

Language, the Unconscious and the Formation of a Children's Joke¹

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The Opportunity of the Children's Joke

Lacan (1979, p. 22) has already placed the Freudian unconscious at the point where predictive models of social action break down. In an earlier paper (Karatheodoris & Raffel, 1981), we sought to situate Saint Paul's problem, the inadequation between "what I do" and "what I want to do" (*Romans* 7:15-16), at a point between the mental acts of willing and intending and a social action, namely, following the commandments of the law. We situated the Apostle's problem where *he* experienced something going wrong. Instead of doing what he wants to do, he does what he detests. We situated Saint Paul's problem at the point where he recognizes that his "reason" disapproves of his actions and has not authored them: "What I do," he claims, "is against my will" (*Romans* 7:19-20). This is not the point at which giving reasons "comes to an end" (Wittgenstein, 1969), but the point at which we account for our actions as though they were those of a reasoning alien and opposed to ours (Freud, 1915, p. 169). We place the Freudian unconscious at the point where the Apostle disclaims that his actions are authored by his "reason" and insists instead that they be ascribed to "sin that has its lodging" in him (*Romans* 7:20).

For the social sciences the Freudian unconscious is situated in the gap between an ideal of rationality and its various embodiments in thought and action. Our reason is astonished by the dream, by parapraxis, by the flash of wit, and the moment of scientific and artistic inspiration. The Apostle, too, it should be remembered, is overwhelmed by the impulse to violate the law of which his reason heartily approves. In these and similar events we face the limits of our authority over our own thoughts and actions. Implicit in our orientation to these limits lie the moral grounds of our conscious rationality. The Apostle, for example, seals the destiny of Christian relations to reason (Schluchter, 1981; Christian rationality), when he formulates the limits of reason as "sin."

Since every science represents a solution to the problem of the limits of reason, even if its solution is to deny there is any limit, we conceive of science as a morally grounded activity. Thus, the discovery of the Freudian unconscious foreshadows not only a Copernican revolution, as Lacan (1977, p. 114) has already pointed out, but a Socratic revolution in the sciences as well. For, if the moral authority of scientific inquiry is conceived as embodied in the particular way in which a science works through its relation to the limits of reason, then every science can be brought, through Socratic interrogation, to reveal the secret of its moral authority.

In our analysis of a children's joke we bring the Freudian unconscious into relief not only as a resource for formulating the grammar of the joke's production which, of course, Freud has already done (1905, pp. 159-180), but, more importantly, as an implicit topic of the joke. If a joke, a product of unconscious revision, can topicalize reason's relation to the unconscious then the Freudian unconscious is not in principle opposed to either self-

representation or self-reflection. We show that even as the joke topicalizes reason's limit, i.e., the unconscious as Freud envisaged it, it provides a strong antidote to Saint Paul's vexatious relation to the limits of reason. Unlike Christianity, the children's joke invites us to achieve a pleasurable relation to the limits of reason.

The Joke: Its Thought and Expression

Q: Why did the cookie cry?

A: Because its mother was a wafer so long.²

We hear this as a children's joke. How is it that the joke exemplifies a child's spirited interest in the comic nature of the whole?

To begin with let us point out the most obvious reasons for considering this a children's joke. In the first place, the joke's usage and lexicon lie within the range of what we consider familiar to children. The joke makes use of things, such as cookies, wafers, crying, and mothers, that are all familiar to children. All of these things inhabit the world of the child. These usages lead us to suspect that our text is a child's joke, but this is not our only reason. The technique of the joke, wordplay and pun, also indicate that our text is the work of a child. Puns, like children, are precious; though clever and attractive, they strain to affect. Finally, the very form of the joke betrays its author. The riddle is a mystifying and misleading question posed as a problem to be solved or guessed.

Aristotle conceived of the riddle as a style of speech wholly composed of metaphors (*Poetics*, 1458a25). Its strength, he argued, lies in *to legonta hyparchonta adynata synapsai*. It lies in saying what is in ways that are impossible (1458a27). The riddle is a kind of nonsense that nevertheless expresses the truth about something. In regard to its metaphoric nature, employment of the riddle is at odds with conceptions of children as excessively literal. Although the question raised by a riddle is intelligible it does not make sense. The riddle is childish because it is a lively reading of a misreading. It is based on a misunderstanding by which the answerer is constrained to abide. Thus, the child's misconstrued question imitates a kind of ignorance (*méconnaissance*) that ensnares.

When the child asks, "Why did the cookie cry?" we could reply that cookies do not cry and that he has misconstrued the use of these words. But then we would be violating the usage of the riddle, which requires that we submit to the particular misunderstanding on which it is based and use it as an occasion to exercise our imagination. The question posed by the riddle invites us to release our imagination and come up with an equally intelligible though nonsense answer. "Did the cookie cry because someone bit it?" "No," says the child gleefully, "it cried because its mother was a wafer so long."

What is it about the joke that allows us to recognize it as a joke? What makes this particular joke a joke? In our example the comic character of the joke does not seem to reside in what Freud called "the thought of the joke." In his book on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud

argued that what makes a joke a joke does not lie “in the thought of the joke,” but:

in the wording in which [the thought] is expressed. We have only to study the peculiarity of its form of expression to grasp what may be termed the verbal or expressive technique of the joke, something which must stand in an intimate relation with the essence of the joke, since, if it is replaced by something else, the character and effect of the joke disappear. (Freud, 1905, p. 17)

If we were to replace the wording in which our joke is expressed while carefully preserving the literal sense of the joke thought, it might sound like this:

Q: Why did the baby cry?

A: Because its mother was away for so long.

It is difficult to determine precisely what is intended by the notion of the joke thought. We will develop this notion by beginning with the literal or propositional value of the joke. If we reproduce the joke’s literal value without reproducing its verbal technique then we lose the very essence of the joke. Freud seems to be saying that it is not the thought behind what we say but what we say itself that is funny.

The thought of our joke, that babies are vulnerable, seems to bear out Freud’s contention. Babies, the thought goes, are in pain when their mothers are absent and they naturally express their pain by crying. The baby’s vulnerability, its lack of resources to care for itself, makes its well-being contingent on its mother’s presence. The baby’s happiness is in the hands of one over whom it has little or no control. The way in which babies get their mothers’ attention is through crying. The joker hears the cry as arousing a maternal response. Although the cry must appear to the joker as a weak form of expression, as a form of expression particular to the baby’s vulnerable condition, it nevertheless serves as a powerful elicitor of maternal response. Is this also a part of our joke thought? How effective the infant’s cry must seem to a child who has learned to make jokes in order to get attention. The infant’s cry is a communication and an expression of affect. It is a “strong distress signal” to the maternal caretaker (Lichtenberg, 1983, p. 24). And all the powers of the child’s articulate speech cannot keep his mother from ignoring him in favour of her baby. The joke thought must think that it is ironic that the child who can ask for so much gets so much less than the infant who only cries.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine speculates on the circumstances that accompany the acquisition of language (Oates, 1948, p. 8). At first, Augustine tells us, he cried and fussed when he wanted something, but,

I gradually learnt to understand what objects [words] signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires. (Oates, 1948, p. 9)

For Augustine the use of speech is grounded in the need to accurately express one’s own desires. Augustine finds crying and fussing inadequate forms of expression because only one signifier covers the whole range of the signified. To use Wittgenstein’s example (1963, pp. 2-3), the crier who wants five red apples must use the same sound to signify five, red, and apples. Although crying seems to Augustine to be an inefficient expression of desire, the joke thought dwells on the problem.

Let us return to Freud's contention concerning the joke thought. Our joke thought certainly does not seem to be a laughing matter. The baby's cry is provoked by a malicious thought: "Let's deprive the baby of its mother." Depriving the baby of its mother is the cruel or tendentious background thought of this joke. Thus far our examination of the joke thought confirms Freud's observation that if the verbal or expressive technique of the joke is separated from its thought, then the thought itself no longer possesses the character and effect of a joke and the joke disappears. What at first appeared comic now appears cruel and mischievous or, at best, only implicitly ironic in its dissatisfaction with the relative effectiveness and efficiency of speech over crying.

Freud advises that in order to discover the essence of the joke we must reconstruct the joke by carefully examining the rules of its production.

Our analysis of the joke's verbal technique will focus on the movement from the joke thought, that we have already begun to explicate, to the joke expression. It will facilitate our inquiry if we briefly set out the terminal point for which we are developing rules of translation (Turner, 1980):

Expression: Why did the cookie cry?

Thought: Why did the baby cry?

Expression: Because its mother was a wafer so long.

Thought: Because its mother was away for so long.

Our analysis of the joke technique begins with the substitution of the word "cookie" for the word "baby" in the joke thought. This substitution is guided by the rule of metaphor: putting one word in the place of another, or letting one sign signify another sign (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b6-9; Ricoeur, 1977, pp. 19-21). Metaphor would hardly be intelligible if there were no trace of the meaning of the former sign left in the place now occupied by the substitute sign. Thus, in the sentence, "Why did the cookie cry?" there remains a trace of the baby. We can see this trace in the place now occupied by the cookie. A cookie is a small, flat or slightly raised, cake. A baby too is small and lies flat or can raise itself but slightly. This brings us back to the joke thought, namely, that babies are vulnerable which, in the eyes of the child, they share with cookies. If we recall that cookies are very often children's favorite snack, we begin to determine the particular way in which they are vulnerable. Babies are like cookies in the sense that they are both inferior to children. Children are predators and cookies are victims. Children hunt for cookies and eat them up. This substitution may represent a fulfillment of the child's wish to enjoy the baby as much as it enjoys its cookies. This extended sense of cookie can be seen in its use as a metaphor for "attractive woman" which has now entered standard English usage. Also the expressions "tough cookie" and "smart cookie" carry the suggestive combination of hard, in the sense of unyielding, yet vulnerable and, therefore, enjoyable, or clever yet vulnerable and, therefore, enjoyable.

The baby, of course, is neither an attractive woman nor is it clever or tough, but, nevertheless, the child sees traces of these possibilities. It may see the baby's potential, but it also sees how this potential is vulnerable because it finds it hard to resist devouring the baby in order to enjoy it. In this

sense we might say that the child is clever, or the realization of the baby's trace of cleverness, since the child sees promise and also sees that it cannot seem to enjoy that promise without devouring it.

The second substitution is that of "a wafer" for "away for." The second substitution is based on homonymy or the substitution of one sign for another bearing the same or similar phonic values. This does not mean, however, that the rule of metaphor no longer holds. We will still have to look for the trace of "away for" left in the place now occupied by "a wafer." But, before we proceed, let us link the two substitutions together.

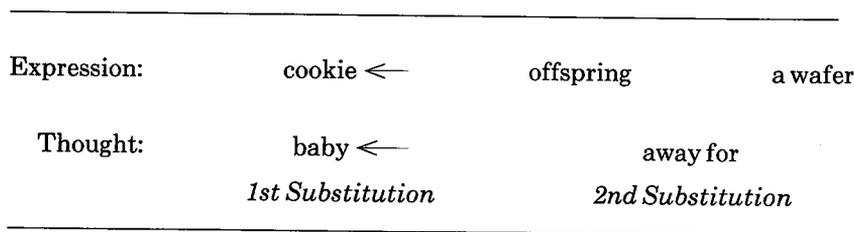


Figure 1.

There is a stronger resemblance between these substitutions than the fact that they are both substitutions suggests. There is an internal, meaningful bond between them. The second takes its bearing from the first. That is, there is a kinship or family resemblance between cookies and wafers that is actually created over and above the joke thought. The relationship between "baby" and "away for" can only be surmised on the basis of what develops at the level of expression. The joke technique plays on the family resemblance between cookies and wafers by making the cookie the offspring of the wafer. Furthermore, the joke technique focuses our attention on the wafer as a metaphor for both the absence of the mother (i.e., as a substitute for "away for") and for what stands in the mother's absence as a substitute for her absence.

In the joke expression the cookie's cries can be interpreted as mourning the loss of the phallic mother ("mother *was* a wafer so long") and as signifying awareness of the threat of castration (the absence of the wafer). It is clear, however, that the wafer substitutes both for the mother and for the mother's absence. If the joke expression laments the passing of the phallic mother can the subject of the joke be the baby? To the infant, of course, maternal care satisfies every need.

The third substitution is determined by the second. In the joke thought "long" refers to the duration of the mother's absence. It is an estimate of the amount of time spent in an activity. In the joke expression, however, "long" refers to the length of a physical object.

The joke thought is that the baby cries because its mother was away for a long time. Since it is because of the duration of the mother's absence that the baby cries, it is necessary, if we are to preserve the parallelism between thought and expression, to assume that it is because of the length of the wafer that the cookie cries in the joke expression.

“A wafer so long” (= phallus) is substituted for “away for so long” (= enduring absence). The phallus is substituted for the absence of the mother. This, however, is not the substitution of one thing for another (at the level of thought, at least), but rather the substitution of something (a long wafer = phallus) for the lack-of-something (a mother): the substitution of something for nothing. This substitution does not relieve the cookie which just keeps crying. But this may be because crying also takes on a new meaning at the level of expression.

The joke technique begins to emerge as a set of rules that enables us to move along the chain of substitutions that run between the joke thought and the joke expression. It is the joke technique that enables us to substitute what the mother has lost for the loss of a mother.

In the joke thought the baby cries because of the loss of its mother, but in the joke expression the cookie cries because of what its mother has lost. The expression of the joke *inverts* the joke thought although it does not conflict with the thought. In the joke expression the mother is named by her lack and this name, in turn, is substituted for the lack of a mother. The substitution of a part (what the mother lacks) for the whole (the lack of a mother) is an example of metonymy.

Crying, too, may have a different significance at the level of expression than it has at the level of thought. Why is the cookie crying?

Implicit in the joke lies a conception of language that is fundamentally opposed to Saint Augustine's. The joke conceives of our initiation into language as grounded in the cry emitted by the infant oriented to the absence of the mother. Just as the cookie is the offspring of the wafer in the joke expression, the baby's cry is authored by the absence of a maternal caretaker in the child's thought. Our analysis needs to formulate the sense in which this cry can serve as a paradigmatic speech act.

Speech, the joke thought suggests, emanates from within the gap that separates mother and infant. Augustine conceives of speech as bridging the gap that separates him from the fulfillment of his desires. Whereas, for Augustine, the speaker names and commands the satisfaction of his desires, for the joker speech emanates out of the difference between a need and the demand that conveys it. Thus, the cry neither names the mother, nor is it intended as a communication (signal) to bridge the gap between infant and mother and summon the maternal caretaker back again. Far from bridging the gap that separates them, the cry, as conceived by the joker, actually widens the distance that separates mother and infant.

What is the illocutionary force of the joke thought (Austin, 1965)? Although the thought is about infants and mothers, its illocutionary force is not purely descriptive. Elements of another relation have been fused and superimposed on the infant-mother relation. That is to say, the cookie does not cry because it lacks a mother, as a baby would, but rather, because of what its mother lacks. The absence of the mother's penis, however, as Juliet Michell has pointed out, “is significant only in that it makes meaningful the father's prohibition on incestuous desires” (Lacan, 1982, p. 17). Thus, the joker is one for whom the father's prohibition and the threat of

castration are compelling issues. The illocutionary force of the joke thought, what it actually *does*, is to work through these issues. The dissolution of the Oedipus complex is the illocutionary point of the joke.

The joker reflects on something comic in the relationship between mothers and infants but cannot (because of his own particular relations) laugh at it, although he wants to, so he makes a joke. The joke works through the comic occurrence without recognizing it as such; that is, without laughing at it.

Crying and Speaking

This brings us once again back to the joke thought and to the question with which we began; namely, what is there to laugh at in this thought? What has occurred to the child?

In order to begin to see how the child construes the cry as a paradigmatic speech act, it may help to compare our original formulation of the joke thought with the first two sentences of a story told by a two year old little girl:

The baby cried. The mommy picked it up. (Sacks, 1974, p. 216)

The child who told this story is not joking, nor has anything comic occurred to it. It merely says: "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up." Our joker, on the other hand, says: "The baby cried because the mommy was not there to pick it up."

Sacks (1974, p. 217) has some interesting observations on how we hear the sentences of the little girl's story, which may shed light on the comic nature of the joke thought. He claims that we hear the sequence in which the occurrences are reported as the same as the sequence in which they occurred. Furthermore, Sacks claims that we hear the explanation for the mommy picking up the baby in the fact that the baby cried. We hear that the mommy picked up the baby *because* it cried.

Sacks wants to create an apparatus to show how we come to hear the story as we do. Is it that as a rule if babies cry, then mommies pick them up? Is this a rule to which both mommies and babies orient? The baby (we say) may be crying because it is wet, or because it is hungry, or because its diaper is on too tight, or even because it simply wants to be picked up by the mommy; but no matter what its crying signifies, it is effective in gaining the mommy's attention, or, as the storyteller points out, in getting picked up. No matter what the baby's cry signifies, the mommy picks up on it and tries to satisfy the demand.

If we return our attention to the joke thought which is that the baby cried because its mother had been away for so long, the following questions occurs to us: How did the baby know that its mother was away for so long? The child telling the joke is not suggesting that the baby noticed that the mother had been away for longer than she should have. The baby cried because its mother was away for too long. But what does "too long" mean here? Does a baby have a sense of how long its mother should be away, or, of how long it should take her to respond to its cries?

At this point, what is implicit in the joke thought is that the baby cried for some such reason as being hungry, for example, and when there was no response to this cry (let us call it the first cry), it then began crying for another reason; namely, it cried because crying was ineffective in gaining the mother's attention (we can call this the second cry). The second cry is not for attention, although mother's attention in response to the second cry could show baby that there really is no reason to cry. Mother's response could show that crying actually is effective in gaining her attention.

The hypothesis of the second cry was suggested by the words "so long" in the joke thought. The second cry, first appeared as a meta-cry, a comment on a previous cry and on crying and its limits. Hearing the humor of the second cry means hearing it as saying something about crying and the crier. Whereas, for example, we hear the first cry as saying "I am hungry," we hear the second as "No one cares that I am hungry," or "I don't get no respect." Rodney Dangerfield has already demonstrated that the second cry gets the laughs.

Parents hear the first cry as a self-report: "I am hungry," or "I am wet." Parents hear a discrete sound variance between a hunger cry and a pain cry. But, from the vantage point of the joker's analytic distinction between first and second cries there is no difference between the cries that parents hear. The joker hears the baby's interest in self-representation as needing to transcend and utilize these natural expressions. Thus, whereas Augustine stresses how hard it is for the baby to form its mouth so as to imitate the sounds that adults make, the joker sees the challenge of speech not in varying sounds but in collecting these variances through an analytic distinction that in turn will be represented by a sound. The joker would insist that the difference in the natural expression of pain, fear, and hunger are not speeches. If a baby falls it makes a different sound than if it is hungry. If an empty can falls it makes a different sound than a full one. Do we hear the can as saying "I am empty?" Yet, we hear the baby as saying, "I am hungry." The reason we do not hear the can saying "I am empty" is because cans are not subjects. They have no self. The sound emitted by an empty can is not made by a self. But, the joker would insist, the second cry must come from a self no matter what it sounds like.

What the joker finds particularly troublesome is that the baby's cries are inarticulate. They do not vary with the clarity that we associate with speech. In the baby's cry the demand for food is hopelessly fused with the demand for love. This confusion spreads to the difference between natural expression and self-representation. This difference, too, often remains inarticulate in the cry. The baby's inarticulate demand for food and love is satisfied in the inarticulation of the mother's response to its cry.

To permit the hallucinated breast to exist for the child is to open for him a place other than the one that concerns the satisfaction of need. His desire begins to take form, inseparable from the unspoken suffering that cries out.

A woman is also impotent to say something at the moment of giving birth. The loss of the breast reproduces the loss of the placenta. It repeats the way in which the mother lived the birth of her child and her own birth, which is replayed during that of her offspring, but not in the same way. It is as a *speaking* being that she experiences a real loss this time. (Montrely, 1980, pp. 84-85)

In *The Story of Louise*, Michèle Montrelay formulates the “feeding” as a time when a woman is impotent to say something. But it is as a speaking being that she loses the power of speech. The woman does not merely give “food” to the baby, in feeding a woman gives herself. She satisfies the baby’s demand for her in satisfying its demand for food. But, here again, the satisfaction of the demand for love is not discernible from the satisfaction of the demand for food.

Not only is the baby’s cry inarticulate, not only does the baby’s cry confuse the demand for food with the demand for love, but, in her impotence to speak, a woman’s response also confuses these two—food and love. The maternal response is just as undifferentiated as the demand that initiated it.

The joke thought collects mother and baby through the inarticulation of the cry in which the demand for love is inseparable from the demand for food. Although cookies and wafers are different, although the one appeals to children and the other to adults, they are deeply the same. They are different embodiments of the same principle. The same relationship holds for babies and mothers, as viewed by the joker, although mothers and babies are different, although the one can speak and the other cannot, nevertheless they are deeply the same: They embody an enjoyable relation to crying, to the inarticulation of the difference between the need for food and the demand for love. The joker, in turn, who has heard the law, the prohibition against such confusions, is exhorted not to act like a baby. He is exhorted not to cry but to speak. It is within the stipulation of this commandment that the child seeks to achieve a spirited relation to language.

Language and the Unconscious

In the Sixth Chapter of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argues that jokes are formed in the unconscious. This is how he describes their formation:

A preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome of this is at once grasped by conscious perception. (Freud, 1905, p. 166)

The thought which momentarily plunges into the unconscious seeks “the ancient dwelling-place of its former play with words” (1905, p. 170). It is seeking the pleasure of speech. Thus, Freud argues that the incentive for the plunge into the unconscious is that pleasure yielding metaphors arise there. The unconscious becomes the joker’s collaborator in achieving a spirited relation to language and its limits. In his effort to recover the pleasure of speech the joker releases his thoughts on the law that forbids incest.

Instead of the father’s law being the object of the joke, however, it is replaced by the baby. The baby is substituted for the law and is charged with responsibility for separating the joker from his mother. In response the unconscious separates the baby from its mother, thus fulfilling the joker’s wish to separate his mother and father and have his mother all for himself. In the unconscious the joker’s effect is diverted from the father to the baby. But out of the separation of the baby from its mother a subject is born. The

second cry announces the presence of a subject. The baby is no longer one who confidently relies on the first cry to elicit an undifferentiated maternal response, but he can rely on the collaboration of language to gain a glimpse of the comic nature of the whole. The second cry which is the product of the joker's diverted malice toward the father returns to divert the joker. In thought the joker should now be running off with his mother, but instead he is diverted by the humor of the second cry. The joker loses interest in the abducted mother who undifferentiatedly gives herself (i.e., the one who cannot speak) and hears the humor of the baby's second cry, "I don't get no respect."

Notes

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2. This joke is taken as a paradigmatic example of a children's joke in McGhee's (1975) review of the field.

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