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Humour as umbrella term: some implications of a classifier

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Abstract

The word humour is often taken as an 'umbrella term'. This article first briefly situates umbrella terms within a context of logically stable and unstable forms of classification. It outlines the reasons why the scope of what is studied as humour justifies the general designation that also encompasses a necessary degree of interdisciplinarity. The implications of this, however, can be at odds with how humour is treated in analysis: there can be few general conclusions about humour per se; global theories of humour, or uniform conceptual vocabularies for its analysis are likely to remain unsatisfactory. The article concludes by pointing to a category mistake analogous to Russell's set theory paradox when humour, accepted as an umbrella term is then conflated with what the classifier subsumes.

Keywords: classification, satire, interdisciplinarity, concept formation, category mistakes.

1. Introduction

Umbrella terms are as familiar as the proverbial common cold, itself an umbrella term (Kardos & Malek, 2017), as are globalisation and nanotechnology. One might be commended as a valuable bridge between distinct fields of research and the general public, another condemned as a means of indiscriminate demonization (Rip & Voss, 2019, pp. 10-33; Grzebalska et. al., 2017). If, as Harro Höpfl has argued, simply adding *ism* to a noun can create the illusion of naming a pre-existing phenomenon (Höpfl, 1981), the suffix more certainly creates an umbrella term, such as *racism*. All, however, exemplify Aristotle's metaphor of *skiagraphia*, painting with a broad brush, so that a diversity of auditors can add detail for themselves—necessary, he held, when dealing with a large and unknown audience (Aristotle, 2006: 1414a, pp. 7-10). In these reflections lies a warning: umbrella terms can be subject to careless or manipulative deployment; the expression itself is close to having a parasolic inclusiveness.

Humour is now rightly accepted as an umbrella term (see for example, Noonan, 2011; Attardo, 2020, p. 7; Attardo, 1994, pp. 5-7; Milner Davis & Hofmann, 2023); but the implications of this need explicating, not least as they are at odds with how humour is widely treated. If humour is best understood parasolically, I will suggest that it exposes and helps explain the limitations of conceptual frameworks that attempt to encompass humour in toto (see

also Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023). The purpose, therefore, is to emphasize the importance of conceptual reflexivity that extends to the most general means of classifying humour. First, however, it may be helpful to situate umbrella terms in a *skiagraphic* context of adjacent forms of classification.

2. Classifiers stable, unstable and the case of satire

Set theory is largely beside the range of issues canvassed here, but it will need to be touched on below in noting Russell's paradox of 1901. It was originally communicated in a brief personal letter to Gottlob Frege (1902), expressed formally in Guiseppe Peano's logical notation and was developed the following year in Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*. It stated that a classifier both is and is not a member of its own set and thus has a resemblance to the classic and much animadverted semantic paradox of the Liar: in its earliest formulation, *Epimenides the Cretan said all Cretans are liars*. There was, in short, a problem at the heart of set theory (Sainsbury, 1995, pp. 107-111; Quine, 1976, pp.10-16). Russell's paradox has been greatly discussed, and within the confines of mathematical logic, may have been solved or by-passed (Quine, 1976, pp. 12-16); but as I shall illustrate in conclusion, it retains a residual suggestiveness beyond set theory. If the concept of any object, such as a tea bowl belongs and does not belong to the classification of all known tea bowls, what is a paradox in mathematical logic, becomes an absurdity in a different context, but one that highlights the misuse of the umbrella term humour.

Irrespective of the intricacies of set theory, classifications in both the sciences and social sciences are often governed by a singular and informative condition for belonging. If clear-cut, as they frequently are in the physical sciences, the classification will be reliable, its contents regardless of range, predictable and secure. There may be many forms of cancer, but they all stem from rapid cell mutation forming malignant tumors. To adapt David Wiggins' most encompassing formulation, we can identify *a* and *b* as examples of the classifier *C* with reliability if and only if, the criterion for subsumption under *C* is itself stable (Wiggins, 1988).

This does not mean that such stability is necessary for any classification to be useful; and in the social sciences, fewer classifications may comply with Wiggins' formulation. The *century* is an arbitrary, although highly convenient chronological unit, but other temporal classifications, such as the *long eighteenth-century*, *Renaissance* or *Enlightenment* purport to be more informative by identifying putative characteristics. As they become classifications of *epoch*, *era*, or *age*, they prove contentious as to range and content. They exemplify forms of classification where *C* is neither stable nor singular: family resemblance, necessarily contested, or 'cluster' concepts, fuzzy classifiers, possibly duplex and interpretive classifiers, and umbrella terms. All of them attest to the recognition that precision is not always possible, can be reductive and so misleading.

Wittgenstein's classification by family resemblance emphasized precisely this (Wittgenstein, 1968, paras 71, 88); it may be taken as adjacent to an umbrella term and is of partial relevance to humour. His notion was symptomatic of his shift from a commitment to exploring the formal logic of his earlier *Tractatus*, and the necessary conditions for language to represent reality, a project that as he admitted, achieved little even if successful (Wittgenstein, 1969, pp. 4/5). In the *Philosophical Investigations*, however, he suggested that when looking at a photograph album, we can see that people belong to the same family not by a single necessarily shared feature, a defining essence, but by a variable constellation of characteristics—eyes, ears, nose, hair (Wittgenstein, 1968, paras. 66-67). Menippean satire, for example, has been notoriously resistant to essentialist definition or constraint within any distinct genre (Weinbrot, 2005, pp. 1-19); but as a sub-set of satire, it can profitably be seen as exemplifying family resemblance, although the much broader notion of humour in which satire is now located might

not be (Condren, 2023, pp. 128-130). Although classification by family resemblance is more restrictive than an umbrella term can be, it raises a similar issue: how many features need to be shared for two cousins to be recognizably related? This can be problematic as features characteristic of a family are unlikely to be exclusive to it; what characterizes does not itself define. Thus, Menippean satire may be identified, by travellers' tales, unreliable narration, and mock encomia, but these motifs neither define nor exhaust the Menippean. They are all present in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play that is difficult to see as Menippean satire. The matter of belonging through family resemblance is probably not something that can be determined *a priori*, it can be a question of the weight of evidence in context—heterochromia is likely to be more significant in determining family membership than hair colour. As Wittgenstein also insisted (Wittgenstein, 1968, para 66), we need to look and see—a point largely irrelevant to the formalities of set theory, or indeed, to much of the precisionist *Tractatus*. Since the dissemination of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, a number of theories of classification have been developed that are of relevance to humour and can very briefly be outlined.

Overall, one can isolate an emphasis principally on the structure of given classifiers, on the field of phenomena to which they are applied, or on the discursive context in which they are used. Following Wittgenstein, W.B Gallie focusing on conceptual content, argued that some concepts were essentially contestable because they housed differing criteria for their use; and William Connolly has discussed them as 'cluster concepts' (Gallie, 1964, pp. 157-191; Connolly, 1983, pp. 9-22). The designation of *concept* is often rather vague (Toulmin, 1972, pp. 8-9), but I am concerned here just with the classificatory power of general terms usually called concepts. The explanatory value of 'essential contestability' has been questioned and only partially endorsed (Mason, 1995, pp. 47-68); and insufficient attention has been given to the types of criteria involved. This, however, is a focus for Joshua Knobe et. al., who have contrasted natural kind classifications with 'dual character' (*duplex*) concepts/classifiers. With the former, characteristic values (fierceness in tigers) are caused by an essential feature, whereas duplex concepts realize normative qualities. A good bus driver, or scientist is not caused by but instantiates certain values; their point is that duplex classifiers provide both empirical and normative criteria to determine what they subsume (Knobe et.al., 2013; Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023) and so provide leeway to dispute what might count as humour. The classification of natural kinds, however, is contentious and the contrast with duplex classifiers might not always hold; a strict bifurcation between empirical and normative may be uncertain in the case of classifying humour. Aware of the limitations of Knobe et. al., Hietalahti and Pennanen also turn to Ronald Dworkin's controversial notion of interpretative concepts. Extrapolating from law, he posits that interpretative difference is bound to arise not because of criterial multiplicity inherent in a classifier, but because of variation in the evaluative facts to which it is applied (Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023, pp. 72-75; Plunkett & Sandell, 2013, p. 243). Thus, judges draw not only on statute, case law and precedent, but also by degrees on relevant social and political norms to produce interpretations that can be creative. Variable interpretation may, in short, be the lifeblood of what we try to classify in the first place. It may be that Dworkin's interpretivism might explain some disagreements over whether something is humorous (Hietalahti and Pennanen, 2023, pp. 74-75) but in its most general terms it may be redundant or too indiscriminate to be helpful (Plunkett & Sandell, 2013). Dworkin's notion of interpretive concepts arose partly from what he took as the inadequacies of legal positivism. But jurisprudence, philosophy and natural science are alike hardly paradigmatic of all concept use, and differing patterns of discursive convention may also play a part in how a given classifier is applied, whether this be a matter of discipline specific enquiry, or everyday discourse (Toulmin, 1972, pp. 146-199; Toulmin, 2003). The considerata of political debate, for example, may require concept use at odds with other forms of discourse. It was a point central to Aristotle's

Rhetoric, in which strict syllogistic logic necessary in dialectic is replaced by the looser analogue of enthymemic reasoning central to persuasion; similarly, the necessity of *skiagraphia* in politics (cited above) is discordant with the rigors of dialectic (Aristotle, 2006, 354.1;1355.11).

At the meta-level, conceptual content, modes of use and fields of application themselves suggest differing criteria for resolving issues of classificatory range and adequacy. Be all this as it may, assessing different theories is less to the point than stressing that given the diversity of what counts as humour, any classificatory variants might be supported by attention to aspects of the whole. This is to prefigure one implication of taking humour as an umbrella term (sect III, V). In the meantime, I shall return to the case of Menippean satire to illustrate the conceptual slipperiness of what we now see as humour, and the importance of reflexivity in the process of its analysis.

In the attempt to make the concept of Menippean satire more precise than family resemblance would suggest it is, and so close off avenues of dispute, Ingrid Smet has argued that only prosimetric satire with a dream motif and the presence of the philosopher Menippus are properly Menippean (Smet, 1996, pp. 23-31; cf. Weinbrot, 2005). Her criteria for the use of the classifier, however, are at odds with the perceptions of those engaged in writing and producing such satire, especially as some of the features are not independent variables like eyes and ears, let alone tea bowls in the set of all tea bowls, and were freighted with normative expectations. Travellers' tales may at the same time be unreliable and mocking encomia. Dworkin's emphasis on the importance of the pattern of evaluative facts under consideration is clearly relevant, regardless of whether the result is a distinct type of classification, or whether it simply provides a common stimulus for classification such as family resemblance. Weinbrot, like Smet is critical of the over-extended use of the Menippean, and in particular is devastatingly dismissive of Bakhtin's appropriation of it; Weinbrot's comprehensive and insightful discussion of the range of evaluative features deemed Mennipean turns genre as a specifically literary classification inside out, only to define the Menippean as a hostility to false orthodoxy, hardly any sort of definition (Weinbrot, 2005, pp. xi, 1-6).

Consider the case of Thomas More's *Utopia*: its principal voice, the much travelled Raphael Hythloday gives a contradictory account of the island of Utopia, beginning with its irreconcilable dimensions, so raising the possibility that he is a fool or charlatan, and either way, the butt of the satire (Curtis, 2006, pp. 106-109, esp. 108); as Warren Wooden argued some time ago, Hythloday himself is also strikingly like the *philosophi gloriosi*, the arrogant dogmatists anathema to More, and ridiculed in Lucian's dialogue *Menippus* (Wooden, 1972, pp. 50-57), a work More had translated. Yet with his excoriating distaste for corruption, his cape and especially his beard, Hythloday has the conventional, normatively endowed features of Menippus (Curtis, 2006, p. 106) It is not clear how his voice engages with orthodoxy, as distinct from hypocrisy and corruption, though it is clearly at odds with Smet's stipulative restrictions. Hythloday's voice, in short, cannot reliably be taken as the author's. The classification of the Menippean though undoubtedly relevant, remains uncertainly helpful, to be used with self-conscious caution.

3. The variable range of humour

It is on such slippery terrain that humour as umbrella term is now established. It has the advantage of ecumenically embracing any stable classifications employed in the physiological study of stimuli, as well as any disputed cluster or duplex concepts within the wider study of humour; and as I have indicated, diversity and fluidity of the subject matter may give illustrative plausibility to a number of classificatory theories (see also Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023, p. 55;

Derrin, 2020, pp. 7-9). As used, the expression may be nothing more than passing recognition that humour in one form or another can seem ubiquitous, but that much of it is beyond the purview of what is about to be considered—hence its being a preliminary affirmation in the discussions already cited. Indeed, but if that is all we are saying there is little point in generalizing about humour—and generalizations about humour are a driving force behind much of its analysis.

For emphasis, it is worth rehearsing the extent of what is covered by the accommodating term: there are the most general modes of humour linguistic and non-linguistic; there are the specific manifestations and tropes of humour such as wit, banter, irony, some of which might be mode specific, or change meaning in being shifted between modes, such as *scherzo* (joke) though musical jokes are rarely *scherzi*. Additionally, there is a range of responses to what is presented as, or perceived to be humour, from laughter to affront, the lawsuit or violence—with negative reactions sometimes challenging the range of the classification. There are the psychological, social, and political functions of humour; and concomitantly, the limitations on its expression, internalised or extrinsic, legal, political, cultural, and religious. Beyond all this are the physiological and chemical causes and correlates of what we now call humour and the appearance of postulated humour in non-human animals. With much of the self-conscious practice of humour, there is often an impetus to play with established conventions and norms, and so to adjust or confront the limits of what might be taken as humour: comedic innovation can be intrinsically destabilising. At a meta-level, any of these aspects of humour can be subject to methodological discussion. None are self-contained, and as is well recognized, any can be a means of exploring further issues within the disciplines in which the study of humour has a place. This wider salience itself helps justify calling humour an umbrella term.

It need hardly be laboured that the rhizomic complexity of what is subsumed by the covering term humour has been much discussed, rearranged, refined, for whatever is classified can be re-classified. Humour is an enticement to metatheory. Yet, often there are no great problems of understanding because we are really dealing with one aspect of the whole, such as irony in a corpus of novels, political cartoons in specific culture, or chemical reactions to jokes under controlled conditions: in such cases, the residue of humour can more or less safely be consigned to the realms of the given or irrelevant. Jokes, for example, constitute a highly convenient focus for analysis; they are usually fairly cohesive and pithy. Arguably, however, they are also a recent phenomenon (Rolfe, 2022, pp. 63-65; Derrin, 2020, p. 7) and are not to be taken either synchronically or diachronically as *pars pro toto*, a totality that because of assiduous academic enquiry, has become a little like the expanding universe.

Initially psychology was predominant in humour studies. Chapman and Foot's volume has since been accorded a foundational role in the field's development (Chapman & Foot, 1977; Attardo, 2014, pp. xxxi-xxxii). The generalizing priorities of psychologists gave coherence to what was largely accepted as a universal human proclivity, a belief in which helped display psychology's scientific credentials, for during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was widely accepted that science was a matter of universal explanation rather than understanding particularities (see, for example, Dilthey, [1884, 1911] 1977). Yet, as linguistics assumed a greater presence in the study of humour from the 1980s, other priorities and foci of attention emerged, although in the English-speaking world the presumption of universality has remained largely undisturbed and under-examined. If nothing else, this effectively proclaims the importance of studying humour: the umbrella has become capacious.

Thus, in this context, the doctrine of Benign Violation Theory that humour should be restricted to, and defined, as *the benign violation of norms* is an attempt to control the range of the umbrella term (e.g. Veach, 1988). The stipulative restriction makes matters more manageable by excluding the malign and aggressive, in one sense of the word, the serious; but if the expression is intended as a definition, it is a poor one, as benign violation would include

almost any process of casuistic extenuation, typical of moral reasoning until the eighteenth century (Toulmin & Jonsen, 1988). Physicians might lie to their patients to give hope or comfort, parents to their children, unmotivated by malignancy — perpetuating a belief in Santa Clause violates an expectation of honesty; but belief in Santa might be needed to see the widespread parental practice as humour, until children become complicit and sustain a seasonal game.

What however, in a minimal sense has been seen as creating an identity for humour, regardless of its range, is the defining function of a contrast with the non-humorous, specified as the serious. According to Kozintsev, this provides the only universal criterion for circumscribing humour (Kozintsev, 2010; Kuipers, 2009, pp. 221-2); hence also the notion that all humour is contained within a *play-frame* — the very metaphor of a frame making things seem neat and tidy; but the strong associations of play with a game take us onto treacherously variable territory, for games are anything but uniform in their relationships to seriousness (Wittgenstein, 1968, paras 69-75). As a point of rough comparison, LGBTQI is sometimes seen as an umbrella term for a diversity of non-heterosexual people forming a community by virtue of a common negative denominator, the relatively precise heterosexuality.

If, however, heterosexuality can be variable, the serious as a defining contrast to humour, is altogether more so, certainly not as straightforward as Kozintsev suggested, and has been explored in different ways (Condren, 2023, pp. 52-54; Kuipers, 2009). It is more a matter of *fuzzy* classification entailed by *fuzzy logic*. This was first developed in mathematics to qualify the binary rigidity of Boolean logic, so vital to computer programming and algorithmic modelling. As many classifications are at odds with this, so the notion of *fuzzy logic* was extended and variously applied. Like Gallie's notion of 'essential contestability', it may suffer from lazy over-extension (Mason, 1993, pp. 47-68), but it is appropriate to the simplistic contrast between humour and the serious.

Not all humour is non-serious (satire); and a *play-frame* may be most plausible where it is least needed. It can be absent, especially in conversational humour, or have holes in it. It can be a notion that is difficult to apply to some non-verbal humour, as found, for example, in music. Mozart's divertimento, K522 (*Ein musikalischer Spass*, a Musical Joke) or the cat duet (*Duetto buffo di due gatti*) attributed to Rossini, are framed: they start, and they stop; but the framing isolates what is going on as music, humorous or not. Anything with a distinct identity is framed in some way, to specify the framing as a matter of play is a case of *petitio principii* if we are trying to isolate humour. That is, to identify the play-frame seems to require that we can already see the humour. With the framing of musical jokes, even here, complicating qualifications are in order. The *Duetto* has a point of reference beyond music. There are cats, they can sound like sopranos[1]; the Mozart is just about compositional expectations with its disjunctive melodic intervals, unsuitable key and rhymic changes. The American composer John Cage (1912-92) and sometime student of Arnold Schoenberg may have taken this further. His composition 'As Slow as Possible' is now being performed on an organ in Halberstadt, Germany, and is not due to finish for years. It comprises discrete notes played occasionally, subverting the notion of a melodic interval. In terms of framing, what is the status of the time that elapses between notes? More famously his '4'33' (1987) never starts. The performers sit silently at their instruments, the only sound is what might be emitted by the audience during the time it takes for non-performance. If nothing else it is a challenge to the distinction between the serious and the humorous, perhaps stretching further the notion of a musical joke.[2]

[1] In some cases, it might not be the music per se that is intrinsically humorous but the situational context that explains it. The loud chord that erupts without warning in Haydn's 'Surprise Symphony' 94 in G Major was apparently added to get the full attention of his audience.

[2] I cannot play the organ but in standing by Thomas Tallis's keyboard in St Alfege's Church, Greenwich, London, was I not playing part of '4'33''?

Umbrellas might have clear uniform limits, umbrella terms are unlikely to; again, reliance on an unexamined metaphor can be misleading. Regarding visual and verbal humour, consider the character of Phil Ormandroyd (Stephen Tompkinson) in the film *Brassed Off* (1996): performing as a clown for a children's party, he tells a story that becomes an explicit and blistering attack on governmental policies that have devastated British mining communities. Despite the clear markers of framed humour, it is anything but, especially when he runs from the party leaving a house of bemused and distressed children and angry mothers. The dark humour of the situation arises from establishing a frame only to break it.

Thus, also with jokes: they can be taken seriously, cause offence, be deliberately malignant, and so forth; indeed, the common expression 'only joking', alerts us to a contentious grey area; 'only' marks a formally presupposed frame, but the point of the expression may be to violate it, palliate potential offence, or draw attention to modes of seriousness. A sub-group of jokes might, as it were, slip in and out of seriousness without departing from the formulaic markers of joking. In an acute discussion of such matters, Delia Chiaro gives the example of the jokes ending in 'Rules O.K'. They began in all seriousness as expressions of vaunting sporting tribalism, then became humorously parodic with 'Apathy Ru O.K.' and 'Dyslexia Rules K.O', and then turned to pointedly serious effect again with 'Poverty Rules O.K?' (Chiaro, 1992, pp. 30, 64). In short, if there are degrees and modes of seriousness (Toulmin, 2003, p. 11) there are degrees of belonging to the classification of the humorous, its study might be most revealing at its fuzzy margins.

4. Implications

Several other points are worth explicating about the coverage of the umbrella, regardless of whether the expression is used casually or with appropriate consideration of the subject matter. First, it is a condition for the interdisciplinary character of humour studies that different aspects attract different types of enquiry, each with its own priorities, usually identified by its own terminology. That is, humour studies itself is a meta-umbrella classification. Certainly, there may often be disciplinary consanguinity, as with areas of political science and sociology; but disciplines are not necessarily impoverished by operating independently of each other. Humour's interdisciplinarity is a recognition of shared territory, not necessarily an imperative to co-mingle. An historian of the vocabulary of humour may have no professional obligation to take an interest say, in teaching computers to tell jokes as a means of refining artificial intelligence, a potential indifference, or agnosticism that can cut both ways. Indeed, a legitimate disciplinary distance, as it were, might well mean that some claims about humour might even be incommensurable. The urge to promote a single conceptual language for humour studies, presumably in the interests of forming a more cohesive (and fundable) field of study, would undermine such interdisciplinarity, and obscure differences that might ultimately simply need accepting. Perish the thought that it would end up as ugly and obscurantist as the social science jargons devastatingly analyzed by Michael Billig (2014). For an historian to reprocess evidence and earlier conceptualizations through new vocabulary of humour analysis would in any case be just another instance of the anachronizing consequences of describing previous theories through the nomenclature of present ones, a habit that has blighted the perfunctory attempts to understand the history of humour (Derrin, 2020, pp. 10-13); yet from an a-historical perspective such applications may simply be taken as illustrating the range of modern theories: ships may pass in the night.

If a general conceptual vocabulary of humour studies arose from a discipline with a stake in the field, it could smack of academic imperialism (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2018, p. 1); if

ecumenically drawn from several, it would probably harness incoherence. In a word, the parasolic character of humour as subject matter would seem to require that at the meta-level, the umbrella term *Humour Studies* also remains multi-disciplinary and is not closed by being reduced to a single conceptual argot.

Second, just as the concept of humour, as umbrella term has a history, so its cultural referents have altered. Indeed, humour's becoming an umbrella term has been an important and variable process, a relatively recent achievement of contested, casual and often confused language use, an on-going process. The very word humour may be of only subordinate standing in what we see as the conceptual field of humour (Hempelmann, 2017; Shilikhina & Shcheglova, 2021); some languages have no direct expression for humour, or, as with French, assimilate it with a changed meaning (Noonan, 2011; Gifford, 1981). As a corollary, the terminology in the ambit of Anglophone conceptions and sub-categories of humour such as teasing and even joking may not travel well in translation; to treat them as trans-cultural may be a form of parochialism that stretches an umbrella further (Goddard, 2018; 2020). It should hardly be surprising that attempted conceptualizations of humour as a whole are only partially successful, or plausible on the basis of partial evidence. Rigorous historicity, for example, is likely to undermine global claims of theories abstracted from contemporary experience (Derrin, 2020). Conversational humour is a challenge for Semantic Script Theory; linguistic pragmatics is understandably deaf to music. This is not to criticize, but to recognize that good theories have their limits; if we take seriously the implications of humour's being an umbrella term, we are already forewarned that there will be some.

A sense of the contingency involved in the range of humour can be gleaned from the initial formation of the first explicit concept of humour in English. Before then, we can at most gloss as humour what is occasionally suggestive of a later concept; the semantic structures and usage patterns of languages like Greek, Latin, French and English do not allow for much more with any degree of confidence. Only gradually in the seventeenth century did a humour come to mean a jest, then became an indeterminant generality, given content probably by the 1690s. This becomes explicit by the early eighteenth-century when the Earl of Shaftsbury's specifications of humour, among them banter and raillery are already indicative of its becoming an umbrella term (Shaftsbury, [1709] 2001, pp. 40-41). Crucially, only at about this time did humour, or some expressions of it, get associated with laughter, and could thus be related to some satire. Indeed, the histories of laughter, a physiological phenomenon, and the concept of humour are contingent in their intersection as semantic relationships were changed in use. There may be reasons specific to England that account for this (Condren, 2023, pp. 32-35). Throughout the century humour's relationship with wit was disputed; humour was a variable, little theorized classification, and not much used. For something since taken to be both ubiquitous and important, this paucity of attention is itself curious. More strikingly, a concept of a sense of humour with its entailed self-consciousness dates only from the mid-nineteenth century, (Wickberg, 1993, pp. 130-139); and satire becomes a type of humour in Anglophone cultures only in the twentieth century. This is all at odds with the familiar promotional myth established in humour studies that the concept of humour and its major theories were all evident in antiquity, so affirming the value of studying a universal phenomenon (Condren, 2023, pp. 9-39). It is, in fact the wide coverage of the umbrella term that gives superficial credence to the claim that humour is universal. It may be trivially plausible about the classifier itself, for it is or can be made sufficiently accommodating to be universally applied; but from this it does not follow that the variable content of humour is also universal. If family resemblance is a classificatory form of relevance to humour, it would suggest that no single feature of the evidence need be ubiquitous for the covering term to remain useful.

One of two related moves would seem to be required if we are to rescue an empirical universality from the teeth of historical implausibility. One is to posit humour as independent

of any conceptualization in language so by-passing an inconvenient lack of evidence (Xu, 2011, p. 49); ultimately it is an assertion of metaphysical faith, and one at odds with recognizing that concept formation is a linguistic process resulting in the means by which we can see something as humour rather than in some other way; to treat the end result, as independent of language may be a convenient philosophical shorthand, but we should be wary of giving concepts an ontic status of their own (Condren, 2017, pp. 132-50).

The second is to draw no distinction between our capacity to use and apply a concept and what is to be elicited from the evidence. Applying a concept of gravity to things that fell over in antiquity is one thing, attributing it to Aristotle's account of the trajectory of an arrow, quite another. Applying a concept of humour to Plato because of what he wrote about laughter is no warrant for calling it his theory. There is not the space to explore such matters here but noting them illustrates that claims about humour's universality might have different thresholds of credibility, even meaning for an historian and possibly for a psychologist, not least, as is widely recognized, concepts are theory dependent and often discipline specific (e.g. Hietalahti & Pennanen, 2023, p. 55). Be this as it may, in the question of humour's scope we have a clear instance of what is rightly accepted as a feature of humour studies, integral to its parasolic character: namely, that the study of humour and its conceptualisation can provide a valuable perspective on wider issues.

5. Conclusion

Finally, insofar as we take seriously humour as an umbrella term, it can carry the weight of few, or only attenuated generalizations (Derrin, 2020, p. 12). Much depends upon what we have singled out from under the umbrella actually to talk about. And so whatever else, we are not discussing humour per se. There is usually no need to. It may be that humour scholars are increasingly cautious about the inferences they draw—reference to humour as an umbrella term may be evidence of this, as it appears to be in the instances cited at the outset.

Yet, as I shall illustrate by way of a coda, this can prove insufficient to deter shifting from the acceptance of humour as an umbrella term to treating it as a cohesive and independent phenomenon; the slippage confuses a classification with its variable content, so mistaking a useful reified abstraction for the reality it abridges. The uncertain limits of umbrella terms may play a part in generating this sort of error. Nevertheless, expressed schematically, just as on a horizontal axis it is unhelpful to confuse one type of classification with another, such as family resemblance with a mathematical set, so on a vertical axis it is misleading to conflate any classification with what it classifies. It is directly analogous to confounding *definiens* with *definienda*, thereby creating definitions of vicious circularity[3]. It is also a good example of what Gilbert Ryle discussed as a category mistake (Ryle, 1949, pp. 16-18), as he put it, the misallocation of 'concepts to logical types to which they do not belong.' (Ryle, 1949, p. 17). His target was the postulation of the mind (not the brain) as an entity separate from the process of thinking — though the case might arguably apply to the relationship between concepts and conceptualizing. One illustration was that of a tourist in Oxford having seen the colleges then asking where to find the university, when the general term *university* is only a convenient abbreviation for the way the colleges are organized. His illustration is not ideal as the University is also a legal entity with a distinct voice at law. The misallocation of humour from classification to the content it has come to subsume would have suited Ryle better, — *the jokes were hilarious*,

[3] The Victorian Fisheries Act 1995 (Australia) Version 101 (2024), section 4 (Definitions 1.c) p. 6 has 'aquatic invertebrate means any invertebrate that lives in water…'. https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au>in-force>acts>fish. I am grateful to Allegra Zakis for drawing this to my attention.

but where do I find the humour. Like Ryle's category mistakes, this generates muddled thinking, and raises the spectre of vicious circularity in argument; there is even a tincture of Russell's paradox, that a classifier both belongs and does not belong to its own set; expressed more mundanely, that we confuse a tea bowl with a concept of one.

Such logical incoherence is aided by reliance on physicalizing metaphors for humour, calling it a universal faculty, (*Humor*, scoping statement, all issues), or the seventh of the physical senses (Forabosco, 2014). To give just one example of the problems outlined immediately above, Salvatore Attardo's assertion that humour is best taken as an umbrella term, is a valuable reminder of the plethora of phenomena and modes of enquiry brought together under the auspices of the classifier (Attardo, 1994, pp. 5-7; Attardo, 2020, p. 7). But when he then calls humour a function of evolution, and something genetically encoded (Attardo, 2020, p. 300), the silent shift from umbrella term to humour as its content, is almost enough to see him pour his tea into the concept of a tea bowl.

It is broadly accepted both that reflexivity and wider issue saliency can be important aspects of what we call humour; this paper has illustrated their conjunction by showing how the umbrella term humour is itself a way into some of the philosophical intricacies of classification, and as a corollary, by suggesting that greater conceptual reflexivity is needed in its use.

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