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## The funny thing about truth

Not Winston, but Charles Churchill once said:

*A jest is a very serious thing.* [\[i\]](#)

—Charles Churchill (1732-1764), English poet and satirist

There is more to it:

*When a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth.* [\[ii\]](#)

—George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Irish dramatist and political activist

The following is neither literally true, nor is it politically correct. But there is a hidden truth. It wouldn't be funny for some of us otherwise.

*Trump loves Kim Kardashian. You know, one more “K” and she would have his favourite initials.* [\[iii\]](#)

—Graham Norton (b. 1963), Irish talk show host

Not only is there truth in humour, jokes, and satire; there is wisdom too:

*A joke is like condensed wisdom.* [\[iv\]](#)

—Charles Lewinsky (b. 1946), Swiss screenplay writer and author

Humour, like beauty, is supposedly in the eye of the beholder. However, understanding how things work is not. Sometimes humour helps to understand things; adds perspective.

*A sense of humour is a sense of proportion.* [\[v\]](#)

—Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Lebanese-American artist, poet, and writer

Understanding of complex issues requires different perspectives. [Who is America?](#), an American political satire television series created by British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen of Borat fame, for instance, adds perspective of, in this case, American politics. The show reveals truths that would be difficult to reveal by a social science professor writing a white paper on American politics for a peer-reviewed science journal. In a scientific setting it would be difficult to reveal that there are grown-up elected officials who *do* think it would be a good idea if children had guns. (The President promoting the idea helps.) Whether Cohen's humour, taste and style are for everyone is beside the point made here.

## Humour as a risk management tool

Perspective matters generally and in risk management in particular. A sense of humour, therefore, is a risk management tool:

*A sense of humor judges one's actions and the actions of others from a wider reference and finds them incongruous. It dampens enthusiasm; it mocks hope; it pardons shortcomings; it consoles failure. It recommends moderation.* [\[vi\]](#)

—Thornton Wilder (1897-1975), American playwright and novelist

One need not be a practitioner of [laughter yoga](#) to appreciate the benefits of humour. Without it, all is lost:

*If you lose the power to laugh, you lose the power to think.*

—Clarence Darrow (1857-1938), American lawyer

Losing the power to think can be dangerous:

*The distrust of wit is the beginning of tyranny.* [\[vii\]](#)

—Edward Abbey (1927-1989), American essayist and novelist

The distrust of wit and satire, often political *incorrect* by definition, is a red flag:

*What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist.* [\[viii\]](#)

— Salman Rushdie (b. 1947), Indian-born British essayist

Political correctness is dishonest by definition, as it bends truth and skews facts to avoid offense. Offense can destroy political capital; hence the incentive for political correctness. Research is defined as [seeking or investigating truth](#) and ought to be honest and therefore must be *political incorrect* by definition. Reason, logic, and thoughtfulness applies. Occasional and potential offensiveness, therefore, is not the purpose but an unfortunate side effect of truth seeking.

The link between tyranny, a form of non-freedom, and political correctness, a form of untruth, was picked up by Thomas Sowell well. (The pun was not intended but I left it there.)

*Have you noticed that there seem to be an ever growing number of things that we are not supposed to say in public?* [\[ix\]](#)

—Thomas Sowell (b. 1930), American economist

Scepticism and science are elementary for progress. Starting a sentence with “the funny thing is” is not entirely unscientific. The following piece of wisdom is often attributed to Russia-born scientist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov:

*The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not 'Eureka!' but 'That's funny ...'*

—Anonymous, potentially Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), American author

This was not lost on Vienna-born, Trinity-College-teaching Ludwig Wittgenstein:

*If people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done.* [\[x\]](#)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Austrian-British philosopher

## Baboons don't read Shakespeare

I herein claim that ridicule too is an analytical tool. One just needs to look hard enough:

*Look for the ridiculous in everything and you will find it.* [\[xi\]](#)

—Jules Renard (1864-1910), French author

If we don't understand the joke, the ridicule, or the irony, we might be missing a certain perspective. Perspective and open-mindedness are key sensory instruments when dealing with uncertainty. The opposite is the opposite:

*Single-mindedness is all very well in cows or baboons; in an animal claiming to belong to the same species as Shakespeare it is simply disgraceful.* [\[xii\]](#)

—Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), English writer

Open-mindedness is to single-mindedness and mindlessness what wisdom is to ignorance and foolishness:

*Some folks are wise, and some are otherwise.* [\[xiii\]](#)

—Tobias Smollett (1721-1771), Scottish author

This idea is ancient:

*The smaller the mind the greater the conceit.* [\[xiv\]](#)

—Aesop (c. 620-564 BC), Greek fabulist

Given that one aim of risk management is to avoid foolishness, one ought to be open-minded. The practical relevance of avoiding foolishness being a good idea is related to survival and best described by the following proverb:

*A fool and his head are soon parted.* [\[xv\]](#)

—Klingon proverb

Not being mindless is a prerequisite to being open-minded. Klingons read Galbraith:

*But one thing is certain: there will be another of these episodes [financial euphoria] and yet more beyond. Fools, as it has long been said, are indeed separated, soon or eventually, from their money.* [\[xvi\]](#)

—John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006), Canadian-American economist

Speaking of *Star Trek*:

"Dad, why does *Star Trek* have a successful socialist society?"

"Because it's fiction, son."

We cannot deal with serious issues, such as for example dealing with uncertainty, virus-related or otherwise, without covering all known perspectives, as Winston Churchill suggests:

*It is my belief, you cannot deal with the most serious things in the world unless you understand the most amusing.* [\[xvii\]](#)

—Winston Churchill (1874-1965), British statesman

- [i] *The Ghost*, 1762, sometimes erroneously attributed to Winston Churchill.
- [ii] *Back to Methuselah* (1921).
- [iii] *The Graham Norton Show*, 6 June 2018, commenting on Kim Kardashian visiting Trump in the Oval Office.
- [iv] NZZ, 23 August 2018. Translation is my own.
- [v] *Sand and Foam* (1926).
- [vi] *The Eight Day*, 1967.
- [vii] *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness (Vox Clamantis in Deserto)* (1990).
- [viii] From "The right to be downright offensive," by Jonathan Duffy in *BBC News Magazine*, 21 December 2004.
- [ix] *Random Thoughts*, 3 March 2015. The article is about President Obama beating around the bush when it comes to Islamic terrorism and violence.
- [x] *Culture and Value* (1980) as translated by Peter Winch, originally *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (1977). A variant is: "If people never did silly things nothing intelligent would ever get done." From [wikiquote.org](http://wikiquote.org), 5 January 2017.
- [xi] "Cherchez le ridicule en tout, vous le trouverez." *Journal*, 17 février 1890 de Jules Renard.
- [xii] *Do What You Will* (1929).
- [xiii] *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748). Sometimes quoted as "Some men are wise, and some are otherwise."
- [xiv] As quoted in *New Cyclopædia of Prose Illustrations*, by Elon Foster, Funk & Wagnalls, 1877.
- [xv] Original: "tlhIngan Hol: tugh qoH nachDaj je chevlu'ta'," Literal translation: "Soon a fool and his head will be separated." In case you were wondering. The Klingons are a fictional race in *Star Trek* and *The Final Reflection* is a 1984 *Star Trek* tie-in novel by John M. Ford which emphasizes developments of Klingon language and culture. A proverb that originated closer to Earth states: "A fool and his money are soon parted."
- [xvi] Galbraith, John Kenneth (1990, 1994) "A short history of financial euphoria," London: Penguin Books. p. 110. First published in 1990 by Whittle Books.
- [xvii] As quoted in *The irrepressible Churchill: stories, sayings and impressions of Sir Winston Churchill*, edited by Kay Halle, Robson, 1987.