ABSTRACT. Freud's theory of jokes explains how they overcome the mental "censors" that make it hard for us to think "forbidden" thoughts. But his theory did not work so well for humorous nonsense as for other comical subjects. In this essay I argue that the different forms of humor can be seen as much more similar, once we recognize the importance of knowledge about knowledge and, particularly, aspects of thinking concerned with recognizing and suppressing bugs — ineffective or destructive thought processes. When seen in this light, much humor that at first seems pointless, or mysterious, becomes more understandable.

INTRODUCTION

A gentleman entered a pastry-cook's shop and ordered a cake; but he soon brought it back and asked for a glass of liqueur instead. He drank it and began to leave without having paid. The proprietor detained him. "You've not paid for the liqueur." "But I gave you the cake in exchange for it." "You didn't pay for that either." "But I hadn't eaten it".

— from Freud (1905). [0]

In trying to classify humorous phenomena, Sigmund Freud asks whether this should be called a joke, "for the fact is we do not yet know in what the characteristic of being a joke resides." Let us agree that some of the cake-joke's humor is related to a logical absurdity — leaving aside whether it is in the logic itself, or in keeping track of it. Later Freud goes on to ask what is the status of a "knife without a blade which has no handle?" This absurdity has a different quality; some representation is being misused — like a frame without a picture.

Freud, who never returned to the subject after writing his 1905 book on the theory of jokes [0], suggested that "censors" in the mind form powerful, unconscious barriers that make it difficult to think "forbidden" thoughts. But jokes can elude these censors — to create the pleasure of unearned release of psychic energy, which is discharged in the form of laughter. He explains why jokes tend to be compact and condensed, with double meanings: this is to fool the childishly simple-minded censors, who see only innocent surface meanings and fail to penetrate the disguise of the forbidden wishes.

But Freud's theories do not work as well for humorous nonsense as for
humorous aggression and sexuality. In this essay I try to show how these different forms of humor can be seen as much more similar, once we make certain observations about the nature of commonsense reasoning. Here is our thesis:

1. Common sense logic is too unreliable for practical use. It cannot be repaired, so we must learn to avoid its most common malfunctions. Humor plays a special role in learning and communicating about such matters.

2. It is not enough to detect errors in reasoning; one must anticipate and prevent them. We embody much of our knowledge about how to do this in the form of “censors” that suppress unproductive mental states. This is why humor is so concerned with the prohibited.

3. Productive thinking depends on knowing how to use Analogy and Metaphor. But analogies are often false, and metaphors misleading. So the “cognitive unconscious” must suppress inappropriate comparisons. This is why humor is so concerned with the nonsensical.

4. The consequences of intellectual failure are manifest in one’s own head, while social failures involve other people. Intellect and Affect seem less different once we theorize that the “cognitive unconscious” considers faulty reasoning to be just as “naughty” as the usual “Freudian” wishes.

5. Humor evolved in a social context. Its forms include graciously disarranging ways to instruct others about inappropriate behavior and faulty reasoning. This deviousness makes the subject more confusing.

Our theory emphasizes the importance of knowledge about knowledge and, particularly, aspects of thinking concerned with recognizing and suppressing bugs — ineffective of destructive thought processes. When seen in this light, much humor that at first seems pointless, or mysterious, becomes more understandable.

I. PROBLEMS OF COMMON SENSE REASONING

When you tell a young child “I am telling a lie” then, if he is old enough to reason so, he will think: “If that is false, then he’s not telling a lie. But, then it must be true. But then, it must be a lie, for it says so. But then — ”. And so on, back and forth.

A child might find this situation disagreeable for several reasons. It challenges the belief that propositions are always either true or false. It threatens to propagate through his knowledge-structure, creating other inconsistencies. And he can make no progress when his mind returns again and again to the same state. Common sense can go awry in endless ways.