



POPULAR CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY®

Curb Your Enthusiasm and Philosophy

Edited by Mark Ralkowski

Awaken the Social Assassin Within

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Curb Your Enthusiasm and Philosophy

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Awaken the Social Assassin Within

Edited by
MARK RALKOWSKI



OPEN COURT
Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois

Volume 69 in the series, *Popular Culture and Philosophy*[®], edited by
George A. Reisch

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First printing 2012

Front cover picture of Larry David: Vincent Altamore, Altamore Graphic Design

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Curb your enthusiasm and philosophy / edited by Mark Ralkowski.

p. cm. — (Popular culture and philosophy; v. 69)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-8126-9793-3

1. Curb your enthusiasm (Television program) 2. Jewish wit and humor—History and criticism. 3. David, Larry. I. Ralkowski, Mark.

PN1992.77.C84C87 2012

791.45'72—dc23

20120196

*To my niece Ellie Vaupel and to
all of Larry's Bald Brothers!*

Dominion over the world, as we know, is divided between angels and devils. The good of the world, however, implies not that the angels have the advantage over the devils (as I believed when I was a child) but that the powers of the two sides are nearly in equilibrium. If there were too much incontestable meaning in the world (the angels' power), man would succumb under its weight. If the world were to lose all its meaning (the devils' reign), we could not live either.

Things deprived suddenly of their supposed meaning, of the place assigned to them in the so-called order of things, make us laugh. In origin, laughter is thus the devil's domain. It has something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (things are less weighty than they appeared to be, letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness).

—MILAN KUNDERA, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

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Pretty Pretty Pretty Far Beyond Good and Evil

I think we're all sort of split down the middle, good and bad, you know. Good is not funny ... but the bad thoughts are funny because they are unexpressed . . . It's being able to get that bad side, that funny side, out. And that's why people really can relate to it. Because it comes from a place inside that somebody else is expressing.

—“Times Talks” interview of Larry David by *The New York Times* reporter Bill Carter in 2006

Have you ever wondered why men don't urinate sitting down, or wanted to yell at a disabled person for driving his wheelchair recklessly? Does it bother you when bald people hide their baldness with toupées, or when teenagers trick-or-treat without costumes? Have you ever wondered whether it's okay to make jokes about Affirmative Action or the size of a child's penis? Do you think some women should never flaunt their bare midriffs, or that no man should wear a thong swimsuit in public? If you've ever wondered any of these things—or been bothered by them or wanted to do them yourself—you should read this book. It's exactly what you've been looking for. Think of it as an opportunity to understand why your friends and family, and even the general public, find you so difficult to live with.

This book is mostly about “Larry David,” *Curb-Larry*, the character that the *real* Larry David plays on HBO's popular television series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. However, if it's true—as HBO once suggested—that we all have a little bit of Larry in us, this book is also about *you*. On some level, in some sense, *you are him*.

Maybe that sounds just about right. After all, Larry often says and does things that most of us wish we had the courage to say and do. We may even fulfill some of our own wishes by watching Larry satisfy his. As Cheryl Hines once said, “I think we all live vicariously through Larry, because . . . when somebody asks you to dinner, you'd like to just say, ‘No, I don't really like you that much.’ But people don't in real life, you know. But Larry does” (“The History of *Curb* . . . So Far,” Season Five DVD Bonus Feature).

We certainly *don't* always live as Larry does. But if Cheryl Hines is right, we wish we could. We wish we were as free as Larry is. That's why it makes sense to say that we all have a bit of Larry in us, even if most of us would never break the rules as happily as he does. We admire Larry because he's free. We're like caged animals watching a member of our species roam unfettered in the wild. Larry doesn't care about the things that ordinary people care about most. And while he may sometimes overvalue things that the rest of us consider trivial, there's usually a playfulness and a carefreeness about Larry's life that's easy to want for yourself.

Even Larry David seems to admire *Curb-Larry's* freedom. As he once said in a revealing interview about *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, his real life “is an act. It's a role.” And it's *the show* that allows him to be himself (“The History of *Curb* . . . So Far”). Think about that. Larry doesn't act while he's doing a scene for *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He acts while he goes about living his daily life. In other words, the real Larry David, the writer and actor, is in the same position as the rest of us, only he's discovered this other side of himself *that is also in us*, and he's put it on television for everyone to see.

Curb Your Enthusiasm is funny, as every fan of the show would agree. But its subject matter is a lot more than just light entertainment. It's hard not to walk away from a few episodes of *Curb* without thinking about something—like race relations, religion, or social expectations—in a new light. And what we usually see is that, like Larry, we live lives that are sort of dishonest. Each one of us has

role—as a Christian, as a Jew, as a friend, as a man or woman, etc.—and we act it out according to unwritten rules, even when we'd rather not. At its best, *Curb* gives us a glimpse of the truth about what we really think and what we really want.

That's how Larry David and Susie Essman understand the show.

SUSIE: You really like your TV-Larry character.

LARRY: Oh, God, I'm so in love with that guy, yeah.

SUSIE: I think we all love our characters, and that's because our characters allow us to act out a part of ourselves that we're not allowed to in real life.

LARRY: Exactly.

SUSIE: And that's why I think it works.

LARRY: I'm becoming a little more TV-Larry in my life. I gotta tell ya, it's a pleasure.

SUSIE: TV-Larry doesn't care about convention.

LARRY: No! Somebody asked me out to lunch the other day. I looked at them and said, "No, I don't think so." It was wonderful and I never saw a face like that in my life.

SUSIE: Do you find that, because of TV-Larry, you can get away with it more as real Larry?

LARRY: Yes, that's what I'm saying. Of course!

SUSIE: So, TV-Larry is just allowing you to be more honest?

LARRY: Yes.

SUSIE: Because people think there's a schmuckiness about TV-Larry when really there's a lack of artifice about TV-Larry. Do you know what I mean? He's just out there doing what everybody wants to do but they just play by the convention.

LARRY: Right, right, I think that's true. But a lot of people I know don't watch the show because they hate TV-Larry. ("Conversation with Larry David and Susie Essman Recorded Live at New York's 92nd Street Y," Season Six DVD Bonus Feature)

Larry's final comment here is worth thinking about at length. A lot of people hate *Curb*-Larry, but they love him. This is fascinating because *Curb*-Larry is *the Larry in all of us*. Which means that to hate him is to hate ourselves. How should we understand this?

On the one hand, it isn't surprising at all. *Curb*-Larry is probably best known for being a pain in the ass, for doing things that people aren't supposed to do. He's so famous for this, in fact, that he's added a new concept to our language, the "Larry David Moment," which the online Urban Dictionary defines as an instance "when a person says or does something offensive to someone else, without intentionally doing so." It's a popular concept. If you do a Google search for "Larry David Moment" you'll get over seventy-five thousand results. You can buy "Larry David Moment" mugs, t-shirts, and magnets. You'll find people blogging about "Monday's Larry David Moment." Others list their favorite instances from the show, and provide YouTube links to videos of the relevant scenes. There's even a Facebook page devoted to the concept.

Without a doubt, it's difficult to be, and to be around, *Curb*-Larry. There's something unbearably attractive about the lightness of his way of life. He's not playing by the same rules as the rest of us. So no wonder some people hate *Curb*-Larry. He isn't paying his dues. He isn't following the social contract. If everyone acted as he does, life would be chaos.

But on the other hand, this creates a puzzle. How can we both love and hate the inner Larry in all of us? Why do some people find his behavior and ideas refreshing, while others find them offensive? Do the Larry-haters resent *Curb*-Larry because he doesn't do what he's supposed to do? Or do they

hate him because he reminds them of *how they should be living but don't* because they lack the courage?

The authors in this book try to answer these questions and many others related to them. We think you'll be surprised to discover how much philosophy is present in the world of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Most of it revolves around *Curb*-Larry: his values and outlook on life, his unusual ways of interacting with people, his inability or unwillingness to conform to the world, and his relationships with others including the *real* Larry David who plays him. We try to cover everything. Some of the chapters discuss ethical and existential issues, such as whether Larry is a "bad apple" or perhaps worth emulating. Others talk about sexuality, religion, and race relations. There's a chapter on *enthusiasm* itself, another on giving gifts, and we even discuss the philosophical significance of Larry's piercing stare into other people's eyes.

In "Kamikaze Bingo" (Season Five), Larry asks Kevin Nealon to excuse him for having "a curious mind that asks questions of people." If you share Larry's curiosity, we think you'll love this book. We certainly enjoyed writing it. And, if we may say so, we think it's pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty good!¹

ANONYMOUS

¹ I would like to thank Jacob Garber for making the index. And I would like to thank Chris Tenberg who was very helpful during the development of this book, especially at the beginning stages when the pieces were first coming together. One day perhaps he will have a chance to enlighten us with his philosophical meditations on baldness.

² EDITOR'S NOTE: "Anonymous" is really Mark Ralkowski.

I

There Are a Few Different Realities Here

Deep Inside You Know You're Him

MARK RALKOWSKI

A real comedian—that's a daring man. He *dares* to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they *want*. A joke releases tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to *liberate* the will and desire, it has to *change the situation*.

—TREVOR GRIFFITHS, *Comedians*

Larry David isn't a good man. Not by ordinary standards, anyway. He steals from corpses and roadside memorials. He digs up graves. He fights with women and he says inappropriate things to homosexuals. He makes fun of the disabled. If he doesn't insult your pet, or take advantage of it sexually, he might kill or steal it. He offends black people and Asians, and he stereotypes Muslims.

Sometimes he sexualizes children, commenting on the size of their genitalia. Other times he fights with them, challenging the prices they charge for their lemonade. He lies constantly. He jokes about the Holocaust and September 11th. He will pledge his faithfulness to his wife *for this life*, but he would like to be free to mess around in the afterlife. He's sacrilegious. He's insensitive to the sick. He breaks up marriages, and doesn't send wedding gifts. He fights with doctors and waiters and the elderly who play bingo. And he's absolutely terrible at showing respect, whether it's for the dead, for friends at their birthday parties, or for teenagers at their Bat Mitzvahs. He simply doesn't fit in with society.

In fact, Larry David is so bad at being human he often has to apologize for his offensive apologies. So why do we like him so much? How can we?

Sure, He's a Schmuck. But Who Isn't?

Maybe it's something simple. Maybe we just like Larry because he makes us laugh. But does he really say enough? The problem here is that Larry makes us laugh at behavior and ideas that we would normally find shocking and monstrous. So, sure, Larry makes us laugh. The question is, why? Why aren't we simply appalled? And what, if anything, does our laughter at him tell us about ourselves? There are a few philosophical theories about the nature of humor. Maybe they can help us answer these questions.

The Superiority Theory of Humor says that humor involves feelings of superiority over other people or over our former selves. We laugh at other people when they fall down, or have toilet paper stuck to their shoes, or are so overweight that they don't fit between the armrests of their seats. And we laugh at ourselves—at pictures of our teenage haircuts or things we did in college—because we feel we're superior to the irresponsible and inexperienced people we used to be. This theory can be

traced back to Plato (429 B.C.–347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384 B.C.–322 B.C.), who thought that in comedy we take pleasure in looking down on subjects who are inferior to us. But it was Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) who developed the Superiority Theory most clearly. He says, “the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”¹ If Hobbes is right, there is something malicious about humor. It’s like the German concept *Schadenfreude*, which means, “the pleasure derived from other people’s misfortunes.”

Larry seems to use Superiority humor in every episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He does this in a variety of ways, since *Curb* invites us to laugh at all kinds of undesirable people, but primarily by showcasing his own character’s incorrigible shortcomings. Larry’s character on *Curb*, like the George Costanza character on *Seinfeld*, is funny in large part because he’s so pathetic, especially in social settings. As Ben Stiller says in “Ben’s Birthday Party” (Season Four), Larry “really has a way to go when it comes to dealing with people.” He’s out of sync with the world. He doesn’t get *it*, and he doesn’t get *him*. He’s even out of sync with himself, as we learned when he smoked marijuana and spent time in front of a mirror.

In episode after episode we see Larry fail, and often because he has undermined himself. In “The Interior Decorator” (Season One), for example, Larry is punished for his “elevator etiquette”: he holds the door open for a young woman who then uses his courteousness to her advantage by signing in and being seen before him at the doctor’s office. When Larry tries to get even and wrestles this woman to the floor the next time they are both in the office, the circumstances change (the doctor has changed the check-in policy on Larry’s recommendation) and Larry loses anyway.

This pattern is repeated in many episodes of *Curb*. Larry is victimized by someone or something (such as the weatherman’s forecast for rain), and so he makes adjustments to avoid the same fate in the future (instead of trusting the weatherman’s forecast and cancelling golf, he will do the opposite). However, despite all of his best efforts, like a character in an ancient Greek tragedy who is predetermined to fail, Larry suffers a second downfall, this one often worse than the first (playing golf in the pouring rain) and sometimes a by-product of his own misguided ideas (attributing nefarious intentions, rather than just limited knowledge, to the weatherman). Larry can’t win no matter what he does. It’s as if the world is prearranged to foil him, which is amusing.

In some cases, Larry’s misfortunes allow us to feel superior to *him*. Think of the countless scenes in which a person, or a room full of people, turns against Larry: for stealing a 5 wood from a dead man in his coffin, for offering edible panties to a conservative orthodox Jewish woman, for appearing to mock Michael J. Fox, for making an offensive joke about affirmative action, for making fun of adopted children from China, for mistakenly thinking a well dressed black man is the valet, for bringing a sex offender to Seder, for making fun of a Holocaust survivor, for not standing up to applaud Leo Funkhouser at his testimonial, for feeding a penis-shaped cake to children, for offending a rabbi who lost his brother-in-law on September 11th, for inadvertently calling people names in sign language, for urinating on a picture of Jesus, for trying to bribe a pharmacist, for hugging a little girl while having “something hard” in his pants, for saving his Blackberry before saving Sammy from drowning, for telling a woman not to “flaunt” her bare midriff, for hanging a mezuzah with a “Christian nail,” for violently stomping on a spider in front of children, and so on and so on. None of us is *that* socially deviant! The Superiority Theory of humor would say that we laugh at these scenes because they make us feel superior to Larry. Compared to his deep and pervasive character flaws, our own foibles seem trivial.

In other cases, we may actually identify with Larry and see reflections of ourselves in the behavior

choices he makes or in the consistently bad luck he can't shake. If you have ever found yourself in a "Larry David moment," not knowing what to say to a mourner or wanting to destroy a fire alarm with a baseball bat, you know what it's like to feel a certain affinity with Larry, even when he's most out of odds with the world. The Superiority Theory of humor would say that, in these cases, when we laugh at Larry and his misfortunes, we're really laughing at *ourselves*. We're laughing at the harmless and perhaps endearing fools we used to be or sometimes still are on our worst days. Larry reminds us of these former selves. And then he lets us enjoy their foolishness, their bad luck, their short fuses, and their tendency to buy products that come in impenetrable plastic packaging.

There's a third type of Superiority humor in *Curb*. This occurs when we side with Larry as he fights with the unreasonable people who populate the world of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He says and does things that a lot of us wish we had the courage to say and do. We've all experienced sample abusers and people who talk loudly on their cell phones in restaurants. Nobody likes to see an old man in a thong swimsuit, and who wouldn't object to having his bathroom habits documented in the office. When we laugh at these people in these scenarios, we're taking up Larry's point of view as our own and condemning *others* for failing to see the world as we do.

All in all, the Superiority Theory of humor clearly has some virtues, which we can appreciate when we apply it to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It helps us see that, in some cases, when we laugh at Larry's outrageous ideas and actions, we're enjoying feelings of superiority over him, over ourselves, or over other people. Countless examples attest to this.

The problem with this theory, however, is that it's too narrow. For example, we often feel superior without experiencing humor. Think of the difference between seeing an ordinary person with toilet paper stuck to his pants and seeing a homeless woman with toilet paper stuck to hers. One is humorous; the other is tragic. But both involve feelings of superiority.

This shows that the feeling of superiority is not a sufficient condition for the experience of humor. A condition that is sufficient for a result is like a trigger: if you have the sufficient condition, you get the result. Superiority doesn't have this relationship with humor. If it did, we'd experience humor whenever we felt superior, but we clearly don't.

And we often enjoy humor without feeling superior to anyone or anything. Think of the joke Marv Funkehouse tells Jerry Seinfeld in "The Table Read" (Season Seven). It's outrageously funny because it's offensive and disgusting, and because it is both of those things to a surprising extent—not because it involves any feelings of superiority. The feeling of superiority also is not a *necessary* condition for the experience of humor. If a condition is necessary for a result, you can't get the result without the condition. But we often experience humor without any feeling of superiority.

If superiority is neither necessary nor sufficient for the experience of humor, the Superiority Theory fails to tell us what humor is in every instance, and we will need another theory if we want to fully understand what it is that we see in Larry's humor.

The Bearable Lightness of Being Larry David

The second theory of humor that we should apply to *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is the Relief Theory. It tries to explain both the nature of humor and the psychological benefits of laughter. According to this theory, which was first developed by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and then more famously by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), we laugh in order to release excesses of psychological energy. Laughter lets us "blow off steam." But how so?

Freud invites us to consider the process that takes place in a man's mind when he is listening someone "produce humor."

He sees this other person in a situation which leads the listener to expect that the other will produce signs of an affect—that he will get angry, complain, express pain, be frightened or horrified or perhaps even in despair; and the onlooker or listener is prepared to follow his lead and to call up the same emotional impulses in himself. But this emotional expectancy is disappointed; the other person expresses no affect, but makes a jest. The expenditure on feeling that is economized turns into humorous pleasure in the listener.²

This sounds like a general description of what it's like to watch an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—doesn't it? First Larry makes us cringe; then he sets us free with a joke or an unexpected twist in the plot. Freud thought he could explain this sort of experience psychologically. An excess of energy is produced, he says, when we realize, thanks to a joke, that a situation or person or thing isn't as serious as we thought, and so doesn't warrant a serious psychological response, such as a strong emotional reaction. However, since our minds have already set aside the energy necessary for a serious response, we experience a sudden surplus of energy, a kind of pressure buildup, which we release in laughter. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is full of this kind of humor.

Think of the moment in "The Carpool Lane" (Season Four) when Larry gets caught with Monina at the Dodgers game. The two men Larry least wants to see—the stuffy Republicans who run the Beverly Park country club that he and Cheryl hope to join—find Larry sharing a bag of popcorn with Monina. When you watch this exchange for the first time, you expect Larry to be upset. After all, in the previous episode, "The 5 Wood" (Season Four), Larry and Cheryl went out of their way to impress these men, dressing and acting as Republicans. They claimed to own "a schooner," to be members of conservative social clubs, to drive a Hummer, and to have once volunteered for Ronald Reagan.

This carefully crafted image of the Davids as elitist conservative Republicans was obliterated the moment the men of Beverly Park saw Larry with Monina. As viewers of this scene, we also know that back home Larry is already in trouble with Cheryl and Susie for getting the Davids and the Greens thrown out of their old country club over the funeral incident involving Larry's 5 wood. In other words, the stage is set for Larry to suffer, and we prepare to suffer with him. We prepare to feel his pain as he tries to explain *this* incident to Cheryl and Susie. But in the end we don't have to. Larry turns the whole thing into a joke: "If you're ever looking for a good blowjob at a reasonable rate," he says to the Beverly Park men, "[Monina] is your gal."

Larry may not save his membership application with this quip, but he certainly changes his situation. Instead of being a victim of his circumstances, he accepts them and transforms his misfortune into something funny. If Freud is right, we laugh at situations like this because the joke releases us from the burden of sympathy. We prepare to suffer with Larry—we might even be anticipating Susie's coming tirade over "fucking up" *this* membership as well: we can already hear her raised voice and profanity; we can see Cheryl's looks of exasperation. But then, suddenly, we don't have to feel anything for Larry. His joke changes the emotional significance of his situation. It's no longer serious. He has stripped it of meaning. This sudden shift from serious to non-serious, Freud says, produces a surplus of energy, and we laugh to release it.

If Freud's Relief Theory is correct, there's something liberating about humor. It changes the way we look at the world and ourselves, and so releases us from our ordinary attachments to both. In its essence, humor says, "Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!" From this perspective, all of our projects and interests, including those that wound us most deeply, can seem trivial and unimportant. Humor therefore spares us the "affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of suffering."

expressions of emotion with a jest.”

This isn't just liberating. It's empowering. It makes us invulnerable to the pressures of life, gives us a kind of antidepressant against them, because it “refuses to be distressed by the provocation of reality” and “insists that [we] cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for [us] to gain pleasure.” When we take up this humorous attitude toward ourselves, we find our successes and our failures, our earnestness and our pessimism, equally insignificant. We look at ourselves the way a parent looks at a child who is upset or excited about something trivial. And that makes us laugh.

The great virtue of humor, Freud thinks, is that it gives us this insight into the insignificance of human life “without over-stepping the bounds of mental health,” which is what happens when we adopt “other methods having the same purposes.” We don't have to lie to ourselves or posit the existence of another world or a transcendent God from whose point of view our troubles are insignificant. Humor is all we need for this perspective. Freud's example is of a man who, while being led to the gallows to be hung on a Monday, remarks, “Well, the week's beginning nicely.” This man isn't resigned, Freud says. He's rebellious. He has changed his situation, relieved himself of the most significant emotional weight, and even experienced pleasure in spite of “the unkindness of the real circumstances” (pp. 161–66). We see Larry do something similar when he “dies” in “The End” (Season Five). His last words are about frivolous and inconsequential things, such as how much mayonnaise to use in a tuna sandwich and who misplaced a Sopranos DVD cover. Like Freud's gallows man, Larry uses humor to triumph over tragedy. His death doesn't amount to much if *life* doesn't amount to much.

We might think that Relief humor is just a form of self-deception or sour grapes that we use to make ourselves feel better about our limitations, our bad luck, and our circumstances. Freud denies this. Relief humor is not delusional, he says. It's lucid in its self-mockery. Neither we nor the world nor our projects in life are as important as the ego likes to think. Larry, of course, takes this insight to the extreme, but the idea's the same: let's not exaggerate our own importance. Insofar as there is wisdom in recognizing this, there's genuine wisdom in humor. It helps us see the world in the right light and value it accordingly. Epictetus, a great Stoic philosopher from the early second century AD, famously said, “we are not bothered by things, but by our judgments about things.” Humor, according to Freud, helps us make the right judgments about things.

There's a second kind of Relief humor, and it is also pervasive in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. In some cases, such as the one with Monina at the Dodgers game, our relief comes from no longer needing to take something seriously. This kind of Relief humor gives us the sensation of having put down a heavy weight. But in other cases, our relief comes from being able to express certain feelings or desires that we would otherwise repress. This kind of relief is more like the excitement of a child running outside for recess, or of a pet dog getting out of the house to run around after being locked up inside all day. Our wild energy is finally free.

Some humor, the kind that taps into our innermost urges, produces a similar sensation in us. Instead of repressing a desire for sex or violence, we express it or have it satisfied in a joke. And the energy we would have used to repress our desire is then released in the form of laughter. These jokes often make us laugh the hardest because they release the greatest amounts of energy.

Think of the unforgettable stomping scene in “The Rat Dog” (Season Six). Larry's dad stands up and yells, “It's a rat,” as Jean's little purse-sized dog scurries through the audience of a school play. Moments later we see Larry's “date,” a crude heavy-set exterminator in a bad suit, stomping violently over and over, on this defenseless little animal. If you laughed hysterically at this scene, as many

people did, Freud would say it's because you felt liberated from the repressed desire to hurt a dog like that. It's no coincidence that, earlier in the episode, Larry asks Hal, Jean's husband, several times whether he really pets "that dog," whether he lets it sit in his lap, and so on.

LARRY: Oh, hey Hal.

HAL: Hey, how are you doing, Larry?

LARRY: You know what? I'm glad I saw you again, because after you left I made a little comment that maybe didn't go over well with your wife. I said her dog looked, you know, half rat.

HAL: Really?

LARRY: Yeah, I was joking in my tone. I had a joking tone. But I guess because, you know, she doesn't hear, she's not able to detect tone.

HAL: No.

LARRY: You know, the dog, it's kind of a ratty looking dog. You've gotta admit that.

HAL: She loves that dog.

LARRY: How about you? Do you pet that dog?

HAL: Yeah, I pet it.

LARRY: *You* pet that dog?

HAL: I pet that dog.

LARRY: You *pet* that dog?

HAL: I pet that dog, yes.

This dialogue is preparing us for the stomping scene by eliciting our own deep-seated feelings about these little dogs. Larry knows they're unpopular. Most people like dogs *or* cats. Some people like both. But very few people like little dogs. They look like rodents, as Larry says. They sound awful. They aren't very smart. Who hasn't wanted to smack a little dog that wouldn't stop yapping? But almost nothing is as taboo as hurting a pet, so we repress any such desire and probably have a hard time admitting that we have it at all. Larry sets us free. He lets us laugh it out. When the "rat dog" gets stomped on, we laugh hysterically because we're watching a wish be fulfilled.

Like the Superiority Theory of humor, the Relief Theory is very illuminating when we apply it to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It helps us make sense of a common experience people have when they watch the show: feelings of deep discomfort followed by relief and laughter. It also helps us understand, and even justify, our fondness for Larry: he isn't the monster that his critics make him out to be; at his best, he is like an ancient Stoic who helps us make the right judgments about things.

Most of us would never live exactly as Larry does, or completely share his perspective on what does and doesn't matter. But, at a minimum, Larry helps us laugh at ourselves, which relieves us of the emotional burdens we carry when we take our lives too seriously. And this isn't all that Larry does for us. His jokes about sex, death, and violence provide us with a kind of therapy for our repressed desires. Watching *Curb* is cathartic. When we laugh hysterically at the rat dog or the black swan or the joke that Marty Funkhouser tells Jerry, we're expressing and indirectly satisfying repressed natural urges that would otherwise torment us.

Critics of the Relief Theory complain that it tells us why we enjoy laughter (it relieves us of a surplus of energy), and it describes a cognitive benefit we derive from experiencing humor (the appreciation of human insignificance). But it doesn't tell us what humor *is*. It doesn't define the object

of humor—the thing we laugh at—as much as it tells us about the psychological byproducts of enjoying humor. And even this account seems problematic, since not every experience of humor involves the release of pent up psychological energy, the reduction of a thing’s significance, or reflective meditation on the finitude of the human condition. Sometimes we laugh at things that are already considered insignificant, and these instances don’t seem to involve the release of tension or invite us to take ourselves less seriously. When Larry rejects his doctor’s medical recommendation because he disagrees with his restaurant recommendation (“The Hot Towel,” Season Seven), we laugh because Larry’s assumption is absurd (a doctor’s medical opinion is not a matter of taste the way his food preferences are), not because we feel relief or superiority.

But this means we still haven’t found what we’re looking for. If the Relief Theory is too narrow to define the nature of humor in every instance, as the Superiority Theory is, we still need another theory if we want to fully understand our fondness for Larry’s humor.

He Likes to Wear Women’s Panties?

The Incongruity Theory, which was originally developed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), says that incongruity, not relief or superiority, is the essence of humor. Philosophers often prefer this theory because it focuses on the object of humor—the thing we laugh at—rather than the feelings that motivate our laughter (the Superiority Theory) or the psychological benefits of laughing (the Relief Theory). According to the Incongruity Theory, humor is the product of people, situations, and things that reverse or clash with our expectations. As Kant says, “Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.”³ We’re amused, in other words, when we feel or perceive an incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens.

Incongruity humor is pervasive in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Think of a few obvious cases of it, such as Larry proudly displaying “his” women’s panties, cousin Andy in bed with a *Playboy* model, Larry’s countless fights with the disabled, and Larry’s father watching pornography with the volume turned up in his assisted living facility. According to the Incongruity Theory, each of these scenes is funny because it reverses our expectations. We would never expect Larry happily to exhibit women’s underwear, and we certainly wouldn’t expect him to introduce himself by saying, “I’m Larry David and I happen to enjoy wearing women’s panties.”

Similarly, cousin Andy is the last person we would expect to score with a *Playboy* model. There’s a type of man who’s likely to take a *Playboy* model home, Andy is the opposite. Moreover, we expect Larry to give disabled people special treatment, the way the rest of us do, not to fight with them as if they were just any other people. And when we first hear the sounds of pornography in “Kamikaze Bingo” (Season Five), the last person we expect to see connected to those noises is Larry’s father.

In episode after episode, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* sets and then reverses our expectations. One of the funniest instances of this occurs when Larry calls Information to look up Krayzee-Eyez Killa’s phone number.

Yeah, I think it’s Knox Road and Silver Lake. Um, Killer. Yeah, that’s the last name. Krayzee-Eyez. There might be a hyphen in that. Well, Krayzee I guess is the first name, unless the whole last name is Krayzee-Eyez Killer. K-r-a-z-y. Krayzee-Eyez. What about an “h” at the end of Killer? Did you try that? K-i-l-l-a-h? What about a “z”, Eyez, E-y-e-z? Is that possible? No, no, that’s an optometry place. Okay, all right, thank you. (Season Three, “Krayzee-Eyez Killa”)

Larry's request is hilarious because it's absurd. "Krayzee-Eyez Killa" is an entertainment name, not a name listed in the phone book. Larry is exploiting our background knowledge here. We laugh at this scene because we recognize the incongruity between the names we expect information to have been listed and the name Larry is asking them to look up.

These are classic instances of incongruity humor because the contradictions are so clear and so simple. However, as every fan of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* knows, most of Larry's jokes are not about such mundane issues. Many of them, and perhaps all or most of the fan favorites, deal with the weightiest issues in life, such as love, death, marriage, children, and other things we tend to give a sacred status. In these scenes Larry uses the sacred as a lever for his comedy: the more important something is to us, the more humor he can squeeze out of it by reversing our expectations. Think of the conversation Larry has with his father in "The Special Section" (Season Three), when he comes home from New York and learns some bad news about his mother.

LARRY: Where's Mom?

NAT: (*Larry's father*) Well, your mother, yeah, well, I'll tell you all about your mother, you know. After all, you know, we brought her back. You know, your mother, she got sicker, and we had to bring her back to the hospital.

LARRY: She's in the hospital?

NAT: Yeah, well, not now, not now, that's—but we had to bring her back for a while.

LARRY: Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you even call?

NAT: She didn't want to bother you. You know how she is. She said, "Don't bother him. He's in New York. Let him enjoy himself." She didn't want to spoil your trip. But she's not in the hospital now, so that's over with. Don't worry about that.

LARRY: So she's feeling better?

NAT: Well, in a way. She did warn me. She said, "If anything happens to me, don't bother Larry, because he's in New York and he wants to enjoy." So, then, after a day or two—nobody goes on forever and ever and ever, and, um—you're not gonna go on, I'm not gonna go on—

LARRY: Is she dead?

NAT: Er, yeah. Dead, dead, she's dead. And she didn't want me to bother you.

As this conversation continues, we learn that Larry also missed his mother's funeral, which was held just a few days before he returned to LA. Out of town relatives were there, but Larry wasn't, and that's because his mother didn't want to "bother him" while he was enjoying himself in New York. People probably laugh at this scene for all kinds of reasons, but the real engine driving the humor here is the incongruity between how we feel about death, especially a mother's death, and Nat's treatment of it as a minor thing, a mere distraction.

Larry does something very similar in "The Survivor" (Season Four) when he subjects wedding vows to the same desanctification. He begins by questioning Cheryl's request for a promise to continue loving her "through all eternity." Larry's genuinely confused. He had understood his original vows literally. "This is continuing into the afterlife? . . . I thought this was over at death . . . Isn't that what it said, 'Till death do us part'?" Cheryl puts her foot down and Larry agrees to promise his love for eternity. But then, when the time comes to renew their vows, Larry can't remember what he planned to say, and he forgot to bring his copy of the vows. No problem, the rabbi says. "Just speak from your heart. Just speak to Cheryl, look into her eyes, and it'll come. The words will come." Larry agrees, and this is what comes from his heart.

Things have been good. It's a very good, uh, relationship. Ten years. Pretty good. Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty good. And I am

your devoted servant—well, I don't know about servant. You know, I'm not a servant. I'll certainly help you, if you ever need help with anything. You know that. I'm in the house a lot—you wanna open a Bridge table or something, you know, whatever you need. I'm not a great handy man, and I'm not good at making plans—that I don't do very well, I have to admit. She makes the plans, you know. She makes good plans. We always have stuff to do . . .

It doesn't get much more incongruous than this. The rabbi asks Larry to look into Cheryl's eyes and speak "from the heart." The Davids' close friends and family are watching. Cheryl has set the mood with her heartfelt promises to Larry, which the rabbi found "very moving." And so our expectations are locked in. We wait for Larry to say something equally heartfelt. When he doesn't—when he goes in the opposite direction and makes a mockery of the event, talking about helping Cheryl with the Bridge table and complimenting her ability to make plans—it's hard not to laugh hysterically. And again, it's thanks to incongruity.

Like the other theories of humor, then, the Incongruity Theory sheds light on the comedy in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It helps us see that Larry makes us laugh by upsetting our expectations. He constantly surprises us, whether it's about the mundane and everyday patterns of our experience, or the sacred things we value the most. This is how his humor works, because this is how humor in general works. We may laugh without feeling superior, and without expressing repressed desires or releasing surplus energy. But the perception of incongruity is essential to every experience of humor, even the instances that we explained earlier with the Superiority and Relief theories.

This is a big deal. If the Incongruity Theory can account for every instance of humor, and the other theories can't, it would seem that Incongruity is the only theory we need. Unfortunately, however, things aren't quite this simple. The Incongruity Theory has flaws as well.

The first problem is that incongruity, like superiority, is insufficient for humor: we don't always experience humor when we perceive incongruities. Sometimes we feel fear or disgust or puzzlement. For example, if I entered one of my classrooms and found all of my students wielding machetes soaked in blood, and angrily chanting "down with Ralkowski," this would be incongruous and *terrifying*, not funny. But this means the Incongruity Theory doesn't tell us quite enough. It doesn't tell us why some incongruities are funny while others aren't.

The second problem with the Incongruity Theory is that it doesn't explain why people take pleasure in having their expectations contradicted. As John Morreall puts this point, "Such enjoyment looks psychologically perverse or at least irrational . . . People who enjoy incongruity are like travelers who discover they are headed in the wrong direction—and enjoy that discovery."⁴ There is something puzzling about our enjoyment of humorous incongruities. It's not clear why rational animals would ever enjoy the experience of intellectual frustration. That's not how we usually are.

For example, if you had a friend who started acting mysteriously (not showing up for work and not answering her phone), wouldn't you try to understand why, and not simply laugh? As rational creatures, we usually respond to incongruities by trying to resolve them, not by reveling in them. This is true at the level of our everyday experience, but it's also true at the theoretical level. In the sciences, for example, we are puzzled and sometimes disturbed by anomalies—when things don't happen as we expect. If something happens in the natural world that we don't know how to explain, we immediately get to work to make sense of things. Why is humor different? How can it be?

The humor in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* can help us answer these questions, but only if we look more closely at a specific kind of incongruity that Larry David specializes in pointing out for his audience. These incongruities involve a clash between Larry and what I will call the "unknown known," the things we know but don't know that we know. The basic idea is that jokes teach us. They tell us truths we've always known but never expressed, and they help us discover truths we don't know yet and have

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