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## Erich Fromm and Critical Humor Research

Jarno Hietalahti

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### Introduction

Humor and laughter are seemingly innocent and simple subjects of study: we all know what is funny (to ourselves, at least) and amusement, in general, appears to be something easy and enjoyable. We laugh when we feel like it, and that's it – why bother to dig any deeper, as the analysis would probably kill the joy? Indeed, to be a killjoy appears to be a severe sin in the contemporary world. If someone questions the humor of others and tries to understand the wider constellations into which humor and laughter fit, he is easily considered to be a bore.

The previous passage brings us to the heart of Erich Fromm's humanistic, critical and social psychological thinking. Fromm offers a sane and fresh perspective on the cultural phenomenon of humor: following his scientific method, one has to go to the roots of the phenomenon and try to tear down the ideological veil around the assumed positivity of humor. Fromm's social criticism encourages us to examine the community of laughers. Why do people, in certain historical periods, laugh at certain topics, and ridicule certain phenomena? How do they relate to others with their laughter? If there is a shared passion for mocking the shortcomings of others, where does this striving come from? Why do we insist that humor is always innocent? These are the central social philosophical and psychological questions around Frommian humor research. *I suggest that humor should be seen in relation to the total character struc-*

*ture. Or, to put it other way, the way one relates to and perceives humor is actually a character trait.*

For conceptual clarity, I understand the concept of humor as it is explained by incongruity theory; humor is always built on paradoxes. To put it another way, there is a conflict of cultural categorizations at the heart of humor. I consider the concept of humor as in a sense dynamic, as humor is always bound to concrete socio-historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> Thus, what is considered to be funny in one historical moment can be, say, tragic or incomprehensible in another. This theoretical position helps to understand why funniness is perceived differently between certain social groups; in a certain social setting a particular joke can be tremendously funny, and for others the very same joke can be just low-minded and not funny at all. This means that the incongruity of humor has to be recognizable and understandable, and the possibility of "getting" a joke is deeply rooted in the prevailing cultural context and how language is used within it.

Even though Fromm never studied humor explicitly, he refers to it through his written works and repeatedly questions widely shared assumption about laughter. My research, then, fills a gap among Fromm studies as well among humor research: previously, nobody has done systematic humor research based on Fromm's thinking. The mission is as follows: first, general

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<sup>1</sup> I have argued for this position in Hietalahti 2016a.



positive assumptions about humor and laughter must be critically examined. This can be done by showing how humor can go wrong (in an ethical sense). After this criticism, the Frommian task is to find possibilities of humor being life-affirmative and productive (in Fromm's way of using this term). This article is based on research I concluded during my Fellowship period at the Erich Fromm Institute Tübingen (November 2014 – November 2016). The essential mission is to put humor in its context: that is, humor has to be evaluated in relation to the basic questions of humanity proposed by Fromm.

### 1. Humor and Humanity

If one were to choose just a couple of phenomena which appear to belong explicitly to the human manner of existence, humor would indisputably be one of them. Some animals do laugh and play, but still human beings appear to be unique in that it is not an exaggeration to say that humor penetrates all spheres of social and cultural life. Technically, there is nothing one cannot joke about as humor is about contradiction. Every human conceptualization can be presented in an incongruent way compared to something else – the possible humorous cultural combinations are infinite. Actually, Fromm considers humanity in its totality to be an absurdity: due to our existential conflict between the animal sphere (we are, in any case, beings of nature, too) and human rationality (we are the only animals, according to Fromm, who are self-conscious), we are freaks of the universe. We are ridden with paradoxes in our cultural spheres as well as in an existential sense. (See e.g. Fromm 1947a.) A Frommian theory of humor starts by asking what it means to be a human being, and how humor is related to this question.

So, to understand humor – of course, not only in the sense of what appears to be amusing but to grasp the meaning of humor – demands that we have to understand humanity, and because of this, socially critical humor research can be located under the banner of philosophical an-

thropology. Fromm argues that the very essence of humanity is based on the paradoxical situation described above, which is the cause of existential needs shared by every human being. These needs, such as the need for relatedness, the need for identity, and the need for a frame of reference, must always be answered in a unique historical and cultural setting (Fromm 1962a, pp. 133-139). I believe that the social significance of humor can be understood when humor is analyzed in relation to these human needs.

The essential problem then is how these human needs can be fulfilled in the best possible way; in other words, we need to study what constitutes a good life. Fromm does not believe that one can give fixed, universal answers to this question but there are certain general guidelines which can be applied here. Fromm argues for a productive or *biophilic* stance on life: humanity is about growth and a positive relatedness to each other in which one remains a unique individual but also finds a new harmony with one's fellow human beings. This kind of approach to life is not about having or possessing as much as possible but instead of *being*. It is based on the faith in humanity, love in its broadest sense, and other high humanistic values, such as freedom and dignity. (See Fromm 1947a; 1962a; 1976a.) These are the guidelines in relation to which also humor has to be evaluated.

Now, there is plenty of humor research which emphasizes how people laugh more easily when in social situations; and, vice versa, the amount of laughter decreases when we are in solitude (see Provine 2000, pp. 44-45). As Henri Bergson (1913, pp. 5-6) puts it, laughter is always laughter of a group and necessarily shared. Generally it is interpreted that this sharedness of humor and laughter makes them positive features in human life. Laughter brings people together, and if we are able to perceive amusing contradictions of the world in a similar manner, then there is at least something similar in our worldviews. One could conclude that humor and laughter are expressions of the so-



cial fact that one is not alone in the world.

On the most superficial level, all this sounds rather good. As Fromm puts it, we cannot bear to be alone and completely unrelated to other human beings (Fromm 1947a, p. 31); a complete isolation leads to insanity, and to be insane is basically same as to be dead. Thus, a shared moment of fun and amusement offers a glimpse of hope – it symbolizes a moment of togetherness. In this respect, it is no wonder that contemporary humor research highlights from time to time how humor enhances one's worth in the relationship markets (see Butzer 2008) and how one should laugh every chance he or she gets (see Seppälä 2015).

However, Fromm's social criticism always questions the quality of relatedness; one has to evaluate the quality of people's relations to each other based on humanistic values. Fromm is quite clear that there are non-productive, or even harmful, ways to be related to each other; such as sadistic, authoritarian, and masochistic forms of relatedness (see, e.g., Fromm and Maccoby 1970b). Instead, it is essential to base the relationship between people upon a life-affirmative stance (see Fromm 1973a about biophilic principles) which admits the equality and uniqueness of every single human individual. In this type of relatedness, people are not treated as a means to something but, following Kantian principles, they are ends in themselves. These principles also extend to humor. To understand the social and cultural significance of humor and its effects on humanity, it is essential to ascertain whether humor respects basic humanistic ideals. In this philosophical and social psychological task, Fromm's concept of social character is of utmost importance.

## 2. Social Character and Humor

Fromm stresses that throughout one's life, one has to answer the question of how to overcome separateness: how to find a connection with others and with nature. He states that one has to give the answer with one's total personality, that is, as a human being "who thinks and dreams, who sleeps and eats, who cries and

laughs". (Fromm 1991f, p. 6.) According to Michael Maccoby, Fromm believed that the sense of humor is an emotional equivalent to a person's cognitive sense of reality (Maccoby 2009, p. 143). This means that the way we are related to the world has crucial effects on our sense of humor, and reciprocally, our sense of humor reflects the way we relate to others.

Fromm's character typology can be fruitfully applied to humor research, too. Fromm himself noted that in his time, laughter appeared to be in some sense *false*; beyond friendly smiles he found other, not as friendly attitudes. (See Fromm 1941a; 1947a; 1973a.) If humor is supposed to be an intimate expression of connection between individuals, it appears curious that people react violently to what is supposed to be funny; one needs only think about the tragic aftermath of the Jyllands Posten Muhammad cartoons in 2005-2006, or the murderous terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo in 2015. The assumedly innocent nature of humor has been questioned recently in the most horrible manner (for a closer analysis of the Charlie Hebdo tragedy, see Hietalahti et al. 2016). Fromm observed that humor, laughter and smiles can be used to highly selfish ends. When a salesperson smiles, his or her smile is probably based on the principle of consumption, or when a sadistic person laughs, his fun comes at the expense of others' – even if unconsciously (see Fromm 1973a). It appears that mirth stems from various sources; and not all of them are acceptable.

Now, Fromm's research on different social character orientations helps to understand the various passions behind humor and laughter. The leading premise is that shared sense of humor helps people to cope with each other; humor and laughter further adaptation to social, cultural and economic conditions. However, at the same moment – as humor is a dynamic feature – what is funny for one may be offensive and hurtful for others. From this it can be concluded that among different social groups humor enhances different emotional attitudes; it can promote hostility, friendliness, indiffer-



ence, openness, etc. The crucial thing is, of course, to ask, in relation to what? Following Fromm, the question about humor should be, then, what the basic attitudes are behind humor. Next, I offer brief analyses of three different character orientations explicated by Fromm and how they can be applied to understand different orientations towards humor (and to others via humor).

*Marketing orientation.* This way of relating to oneself, the world and to others is based on a worldview through which everything and everyone is evaluated as a commodity. For this kind of character, everything is up for sale or trade, including personal relationships and smiles, and this kind of personality understands even human relationships on the basis of exchange value. People of this type are extremely flexible. Instead having a clear core, Fromm argues, there is a lack of permanency, as everything is sellable in the terms of the prevailing market system. (Fromm 1947a, pp. 50-57.) I add that for this kind of character, humor is also based on the idea of flexibility and on the demands of the current situation. For him or her, jokes and laughter are commodities to be exchanged, and this type considers humor to be a tool for selling even his or her personality. The very general idea of 'humor sells' reflects the above described tendency in everyday life, and there are studies which suggest that humor makes one more approachable in social relationships (see Graham 1995).

*Sadistic characters,* on the other hand, are guided by the striving for control and power. Sadistic personalities do not necessarily want to inflict pain but are rather interested in transforming other human beings into things that can be handled and manipulated according to the sadist's own wishes (Fromm 1973a, p. 488). This idea fits well with the claim that we laugh when we feel ourselves superior to others. This can be manifested in a sudden reaction (as Thomas Hobbes [1651] classically describes laughter), or it may be a deliberate attempt to subjugate others via ridiculing and shaming in the form of humor. If something or someone is

ridiculous, it means – for a sadistic personality – that the object of laughter is worthless at least in some respect. This general sadistic tendency, connecting ridiculousness with worthlessness, is a relatively general trait among certain groups, and even though this presentation lacks empirical data on the subject matter, this hypothesis can be verified by empirical studies (see e.g. Zeigler-Hill et al. 2016). The guiding principle in sadism, as Fromm writes, is "the passion for unrestricted power over another sentient being." (Fromm 1973a, p. 38) I suggest cruel mockery against, say, minorities fits well within this framework.

The most humane way to relate to others and to oneself, is through what Fromm calls a *productive character orientation*. It refers to "a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience" (Fromm and Maccoby 1970b, pp. 94), or in a more poetic form, this type of personality "gives soul to that which surrounds him. The productive person gives birth to his own faculties and gives life to persons and to things" (loc. cit.). This type of character, then, does not base his humor on selfishness but rather he is sensitive to himself and to others even in his laughter. As Fromm describes, "What matters in the productive attitude is not its particular object, which may be people, nature, or things, but rather the whole approach. The productive orientation is rooted in the love of life (biophilia). It is *being*, not *having*" (loc. cit.) In my interpretation, humor, for this type of personality, is not a tool for anything, but an expression of productive relatedness. Humor is a joyful acknowledgement of categorical anomalies but not in the sense that others are considered to be ridiculous *and* worthless; instead the plurality, commonalities and differences between people can be considered as a reminder of the total humanity and its versatile nature. In Fromm's view, the totality of human existence is an absurdity (Fromm 1990a, p. 77) and we are freaks of the universe (Fromm 1947a, p. 28), and the productive character reflects this insight in his humor. This character orientation accepts the totality of the human condition, and understands that every



individual shares the basic paradox of humanity. Life may be an absurdity but at least we are all in the same boat; so, humor and laughter are not tools of separation, but sparkling moments of joyful relatedness and aspects of sharing.

These brief illustrations describes how there are fundamental differences between the ways different individuals relate to humor and to others via humor. In short, humor can be, for instance, a form of selling oneself, or a tool to hurt and oppress others, or, it can be a life-affirmative way to be related to others. It is essential to underline that individuals and societies are not always aware of their own forms of relatedness; Fromm says throughout his written works that these forms of relatedness are often latent aspects of personality. Fromm's genius is to proceed from an individual unconscious to the *unconscious of the society* by which he refers to

that repression of inner reality which is common to large groups. (...) Naturally the contents of the social unconscious vary depending on the many forms of social structure: aggressiveness, rebelliousness, dependency, loneliness, unhappiness, boredom, to mention only a few. The repressed impulse must be kept in repression and replaced by ideologies which deny it or affirm its opposite. (Fromm, 1981a, p. 36)

This aspect is essential if we are to solve, say, the public and academic dispute over controversial humor; Fromm's position offers an insightful perspective on, for instance, debates about the relationship between humor and freedom.<sup>2</sup> Next, I will discuss how the freedom of humor should be conceptualized from a humanistic perspective.

### 3. Humor and Freedom

Among comedians, academics and the wider

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed take on the subject matter, see Hietalahti 2015a and Hietalahti 2016b.

public, there appears to be a general assumption that humor should not be restricted. As humor is often seen something non-serious and socially appreciable, and laughter as a positive force in life, this general position is understandable. Often humor is thought to be the last base of freedom, and that there is nothing one could or should not joke about. In this perspective, humor and freedom go hand in hand (e.g. Morreall 1983). However, as international humor research has shown, there are plenty of examples of how humor can be oppressing and hurtful. It has been claimed that there are topics which are so awful that one should not joke about them (see Morreall 1987 for ethics of humor). Also, there are repeatedly conflicts around harsh humor; others claim that their amusement cannot be restricted because some other people feel offended. Repeatedly the public discussion returns to the theme of whose emotional reaction is justified or right. These discussions, in the end, are about the right to feel amused or offended, and this conflict is based on the assumption that there is one right answer to the problem. I believe Fromm's thinking offers a novel way to analyze these cultural contradictions, and to reformulate the whole problem. This, then, helps to go the roots of the problem and brings us a step closer to solving the prevailing cultural contradiction.

Defenders of humor claim that humor is a high manifestation of freedom of speech, and this freedom should not be limited by any means; thus, humor should not be curtailed. These arguments were once again present, for instance, around Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016. Trump's election had a strong symbolic significance: his triumph was a signal that it is now more acceptable to publicly express sexist, racist and hostile humor – those who disagree are said not to have a proper sense of humor and to be bores. I do not claim that this position is right or praiseworthy, but instead, consider the popularity of Trump's campaign as a clear indicator of the current prevailing social



character.<sup>3</sup>

Historically speaking, the roots of humor (in the form of comedies) are said to have arisen in violating norms; comedy was apparently born alongside with worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and ritual madness. In his ritual worshiping, rules were twisted and broken, and accompanied with laughter. (Alho 1988.) In this aspect, breaking boundaries appears to be funny, and this tendency is still present in modern comedies. For example, one of the guiding ideas of the animated comedy series *South Park* (1997ff.) is that it *laughs at everything*. *South Park* can be labeled as black humor as it aims to break every existing boundary; nothing is too sacred for *South Park* to ridicule. This kind of black humor calls into question, as James Nagel (1974, p. 51) puts it, the sanity of the current world and our commitments to it. There are both academics and comedians who believe that challenging the limits of morality is an essential aspect of humor (see e.g. Gray et al 2009), and it has been claimed that all humor is at bottom black (see O'Neill 1983, pp. 79-80).

Following Fromm, to understand the social and cultural significance of controversial humor, it is necessary to examine the underlying motives of the joker, as well as the values shared by the audience. These latent aspects of personality are more important than, say, the legal formulations of free speech when analyzing the profound essence of humor.<sup>4</sup> As Fromm (e.g. 1964a) clearly shows, even freedom of speech has to be contextualized; an absolute and unlimited freedom of speech easily becomes a social shackle, or even 'unfreedom', if it is idolized and used, for example, to promote oppression or inequality. Indeed, freedom in general has to be understood as a socially constructed feature. Fromm's basic claim is that we cannot be free without other people because we are essentially social creatures. Therefore, a mere

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, I am unable to discuss this aspect here in further detail; the analysis has to be left for later articles.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, freedom of speech is highly important, but it has to be analyzed from a wider perspective.

Fromm's co-worker Michael Maccoby remembers some of Fromm's favorite jokes. Evidently, as Maccoby elaborates in our personal exchange, Fromm told many jokes with a bite. I am happy to share two of them here:

The economy of Czechoslovakia was ruined, and the Minister of Finance in trouble. No salvation was to be found and the state was basically in bankruptcy. As the minister himself could not find any kind of solution, he asked, if it was possible to find somewhere some wise man who could help them in this disastrous situation. One of the advisers of minister uttered that just outside Prague there should be a Rabbi, who is supposed to be a particularly wise man. Perhaps he could help?

In the moment of despair, the minister decided to act. He conducted an official convey and traveled to meet the Rabbi. Finally, they arrived at the destination, and the minister, after all the official introducing, explained the situation. Humbly he asked if the Rabbi had any idea how the problem could be solved. The Rabbi thought for a moment and announced that he saw two possible solutions: a natural and a supernatural one. Well, what is the natural solution, asked the minister?

"The natural solution, obviously, is that the Messiah arrives and transforms the whole world to an Earthly Paradise. And, at the same moment, the financial troubles of Czechoslovakia will be gone."

"Mm ... right ... Well, what is the supernatural?"

"You try to do it."



During the communist period, an old Jew in Prague gets permission to emigrate to Israel. A year later he is back and asks again for permission to go to Israel. 'What is this?', asks the authority. The man answers, 'It is impossible living here and it is impossible living there. But the trip is wonderful.'

negative freedom (freedom from) is never enough, as we have to develop towards posi-



tive freedom (freedom to); that is, to be free to live as human beings (Fromm 1941). Inspired by A. S. Neill, Fromm notes that freedom is not a license; we misunderstand freedom if we think that it means that we are allowed to do or say whatever we wish (Fromm 1960). Instead, it has to be asked, on what latent aspects of personality one's sense of humor is based. That is to say, we have to be free to evaluate our own humor. I believe his concept of disobedience is of great help in this respect.<sup>5</sup>

As it has been noted, there is a clear cultural tendency that humor can be disobedient, for instance, towards socially shared moral values. That is to say, offensive humor is something which does not obey the idea of dignity or respect towards others. Fromm states that disobedience is a dialectic concept, which means that disobedience includes the possibility of obeying. Thus, disobedience is an act of resisting something but at the same moment and in the same act standing up for something else. In Fromm's humanistic framework, disobedience

is an act of affirmation of reason and will. It is not primarily an attitude directed *against* something, but *for* something: for man's capacity to see, to say what he sees, and to refuse to say what he does not see. To do so he does not need to be aggressive or rebellious; he needs to have his eyes open, to be fully awake, and willing to take the responsibility to open the eyes of those who are in danger of perishing because they are half asleep. (Fromm 1981a, p. 48.)

Fromm's idea of disobedience includes both the capability to affirm and to reject, and a disobedient individual is someone who "can say 'no' because he can affirm, who can disobey precisely because he can obey his conscience and the principles which he has chosen." (Fromm 1981a, p. 46.) This formulation presents a clearly distinct position from that of unlimited "negative freedom". Following Fromm's

<sup>5</sup> I have analyzed extensively the relationship between disobedience and humor in Hietalahti 2016b.

idea, humor should not just rebel against everything possible without any conviction but instead, an object of humor needs a contrast, something that is taken seriously. Therefore, the common claim that we must be able to laugh at everything everywhere at all times is implausible. Fromm emphasizes that often there are motives which may not be clear to the agent himself: "a person, even if he is subjectively sincere, may frequently be driven unconsciously by a motive that is different from the one he believes himself to be driven; that he may use one concept which logically implies a certain meaning and which to him, unconsciously, means something different." (Fromm 1941a, pp. 66-67.) The central idea is that different kinds of rationalizations should not necessarily be taken at face value; a humorist may well say that he is defending some high value, such as free speech, but his deeper motivation may be something different. As Fromm remarks, it is hard to evaluate whether the given explanation is a mere rationalization or a profound conviction "by determining the logicity of a person's statement as such, but we also must take into account the psychological motivations operating in a person. The decisive point is not *what* is thought but *how* it is thought." (Fromm 1941a, p. 193.)

Fromm adds: "However unreasonable or immoral an action may be, man has an insuperable urge to rationalize it, that is, to prove to himself and to others that his action is determined by intelligence, common sense, or at least conventional morality." (Fromm 1981a, pp. 11-12.) So, even though a humorist may personally believe that his or her humor is good and it offers some kind of redemption from social shackles, humor has to be evaluated from a wider perspective. Thus, it is necessary to ponder the ideas and values on which humor is built. If there is hatred towards the other beyond jokes and laughter, or if fun springs from selfishness and is based on a wish to oppress certain minorities, it is possible to claim that this kind of humor is not as revolutionary as advertised. Offensive humor is often said to be critical and *liberating* (see Martin 1998, p. 41;





Mindess 1971, pp. 67-70); however, the claimed liberation needs to be taken under critical scrutiny – liberation from what? As Fromm points out: "we are fascinated by the growth of freedom from powers *outside* ourselves and are blinded to the fact of *inner* restraints, compulsions, and fears, which tend to undermine the meaning of the victories freedom has won against its traditional enemies." (Fromm 1941a, p. 105). Fromm links the idea of freedom to other human values, and from that combination it should be asked: What are the basic values from which humor stems? What does it advocate? How does it treat humanity in general? What are the goals of humor?

#### 4. The Possibility of Humane Humor

There have been some attempts to formulate certain moral principles of humor. For instance, Emily Toth has formulated the first rule of humane humor according to which one should never "make fun of what people cannot change, such as social handicaps, race, sex, or physical appearance" (Toth 1981, p. 783). These kinds of claims aim, generally, to good. It is possible to carry on this line formulating other rules, like, "Joke about your own gender or ethnic group, but no other", or, "do not mock other's sufferings", or, "there has to be temporal and psychological distance before making fun of a tragedy". Despite the possible ethical attitude behind the above mentioned moral principles of humor, they are problematic as they do not take into account the dynamic aspect of humor. I believe that there can be truly humanistic humor that might offend someone and target certain qualities that are quite unchangeable. Also, the most brilliant humorists are able to handle even "forbidden topics" in a humane manner. Still, I believe, humor cannot be just about shocking for the sake of shock. If humor is designed to rattle the cage of morality and hypocrisy, the apparent question is: for what reason?

It is central to try to understand the principles on which humor is eventually based. Obviously, humor can be used to trample upon humanistic

ideals, and it can be a tool for oppressing, for example, minorities (Lewis 2006). But then, aggressive humor can fight for humanistic ideals. In these cases, humor can be a means to improve life, and to stand against dehumanizing practices and authorities (Gouin 2004). Following Fromm, humor should be understood in relation to the prevailing character matrix, and this is the central feature if one is to analyze what can be found beyond jokes and laughter. In a Frommian framework, humor may be a specific form of disobedience, but it cannot be about rebelling against everything. Instead, humor has to be based on something. The ultimate goal of humor cannot be the demolishing of all external restrictions on humor.

The ideal of humane humor can be explicated by comparing *the modes of having and being*. They describe two alternative ways to relate to reality. In the so-called having mode all that matters is property, and the guiding principle is that almost anything can be owned. This includes ideas and qualities, personal relationships, and so forth. In this mode, well-being and happiness are achieved by possessing as much as possible. (Fromm 1976.) Humor, I add, is one object of possible property in this mode. Be it an analytical study, concocting a joke, or possessing a sense of humor, everything is considered as property.

In the being mode, in opposition, the central aspect is to "renew oneself, to grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one's isolated ego" (Fromm 1976a, p. 111). In this mode, humor is not something to be captured by words, and this holds for both analytical studies and humorous experiences. Fromm explains: "In the structure of having, the dead word rules; in the structure of being, the alive and inexpressible experience rules" (Fromm 1976a, p. 112). Thus, humane humor is an immediate expression of productive or biophilic relatedness.

I suggest that humane humor, in the light of Fromm's premises, is not canned or packaged. Instead, it rejoices in the moment, spontaneously. In this "being type of humor" it is not



necessary to be a great joke teller. Instead, humorous sights and spontaneities take a central role. It is immediate and unselfish. Humor happens in a moment, and disappears just as quickly. This combination of funniness and joy is hard to store for later usage (or retelling) as it can never be fully repeated. Still, it leaves its mark and has an impact on everyone who experiences it. This kind of humor does not have to be anything grand. What Fromm writes about tenderness can be paraphrased to describe humane humor: it is not "self-propelling, it has no aim, it has no end. Its satisfaction is the very act itself, in the joy of being friendly, of being warm, or considering and respecting another person" (Fromm 1994a, p. 129). What Fromm writes about life, also holds for humor: "I think nothing in life is repeated, only mechanical things can be repeated" (Fromm 1991a, p. 56).

The connection between humanistic thinking and humor is vital: humor is not outside humanistic thinking, and even humanistic thinking has room for humor. Fromm himself saw humanistic possibilities in humor, and he was highly impressed by Charlie Chaplin's movies as they express loving relatedness to another person and love for humanity "to an exceptional degree" (Fromm 1991b, p. 67). Fromm especially praises *The Great Dictator* (1940) which "ended with one of the most moving speeches I have ever heard" (Fromm 1991b, p. 56).

Humanistic humor does not mean that one could not consider some immoral story funny. Humor always surprises us to some extent, and sometimes we find ourselves laughing at others' misfortunes perhaps without even realizing what we are laughing at. The demands of humanism should not be taken as a burden which restricts individual freedom to joke and laugh. Instead, as Fromm himself interprets the Jewish law collection *halakhah*, it points to a meaningful way of living (Fromm 1966a, p. 192). Certain fixed claims about what can and cannot be laughed at are, eventually, narrow and do not reach the essence of humane humor. I believe that humane humor is not a technical, measur-

able quality. What Fromm writes about brotherly love or love for neighbor and stranger, is applicable also to humor. This form of love "is based on the experience that we are all one. The differences in talents, intelligence, knowledge are negligible in comparison with the identity of the human core common to all men. (...) If I perceive in another person mainly the surface, I perceive mainly the differences, that which separates us." (Fromm 1956a, p. 43.) If humor respects these ideals, it is humane. But if humor is based on separating and shaming, it can be called unproductive in the Frommian sense.

### Concluding remarks

In this article, I have articulated key premises of what I call Frommian humor research, and shown how Fromm's theories can be applied to understand and to evaluate the cultural phenomena of humor and laughter. Of course, there are plenty of other possibilities to apply Fromm's thinking to humor studies. During the research period at Erich Fromm Institute Tübingen, I have critically analyzed, for instance, the relationship between humor and racism (Hietalahti 2017), studied humor as a form of competition (Hietalahti 2015b), and questioned the positivity of the currently highly praised trait of laughing at oneself (Hietalahti 2015c). Naturally, there remain many interesting research possibilities, both theoretical and empirical. For example, so far I have only touched upon the topic of unconsciousness and its significance for (a shared sense of) humor. Also, it would be highly interesting to perform a systematic analysis of how Frommian social theories of humor develop from and improve Sigmund Freud's studies on the subject (see Freud 1905a; 1927a). In general, I believe Fromm's concept of social character can and should be used to make ever deeper analysis of contemporary humor both as a product of the amusement industry and as a form of relatedness.

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