obtained by the joke-work itself takes over the lifting of further inhibitions; but the expenditure on the joke-work is in every case deducted from the yield resulting from the lifting of the inhibition—an expenditure which is the same as the one which the hearer of the joke avoids. What I have just said may be confirmed by observing that a joke loses its effect of laughter even in the third person as soon as he is required to make an expenditure on intellectual work in connection
A person who is responsive to smut will be unable to derive any pleasure from witty jokes of exposure; Herr N.'s attacks will not be understood by uneducated people who are accustomed to give free play to their desire to insult. Thus every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same joke is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity. Here moreover we have arrived at a point which enables us to guess still more precisely what takes place in the third person. He must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person’s joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken. This readiness for inhibition, which I must regard as a real expenditure, analogous to mobilization in military affairs, will at the same moment be recognized as superfluous or too late, and so be discharged in status nascendi by laughter.8

[2] The second condition for making free discharge possible—that the liberated energy shall be prevented from being used in any other way—seems very much the more important. It provides the theoretical explanation of the uncertainty of the effect of jokes when the thoughts expressed in a joke arouse powerfully exciting ideas in the hearer; in that case the question whether the purposes of the joke agree with or contradict the circle of thoughts by which the hearer is dominated will decide whether his attention will remain with the joking process or be withdrawn from it. Of still greater theoretical interest, however, are a class of auxiliary techniques which clearly serve the end of entirely detaching the hearer’s attention from the joking process, and of allowing that process to run its course automatically. I deliberately say ‘automatically’ and not ‘unconsciously’, because

8The notion of the status nascendi has been used by Heymans (1896) in a somewhat different connection.
the latter description would be misleading. It is only a question here of holding back an increased cathexis of attention from the psychical process when the joke is heard; and the usefulness of these auxiliary techniques rightly leads us to suspect that precisely the cathexis of attention has a great share in the supervision and fresh employment of liberated cathetic energy.

It appears to be far from easy to avoid the endopsychic employment of cathexes that have become superfluous, for in our thought-processes we are constantly in the habit of displacing such cathexes from one path to another without losing any of their energy by discharge. Jokes make use of the following methods with that aim in view. Firstly, they try to keep their expression as short as possible, so as to offer fewer points of attack to the attention. Secondly, they observe the condition of being easy to understand (see above [p. 183]); as soon as they call for intellectual work which would demand a choice between different paths of thought, they would endanger their effect not only by the unavoidable expenditure of thought but also by the weakening of attention. But besides this they employ the device of distracting attention by putting forward something in the joke’s form of expression which catches it, so that in the meantime the liberation of the inhibitory cathexis and its discharge may be completed without interruption. This aim is already fulfilled by the omissions in the joke’s wording; they offer an incitement to filling up the gaps and in that way succeed in withdrawing the joking process from attention. Here the technique of riddles, which attract the attention [p. 183], is, as it were, brought into the service of the joke-work. Far more effective even are the façades which we have found especially in some groups of tendentious jokes (p. 126 ff.). The syllogistic façades admirably fulfil the aim of holding the attention by setting it a task. While we are beginning to wonder what was wrong with the reply, we are already laughing; our attention has been caught unawares and the discharge of the liberated inhibitory cathexis has been completed. The same is true of jokes with a comic façade, in which the comic comes to the help of the joke-technique. A comic façade encourages the effectiveness of a joke in more than one way; not only does it make the automatism of the joking process possible, by holding the attention, but it also facilitates the discharge by the joke, by sending on ahead a discharge of a comic kind. The comic is here operating exactly like a bribing fore-pleasure, and we can in this way understand how some jokes are able to renounce entirely the fore-pleasure produced by the ordinary methods of joking and make use only of the comic for fore-pleasure. Among the joke-techniques proper, it is in particular displacement and representation by something absurd which, apart from other qualifications, give rise, too, to a distraction of the attention which is desirable for the automatic course of the joking process.9

9I should like to discuss yet another interesting characteristic of joke-technique, in connection with an example of a displacement joke. Once when Cullnity, that actress of genius, was asked [in the course of an official examination] the unwelcome question ‘Your age?’ she is said to have replied ‘in the tone of voice of a Gretchen and with her eyes pathetically cast down: “at Brünn.”’ This is a model displacement. When she was asked her age she replied by giving the place of her birth. She was thus anticipating the next question and was letting it be understood that she would be glad to know that this one question had been passed over. Yet we feel that in this instance the characteristic of jokes is not expressed in all its purity. It is too clear that the question is being evaded, the displacement is too obvious. Our attention understands at once that what is in question is an intentional displacement. In the other displacement jokes the displacement is disguised, our attention is held by the effort to detect it. In the displacement joke recorded on p. 65, in the reply made to a recommendation of a riding-horse ‘What should I be doing in Prewsburg at half past six?’ the displacement is also prominent. But to make up for this it has a confusing effect on the attention through its nonsensical nature, whereas in the
As we can already guess, and as we shall see more clearly later on, we have discovered in the condition of distracting the attention a by no means unessential feature of the psychological process in the hearer of a joke. In connection with this there are still other things that we can understand. Firstly, there is the question why we scarcely ever know what we are laughing at in a joke, though we can discover it by an analytic investigation. The laughter is in fact the product of an automatic process which is only made possible by our conscious attention’s being kept away from it. Secondly, we are able to understand the peculiar fact about jokes that they only produce their full effect on the hearer if they are new to him, if they come as a surprise to him. This characteristic of jokes (which determines the shortness of their life and stimulates the constant production of new jokes) is evidently due to the fact that the very nature of surprising someone or taking him unawares implies that it cannot succeed a

[Added 1912] What are known as 'Scherzfragen' (facetious questions) deviate from jokes in another direction, though apart from this they may make use of the best techniques. Here is an example of one of them, which uses the technique of displacement: 'What is a cannibal who has eaten his father and his mother?'—'An orphan.'—'And if he has eaten all his other relations as well?'—'The sole heir.'—'And where will a monster of that kind find sympathy?'—'In the dictionary under 'S.' Facetious questions of this kind are not proper jokes because the joking answers that they call for cannot be guessed in the same way as are the allusions, omissions, etc. of jokes. [Josefine Callmeyer (1858–84) was a soubrette actress, extremely popular in Vienna]

[Freud pointed out later that the device of distracting the attention is a technique that is also used in hypnotic suggestion. Cf. Chapter X of his Group Psychology (1921), Standard Ed., 18, 136. He expressed his opinion, too, in a posthumously published paper on 'Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy' (1941d [1921]), ibid., 184, that the same procedure was at work in certain cases of thought-reading. A first hint at the idea of the device is probably to be seen in Freud’s technical contribution to the Studies on Hysteria (1895d), ibid., 2, 271, in his explanation of the mechanism of his own ‘pressure’ technique.]

second time. When a joke is repeated, the attention is led back to the first occasion of hearing it as the memory of it arises. And from this we are carried on to an understanding of the urge to tell a joke one has heard to other people who have not yet heard it. One probably recovers from the impression the joke makes on a new-comer some of the possibility of enjoyment that has been lost owing to its lack of novelty. And it may be that it was an analogous motive that drove the creator of the joke in the first instance to tell it to someone else.

[3] In the third place I shall bring forward—but this time not as necessary conditions but only as encouragement to the process of joking—the auxiliary technical methods of the joke-work which are calculated to increase the quota which obtains discharge and in that way intensify the effect of the joke. These, it is true, also for the most part increase the attention that is paid to the joke, but they make this effect innocuous once more by simultaneously holding it and inhibiting its mobility. Anything that provokes interest and bewilderment works in these two directions—thus, in particular, nonsense, and contradiction, too, the ‘contrast of ideas’ [p. 8f.] which some authorities have tried to make into the essential characteristic of jokes, but which I can only regard as a means of intensifying their effect. Anything that bewilders calls up in the hearer the state of distribution of energy which Lipps has called ‘psychical damming up’ [p. 144]; and he is no doubt also correct in supposing that the discharge is the more powerful, the higher was the preceding damming up. Lipps’s account, it is true, does not relate specifically to jokes but to the comic in general; but we may regard it as most probable that in jokes, too, the discharge of an inhibitory cathexis is similarly increased by the height of the damming up.

It now begins to dawn on us that the technique of jokes
is in general determined by two sorts of purposes—those that make the construction of the joke possible in the first person and those that are intended to guarantee the joke the greatest possible pleasurable effect on the third person. The Janus-like, two-way-facing character of jokes, which protects their original yield of pleasure from the attacks of critical reason, and the mechanism of fore-pleasure belong to the first of these purposes; the further complication of the technique by the conditions that have been enumerated in the present chapter takes place out of regard for the joke's third person. A joke is thus a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once. Everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye to the third person, as though there were internal and unsurmountable obstacles to it in the first person. And this gives us a full impression of how indispensable this third person is for the completion of the joking process. But whereas we have been able to obtain a fairly good insight into the nature of this process in the third person, the corresponding process in the first person seems still to be veiled in obscurity. Of the two questions we asked [p. 175–6], 'Why are we unable to laugh at a joke we have made ourselves?' and 'Why are we driven to tell our own joke to someone else?,' the first has so far evaded our reply. We can only suspect that there is an intimate connexion between the two facts that have to be explained: that we are compelled to tell our joke to someone else because we are unable to laugh at it ourselves. Our insight into the conditions for obtaining and discharging pleasure which prevail in the third person enables us to infer as regards the first person that in him the conditions for discharge are lacking and those for obtaining pleasure only incompletely fulfilled. That being so, it cannot be disputed that we supplement our pleasure by attaining the laughter that is impossible for us by the roundabout path of the impression we have of the person who has been made to laugh. As Dugas has put it, we laugh as it were 'par ricochet [on the rebound]'. Laughter is among the highly infectious expressions of psychical states. When I make the other person laugh by telling him my joke, I am actually making use of him to arouse my own laughter; and one can in fact observe that a person who has begun by telling a joke with a serious face afterwards joins in the other person’s laughter with a moderate laugh. Accordingly, telling my joke to another person would seem to serve several purposes: first, to give me objective certainty that the joke-work has been successful; secondly, to complete my own pleasure by a reaction from the other person upon myself; and thirdly—where it is a question of repeating a joke that one has not produced oneself—to make up for the loss of pleasure owing to the joke’s lack of novelty.

At the conclusion of these discussions of the psychical processes in jokes in so far as they take place between two persons, we may glance back at the factor of economy, which has been in our mind as being of importance in arriving at a psychological view of jokes ever since our first explanation of their technique. We have long since abandoned the most obvious but simplest view of this economy—that it is a question of an avoidance of psychical expenditure in general, such as would be involved by the greatest possible restriction in the use of words and in the establishment of chains of thought. Even at that stage we told ourselves that being concise or laconic was not enough to make a joke [p. 49]. A joke’s brevity is of a peculiar kind—‘joking’ brevity. It is true that the original yield of pleasure, produced by playing with words and thoughts, was derived from mere economy in expenditure; but with the development of play into a joke the tendency to economy
too must alter its aims, for the amount that would be saved by the use of the same word or the avoidance of a new way of joining ideas together would certainly count for nothing as compared with the immense expenditure on our intellectual activity. I may perhaps venture on a comparison between psychical economy and a business enterprise. So long as the turnover in the business is very small, the important thing is that outlay in general shall be kept low and administrative costs restricted to the minimum. Economy is concerned with the absolute height of expenditure. Later, when the business has expanded, the importance of the administrative cost diminishes; the height reached by the amount of expenditure is no longer of significance provided that the turnover and profits can be sufficiently increased. It would be niggling, and indeed positively detrimental, to be conservative over expenditure on the administration of the business. Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that when expenditure was absolutely great there would be no room left for the tendency to economy. The mind of the manager, if it is inclined to economy, will now turn to economy over details. He will feel satisfaction if a piece of work can be carried out at smaller cost than previously, however small the saving may seem to be in comparison with the size of the total expenditure. In a quite analogous fashion, in our complex psychical business too, economy in detail remains a source of pleasure, as may be seen from everyday happenings. Anyone who used to have his room lighted by gas and has now had electricity installed will for quite a time be aware of a definite feeling of pleasure when he switches on the electric light; he will feel it as long as the memory is revived in him at that moment of the complicated manoeuvres that were necessary for lighting the gas. Similarly, the economies in psychical inhibitory expenditure brought about by a joke—though they are small in comparison with our total psychical expenditure—will remain a source of pleasure for us because they save us a particular expenditure which we have been accustomed to make and which we were already prepared to make on this occasion as well. The factor of the expenditure’s being one that was expected and prepared for moves unmistakably into the foreground.

A localized economy, such as we have just been considering, will not fail to give us momentary pleasure; but it will not bring a lasting relief so long as what has been saved at this point can be put to use elsewhere. It is only if this disposal elsewhere can be avoided that this specialized economy is transformed into a general relief of psychical expenditure. Thus, as we come to a better understanding of the psychical processes of jokes, the factor of relief takes the place of economy. It is obvious that the former gives a greater feeling of pleasure. The process in the joke’s first person produces pleasure by lifting inhibition and diminishing local expenditure; but it seems not to come to rest until, through the intermediary of the interpolated third person, it achieves general relief through discharge.