As a theme of aesthetics the comical is of minor importance. It is not domi-
nant in any of the arts except literature. It occurs occasionally in “program
music,” but does so even here mostly through the words which the music
accompanies. However, within limits, life itself is full of the comical. Any
awkwardness, any unsuitable conduct may provoke laughter; and the laught-
ter can be rather heartless — a mockery.

But what is mockery? In its basic form it is nothing other than finding
pleasure in the non-voluntary comical in life. Beyond this it can become
quite unpleasant, deliberately seeking weaknesses in others, elaborating them,
displaying them for ridicule. And there are people who thrive on making
others the object of ridicule.

We may well ask, therefore, does the comical really have aesthetic value?
Are we here at all concerned with an aesthetic phenomenon?

The answer to this question must be a qualified Yes.

To the extent to which we are not concerned with moral values or disvalues
we can at least concentrate on the aesthetic aspect of the comical. This is
possible because the gaiety which the comical elicits may be completely
harmless. It need not tend toward malicious joy — and perhaps does so for
morally immature persons. The mature person knows the little annoying ca-
lamities only too well. He or she looks at them, smiles understandingly, and
forgets them. Although this fact does not prove that the pleasure taken in the
comical is an aesthetic pleasure, it indicates at least that it can be one.

The genuine aesthetic character of the comical lies in the fact that the
pleasure is purely objective and without practical interest. It pertains to what
happens, never to the person affected by it. Compassion or malicious joy do
not belong to the aesthetic phenomenon but to an ethical attitude taken by
the observer.

What provokes laughter is always something in the realm of human weak-
ness — be it presumptuousness or folly. What is primarily involved are con-
ceit, arrogance, and pompousness. But even a bit of the unlogical is sufficient
to provoke laughter if it displays itself as important wisdom.
However, recognizing the comical as such is one thing; explaining it is something else.

Thomas Hobbes argued that the comical is the occurrence of the unexpected, and he added that this occurrence must be connected with the feeling of one’s own superiority. To be sure, the “occurrence of the unexpected” is basic to the comical, but being unexpected alone is not sufficient. The unexpected must be the weakness and littleness in human attitudes where something much greater and more important is expected.

This Hobbesian thesis was widely discussed during the eighteenth century—a discussion which culminated in Kant’s assertion in the *Critique of Judgment* that

in everything that is to excite a lively and hearty laughter there must be something absurd (something, therefore, in which the understanding can find no delight). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.* This transformation, which is not enjoyable for the understanding, still gives indirectly great enjoyment for the moment.²

One laughs at the simplicity that does not yet know how to dissemble and awaits the commonplace reaction to artificial utterances carefully devised to produce a beautiful situation. And lo and behold! it is the unspoiled innocent nature which we did not expect to be present and which the person who lets it be seen did not intend to reveal.

Against this Kantian background Nicolai Hartmann developed his own interpretation of the comical.³ To begin with, Hartmann finds three groups of phenomena in human life that provide the basis for the comical.

1. The first group includes the moral weakness and pettiness which likes to masquerade as strength and superiority. It is an attitude which likes to hide itself but cannot prevent unmasking, and thus destroying itself. Hartmann includes in this group such human frailties as inconsequence, fickleness, indolence, laziness, impatience, cowardice, timidity, credulity, blind confidence, lack of self-control, anger, blind fury; but also talkativeness, gossiping disposition, pompousness, secretiveness, pedantry, niggardliness, avarice, and others. Human weakness of this type provides an inexhaustible supply of themes for the comical. What is comical in all of these cases is the inherent tendency to camouflage and, if possible, to give the impression of the opposite. The comical effect occurs at the critical moment when the camouflage is destroyed and the all-too-human reality is revealed.

2. The second group shows more intellectual defects and thus comes closer to the unlogical in human experience. Hartmann here mentions stupidity,