

THE PRODUCTIVITY OF HUMOR

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[The following notes prepared for Dr. Harriss' talk are reprinted with permission. The talk given was in honor of Ben Stein, CC '66, at the Columbia University Club of Southern California on January 25, 2003.

[While best known as the host of the Comedy Central TV show, Win Ben Stein's Money, Ben Stein also has been a columnist and editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal, a syndicated columnist for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner and King Features Syndicate, a regular columnist for Los Angeles Magazine, New York Magazine, E! Online, and The American Spectator. He has written and published sixteen books. His most recent book is the best selling humor self help book, "How to Ruin Your Life." The biography of Ben Stein, Beverly Hills, CA, can be found at <http://www.benstein.com/bio.html>.]

Columbia has enabled me to meet many fine human beings. Our friend Ben Stein stands out. I associate him with, among many things, humor -- about which I shall say a few words, beginning with: "There is not enough."

Definition? As a Supreme Court justice said about another term -- he could not define it but knew it when he saw it. Intangible, of course, but full of reality. Not always "just fun." Wit can also hurt. But humor can bring pleasure -- lots of it, enriching life.

Ben adds to the supply. I would not think of presuming to do so. But since rather impulsively indicating a title weeks ago, I have thought about the subject and could now say more than appropriate for this

occasion. My impulse came from recognition that humor can have large positive externalities with near zero incremental costs. Are there not potentials for great gains from the use of a bit more of inputs for expanded benefits?

A joke, clever phrasing, humor in extraneous forms can bring benefits beyond the immediacy -- positive externalities. There are results which cannot enter the calculations of those who make decisions. The market, human beings going about their affairs in buying and selling, demanding and supplying, ignores (overlooks) aspects not explicitly embodied in the transactions. When acquiring intangibles we often do not know just what we are getting (quantity and quality). And when we are bystanders, we have no way to influence decisions.

A word about "productivity." It is output related to input -- typically hours worked relative to the dollars buyers will freely pay for the results of the time worked. Although there are "soft spots" in the methods of calculation and the data available, broad outlines are clear: Most of us have a lot more per hour of work of what human beings want than did our grandparents at comparable ages. (But better than Mark Twain?) People in high places point to figures of trends that are unambiguous. (We can safely ignore the precision of decimal points.) But those who give us

the numbers would agree that the goods and services measured do not include intangibles that can be meaningful.

Yet humor can make one feel good. Is it not a constituent of the better as against the less satisfactory life? It brings pleasure, different from, but also like, that from a good meal or a stylist suit. One feels better, in ways possibly not measurable but truly very real. Perhaps only momentarily but sometimes longer as chuckles continue.

When I began to think of these remarks, I searched, successfully, for an issue of the Mayo Clinic Health Letter 10 years ago about therapeutic benefits: "Laughter may not be the best medicine, but its positive effects on your mind and body are no joke." And so on!

Real even though not measurable. You can all think of the welcome feelings from a good joke. Or how humor can reduce tension and help us get along with each other. Abraham Lincoln and other Presidents. Negotiations -- diplomatic, labor affairs, familial -- can be lubricated by humor.

The topic is bigger than I realized when I began.

Two years or so ago I saw the announcement of a forthcoming book, THE MIRTH OF NATIONS. I ordered it. Nothing happened for months. Then it came. A few glances revealed that it did not deserve a high priority on my crowded list of serious reading. Later, as I thought of my remarks tonight, I took a more inquiring look. Humor, the "mirth" of the title, is no joke. The bibliography of this one aspect of the subject has 502 items plus reference to 17 sets of archives.

I cannot bring to you now the fruits of any study of breadth or depth. Yet I do feel confident in asserting that "we" would profit from more good humor.

But how? So much is ephemeral. Who remembers the jokes one likes? How can our desires for humor be revealed? The soundtracks on TV may indicate something of customers' likes. And sophisticated inquiry methods must serve to guide expensive, very costly, selling efforts that use humor. Some of you and other persons of talent in this part of the world undoubtedly concentrate high skills on finding what appeals to potential customers, investors, voters.

Yet a market, as for brown shoes or rental autos, does not exist. Much of the humor we "buy" in the market is part of a package, a TV broadcast for soap or a cartoon in the daily paper. The supplier provides what becomes a "public good," not identifiable as a marketable element for which a charge can be made. How to cover cost? Can we identify a "market failure" in the absence of incentive to create something desirable? More desirable than the incremental cost.

What do other economists say? I spent some time browsing in a random (not a scientific sample) scrutiny of books of "general" economics on the shelves of the Business/Economics Library at Columbia. Are there index listings under "humor"? Perhaps listing as an object (purpose, end) we seek in economic life. Or something to be supplied to produce income. (continued on p. 8)

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I did not expect any index listings, despite my belief that humans like humor -- quite a lot.

After finding no entries in 25 to 30 books I was giving up. Then I saw a volume by an economist who has written much for the general public, Prof. John K. Gailbraith. It does have an index item under "humor"; in fact the reference is rather indirect, to the gravity of the Harvard environment, the "extreme solemnity ... Of modern academic life." Professors are expected to take themselves seriously. Being judged by their peers, they can never relax.

So having found one somewhat illuminating case, I resumed the search on a later visit, to a total of perhaps 80, including all in the "consumption" group. Not one more index listing. (But, as I knew I would, I found keen humor in George Stigler's articles as I yielded to temptation to read.) Humor does not have a prominent explicit role in economics - nor do many other things of importance such as excitement, beauty, play, honor, etc., etc. Justice yes, often; mercy, never (?).

Later, I paged hurriedly through issues of professional journals at home. Lots and lots of work of many persons on a great variety of subjects. Their scholarship reflects effort to add to the world's knowledge. For all sorts of worthy purposes. But not humor. Rarely anything approaching "an acute appreciation of the absurd, true sense of the fallacies and banalities of our time." (Galbraith, p402)

Whatever my little survey may suggest about the absence of a recognition of humor in the writings of economics, I believe that the world -- and our own little slices of life -- would be better with more humor.

While teaching at Columbia, I put cartoons on the bulletin board to attract attention. When unpacking some years after retiring, I found and copied a few and began to include one or two with my correspondence. Friends sometimes expressed pleasure. So I resumed unsystematic collecting and now have hundreds. Last summer I had occasion to look through an unorganized assortment. No news in asserting that a cartoon can do more than bring a smile. It can make a point. (One thinks of Thomas Nast whose cartoons of Tammany Hall, Boss Tweed, and others profoundly influenced New York City government in the 1870s.) Many cartoons that once seemed of merit are now out of date. But not all.

My sources are, of course, limited. But I do subscribe to two weeklies -- LIBERAL OPINION and CONSERVATIVE CHRONICLE. Each will have perhaps 15 to 20 cartoons and three dozen or so articles (columns). In a typical week I find from the two sources perhaps one really good cartoon and one or two more of some appeal. The majority are more crude than subtle, exaggerated beyond any power to illuminate or persuade, without any element of amusement or momentary relevance.

The quality of the cartoons (humor) seems below that of generalization/ writing. This is, of course, subjective. I disagree with many of the opinions while respecting the writing. A columnist allowed 750 or so words faces challenges in deal-

ing with the complex issues of modern life. He or she hopes to build credibility. Rarely is there effort to be amusing as is the essence of much success in cartoons.

Ben's parents, Mildred and Herbert, and I were graduate students together at the University of Chicago, 1936-38. We kept in touch. Herb's career of distinction included much skill in writing. For years he headed research of the Committee for Economic Development. In that capacity he once said that academic economists frequently fail to put their spoken words into writing, in forms that carry the message home. It is so easy to miss points in a talk--and to forget; thus I try to put something in writing. And for you tonight also a selection of cartoons.

[Economics Professor Emeritus Dr. C. Lowell Harriss received his Doctorate degree from Columbia University, with which university he had a long professional career. Dr. Harriss is past president of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, NY, and is past president of the National Tax Association.]
