

# Sympathy for the Coyote

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# 1 Introduction

In this essay I analyze the Coyote-Road Runner series as humor using some well-known philosophical theories. My aim is to show that not many theories can explain why the cartoon is considered humor.<sup>1</sup> This is potentially disastrous to all of them, if we take these theories to be about the essence of humor. If they cannot explain why the cartoon is humor, they clearly have problems. I suggest that Luigi Pirandello's theory offers some ideas to explain the cartoon. Finally I will consider what kinds of theoretical implications the cartoon and my interpretation of it may have.

Chuck Jones (1989, 225) writes in his biography that while making the Coyote-Road Runner series his team obeyed<sup>2</sup> the following rules (presumably among others):

1. The Road Runner cannot harm the Coyote except by going "beep-beep!"
2. No outside force can harm the Coyote—only his own ineptitude or the failure of the Acme products.
3. The Coyote could stop anytime—*if* he were not a fanatic. (Repeat: "A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim." George Santayana)
4. No dialogue ever, except "beep-beep!"
5. The Road Runner must stay on the road—otherwise, logically, he would not be called Road Runner.
6. All action must be confined to the natural environment of the two characters—the Southwest American desert.
7. All materials, tools, weapons, or mechanical conveniences must be obtained from the Acme Corporation.
8. Whenever possible, make gravity the Coyote's greatest enemy.
9. The Coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures.

Although the list is not a substitute to watching the cartoon, it helps us to get a picture of what happens in the cartoon and which things are the most important. The first thing to note is that the cartoon is thoroughly structured: Wile E. Coyote wants to capture the Road Runner to eat him, but *always* fails

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<sup>1</sup>Some might deny that the cartoon is actually humor. I hope my analysis can work as an argument against this claim. But even before we consider my argument, we can say that people are amused by the cartoon, and that this was at least partly the intention of the cartoonists. Thus *prima facie* it has to be considered humor.

<sup>2</sup>The rules or some of them might not have existed in printed form, and some of them do not even seem to be consistent with what happens in the cartoon. This is not crucial here. Whenever I take a rule mentioned here to be descriptive of the cartoon, the responsibility is mine.

and gets hurt. There are obviously no logical or linguistic incongruities. There are no multiple ways to interpret the action. This means that the *incongruity theory* is unable to explain the humor in the cartoon (Critchley, 2002, 3). This becomes even more obvious after you realize that the cartoon really becomes funny only after a few times you see it.

It needs to be said that there are scenes in the cartoon that surprise the viewer. A classic example is the recurring scene in which the Coyote paints a fake tunnel on the wall in an attempt to fool the Road Runner to run into the wall, only to find out that the Road Runner (but not the Coyote himself) is able to pass through the tunnel.<sup>3</sup> There are other similar examples. But even though they contribute to the funniness of the cartoon, they do not exhaust it, and as I mean to argue, they do not constitute its core. For one thing, not all scenes are surprising. Even those scenes that have surprises end in a predictable way. Many of the surprises have become commonplaces. But perhaps the most important reason why the incongruity theory fails to explain the cartoon is that even when the cartoon surprises the viewer, it remains a mystery why the surprise is an amusing one. Obviously not all surprises amuse.

## 2 Observations

There are two main characters in the cartoon. Of these two the Road Runner is never funny. On some level it can be asked if the Road Runner is a character at all. The problem presents itself immediately in that it is difficult even to know which pronoun to use to talk about the Road Runner. He? She? It? The Road Runner has no emotions, no psychology and no instincts, being even less than an animal. All the Road Runner does is escape, and irk the Coyote (in a very machine-like way). This means that if the cartoon is funny, the funniness depends on the Coyote.

Is the Coyote funny? We can make some observations of him and apply certain theoretical ideas to these observations.

1. he is portrayed as being really desperate and pathetic
2. he is a fanatic and single-mindedly pursues his objective even if it does not seem necessary
3. very often outside forces reduce him into just a physical thing, flying through air, squashed under a heavy object etc.

According to the *superiority theory* defended most famously by Thomas Hobbes, we laugh at the cartoon because of 1 (Critchley, 2002, 2-3). The Coyote never tries to do anything except for one thing, capture and eat the Road Runner, and always fails. His skinny and colourless appearance and bloodshot eyes represent the fact that he is a failure. The idea of the superiority theory is that we feel

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<sup>3</sup>And after this, generally a big truck or a train comes out of the tunnel and runs over the Coyote.

joy because we perceive ourselves to be superior to the Coyote, and that it is this joy that makes us laugh.

Henri Bergson's theory can be considered a version of the superiority theory, but it is further developed in a way that makes a difference in the analysis of the cartoon. According to Bergson's theory, the cartoon is funny because of 2 and 3. Bergson holds that we laugh at someone behaving mechanically, like a machine. This behavior can be caused by several things from physical force to character flaws. The idea is that laughter is a social phenomenon evolved to humiliate people and bring them back to conformity with the rules and norms of the society (Bergson, 1911, 197). The person has to be flexible to adjust to social life, and when he behaves mechanically because of some non-social obsession or other kind of force, he fails to adapt. The result is we perceive him as comic, and we laugh at him. The phenomenon can be used by comic authors in several ways, but the core idea is always the same: the comic is "something mechanical in something living" (Bergson, 1911, 77). The Coyote has a character flaw in that he is a fanatic. And as Jones's rules 2 and 8 lead us to expect, the Coyote also often becomes a victim of physical forces and malfunctioning devices.

In sum, there are reasons to think that the Coyote-Road Runner cartoon is an example of the superiority theory and also an example of Bergson's theory of humor. In the next chapter I ask whether or not these reasons are persuasive enough.

### 3 Difficulties

The basic version of the superiority theory is correct in pointing out the Coyote's being a failure as something that contributes to the cartoon's funniness. But although the Road Runner in itself is not funny, in the end neither is the Coyote. Not all failures are funny. Instead the funniness of the cartoon is in the interplay of the characters and in the specific way that the Coyote fails to achieve his goals. The interplay between the characters is not just an illustration of the Coyote's "infirmity" (in Hobbesian terms), in that it is not just a replaceable part in the cartoon: one cannot replace it with for example a direct description of the Coyote's flaws without diluting the humor. At least a part of the funniness is in the action.

Bergson's theory is in an excellent position to explain the fact that the funniness is in the interplay between the characters. In many respects the Coyote is a perfect Bergsonian "character", a personification of single-mindedness and inflexibility. However, an important detail in the theory is that the comic effect is only possible when emotional involvement is suspended. Bergson (1911, 139) writes that human character flaws can be "ludicrous" only if they do not "arouse our feelings; that is the sole condition really necessary, though assuredly it is not sufficient". Although we might feel sympathy for a character, we can only laugh at him when in some way we "get over" this sympathy and begin to see objectively, without emotion, the mechanic nature of his behavior. But in fact we do seem to feel sympathy for the Coyote—as Jones (1989, 219) describes in

his biography, the Coyote capturing the audience's sympathies actually was an important goal of the animators, even to the point of being "the basis of the series"—and this does not seem to subtract from the cartoon's funniness.

Bergson could try to get around the problem by pointing out that we do feel sympathy for the Coyote, but as we laugh at him, the sympathy moves to the background. According to this idea, we alternatively sympathize and laugh, but never both at the same time. This does not seem an honest description, however, and it would be strange if our emotions were to alternate in such a way. A better description has to include our sympathetic feelings for the Coyote as being part of what makes the cartoon humor.

## 4 Pirandello's theory

Pirandello's theory of humor promises to be able to accommodate the sympathy we feel for the Coyote, and in his view humor even requires sympathy for the object of laughter. In this it seems to have an advantage over Bergson's theory. The problem is that Pirandello's theory is imprecise and therefore difficult to understand. I will try to defend a schematized and probably simplified version of it while not worrying too much about being faithful to Pirandello's intention. My hope is to show that it can add to our understanding of the cartoon.

The core of the theory is formed by two components: *the perception of the contrary* and *the sentiment of the contrary*<sup>4</sup>. First we need to understand what is meant by "the contrary". Pirandello's examples indicate that it is a difference between what should be done and what actually is done. One example is of an old lady who dyes her hair and wears clothes intended for a much younger woman to avoid looking old: the lady should behave her age, but instead acts like someone much younger (Pirandello, 1992, 126). As I understand it, Pirandello's contrary is very similar to Bergson's inflexibility or rigidity. The idea is that someone fails to adapt to the circumstances and stubbornly does the same thing the same way over and over again.

When it comes to the effect of perceiving the rigidity in persons, Bergson and Pirandello are in agreement. The effect is *comic* and provokes laughter—in Pirandello's terms, this effect is called the perception of the contrary. But after this the paths diverge somewhat. Bergson thinks laughter is a corrective, a social phenomenon born to humiliate its object and make him behave like he should. Pirandello might agree to some extent, but goes on and distinguishes the comic from the *humorous*: the difference according to him consists in the passage from the perception of the contrary to the sentiment of it (Pirandello, 1992, 126). The idea is that we laugh at comedy because we do not *reflect*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*avvertimento del contrario, sentimento del contrario*

<sup>5</sup>Reflection is an important and yet only loosely defined process. It is what turns comedy into humor, so it would need to be described better. In fact Pirandello does not talk about reflection in general, but only a "special activity of reflection". Pirandello himself talks about things like doubling and contrast, and often gives the impression that he is using the word in a strict technical sense. However, I think his theory can be understood without going into specifics over the meaning of the term. I take it to mean very generally a rational process

upon the situation of the comic character. Because of this lack of reflection, we do not really sympathize with him. But once we begin to understand the character better, we begin to sympathize with him, because we realize why he behaves like he does. This is what Pirandello calls the sentiment of the contrary, and it is the essence of humor as distinguished from comedy.

Pirandello (1992, 129) writes that it is “the saddest experience of life [...] that has determined the humorous disposition in the poet”. To be able to write a humorous work, one needs to understand why people behave in that rigid way described by Bergson. It is not an accident that people behave comically. Instead this behavior is caused by suffering. In Pirandello’s own example of the lady failing to dress her age the point is that by trying desperately to look younger, the lady hopes to retain the love of her much younger husband. It is not relevant here whether or not it is necessary for the humorous author himself to have led a sad life. What is crucial is that in a humorous work there has to be an element of suffering on which to reflect.

Let us return to the cartoon. The “contrary” in the case of the Coyote is that he should understand that he is never going to catch the Road Runner and that his time would be better spent trying to procure himself something else to eat, but instead all he does is try to catch the Road Runner. Thus he is a fanatic, like Jones’s rule 3 says. When we see that he is a fanatic, we laugh. But when we begin to reflect on the predicament of the Coyote, we laugh in a different way.

At this point it is important to repeat that we are not looking for a completely new explanation of comedy, humor, funniness and laughter. Like we saw, Bergson’s theory already offers a good basic explanation of the cartoon, and its only problem is that it cannot account for the sympathy we feel for the Coyote. Pirandello tells us to try and reflect on the situation of the Coyote. Jones (1989, 219) writes that the Coyote is a “history of [his] own frustration and war with all tools, multiplied only slightly”. Thus he has transferred some of his own experiences to the Coyote, in particular experiences of failure. Jones (1989, 222) goes on to say that even human beings, “even in their most grandiloquent plans, often resemble coyotes”. Thus, from being a way for Jones to cope with his particular frustrations, the Coyote acquired a more universal meaning. It seems there is something in the universality of the experience of suffering that is crucial to understanding the cartoon and perhaps humor (in the Pirandellian sense) in general.

If I am correct, when we laugh at the Coyote, we laugh at life and ourselves. The Coyote strictly speaking cannot be understood. He does not have good reasons to continue his attempts to catch the Road Runner. We have two ways of relating to him. We may consider him mentally ill and have pity for him. But this pity is not sympathetic but tragic. We cannot put ourselves into his position and see the world like he sees it, as his way of seeing the world is incoherent and thus out of reach for (formally) rational reflection. But reflection does allow

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of trying to understand a person or a social situation, and it is motivated by the belief that there is something beyond appearances.

another possibility. The unexplicability of the Coyote can be turned back to the lack of a form of human life in general. Pirandello (1992, 151) himself paints a picture of human life as endless flux disguised by a superficial order (or “logic”). Thus the Coyote can be understood symbolically, being a kind of allegory for the human condition. We recognize ourselves in him.

The crucial missing step is to explain how we can laugh at all this. I think it is possible when we realize the inherent paradox in laughing at oneself.<sup>6</sup> It is in our interests not to be found laughable. Yet most of us laugh at ourselves from time to time. The difficulty with the incompatibility between sympathy and laughter can be resolved, if I can treat our past self as separate from my present self. I sympathize with both, as I recognize myself in both. But sympathies can be of different weight. The possibility of laughing at myself opens up if I can notice an improvement in my condition. Although I do sympathize with who I was, I prefer to be better than who I was. I may see myself in the Coyote, but it is my past self.

## 5 Theoretical implications

In some ways Bergson and Pirandello talk about the same things, but interpret them differently. Both talk about laughter and sympathy. But while for Pirandello laughter comes chronologically before sympathy, for Bergson (1911, 194) empathy comes first. For Pirandello (1992, 128), the initial laughter comes to be disturbed by a sense of commiseration, making the laughter bitter. For Bergson, the empathy is set aside to deliver—in the form of laughter—the punishment for inflexibility. Now, it is common sense to think that we often laugh at things we do not understand. But after we come to understand them and the reasoning behind them, we cease to laugh. The move of sentiment away from sympathy seems quite unusual, and as far as I see Bergson is not able to explain it. Pirandello’s train of thought seems a bit more reasonable. If we sympathize with someone at all, we sympathize with him after we begin to understand him, and once we do understand him, we are no longer able to laugh at him as an object of comedy. The question is why we can laugh at him at all. Although Pirandello hints at a possible explanation, he does not complete it. My analysis tries to bridge some gaps in his work in a way that is possibly less than faithful to his intention.

If my analysis of the cartoon is correct, Bergson’s theory would have to be modified. In particular, his views on sympathy would have to be remodeled, if it is true that sympathy and laughter may coexist. Although the theory is admittedly elegant, it achieves this elegance for the price of certain unintuitive assumptions. Some of these are interconnected. Bergson’s idea of the incompatibility of sympathy and laughter becomes more understandable but even less plausible when we realize that it entails his essential refusal of the possibility of finding oneself ridiculous:

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<sup>6</sup>As Simon Critchley (2002, 94-96) notes, Freud has a solution that is structurally similar to mine but requires his whole theoretical framework.

However interested a dramatist may be in the comic features of human nature, he will hardly go, I imagine, to the extent of trying to discover his own. Besides, he would not find them, for we are never ridiculous except in some point that remains hidden from our own consciousness. (Bergson, 1911, 168.)

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