Book review

WOULD HAVE BEEN SWELL…

Hurley, M. M., Dennett, D. C. & Adams, R. B., Jr. (2011). *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. **Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 376 pp**

My title refers both to that of the book and its subtitle: it would have made this author and hordes of his colleagues in humour research, artificial intelligence, computational sciences, and mind research very happy both to get inside jokes and to reverse-engineer the mind – and all of that for a pretty incredible $30, discounted almost 50% online. Like virtually all humour researchers, both affiliated and non-affiliated with the International Society for Humour Studies, attending or not its annual international conferences on humour research, and contributing or not to *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, now into its 24th volume, the authors take humour seriously and attempt to relate it to several important aspects of the study of the mind. Its basis is Dr Hurley's 2006 Tufts dissertation supervised by his two co-authors, who presumably added some of their own thoughts on humour. The project crucially depends on and is informed by Dr Dennett's considerable and often controversial scholarship on the mind and evolution.

The book's stated premise is indeed evolutionary and, less obviously, also sociobiological: the pleasure of humour is nature's bribe to the brain for valiantly dealing with unresolved and unresolvable issues as well as for the onerous tasks of cleaning and debugging itself in the process. It is tinged with phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy (Gilbert Ryle (1953) was Dennett's doctoral supervisor at Oxford in the mid sixties) that the book tries to combine with cognitivism, computationalism – surprisingly, of the strong AI variety – and a number of other schools and approaches, all cheerfully and smoothly reviewed from a fresh and unspoilt perspective of an enthusiastic PhD student. There is nothing blasé or tired about the narrative, except perhaps for the few gems by Steven Wright, quoted to this writer's silent applause.

Unlike many first-timers who discover that humour can be researched and proceed to re-invent the wheel – and in spite of no humour researchers appearing on the long lists of names in the acknowledgments (Douglas Hofstadter, his current boss, constituting the sole semi-exception) – Hurley does pay tribute to humour research *per se*, quoting a dozen or so sources, including this author's 36-year-old overrated book. He largely follows the traditional (à la Keith-Spiegel) tripartite taxonomy of humour theories into superiority/release/incongruity types, but then, again surprisingly, posits several subtypes of incongruity theories at apparently the same level. Probably unavoidably, there are gaps in the references, some of them significant. Thus, Plato, Cicero, and other ancients are not listed as predecessors of Hobbes, who is established as the progenitor of the superiority theories, which, in modernity, he definitely was. Albert Rapp's (1951) absence among the contemporary adherents is noticeable, while Charles Gruner (1978) is quoted in a different section – his later and lighter fare rather than his main contribution. The minority release theory is correctly attributed, after Keith-Spiegel again, to Spencer and Freud but a significant contribution to it by psychoanalysts later in the last century (e.g., Mindess 1971 or Fry 1963) is missing. Most amazingly perhaps, major research in the psychology of humour (Ruch 1998; Martin 2007) is omitted entirely, even though a couple of the earlier psychological works on stimulus-response incongruity resolution is mentioned. On the cognitive side of the

incongruity approach, the earlier Attardo (1994) reference would have worked better – and because this writer is not supposed to promote his own work, Raskin (2008) cannot be mentioned in this review, but its post-dissertation absorption, in the process of the always much-needed thesis-to-book conversion, would have corrected some distortions of the humour research contemporary panorama and relieved the account of its flatness and superficiality.

There are quite a few puzzling and even alarming elements in the book. The first and foremost perhaps comes from the ghost of Sir Karl Popper: is the evolutionary claim of humour as a brain bribe falsifiable in principle or is it an item of faith (faith? from Dennett?)? This is not allayed by the chapter on falsifiability, which deals, rather unoriginally, with the question of, roughly, how the text of the joke can be manipulated to lose its funniness. The additional troubling question is whether the view of humour as a consolation prize to the brain for failure to encompass life is not actually biased towards the "Anglo-Saxon" or Western tradition of self-deprecation, or – worse – whether humour here is confused with the laughter of embarrassment, which is far from being universal (the heavy dependence on Provine exacerbates this fear).

Even more problematic for the readers of this journal is the somewhat uncomfortable dance around computation of humour. After reviewing a few of the available toy systems generating humour and discovering just one humour detection system (see Taylor 2010 for a much better survey and original proposal as well as the computational humour chapter in Raskin 2008), the book declares its intention to contribute to a computational system of humour which will not be simply algorithmic but will also have somehow reflected the functional and motivational aspects of the sense of humour (in view of which the omission of Ruch 1998 is even more regrettable). No such system is developed, as the authors state outright, and after claiming its AI-completeness, the issue is laid to rest quite early in the book.

The several discussions of the usages of a few important words, such as *funny*, as well as the redundant examples of jokes in other languages, are the ineffective vestiges of ordinary language philosophy, while the proud rejection of the essentialist approach – yes, it would be lovely to establish the necessary and sufficient conditions of humour but we'd rather talk about the evolution of this mysterious entity – establishes the authors' phenomenological credentials rather unobtrusively: just enough to be recognized by friends and hopefully largely ignored by foes.

Probably the most disappointing aspect of the book is that the narrative of humour, mostly jokes with partial explanations, couched when possible in the terminology of the chapter, and the study of the mind, with an emphasis on the emotional over the cognitive, do not really mesh – instead they cohabit somewhat uneasily. One is not sure, however, if the authors should be judged too harshly for that: after all, if a happy union had been achieved and consummated, we would have found ourselves inside jokes as well as having reverse-engineered the mind.

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