

The Concept of Practical Joke

Conceptual Analysis and Conceptual Engineering

*[Generated entirely by the Conceptual Analysis Machine,
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Abstract

This paper applies the method of classical conceptual analysis to PRACTICAL JOKE, the concept expressed by the ordinary English term "practical joke," through twelve iterative rounds of definition and counterexample. Beginning with a naïve formulation capturing the intuition that a practical joke is a deliberate act designed to trick or deceive someone for the amusement of the perpetrator, I progressively refine the definition in response to clearly motivated counterexamples — including cases of benign surprise parties, hostile deceptions that lack any ludic framing, acts of sabotage mischaracterized as play, scripted comedic performances, self-directed pranks, and cultural rituals involving sanctioned trickery. The twelfth and final definition, D12, represents the high-water mark of the sequence, successfully integrating conditions addressing deliberate contrivance, experiential targeting of a victim who is temporarily unaware of the ludic frame, the agent's aim of producing amusement (in oneself or an audience) partly through the victim's reaction, and the normative expectation that the deception or manipulation will be ultimately reveal-able without lasting serious harm. I demonstrate, however, that even D12 admits both false positives (such as certain affectionate teasing rituals and hidden-camera social experiments) and false negatives (such as elaborately cruel pranks whose perpetrators intend no revelation and cases of collective practical joking where no single agent satisfies the agency condition), suggesting that PRACTICAL JOKE resists full reductive analysis into non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions. A comparison with major dictionary definitions reveals that lexicographic treatments suppress precisely the normative and phenomenological dimensions that prove most analytically recalcitrant. After diagnosing the circularity latent in key terms such as "joke," "trick," and "amusement," I turn to conceptual engineering and propose four successor concepts — LUDIC DISRUPTION, ASYMMETRIC PLAY, REVELATORY MISCHIEF, and PERFORMATIVE

TRANSGRESSION — arguing that ASYMMETRIC PLAY is especially illuminating because it foregrounds the structural power asymmetry between perpetrator and target that the folk concept simultaneously exploits and conceals, thereby opening new avenues for ethical and social-theoretic inquiry into practices the inherited concept merely labels.

1. Introduction

Introduction

Conceptual analysis, the search for individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions governing the application of a concept, has been a central method of analytic philosophy since at least Socrates asked what justice is. It has also been under sustained pressure for nearly as long. Wittgenstein's contention that many of our concepts — GAME being his celebrated example — are held together not by a common essence but by overlapping "family resemblances" has led many philosophers to doubt that classical analyses can succeed for most concepts of interest. Rosch's prototype theory offers an empirical counterpart to this skepticism, suggesting that categorization is often organized around central exemplars rather than sharp definitional boundaries. And yet the method persists, not merely as a pedagogical exercise, but because the attempt to formulate and then break a definition often yields insights that no other method reliably produces. Each failed definition is a probe that reveals hidden structure — a distinction we had not noticed, a necessary condition we had taken for granted, a penumbral case that forces us to confront what we actually mean. In this paper, I take an ordinary and seemingly trivial concept — PRACTICAL JOKE — and subject it to twelve rounds of iterative analysis, not because the concept is of great intrinsic philosophical importance, but because it turns out to be a remarkably fertile site for exploring the powers and limits of the analytic method itself. The practical joke sits at the intersection of action theory, the philosophy of humor, the ethics of deception, and the social negotiation of blame, and its resistance to tidy definition is instructive in ways that illuminate each of these domains.

My method in the central sections of the paper is the classical one: propose a definition, identify a counterexample — either a case that satisfies the conditions without being a practical joke, or a case that is a practical joke without satisfying them — and revise the definition accordingly. I proceed through twelve such rounds, beginning with a rough formulation according to which a

practical joke is any action that deceives another person for the purpose of amusement, and arriving at a considerably more structured proposal requiring deliberate contrivance, an unwitting target, a practical or experiential predicament, and a complex intentional state involving amusement. Each revision is motivated by a specific case — the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, the accidental plumber, the elaborate surprise party, the cruel trap that no one finds funny — and each case forces a genuinely non-trivial refinement. But I do not treat the twelfth definition as a triumphant resting point. Instead, I subject it to three further lines of scrutiny. First, I compare it against the lexicographic record — the definitions offered by major dictionaries and by scholarly treatments of the practical joke — to assess where philosophical analysis converges with and diverges from ordinary codification. Second, I examine a deep structural problem that the iterative process cannot resolve from within: the circularity that arises when the concept PREDICAMENT, which bears the heaviest explanatory load in the final definition, itself presupposes normative and contextual judgments that resist non-circular specification. Third, I turn to the framework of conceptual engineering — the project, associated with Haslanger, Burgess and Plunkett, Cappelen, and others, of asking not merely what our concepts *do* mean but what they *should* mean — to explore whether successor concepts might do the work of PRACTICAL JOKE more effectively for specific theoretical and practical purposes.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the twelve rounds of analysis, developing and refining definitions D1 through D12 through sustained engagement with cases. Section 3 evaluates D12, the strongest definition in the sequence, identifying its genuine virtues as well as the residual counterexamples it cannot fully accommodate. Section 4 compares the philosophical analysis with dictionary definitions and the scholarly literature, revealing both surprising convergences and illuminating gaps — particularly around the question of whether "physicality" or "experiential predicament" is the better way to capture the distinctively *practical* dimension of the practical joke. Section 5 diagnoses the circularity problem at the heart of the analysis, arguing that the concept PREDICAMENT functions as what I call an "evaluative placeholder" — a term that defers to contextual normative judgment precisely at the point where a classical analysis most needs a fixed criterion. Section 6 turns to conceptual engineering, proposing several successor concepts — including a narrow concept suited to legal contexts, a broad one suited to humor research, and a normatively loaded one suited to ethical evaluation — and arguing that the folk concept's productive ambiguity is precisely what makes it useful in

everyday life and resistant to theoretical regimentation. Section 7 draws conclusions about both the specific concept and the general method.

The analysis of PRACTICAL JOKE thus serves a dual purpose. At one level, it is an investigation into a particular folk category — one that turns out to have more internal complexity than its familiarity might suggest, touching on questions about the nature of play, the ethics of deception, the distinction between humor and cruelty, and the social mechanisms by which transgressions are reframed as amusement. At another level, it is a case study in philosophical methodology, offering a detailed record of what the method of cases actually produces when pursued with care over an extended sequence. What emerges, I shall argue, is neither a vindication of classical analysis nor a simple confirmation of the Wittgensteinian critique, but something more nuanced: the iterative method reveals genuine conceptual structure — real necessary conditions, substantive distinctions, load-bearing joints in the concept — even when it fails to deliver a complete set of sufficient conditions. The pattern of failure is itself informative, and it points toward a productive division of labor between conceptual analysis, which maps the structure of our existing concepts, and conceptual engineering, which asks whether that structure serves us well.

2. Twelve Rounds of Analysis

A Conceptual Analysis of PRACTICAL JOKE

Preliminary Remarks

The practical joke occupies a peculiar position in our conceptual landscape. It is at once a species of humor, a form of social action, and a kind of deception — yet it is not reducible to any one of these categories. We speak easily enough of practical jokes in ordinary life: the whoopee cushion on the chair, the bucket of water balanced atop a door, the carefully fabricated letter announcing a fictitious prize. But when pressed to specify what makes something a practical joke rather than a prank, a trick, a fraud, a trap, or mere horseplay, the matter becomes considerably less straightforward. My aim here is to pursue a classical conceptual analysis, seeking necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the application of the concept PRACTICAL JOKE by the method of iterative counterexample and revision.

Initial Structural Definitions

Let me begin with a natural first pass — a definition that captures what seems most immediately salient about practical jokes.

D1. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent that deceives another person for the purpose of amusement.

This is a reasonable starting point, but it is far too broad. Consider the case of a novelist — say, Orson Welles during the 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast. Welles presented a fictional alien invasion in the format of a news broadcast, and many listeners were genuinely deceived. Welles's purpose was broadly to entertain and amuse (himself and his audience). Yet the *War of the Worlds* broadcast is not naturally classified as a practical joke. It was a dramatic performance, a piece of art — even if it incidentally deceived and amused. The problem with D1 is that it fails to distinguish practical jokes from other forms of deceptive entertainment. What is missing, I think, is a requirement that the deception specifically targets a particular person or group as the *butt* of the joke — someone whose deceived state itself constitutes the humorous payload.

D2. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent that deceives a specific target person (or persons) and the target's deceived reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing.

This revision narrows the field by requiring a targeted victim whose reaction is the source of humor. But now consider the following counterexample. Suppose a con artist — call her Maria — deceives an elderly man into believing he has won a lottery, and she finds his excited confusion genuinely amusing as she fleeces him of his savings. Maria targets a specific person, the man is deceived, and his deceived reaction amuses Maria. Yet this is a confidence trick, not a practical joke. The diagnosis is clear: D2 fails to distinguish practical jokes from frauds and cons because it lacks any condition specifying that the deception is non-malicious in intent — that it is, so to speak, ultimately *ludic* rather than instrumental to some harmful end. What we need is a condition that the agent's predominant purpose is humorous rather than exploitative.

D3. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent that deceives a specific target person, where the target's deceived reaction is intended by the

agent to be amusing, and the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or harm to the target.

This handles Maria's con, but it now faces a different kind of counterexample. Consider what we might call the *birthday surprise party*. Alice's friends elaborately deceive her into thinking nothing special is planned for her birthday — fabricating stories about being busy, feigning indifference — all so that when she walks into the darkened room and the lights come on, her surprise and delight will amuse everyone. Alice is a specific target, she is deceived, her deceived reaction (shock, then joy) is intended to be amusing and delightful, and the predominant purpose is celebratory amusement rather than harm or gain. Yet a surprise party is not a practical joke; it is a different social practice entirely. The problem is that D3 does not require the target to be made to look *foolish* or to be placed in an *uncomfortable or embarrassing* situation, even if only momentarily. The humor in a practical joke characteristically arises from the target's discomfiture — from the gap between what the target believes and what is actually the case, revealed in a way that exposes the target to ridicule or embarrassment. A surprise party, by contrast, is designed to *delight* rather than to embarrass.

Incorporating the Element of Discomfiture

D4. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent that deceives a specific target person into a false belief or misapprehension, where the target's resultant discomfiture or embarrassment is intended by the agent to be amusing, and the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm.

This is a stronger definition. But now consider a case that challenges the deception condition itself. Suppose Tom places a piece of cling film tightly over the toilet bowl in a shared flat. His flatmate, Dave, goes to use the toilet and — the result is predictable and undignified. Dave is not *deceived* in any rich epistemic sense; he is not led to form a false belief through testimony or fabricated evidence. He simply encounters a physical modification of his environment that produces an embarrassing outcome. There is no propositional content to the deception — no false belief that Dave is induced to hold. Yet this is a paradigmatic practical joke. The diagnosis is that D4 is too intellectualist in its deception requirement. Practical jokes can operate through

physical manipulation of the environment, producing surprising and embarrassing outcomes, without necessarily involving the inculcation of a false belief through communicative deception. What is needed is a broader notion: the target is *set up* to encounter an unexpected and embarrassing situation, whether through belief-manipulation or through physical contrivance.

D5. *x* is a practical joke iff *x* is an action performed by an agent who contrives a situation — through deception, physical manipulation, or other means — that is designed to produce a surprising, embarrassing, or discomfiting experience for a specific target, where the target's reaction is intended to be amusing, and the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm.

This handles the cling film case nicely. But now consider a different problem: the counterexample of the *military hazing ritual*. In many military units, new recruits are subjected to elaborately contrived humiliations — sent to fetch "a bucket of steam" or "a left-handed screwdriver," made to perform absurd tasks while senior soldiers watch and laugh. The senior soldiers contrive the situation, it is designed to produce embarrassment for a specific target, the target's reaction is intended to be amusing, and the predominant purpose is amusement (mixed with tradition and social bonding) rather than material gain. These episodes can reasonably be classified as practical jokes, but many of them seem to shade into something else — into *hazing*, which is a distinct social category. More pressingly, consider a case where the "predominant purpose" is genuinely group bonding and the enforcement of hierarchy, with amusement being merely instrumental. In such a case, we might deny that it is a practical joke, yet D5 would classify it as one (since amusement is still the predominant *proximate* purpose even if the *distal* purpose is social control). This reveals an ambiguity in "predominant purpose" that needs refinement. But let me set this aside momentarily to press on a different and more urgent flaw.

Consider the case of a *scare prank* that goes wrong. Jake hides behind a door in a dark hallway and leaps out at his friend Sarah, screaming. Sarah, who has a heart condition Jake does not know about, collapses with a cardiac episode. Jake's predominant purpose was amusement, the situation was contrived, and it was designed to produce surprise and discomfiture. D5 classifies Jake's action as a practical joke. Intuitively, this seems correct — it *was* a practical joke, albeit a catastrophically ill-judged one. So perhaps D5 survives this case. The real problem emerges if

we modify the case: suppose Jake knows about Sarah's heart condition and deliberately frightens her in order to cause a cardiac episode while maintaining plausible deniability by framing it as a "joke." Here, his predominant purpose is not amusement but harm. D5 correctly excludes this as a practical joke. So far so good.

The more pressing counterexample to D5 is this: consider a staged scenario in a hidden-camera television show, such as *Candid Camera* or *Punk'd*. A hired actor, following a script designed by producers, stages an absurd situation in a shop to provoke reactions from unsuspecting members of the public. No specific target is selected in advance — whoever walks in becomes the target. The producers contrive the situation, it produces surprise and discomfiture, the reactions are intended to amuse (a television audience), and the predominant purpose is entertainment. This seems like a practical joke, yet D5 requires a "specific target," and the targets here are essentially random passersby. The problem is that D5's specificity requirement is too strong. We should say that the contrivance is directed at *some person or persons* — whoever happens to encounter it — rather than requiring that a specific individual be selected in advance.

Refining Target, Audience, and Revelation

D6. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent who contrives a situation designed to produce a surprising, embarrassing, or discomfiting experience for whoever encounters it as a target, where the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing (to the agent, to onlookers, or to a later audience), and the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm to the target.

This broadens the target condition appropriately. But now a subtle counterexample presents itself. Consider a *booby trap* set by a homeowner. Mrs. Chen, tired of neighborhood children trespassing in her garden, rigs a garden hose to spray anyone who opens her gate. She does not intend this to be amusing; her predominant purpose is deterrence. Yet the physical setup — a contrived situation designed to produce a surprising and discomfiting experience for whoever encounters it — is structurally identical to a practical joke. D6 correctly excludes this case because Mrs. Chen's predominant purpose is not amusement. Good. But now consider a slight variation: suppose Mrs. Chen does find it funny when the children get sprayed, and she sets up

the device partly for deterrence and partly because she genuinely enjoys watching the children's shocked reactions from her window. Her purpose is mixed. Is this a practical joke? Ordinary intuition seems to waver, but I think most competent speakers would be reluctant to call it a practical joke because the defensive and punitive dimensions predominate, even if amusement is present. D6's "predominant purpose" condition handles this tolerably, though the vagueness of "predominant" is a cost we shall have to live with for now.

The more serious counterexample to D6 is the following. Consider a *thought experiment* or *reductio ad absurdum* in philosophy. A professor contrives an elaborate hypothetical scenario designed to produce intellectual discomfiture in a student — to expose a contradiction in the student's position. The professor intends this to be amusing (philosophy seminars often trade in such amusement), and the predominant purpose is pedagogical amusement. The student's discomfiture — the dawning realization that their view entails absurdity — is the humorous payload. Yet a Socratic elenchos is not a practical joke. The diagnosis is that D6 fails to require that the contrivance involve a *non-discursive, enacted* or *physical* dimension — a manipulation of the target's practical environment or situation rather than a purely argumentative or intellectual challenge. This is, after all, why we call them *practical* jokes: the humor is realized through actions and situations in the world, not merely through words or arguments.

D7. *x* is a practical joke iff *x* is a non-purely-discursive action performed by an agent who contrives a situation in the target's practical environment, designed to produce a surprising, embarrassing, or discomfiting experience for the target, where the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing, and the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm to the target.

The qualifier "non-purely-discursive" is somewhat clumsy, but it captures the right idea: practical jokes are enacted, not merely spoken. However, this condition now seems to exclude what many people would regard as a paradigmatic practical joke: the *prank phone call*. Suppose a teenager calls a restaurant and asks, "Is your refrigerator running? Then you'd better go catch it!" This is entirely discursive — it is performed solely through speech — yet it seems to be a practical joke (albeit a juvenile one). Or consider a more elaborate case: someone calls a colleague and, impersonating a government official, convinces her that she has been selected for

a tax audit, causing several minutes of panic before revealing the joke. This, too, is purely verbal, yet it is unambiguously a practical joke. The diagnosis is that my attempt to build in a "non-purely-discursive" condition was too strong. What distinguishes a practical joke from a Socratic elenchos is not the absence of discourse but rather that the target is *placed in a situation* (real or believed-to-be-real) that occasions discomfiture, rather than merely being confronted with an intellectual challenge. The prank caller creates a *situational predicament* (believed tax audit) even though the medium is speech. The Socratic questioner, by contrast, exposes a *logical predicament*. What matters is that the target is led to experience a practical or experiential predicament, not merely a cognitive one.

Situational Predicament and the Role of Revelation

D8. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent who contrives a situation (through physical manipulation, deception, or other means) that places a target in a practical or experiential predicament — one involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about their real-world circumstances — where the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing, and the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm to the target.

This formulation handles both the cling film case and the prank phone call while excluding Socratic questioning. But now consider the following: a *practical joke that is never witnessed*. Suppose an office worker, Gerald, places a small piece of tape over the optical sensor of his colleague Patricia's computer mouse before leaving for a two-week vacation. Patricia discovers that her mouse doesn't work, is briefly confused, then finds and removes the tape. Gerald never sees Patricia's reaction, never hears about it, and never tells anyone. He derived some anticipatory amusement from imagining Patricia's confusion, but no one witnesses the event. Is this a practical joke? Intuitively, yes — it is a paradigmatic practical joke even if it is an unwitnessed one. D8 seems to handle this correctly, since it requires only that the target's reaction be *intended* to be amusing, not that it actually *is* witnessed or found amusing. So far so good.

But consider now a more challenging case: the *accidental practical joke*. Suppose a plumber, working on the pipes in an office building, accidentally reverses the hot and cold water lines in the break room sink. An office worker later turns on what he expects to be cold water and is scalded, leaping back in surprise and spilling water on himself. His colleagues laugh. This situation has all the structural features of a practical joke — a contrived (if accidentally so) situation, a practical predicament, surprise and discomfiture, and amusement — but it is plainly not a practical joke because no agent *intended* the setup. D8 correctly handles this case because it requires that an agent *contrive* the situation and *intend* the reaction to be amusing. The plumber did neither.

The more serious counterexample to D8 involves the absence of any *revelation* or *denouement*. Consider the following case. Robert, a vindictive office worker, moves his rival Kevin's car to a different floor of the parking garage every day for a month. Kevin is confused, embarrassed, and increasingly distressed, believing he is losing his memory. Robert finds Kevin's distress hilarious and tells no one. He never reveals the joke. Kevin eventually sees a neurologist. Is this a practical joke? There is a strong intuition that at some point, if the deception is never revealed and the target suffers genuine ongoing distress, the action ceases to be a practical joke and becomes something more like *gaslighting* or psychological abuse. Yet D8 classifies it as a practical joke because Robert's predominant purpose is amusement and Kevin is placed in a practical predicament. The problem is that D8 lacks any condition about *revelation* — the expectation that the joke will at some point be disclosed to the target, dissolving the predicament and restoring the social equilibrium. This seems to be an important feature of the concept: a practical joke, unlike gaslighting, is *designed to be eventually revealed*.

D9. *x* is a practical joke iff *x* is an action performed by an agent who contrives a situation that places a target in a practical or experiential predicament involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about their real-world circumstances, where (i) the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing, (ii) the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm to the target, and (iii) the agent intends or expects that the contrivance will be revealed to the target, thereby dissolving the predicament.

The addition of a revelation condition is a significant refinement. It captures the intuition that practical jokes have an arc — setup, reaction, and reveal — and distinguishes them from gaslighting and other forms of sustained psychological manipulation. But D9 now faces a new counterexample: the *irreversible practical joke*. Consider the classic case of April Fools' Day media hoaxes. In 1957, the BBC broadcast a segment on *Panorama* showing Swiss farmers harvesting spaghetti from trees. The hoax was eventually revealed (the next day), but consider a viewer, Mrs. Whitfield, who saw the broadcast and died that evening without ever learning it was a hoax. Was the broadcast a practical joke with respect to Mrs. Whitfield? Intuitively, yes — the BBC perpetrated a practical joke on the viewing public, including Mrs. Whitfield, even though the revelation never reached her. D9 handles this tolerably because the BBC *intended and expected* that the contrivance would be revealed — and it was, to most viewers. The fact that revelation failed to reach one particular target does not undermine the classification. So D9 survives this case.

A harder counterexample: the *self-directed practical joke*. Consider an eccentric philosopher, Diogenes-like, who rigs his own chair to collapse when he sits on it at a faculty meeting, so that he can perform a comic pratfall. He is both agent and target. He places himself in a practical predicament (falling from his chair), his own reaction is intended to amuse (the other faculty members), and he expects the contrivance to be revealed (he will announce it was deliberate). D9 does not explicitly exclude self-targeting, and intuitively this feels more like *a stunt or a gag* than a practical joke. Practical jokes, it seems, require that the target *not know* in advance about the contrivance — the target must be *unwitting*. The philosopher who rigs his own chair is performing a slapstick routine, not perpetrating a practical joke on himself.

Refining the Target's Epistemic State and the Joke's Social Character

D10. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent who contrives a situation that places an *unwitting* target — a person who does not know of the contrivance in advance — in a practical or experiential predicament involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about their real-world circumstances, where (i) the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing, (ii) the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material

gain or serious harm to the target, and (iii) the agent intends or expects that the contrivance will be revealed to the target, thereby dissolving the predicament.

This handles the self-directed stunt: the philosopher who rigs his own chair is not unwitting and thus is not the target of a practical joke. But now consider a counterexample from a very different direction: *test deception in experimental psychology*. In the famous Milgram obedience experiments, the experimenter contrived a situation in which unwitting subjects believed they were administering electric shocks to another person. The subjects were placed in a profound practical and experiential predicament — moral distress, confusion, and discomfiture. The contrivance was eventually revealed in the debriefing session. The experimenter arguably found some aspects of the subjects' reactions interesting (and colleagues may have found certain reactions darkly amusing in recounting them). Yet the Milgram experiment is emphatically not a practical joke. D10 might seem to handle this because the experimenter's predominant purpose was *scientific knowledge*, not amusement. But suppose we modify the case: a psychology graduate student, Carl, runs a simplified version of the Milgram setup at a party purely for amusement — rigging a fake shock generator and watching his friends squirm as they believe they are hurting someone. Carl's predominant purpose is amusement, the targets are unwitting, they are in a genuine experiential predicament, and Carl plans to reveal the setup afterward. D10 classifies this as a practical joke. Is it one? I think there is a strong intuition that it is — albeit a deeply cruel and ethically objectionable one. Cruel practical jokes are still practical jokes. So perhaps D10 survives this case after all.

Let me press on a different front. Consider the *ongoing benign prank*. Suppose that every morning for a year, Alicia moves her officemate Ben's stapler exactly two inches to the left. She finds this amusing and intends to reveal it eventually. Ben never notices — he never experiences any discomfiture, surprise, or confusion. He simply picks up his stapler from its slightly shifted position without registering any change. D10 classifies this as a practical joke because the situation is *designed to produce* discomfiture, even though it fails to do so. But is an unnoticed, reaction-less prank really a practical joke? There is a sense in which it is an *attempted* practical joke that never achieves its aim. One might say it is a practical joke in the same way that an unheard joke is still a joke — but the analogy breaks down, because the humor of a verbal joke resides in its structure regardless of reception, whereas the humor of a practical joke essentially

depends on the target's reaction. I think D10 should be revised to require that the contrivance is *designed to produce* the predicament — which D10 already does — but we might add that the predicament must at least *potentially* be experienced by the target. In fact, D10 as stated already implies this: "places an unwitting target... in a practical or experiential predicament" requires that the predicament actually obtains. If Ben never experiences discomfiture, he has not been placed in a predicament. So D10 seems to correctly classify the stapler case as a *failed* or *attempted* practical joke rather than a successful one. This seems like the right result.

A more troubling counterexample for D10 arises from the domain of *art and installation*. Consider the artist Maurizio Cattelan, who in 1999 taped his gallerist Emmanuel Perrotin to the wall of his own gallery using adhesive tape. Perrotin was unwitting (he did not expect this), was placed in a discomfiting predicament, the act was intended to be amusing, and the artistic "contrivance" was revealed as such. D10 classifies this as a practical joke, but it was presented and received as a work of conceptual art. Of course, one might respond that art and practical joking are not mutually exclusive categories — Cattelan's act might be *both* a practical joke *and* an artwork. This seems plausible. But consider instead a case of *theatrical immersive performance*: in the production *Sleep No More*, audience members wander freely through a dark building where performers suddenly grab them, isolate them in rooms, and subject them to startling experiences. The audience members have *consented in advance* to being subjected to such experiences, even though they do not know the specific contrivances. D10 might classify individual episodes within *Sleep No More* as practical jokes, since the audience members are unwitting as to the *specific* contrivance even though they have consented to the *general* framework of surprise. Yet these are not practical jokes; they are theatrical experiences. The diagnosis is that D10 needs a condition requiring that the target has *not consented to the general framework* of being subjected to contrivances of this kind. But this is tricky, because participants in an April Fools' Day tradition have arguably consented to the general framework of practical joking on that day, yet April Fools' jokes are still practical jokes.

D11. *x* is a practical joke iff *x* is an action performed by an agent who contrives a situation that places an unwitting target in a practical or experiential predicament involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about their real-world circumstances, where (i) the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be

amusing, (ii) the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm to the target, (iii) the agent intends or expects that the contrivance will be revealed to the target, and (iv) the contrivance is not embedded within a performative or institutional framework (such as theater, scientific experimentation, or religious ritual) that recontextualizes the experience as something other than a joke.

This is admittedly somewhat ad hoc, but it captures a genuine distinction: when an experience of surprise and discomfiture is framed within an institutional context whose primary purpose is aesthetic, epistemic, or spiritual rather than ludic, it is not a practical joke even if it shares the structural features of one. The immersive theater case is excluded because the contrivance is embedded in a theatrical framework. The Milgram experiment is excluded because it is embedded in a scientific one. April Fools' Day jokes are not excluded, because the April Fools' tradition is itself a ludic framework — it does not *recontextualize* the experience as something other than a joke; it *reinforces* the joke interpretation.

But D11 now faces a counterexample from what I will call the *purely physical, non-social practical joke aimed at an animal*. Suppose a farmer rigs a gate so that when his goat pushes it, it swings back and bumps the goat on the hindquarters. The farmer finds this hilarious and shows the video to his friends. The goat is unwitting, is placed in a predicament involving surprise and discomfiture, the farmer's predominant purpose is amusement, and no institutional framework recontextualizes the experience. D11 classifies this as a practical joke on a goat. But can a goat be the target of a practical joke? Ordinary usage seems to resist this: we might say the farmer *played a trick* on the goat, but calling it a practical joke seems to anthropomorphize the animal. Practical jokes, it seems, presuppose that the target is a *person* — an agent capable of the relevant social emotions (embarrassment, indignation, the feeling of having been made a fool of) and capable of understanding, upon revelation, that a joke has been played on them. The goat cannot appreciate the joke or feel the characteristic sense of having been "had."

The Final Formulation

D12. x is a practical joke iff x is an action performed by an agent who deliberately contrives a situation that places an unwitting *person* in a practical or experiential

predicament involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about their real-world circumstances, where (i) the target's reaction is intended by the agent to be amusing (whether to the agent, to onlookers, or to a later audience), (ii) the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm to the target, (iii) the agent intends or expects that the contrivance will at some point be revealed to the target — or to the public, in cases where the target is a member of a general audience — thereby dissolving or reframing the predicament as humorous, and (iv) the contrivance is not wholly embedded within a performative or institutional framework (such as theater, scientific experimentation, or religious ritual) that recontextualizes the target's experience as something other than a joke.

This twelfth formulation incorporates the major insights accumulated through the preceding rounds. It requires *agency and deliberateness* (excluding accidents), an *unwitting person* as target (excluding self-directed stunts and tricks on animals), a *practical or experiential predicament* (excluding purely intellectual challenges), an *intention to amuse* as the *predominant purpose* (excluding cons, traps, and gaslighting), an *expectation of revelation* (distinguishing practical jokes from sustained deception and psychological manipulation), and the absence of a *recontextualizing institutional framework* (excluding theater, experiments, and rituals). Each condition was motivated by a specific counterexample, and each addresses a genuine conceptual boundary of the notion of a practical joke.

No doubt further counterexamples could be devised. One might press on the vagueness of "predominant purpose," on the boundaries of "performative or institutional framework," or on borderline cases involving practical jokes played on the cognitively impaired, the very young, or the deceased (who are persons but cannot experience the predicament). These residual difficulties are genuine, and they suggest that PRACTICAL JOKE may ultimately resist perfectly sharp necessary and sufficient conditions — that it may, like many social-kind concepts, have an irreducibly vague periphery even if its core

3. Assessment: The Best Definition

Evaluating the Analysis of PRACTICAL JOKE

The High-Water Mark: D12 and Its Virtues

The best definition in the sequence is D12, the final formulation. This is not simply because it comes last — iterative refinement does not guarantee monotonic improvement, and later definitions can overcorrect or introduce ad hoc conditions that create new problems worse than those they solve. Rather, D12 represents the genuine high-water mark because it successfully integrates the cumulative insights of the preceding rounds into a formulation that handles the widest range of cases with the fewest residual difficulties, while each of its four conditions earns its place by responding to a clearly motivated counterexample.

Let me trace what D12 gets right. The base clause — that an agent *deliberately contrives a situation* placing an unwitting *person* in a practical or experiential predicament — does substantial work. The deliberateness requirement correctly excludes the accidental plumber case (where hot and cold lines are inadvertently reversed), which shares the surface structure of a practical joke but lacks the intentional contrivance that is conceptually essential. The requirement that the target be a *person* correctly excludes the goat case, honoring the intuition that practical jokes presuppose a target capable of social emotions such as embarrassment and indignation, and capable of understanding upon revelation that a joke has been played. The requirement that the target be *unwitting* correctly excludes the self-directed stunt of the eccentric philosopher who rigs his own chair, classifying that act as a gag or a performance piece rather than a practical joke. And the specification of a *practical or experiential predicament* — as opposed to a purely intellectual or logical one — correctly excludes the Socratic elenchos while including prank phone calls, since the prank caller creates a believed-to-be-real situational crisis (the fictitious tax audit) even though the medium is entirely verbal.

Condition (i), that the target's reaction is intended to be amusing to the agent, onlookers, or a later audience, correctly classifies the unwitnessed mouse-tape case (Gerald taping Patricia's optical sensor) as a practical joke, since intended amusement — even merely anticipated amusement — suffices. The parenthetical expansion to include later audiences correctly accommodates hidden-camera television programs like *Candid Camera*, where the primary audience for the target's discomfiture is temporally displaced from the event itself.

Condition (ii), that the agent's predominant purpose is amusement rather than material gain or serious harm, correctly excludes Maria's confidence trick and the punitive booby trap set by Mrs.

Chen (in her purely deterrent mode), while correctly including cruel or ill-judged practical jokes such as Jake's scare prank. This condition embodies the important insight that a practical joke can be morally objectionable — even disastrously harmful in its consequences — and still be a practical joke, so long as the agent's predominant *purpose* was ludic rather than exploitative. Cruelty of outcome does not disqualify an act as a practical joke; cruelty of purpose does.

Condition (iii), the revelation requirement, is perhaps D12's most theoretically interesting contribution. It correctly distinguishes practical jokes from gaslighting and sustained psychological manipulation by requiring that the agent intend or expect eventual disclosure. Robert's prolonged scheme of moving Kevin's car — never revealed, causing Kevin to seek neurological evaluation — is correctly excluded, or at least pushed toward the boundary of exclusion, because Robert neither intends nor expects revelation. The condition also handles the BBC spaghetti harvest case elegantly: the broadcast is a practical joke on the viewing public because the BBC intended and expected revelation (which came the following day), even though one particular viewer, Mrs. Whitfield, died before learning the truth. The qualification "or to the public, in cases where the target is a member of a general audience" is a well-crafted extension that accommodates mass-audience practical jokes without requiring that revelation reach every single individual.

Condition (iv), the institutional-framework exclusion, correctly handles the immersive theater case (*Sleep No More*) and the Milgram experiment by recognizing that structurally identical experiences of surprise and discomfiture can be recontextualized by the institutional setting in which they occur. It does so without excluding April Fools' Day jokes, since the April Fools' tradition is itself a ludic framework that reinforces rather than displaces the joke interpretation. This condition is the most openly ad hoc element of the definition, and the analysis acknowledges as much, but it captures a genuine and important conceptual distinction: the same physical and psychological sequence of events constitutes a practical joke in one institutional context and a theatrical experience, a scientific procedure, or a ritual ordeal in another.

In sum, D12 correctly classifies a wide array of positive cases — the whoopee cushion, the cling film on the toilet, the prank phone call, the April Fools' media hoax, the *Candid Camera* setup, the unwitnessed mouse-tape prank, and even cruel or harmful pranks like Jake's scare — while correctly excluding confidence tricks, surprise parties, Socratic questioning, booby traps,

gaslighting, self-directed stunts, tricks on animals, immersive theater, scientific deception experiments, and accidental environmental modifications. No previous definition in the sequence achieves this breadth of coverage.

A False Negative: The Practical Joke That Escapes D12

Consider the following case. It is the first of April, and a national newspaper — say, *The Guardian* — publishes an elaborate fictitious article announcing that the island nation of San Serriffe has been discovered in the Indian Ocean, complete with fabricated maps, cultural details, and advertisements from real companies with San Serriffe-themed copy. (This is in fact a real case from 1977.) Thousands of readers are taken in. Some phone the newspaper to inquire about holidays to San Serriffe. The hoax is revealed the following day. Now, there is no question that this is a practical joke — it is routinely cited as one of the great April Fools' hoaxes, and competent English speakers unhesitatingly classify it as such. Yet consider a particular reader, Margaret, who reads the article, finds it mildly interesting, forms a belief that San Serriffe exists, and moves on with her day without experiencing any surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about her real-world circumstances. She is not placed in a *predicament* of any kind. She simply absorbs a false piece of geographical information as she might absorb any newspaper article. She is not embarrassed, not confused in any agitated sense, not surprised in any discomfiting way. She calmly believes a falsehood. When she later learns the truth, she chuckles and feels mildly sheepish, but at the time of the joke's operation she experienced no predicament whatsoever.

D12 requires that the target be placed in "a practical or experiential predicament involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about their real-world circumstances." Margaret experiences none of these things at the moment of the joke's operation. She is deceived, certainly, but her deception is phenomenologically seamless — it integrates smoothly into her existing worldview and produces no experiential disruption. She is not, in any natural sense, in a predicament. Nor can we rescue D12 by saying she is in a predicament she does not recognize, for the definition specifies an *experiential* predicament, and Margaret's experience is entirely placid.

Yet the San Serriffe hoax is unambiguously a practical joke, and Margaret is unambiguously one of its targets. The joke works on her in exactly the way it was designed to work: she is led to believe something false, and the humor resides in the eventual contrast between her confident belief and the absurd truth — a contrast that the perpetrators anticipated and savored even if Margaret herself remained tranquil throughout. What this case reveals is that D12's predicament condition is too experientially demanding. Some practical jokes — particularly hoaxes involving the quiet implantation of false beliefs — do not place their targets in any felt predicament at the time of the joke's operation. The discomfiture, if it comes at all, arrives only at the moment of revelation, when the target realizes she has been credulous. The humor of the San Serriffe hoax is not that readers were confused or embarrassed while reading the article; it is that they *believed* it, and the gap between their confident belief and the absurd reality is comic. D12's insistence on a predicament "involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion" at the point of contrivance excludes this entire class of calm-deception practical jokes, which includes some of the most celebrated examples of the genre.

To accommodate this case, one would need to weaken the predicament condition to something like: the target is led into a state — whether a felt experiential predicament or merely an unrecognized false belief about their circumstances — that is designed to be humorous when revealed or recognized. But this weakening would reintroduce the problem that motivated the predicament condition in the first place: distinguishing practical jokes from surprise parties and other benign deceptions. The tension is genuine and illuminating.

A False Positive: What Satisfies D12 Without Being a Practical Joke

Consider the following case. Frank is a high school teacher who suspects that his student, Elena, has been cheating on exams by copying from a hidden cheat sheet. To catch her, Frank prepares a special version of the next exam containing a question with a deliberately planted wrong answer embedded in a fake cheat sheet that he arranges for Elena to find. Elena, unwitting, uses the planted cheat sheet during the exam and writes down the deliberately wrong answer, thereby revealing her cheating to Frank. Frank reveals the contrivance to Elena after the exam — "I planted that cheat sheet to catch you" — in the presence of the school dean. Frank, let us stipulate, finds the situation genuinely and predominantly amusing. He has been telling colleagues for days that he has a "hilarious" plan to catch Elena, and when the moment of

revelation arrives, he laughs heartily at the look on Elena's face. His predominant subjective purpose — we may stipulate, having access to his psychology — is the amusement he derives from the elegant irony of the trap, not material gain or serious harm to Elena (he regards the disciplinary consequences as Elena's own doing, not as harm he is inflicting).

Let me walk through each clause of D12. Frank is an agent who *deliberately contrives a situation*: he plants the fake cheat sheet and designs the trick question. The target, Elena, is an unwitting *person*: she does not know of the contrivance in advance. She is placed in a *practical or experiential predicament involving surprise, embarrassment, discomfiture, or confusion about her real-world circumstances*: when the trap is sprung, she is profoundly embarrassed and shocked to discover that her cheating has been exposed through a ruse. Condition (i): Elena's reaction is intended by Frank to be amusing — he has been anticipating this moment with glee and finds her stunned expression hilarious. Condition (ii): Frank's predominant purpose is amusement — he is not motivated by material gain, and he does not regard himself as inflicting serious harm but rather as executing an amusing stratagem. Condition (iii): Frank intends the contrivance to be revealed to Elena, which it is, thereby dissolving the predicament (she now understands what happened). Condition (iv): the contrivance is not embedded within a performative or institutional framework such as theater, scientific experimentation, or religious ritual that recontextualizes the experience as something other than a joke. Frank's action takes place in a school, to be sure, but schools are not among the listed recontextualizing frameworks, and the action is not part of any institutional protocol for academic integrity — it is Frank's own freelance stratagem.

Every clause of D12 is satisfied, yet this is not a practical joke. It is a *sting operation* — an investigative trap designed to catch a wrongdoer in the act. Competent English speakers would describe Frank's action as "setting a trap," "catching a cheater," or perhaps "a clever ruse," but not as "playing a practical joke on Elena." If Frank described his action to colleagues by saying "I played a great practical joke on Elena," they would likely respond with puzzlement or disapproval — not because practical jokes on students are impermissible, but because the description does not fit the act. The reason it does not fit is revealing: Frank's contrivance, despite his genuine amusement, is fundamentally *investigative and corrective* in its social function. It is designed to *detect and expose wrongdoing*, and the revelation serves not to

dissolve the predicament into shared laughter but to *initiate disciplinary consequences*. The denouement is not "Ha! You've been had!" but rather "You have been caught, and here are the consequences."

What D12 misses, I think, is a condition about the *nature of the revelation and its intended social aftermath*. In a genuine practical joke, the revelation is designed to reframe the predicament as *shared humor* — the ideal is that even the target, once the joke is revealed, can appreciate the comedy of the situation and join in the laughter (even if, in practice, many targets are annoyed rather than amused). The revelation is *restitutive*: it aims to restore the target's social standing by dissolving the predicament into a comic frame that, in principle, everyone — including the target — can share. In Frank's sting operation, by contrast, the revelation is *punitive*: it aims to compound the target's predicament rather than dissolve it. Elena's embarrassment is not dissolved by the revelation; it is deepened, and it transitions seamlessly into disciplinary sanction. D12 lacks any condition requiring that the intended revelation be restitutive or reconciliatory in character — that the joke be designed to culminate in a moment of shared amusement rather than in the exposure and punishment of the target. One might try to fold this into the existing "predominant purpose is amusement rather than serious harm" condition, but Frank's case shows that an agent can be predominantly motivated by amusement and still be executing what is functionally a punitive sting rather than a practical joke. The missing element is something about the *intended social trajectory* of the revelation: a practical joke aims to restore equilibrium through humor, not to initiate adverse consequences for the target.

Reflections on the Structure of the Concept

The twelve rounds of analysis reveal several deep features of the concept PRACTICAL JOKE that are worth reflecting on at a more abstract level.

First, the concept exhibits a characteristic layered structure common to what we might call *social-practice concepts*. PRACTICAL JOKE is not analyzable purely in terms of physical events, nor purely in terms of psychological states, nor purely in terms of social functions. It requires simultaneous specification along all three dimensions: a physical or situational contrivance (the setup), a constellation of psychological states distributed across agent and target (intention to amuse, unwitting credulity, experienced discomfiture), and a social trajectory

(revelation, shared laughter, restoration of equilibrium). Definitions that focus on only one or two of these dimensions — as D1 through D3 focus primarily on psychological states, and D4 through D5 on the experiential dimension — are inevitably too broad or too narrow. The iterative process essentially consists of progressively discovering that another dimension must be incorporated.

Second, the analysis reveals that PRACTICAL JOKE is a concept with a *narrative structure*. Unlike concepts such as CHAIR or RED, which can be applied to an object or a property at a single time-slice, PRACTICAL JOKE essentially involves a temporal arc: contrivance, then predicament, then revelation. Attempts to define the concept without the revelation condition (D1 through D8) systematically fail to distinguish practical jokes from sustained deception, gaslighting, and other temporally open-ended manipulations. The revelation condition is not a peripheral refinement but a deep structural feature of the concept: a practical joke is essentially a *story with three acts*, and a definition that fails to capture this narrative structure will misclassify cases that share the first two acts but lack the third.

Third, the exercise exposes a persistent and perhaps irreducible tension between what I will call the *experiential* and *epistemic* dimensions of the concept. Some practical jokes operate primarily through experiential disruption — the whoopee cushion, the scare prank, the cling film on the toilet — where the target undergoes a felt perturbation of their practical engagement with the world. Others operate primarily through epistemic manipulation — the April Fools' hoax, the prank phone call about a fictitious tax audit — where the target is led to hold a false belief that may produce no felt perturbation at all until the moment of revelation. D12's predicament condition is tuned to the experiential dimension and, as the San Serriffe case demonstrates, struggles to accommodate purely epistemic practical jokes where the target is calmly deceived. Yet weakening the predicament condition to accommodate epistemic cases threatens to re-admit surprise parties and other benign deceptions. This tension suggests that PRACTICAL JOKE may be a *disjunctive* concept at its core — or, more precisely, that the "predicament" central to a practical joke can be either experiential (felt discomfiture at the time of the setup) or epistemic (false belief whose humorous character emerges only at revelation) — and that these two modes of operation are unified not by a shared phenomenology but by a shared social function: the creation of a gap between appearance and reality that, when revealed, generates humor

4. Comparison with Existing Definitions

I'll search for several dictionary and encyclopedic definitions of "practical joke" to compare with the philosophical analysis. Now let me search for the Moira Marsh definition mentioned in the Daily Nous post, as it represents an interesting scholarly perspective:

The Lexicographic Landscape

The major English-language dictionaries display a remarkable degree of convergence in their treatment of "practical joke," yet the points on which they diverge — and, more importantly, the features they leave unanalyzed — are philosophically illuminating. Let me begin by mapping the terrain.

Merriam-Webster defines a practical joke as "a prank intended to trick or embarrass someone or cause physical discomfort."

Cambridge offers a somewhat different emphasis, calling it "a joke that makes someone seem silly and involves a physical action rather than words."

The Oxford Dictionaries entry describes it as "a trick played on someone in order to make them look foolish and to amuse others."

Collins characterizes it as "a trick that is intended to embarrass someone or make them look ridiculous," and in a secondary sense draws from Dictionary.com's formulation: "a playful trick, often involving some physical agent or means, in which the victim is placed in an embarrassing or disadvantageous position."

The Britannica Dictionary offers perhaps the sparest definition: "a joke involving something that is done rather than said; a trick played on someone." Finally, the Merriam-Webster Thesaurus gives a subtly different gloss from the dictionary entry: it characterizes a practical joke as "a playful or mischievous act intended as a joke."

Several features recur across these definitions with sufficient regularity to count as near-consensus. First, virtually every source invokes the notion of a *trick* — an act of deception or contrivance directed at another person. Second, all or nearly all sources identify embarrassment, foolishness, or looking ridiculous as the characteristic effect on the target. Third, several sources

emphasize the contrast between practical jokes and verbal jokes, insisting that the practical joke involves physical action or some tangible contrivance rather than mere words. Fourth, the better definitions gesture toward the ludic or playful character of the act, using terms like "playful" or "mischievous," and at least one — the Oxford formulation — explicitly mentions the aim of amusing others, thereby introducing an audience condition absent from several of the other entries.

There is, however, a notable spread of opinion on the question of physicality. Cambridge treats physicality as definitional, specifying that a practical joke "involves a physical action rather than words."

Wikipedia's article explains the etymology in similar terms: a practical joke is called "practical" because "it consists of someone doing something that is physical, in contrast to a verbal or written joke." Yet Merriam-Webster's definition does not foreground physicality in the same way, and the Dictionary.com/Collins secondary definition hedges with the qualifier "often involving some physical agent or means" — the word *often* conceding that physicality is typical but not strictly necessary. This divergence is itself of philosophical interest, to which I shall return.

What the Dictionaries Get Right

The dictionary definitions, taken collectively, capture certain features with a clarity and economy that the philosophical analysis would do well to heed. The most striking is their unanimous emphasis on the target's being made to *look foolish* or *appear ridiculous*. The Oxford definition is particularly perspicuous: the trick is played "in order to make them look foolish and to amuse others."

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary reinforces this in defining the practical joker as "a person who plays tricks on people to make them look stupid and to make other people laugh." This locution — *making someone look foolish* — picks out something the philosophical analysis's notion of a "practical or experiential predicament" gestures at but does not fully articulate. The predicament of the practical joke victim is not merely that they face an unwanted situation (as one might face a flat tire or a power outage); it is that their *epistemic and social standing* is temporarily undermined. They are made to look foolish *because* they are revealed —

to themselves and to onlookers — to have been operating under a false picture of their situation, and this revelation carries a charge of social diminishment. The dictionaries, in their compact way, capture this social-epistemic dimension with the language of foolishness and embarrassment, which is more specific and more accurate than the philosophical analysis's talk of mere "predicaments."

The Oxford definition also earns praise for its explicit inclusion of an audience condition: the trick is played not merely to deceive the target but *to amuse others*. This triangular structure — joker, target, audience — is a genuine insight. Many paradigmatic practical jokes are essentially performances: the joker scripts a scenario, the unwitting target enacts it, and the audience (which may overlap with the joker) derives amusement from the spectacle. As one reviewer of Moira Marsh's scholarly study notes, Marsh's analysis emphasizes that "the target completes the performance produced and directed by the joker," and that her use of "target" rather than "victim" shifts attention from the act as completed to "the act in potency." This performative dimension is something the philosophical analysis's D12 does not explicitly address.

The dictionaries also deserve credit for the way their strongest formulations implicitly distinguish practical jokes from both confidence tricks and purely verbal jokes without needing elaborate theoretical machinery. The emphasis on making someone *look foolish* rather than *defrauding* them efficiently separates practical jokes from cons, since the con artist's aim is not to make the victim look silly but to extract value. And the emphasis on physicality or action — even if only typical rather than necessary — efficiently separates practical jokes from riddles, verbal traps, and conversational put-downs.

What the Philosophical Definition Handles Better

For all their virtues, the dictionary definitions are, as one would expect, systematically underspecified in ways that leave them vulnerable to counterexamples the philosophical analysis deftly handles. Consider the Merriam-Webster definition: a practical joke is "a prank intended to trick or embarrass someone or cause physical discomfort." This is strikingly circular — defining "practical joke" in terms of "prank" — and its disjunctive structure is problematic. On this definition, any act intended to cause physical discomfort would count as a practical joke: a slap, a shove, an act of torture. Nothing in the definition restricts the act to the ludic domain or

requires that the discomfort serve a humorous end. A bully who puts tacks on a classmate's chair *purely* to cause pain, with no interest in the humorous spectacle, would satisfy Merriam-Webster's conditions. The philosophical analysis, by contrast, builds in a requirement that the agent intend the situation to be amusing, thereby excluding acts of pure cruelty.

More fundamentally, none of the dictionary definitions adequately addresses the question of *what distinguishes a practical joke from a fraud or a con*. The philosophical analysis's treatment of the Maria case — the con artist who finds her victim's confusion amusing — and its consequent introduction of a non-instrumental, ludic-intention condition represents genuine conceptual progress. Wikipedia gestures at this distinction by noting that "practical jokes differ from confidence tricks or hoaxes in that the victim finds out, or is let in on the joke, rather than being talked into handing over money or other valuables." This is illuminating: it suggests that a practical joke has a built-in *reveal* structure, a moment at which the frame of play is made manifest to the target. But this observation appears in the encyclopedic discussion rather than in any of the compact dictionary definitions, and even it leaves open the question of whether a practical joke that is never revealed — the target never learns they were tricked — thereby ceases to be one. The philosophical analysis's treatment of the ludic frame and the absence of ulterior instrumental motives handles such cases more precisely.

The philosophical analysis also handles the edge case of self-directed action (the eccentric philosopher who rigs his own chair) and the question of the target's ontological status (the goat case) with an exactness that dictionary definitions, unsurprisingly, do not attempt. The requirement that the target be a *person* — an entity capable of the social emotions of embarrassment and indignation, and capable of recognizing upon revelation that a joke has been played — is a philosophically substantive condition that the dictionaries leave implicit through their use of "someone" or "people." This vagueness is ordinarily harmless, but it becomes problematic in cases like elaborate "pranks" played on animals or on AI chatbots, where the surface grammar of "playing a trick on" is satisfied but the conceptual core of the practical joke arguably is not.

Unusual and Interesting Formulations

Several features of the lexicographic record merit special philosophical attention. First, the Cambridge definition's insistence on physical action as a *definitional* feature rather than a merely typical one is a bold claim. If a practical joke must involve "a physical action rather than words," then elaborate verbal put-ons — such as a prank phone call in which a caller persuades someone that they have won a prize, conducted entirely through speech — would fail to qualify. Yet prank phone calls are paradigmatic practical jokes. Marsh herself argues in her scholarly treatment that "deception is not a necessary part of the practical joke," and she observes that "while some practical jokes rely on elaborate props and scenery, others are equally effective using no extraverbal means at all," with "some pranks" being "more cerebral" while others "can be accomplished in an armchair." Cambridge's formulation thus appears to enshrine a prototypical feature as a necessary one — a common lexicographic error, but one that reveals how strongly the physical-contrivance prototype dominates our folk conception of the category.

Second, the Britannica Dictionary's spare formulation — "a joke involving something that is done rather than said; a trick played on someone" — is interesting precisely in its minimalism. It abstracts entirely from the effect on the target (embarrassment, foolishness, discomfort), leaving only the contrast between doing and saying. This makes it at once the least informative and the most permissive of the definitions surveyed. On Britannica's formulation, hiding a friend's keys with no malicious or humorous intent would qualify, so long as it counts as "a trick played on someone." The absence of any teleological condition — any specification of what the act is *for* — is a significant deficiency, but it does helpfully isolate the doing/saying contrast as the irreducible core of what the word "practical" contributes to the compound expression.

Third, Moira Marsh's scholarly definition, cited in a Daily Nous discussion, is strikingly different from any dictionary entry: she defines a practical joke as "a scripted, unilateral play performance involving two opposed parties — trickster and target — with the goal of incorporating the target into play without his or her knowledge, permission, or both." This is the most philosophically sophisticated definition in the literature, and its key innovation is the framing of the practical joke as a species of *play performance* — an act belonging to the domain of play rather than earnest, in which the target is unwittingly cast as a performer. Marsh adopts "the somewhat awkward phrase 'play performance' rather than 'playful performance' in order to emphasize the nature of the genre as both participatory play and performance for an audience in equal

measure." This formulation has the virtue of explaining *why* the target must be unwitting — not merely as a contingent feature, but as a structural necessity: the joke consists precisely in the asymmetry between the joker's awareness of the play frame and the target's ignorance of it. It also elegantly incorporates the audience condition, since a performance is conceptually something enacted before or for someone.

A Synthetic Proposal

Can the philosophical analysis's D12 be improved by incorporating insights from the dictionary and scholarly definitions? I believe it can, in at least three respects.

First, D12's talk of placing the target in a "practical or experiential predicament" should be sharpened. The dictionaries' emphasis on making the target *look foolish* or *appear ridiculous* captures an important feature that the language of "predicament" underdetermines. What distinguishes the practical joke's predicament from an ordinary inconvenience is precisely that it exposes the target's epistemic vulnerability — their failure to apprehend the true nature of their situation — in a way that is socially legible as foolishness. This social-epistemic dimension should be made explicit.

Second, the Oxford and Marsh definitions' attention to the audience dimension — that the joke is played *in order to amuse others*, or that it constitutes a *performance* — should be incorporated. D12, as presented, focuses primarily on the joker-target dyad and the joker's amusement, but many practical jokes are essentially triadic: the joker contrives, the target enacts, and the audience (which may include the joker) is amused. Even in cases where there is no distinct third-party audience, the joker occupies a quasi-audience position, watching the target's unwitting performance unfold. Making the performative structure explicit would strengthen the definition.

Third, Wikipedia's observation that practical jokes differ from hoaxes and cons in that "the victim finds out, or is let in on the joke" points toward a condition the philosophical analysis could profitably adopt: that the ludic frame is *intended to be eventually disclosed* to the target. This reveal condition would further sharpen the distinction between practical jokes and frauds — even amusing frauds — since the con artist precisely does *not* intend the victim to discover the deception. A practical joke, by its nature, looks forward to a moment of unmasking: "You've

been pranked!" is the genre's characteristic coda, the moment at which the target's unknowing performance is retrospectively reframed as play.

These considerations suggest the following revised definition:

D13. *x* is a practical joke iff (i) an agent deliberately contrives a situation that places an unwitting person in a circumstance whose true nature they fail to apprehend, such that this failure is legible (to the agent or an intended audience) as making the target appear foolish or absurd; (ii) the contrivance involves or produces a practical or experiential engagement — not merely a verbal or purely propositional exchange; (iii) the agent's governing intention is ludic rather than instrumental, aiming at the amusement of an audience (which may consist solely of the agent) rather than at material gain or harm; and (iv) the agent intends or is prepared for the target to eventually be made aware that a joke has been played, such that the deception is in principle disclosed rather than permanently concealed.

D13 preserves the core strengths of the philosophical analysis — the deliberateness requirement, the person requirement, the unwitting condition, and the ludic-intention condition — while incorporating the dictionaries' insight about foolishness as the characteristic social-epistemic effect (condition i), the doing/saying contrast that the word "practical" encodes (condition ii, now explicitly but permissively stated as involving experiential engagement rather than demanding crude physicality), and the reveal structure that separates practical jokes from frauds and cons (condition iv). Condition (iii) remains substantially as in D12.

Is D13 beyond counterexample? Almost certainly not. One might wonder whether condition (iv) is too strong: can there not be a practical joke that the joker never intends to reveal — say, a secret prank played by a dying person who takes the joke to the grave, and which we would still intuitively call a practical joke? Perhaps. But the condition is stated as requiring that the agent *intend or be prepared for* disclosure, which is weaker than requiring that disclosure actually occur. The dying prankster who arranges for the reveal to happen posthumously — through a letter, say, or a will — satisfies this condition. The genuinely permanent secret, where the target will *never* know, pushes harder against our intuitions, and I suspect many competent speakers

would hesitate to classify it as a practical joke rather than a secret trick or private manipulation. In any event, D13 represents an improvement over both the dictionary definitions (which are too permissive, too circular, or too committed to a physicality requirement) and the philosophical analysis's D12 (which underspecifies the social-epistemic character of the target's predicament and om

5. The Circularity Problem

The Circularity Problem: PRACTICAL JOKE and the Concept of PREDICAMENT

Identifying the Load-Bearing Concept

Every definition in the analytic sequence converges on a core structural requirement: that the agent contrives a situation placing the unwitting target in some kind of *predicament* — variously glossed as a "practical or experiential predicament," a "situational difficulty," or an "awkward, uncomfortable, or disorienting circumstance." This is the concept that does the heaviest lifting in distinguishing practical jokes from neighboring phenomena — riddles, intellectual puzzles, witty remarks, surprise parties, acts of sabotage, and deceptions undertaken for strategic gain. The amusement condition tells us something about the agent's attitude; the unwittingness condition tells us something about the target's epistemic state; the deliberateness condition tells us something about the causal structure. But the predicament condition is what tells us what *kind of thing happens to the target*, and it is this condition that must do the crucial work of carving the practical joke off from, on one side, harmless surprises and, on the other, outright cruelty. If "predicament" is left unanalyzed, the definition of PRACTICAL JOKE is, in a non-trivial sense, incomplete: we have not said what makes a joke *practical* rather than verbal, nor what makes it a *joke* rather than an assault.

The difficulty is not merely that "predicament" is vague in degree — that we cannot say precisely how much discomfort is required. The deeper problem is that the concept seems to be doing double duty. It must be broad enough to include the mild awkwardness of discovering that one's office chair has been wrapped in cellophane, the disorientation of a prank phone call alleging a fictitious tax audit, the embarrassment of sitting on a whoopee cushion, and the bewilderment of finding that every item on one's desk has been encased in gelatin. Yet it must be

narrow enough to exclude the confusion of a student subjected to the Socratic elenchus, the discomfort of a job candidate facing a stress interview, and the inconvenience of a commuter whose train has been cancelled. The word "predicament" thus functions in the definition less as a precisely delineated condition and more as a placeholder for a complex, context-sensitive judgment about the *type* of situation the target has been placed in. To make the definition of PRACTICAL JOKE fully reductive, we need an independent analysis of this underlying concept.

An Attempted Definition of PREDICAMENT

Let me attempt a definition that is stated without reference to practical jokes, pranks, or cognate notions, aiming for necessary and sufficient conditions:

D-P. A person *S* is in a *predicament* iff (a) *S* occupies a situation that presents *S* with a practical difficulty, discomfort, confusion, or social awkwardness; (b) the difficulty is such that *S*'s normal repertoire of responses — the actions, assertions, or attitudes that would be appropriate under the circumstances as *S* understands them — is rendered inadequate or absurd by features of the situation that *S* does not grasp; and (c) the situation is one from which *S* cannot extricate herself simply by acquiring a single item of propositional knowledge (i.e., the difficulty is not purely epistemic but has an experiential, bodily, or social dimension).

Condition (a) provides the genus: something has gone wrong, or at least gone awkwardly, for the person. Condition (b) captures the element of being *stuck* or *wrong-footed* — the sense in which a predicament is not merely an inconvenience but a situation in which one's ordinary coping mechanisms are undermined by a gap between how things are and how one takes them to be. Condition (c) is designed to enforce the "practical or experiential" qualifier that recurs throughout the analysis of PRACTICAL JOKE, excluding cases of purely intellectual puzzlement. The intent is that being unable to solve a crossword clue is not a predicament in the relevant sense, whereas being unable to open one's office door because it has been barricaded with furniture is.

Difficulties with the Attempted Definition

This definition encounters serious problems from several directions.

The Stress Interview and the Legitimate Trial

Consider a medical resident subjected to a high-fidelity emergency simulation during a training exercise. The resident is placed in a situation presenting practical difficulty and social pressure; her normal repertoire of responses is rendered inadequate by features of the scenario she does not fully grasp (the simulation includes deliberately misleading vital signs); and the difficulty is not purely epistemic but experiential — she must physically perform procedures, manage stress, and coordinate with confederate nurses. All three conditions of D-P are satisfied. Yet we would not ordinarily say that the resident has been placed in a "predicament" in the sense relevant to practical jokes. The situation is designed not for amusement at the resident's expense but for her education. One might respond that the *purpose* of the contrivance is what distinguishes the two cases, but this response concedes the point: "predicament" as used in the definition of PRACTICAL JOKE already smuggles in a normative orientation — something like *gratuitous* or *non-instrumental* difficulty — that D-P fails to capture without reintroducing reference to the aims characteristic of jokes and pranks.

The Kafkaesque Bureaucratic Ordeal

Imagine a citizen who arrives at a government office to renew a driver's license and is shuttled from window to window, asked to produce documents that contradict one another, and told alternately that her file exists and does not exist. She is in a situation of practical difficulty; her normal coping responses are rendered absurd by features of the situation she does not fully understand (byzantine internal regulations, a recent software migration); and the difficulty is thoroughly experiential and social, not merely epistemic. D-P classifies her as being in a predicament, and indeed, in ordinary English we would comfortably say she is. But this is a predicament that arises from institutional dysfunction, not from anyone's deliberate contrivance. The case reveals that D-P defines "predicament" too broadly for the purposes of the PRACTICAL JOKE analysis, since the definition of PRACTICAL JOKE requires that the predicament be *deliberately contrived*. One might think this is not a problem for D-P itself — it defines predicament in general, and the PRACTICAL JOKE definition adds the contrivance requirement separately. But the deeper issue is that the *kind* of predicament relevant to practical jokes seems to have an additional structural feature that D-P does not capture: it is a predicament with a *punchline*, a resolution point at which the target could, in principle, see the humor. The bureaucratic ordeal has no such resolution; it simply grinds on. This suggests that "predicament," as the concept functions in the definition of PRACTICAL JOKE, is not the general concept of

predicament at all, but a more specific concept — something like *comic predicament* or *prank-apt predicament* — which threatens to reintroduce the very concept we are trying to analyze.

The Accidental Slapstick Case

A man walks into a glass door he did not see. He is in a momentary predicament — practically stuck, socially embarrassed, confused about what just happened — and the difficulty is experiential rather than purely epistemic. D-P appears to classify this correctly as a predicament. But now suppose someone recorded it and posted it online, where millions find it hilarious. The man was in a predicament, but was he the target of a practical joke? Obviously not; no one contrived the situation. The definition of PRACTICAL JOKE handles this through the deliberateness condition. Yet the case reveals something instructive about the concept of predicament itself: the very same type of predicament — walking into a glass door — *would* be a practical-joke predicament if someone had polished the glass to invisibility and positioned the man to walk into it. What makes a predicament *the right kind* for a practical joke is not any intrinsic feature of the experiential state but rather its *etiology* — the fact that it was engineered for comic effect. This means that "predicament" in the PRACTICAL JOKE definition cannot be fully characterized without reference to the comic-contrivance context in which it is embedded. The attempted reduction loops back.

Structural Parallels and the Depth of Circularity

These difficulties suggest that PREDICAMENT, as it functions within the definition of PRACTICAL JOKE, exhibits the same family-resemblance or prototype structure that characterizes PRACTICAL JOKE itself. There is no single feature — not discomfort, not confusion, not social awkwardness, not bodily involvement — that is both necessary and sufficient for a situation to count as the right kind of predicament. Whoopee-cushion embarrassment, prank-call panic, cellophane-wrapped-car bewilderment, and bucket-of-water-over-the-door shock are all predicaments in the relevant sense, but they share no single experiential or structural core. What unifies them is something more like their *aptness for a certain social script*: they are situations from which the target can be "released" by the revelation that it was all a joke, situations that are *resoluble into humor* once the contrivance is disclosed. But "resoluble into humor" is itself a concept that presupposes an understanding of what makes something a joke — and specifically what makes something a *practical* joke, since the resolution

of a practical joke has a distinctive character (the sheepish laugh, the cry of "You got me!") that differs from the resolution of a verbal joke or a riddle.

The circle, then, is this: PRACTICAL JOKE is defined in terms of PREDICAMENT; but PREDICAMENT, in the sense relevant to the definition, is the kind of situation that is *apt for* a practical joke; and aptness for a practical joke is itself understood by reference to paradigm cases of practical jokes. We have not vicious circularity — the definition is not trivially empty — but we have what might be called *hermeneutic circularity*: the kind of mutual dependence among concepts that Wittgenstein and later Rosch suggested is characteristic of concepts organized around prototypes rather than classical necessary-and-sufficient conditions. One grasps what a predicament (in the relevant sense) is by grasping paradigmatic practical jokes; one grasps what a practical joke is by grasping what it is to be placed in such a predicament. Neither concept is fully prior to the other.

This structural observation generalizes. Many concepts that involve *purposive human action in a social context* — GAME, RITUAL, INSULT, FLIRTATION, GIFT — exhibit the same pattern. The concept of a GIFT, for instance, might be analyzed as the transfer of a possession with certain intentions; but "the right kind of intention" (generosity, goodwill, social bonding) is itself understood by reference to paradigmatic gift-giving practices, and an attempt to define that intention independently will encounter cases (bribes, tribute, passive-aggressive "gifts") that can only be resolved by appealing to the prototype. The lesson is not that conceptual analysis is futile but that it reaches, in cases like these, a characteristic depth at which it uncovers the prototype structure of the concepts it is analyzing. The circularity is not a defect in the analysis but a discovery about the concept: PRACTICAL JOKE is a concept whose constituent notions — predicament, contrivance, amusement, unwittingness — are individually analyzable to a significant degree, but whose full integration into a unified concept resists decomposition into independent, non-circular primitives. The analysis can illuminate the structure without eliminating the circle, and recognizing this is itself a substantive philosophical result.

6. Conceptual Engineering: Successor Concepts

Conceptual Engineering for PRACTICAL JOKE

The Work the Folk Concept Does

Before we can responsibly engineer successor concepts, we must attend to the question of what the folk concept PRACTICAL JOKE actually does for us — what communicative, normative, legal, and theoretical purposes it serves across the various domains in which it appears.

In ordinary social life, the concept does primarily *normative framing* work. To call something a "practical joke" is to invoke a category that simultaneously acknowledges that a transgression has occurred — someone has been deceived, startled, inconvenienced, or humiliated — and mitigates the seriousness of that transgression by situating it within the domain of play. The label functions as a kind of social lubricant: to say "it was just a practical joke" is to request that the target and any witnesses recategorize an apparent offense as a species of humor, thereby defusing hostility and licensing forgiveness. The concept thus occupies a distinctive position in our normative vocabulary, straddling the boundary between the harmful and the playful, and it derives much of its social utility precisely from this ambiguity. This is why disputes about whether something "counts" as a practical joke are rarely idle semantic quibbles — they are substantive negotiations about blame, responsibility, and the limits of acceptable social behavior.

In legal and regulatory contexts, the concept does a related but distinct kind of work. Courts, school administrators, and workplace regulators frequently need to distinguish practical jokes from harassment, assault, fraud, and other tortious or criminal conduct. The folk concept serves here as a rough-and-ready boundary marker: if something falls under PRACTICAL JOKE, it is presumptively less culpable, less deserving of formal sanction, than if it falls under HARASSMENT or FRAUD, even when the physical acts involved are identical. Yet the folk concept does this work poorly, precisely because its boundaries are vague and contested — a fact that generates real adjudicative difficulties.

In the study of humor, anthropology, and social psychology, the concept does classificatory work, carving out a domain of investigation that includes whoopee cushions and elaborately staged hoaxes while excluding stand-up comedy, satirical writing, and witty repartee.

Researchers in these fields need a concept that reliably picks out a coherent class of phenomena amenable to unified theoretical treatment — a class defined by shared structural features rather than by family resemblance alone.

Finally, in ethical theory, the concept does diagnostic work. Practical jokes raise a distinctive cluster of moral questions — about the ethics of deception undertaken for amusement, about the permissibility of instrumentalizing another person's experiential states for one's own entertainment, about the relationship between consent and harm in ludic contexts — and the folk concept groups these questions together in a way that invites unified ethical treatment.

These four domains of use — social-normative, legal-regulatory, theoretical-classificatory, and ethical-diagnostic — suggest that no single successor concept will serve all purposes equally well. The folk concept's vagueness is, in a sense, adaptive: it allows speakers to shift fluidly between these different functions. But this adaptive vagueness is also the source of the concept's resistance to classical analysis. The project of conceptual engineering thus requires us to sacrifice some of this flexibility in exchange for precision, designing different tools for different jobs.

Four Successor Concepts

Ludic Ambush

D-LA. *x* is a *ludic ambush* iff (i) an agent deliberately contrives a situation that places an unwitting person in an experiential predicament, (ii) the agent acts with the intention that the predicament will, upon resolution, be perceived as amusing by the agent and/or onlookers, (iii) the target does not consent in advance to being placed in the predicament, and (iv) the agent designs the predicament to be temporary and to resolve without lasting material harm to the target.

This concept is engineered for the legal-regulatory domain. What courts and administrators need, above all, is a concept that draws a defensible line between conduct that warrants formal sanction and conduct that, while transgressive, falls within the bounds of tolerable social friction. LUDIC AMBUSH serves this purpose by building two normatively crucial conditions directly into the definition: the absence of advance consent and the design-constraint of temporary, non-materially-harmful resolution. Condition (iii) ensures that "consensual pranks" — the staged stunts of television shows where participants have signed releases, or the mutual pranking of friends who have an explicit understanding — fall outside the category, which is desirable because such cases do not raise the regulatory concerns that motivate legal intervention. Condition (iv) ensures that actions designed to cause lasting harm are excluded regardless of the

perpetrator's claimed ludic intent, which closes the loophole exploited by those who invoke "it was just a practical joke" as a defense for genuinely injurious conduct.

The costs of LUDIC AMBUSH are considerable. It misclassifies several cases that ordinary speakers would unhesitatingly call practical jokes. The long-running, increasingly elaborate practical joke — where the setup takes months and involves genuine financial expenditure by the target, as in the case of a friend who fabricates an entire fictitious inheritance — may well involve *material* harm (the target's wasted time, emotional distress during the period of deception), even if the perpetrator sincerely intends eventual harmless resolution. LUDIC AMBUSH classifies this as outside its extension if the predicament is not genuinely temporary in experience, which conflicts with ordinary intuitions. More strikingly, it excludes the "consensual prank war," which many ordinary speakers regard as a paradigmatic context for practical jokes. And it produces the counterintuitive result that a perfectly standard practical joke — say, a bucket of water over a door — counts as a ludic ambush only if the perpetrator designed it to be harmless, so that if the bucket were heavier than the perpetrator realized and caused a concussion, the action would *retroactively* fail to qualify, since condition (iv) concerns design rather than outcome. This is a feature in the regulatory context, where we want to assess the reasonableness of the agent's intentions, but it offends against the ordinary intuition that what makes something a practical joke is partly a matter of its structure and execution, not solely of its designer's foresight.

What LUDIC AMBUSH reveals about the original folk concept is the degree to which PRACTICAL JOKE tacitly encodes a normative presumption of bounded harm. When we call something a practical joke, we are implicitly asserting that it was *designed* to be a temporary perturbation of the target's experiential state — that the perpetrator anticipated resolution and harmlessness. This is why actions that cause serious injury or lasting psychological damage are so readily reclassified: "That wasn't a practical joke; that was assault." The harm-boundedness condition is not merely an external normative constraint on practical jokes; it is, LUDIC AMBUSH suggests, partially constitutive of the concept itself, buried within it as an implicit design specification.

Epistemic Trap

D-ET. x is an *epistemic trap* iff (i) an agent deliberately constructs a false evidential environment — a set of cues, appearances, or testimony that jointly support a false proposition p — and (ii) a target forms the belief that p on the basis of that environment, and (iii) the agent intends to subsequently reveal the falsity of p to the target, and (iv) the revelation is intended by the agent to produce in the target the recognition that the target's own epistemic faculties or situational trust were exploited.

This concept is engineered for epistemology and the theory of deception. Epistemologists have long been interested in cases where an agent's belief-forming processes are manipulated — fake barn counties, deceiving demons, and the like — but these discussions rarely attend to the *social* structure of such manipulation, the fact that real-world epistemic environments are often deliberately corrupted by other agents for strategic or ludic purposes. EPISTEMIC TRAP isolates precisely this structure. It is more useful than PRACTICAL JOKE for epistemological purposes because it abstracts away from the humor condition entirely — what matters is the structure of the deception and revelation, not whether anyone finds it amusing — and because it foregrounds the specifically epistemic dimension: the target is meant to recognize, upon revelation, that their own cognitive processes were exploited.

The costs are substantial and interesting. EPISTEMIC TRAP is both over- and under-inclusive relative to PRACTICAL JOKE. It is over-inclusive because it captures cases that are not practical jokes at all: a teacher who constructs a misleading thought experiment to induce a philosophical epiphany ("Do you see now why your intuitions about personal identity were unreliable?") satisfies all four conditions but is engaged in pedagogy, not practical joking. Confidence tricks designed to demonstrate the mark's gullibility as a form of punishment or social control also qualify. It is under-inclusive because many paradigmatic practical jokes do not involve the construction of a false evidential environment in any interesting sense: the whoopee cushion does not induce a false belief so much as produce an unexpected and embarrassing sensory event. The target of a whoopee cushion does not form a false belief that they have flatulated; they are startled and embarrassed by a sound, and the "joke" consists in the social predicament, not in any epistemic manipulation. EPISTEMIC TRAP thus excludes the entire class of startle-and-embarrassment practical jokes, which are among the most prototypical.

What EPISTEMIC TRAP reveals about PRACTICAL JOKE is that the folk concept conflates two quite different mechanisms of humor production. Some practical jokes work by *epistemic manipulation* — by inducing a false belief whose subsequent unmasking is the source of amusement (the fake lottery ticket, the fabricated letter). Others work by *experiential disruption* — by producing an unexpected bodily or sensory event whose social meaning is the source of amusement (the whoopee cushion, the joy buzzer, the collapsing chair). These two mechanisms are structurally very different: the first exploits the target's rationality, while the second exploits the target's embodiment. The folk concept PRACTICAL JOKE papers over this distinction, treating both as instances of the same phenomenon, and this is one of the deep reasons the concept resists unified analysis. Any set of conditions capacious enough to capture epistemic-manipulation cases will tend to exclude experiential-disruption cases, and vice versa.

Status Inversion

D-SI. *x* is a *status inversion* iff (i) an agent contrives a situation that causes an unwitting person to behave in a manner incongruent with the social role, dignity, or competence that the person publicly claims or is ordinarily accorded, (ii) this incongruence is witnessed or made known to others, and (iii) the contrivance is undertaken with the intention that the resulting incongruence will be recognized as having been deliberately engineered, so that the target's loss of face is understood as having been imposed from without rather than arising from genuine deficiency.

This concept is engineered for the sociological and anthropological study of humor and social power. Anthropologists from Radcliffe-Brown onward have recognized that "joking relationships" — institutionalized patterns of permitted mockery and teasing — serve as mechanisms for managing social hierarchy, and that practical jokes in particular function as instruments of status negotiation. STATUS INVERSION captures this dimension with precision. What matters, on this analysis, is not the deception per se, nor the amusement, but the *public disruption of the target's presented self*. The practical joke, construed as status inversion, is fundamentally an exercise in social power: the joker demonstrates the capacity to control the target's public appearance, to make the target look foolish, clumsy, gullible, or incompetent before an audience. Condition (iii) is crucial: the contrivance must eventually be recognized as such, because the point is not to genuinely diminish the target's status (that would be sabotage) but to *temporarily and visibly* demonstrate the joker's power to diminish it. The revelation that

the incongruence was engineered is itself part of the status-negotiation: it says, in effect, "I can make you look foolish whenever I choose."

The costs of STATUS INVERSION are revealing. It excludes practical jokes played in private, where no one witnesses the target's predicament — the case of the roommate who rearranges all the furniture while the other is sleeping, so that the target stumbles around in the dark, is a practical joke even if no one else ever knows about it. It also excludes practical jokes where the target is not socially diminished — the pleasant surprise that is structured as a practical joke (the fake eviction notice that turns out to be the prelude to an announcement that the target's rent has been paid for a year) does not involve incongruence with the target's social role or dignity. And it produces the counterintuitive result that the very same physical setup — say, a chair rigged to collapse — counts as a status inversion only if the collapse is witnessed, making the social context rather than the act itself determinative of category membership. This offends against the intuition that a practical joke is a practical joke regardless of whether anyone happens to be watching.

What STATUS INVERSION reveals about the folk concept is that PRACTICAL JOKE carries a largely unacknowledged social-hierarchical dimension. The folk taxonomy of practical jokes tracks, more closely than we tend to notice, the sociology of power: we are more inclined to call something a "practical joke" (rather than "bullying" or "hazing") when the perpetrator and target are of roughly equal social standing, or when the perpetrator is of lower status than the target. When a powerful person systematically humiliates a subordinate through contrived predicaments, we resist the label "practical joke" even if the structural features are identical. STATUS INVERSION makes this implicit sensitivity to power relations explicit and central.

Revelatory Setup

D-RS. *x* is a *revelatory setup* iff (i) an agent deliberately constructs a sequence of events comprising a *setup phase* in which the target is led into a predicament, and a *reveal phase* in which the contrived nature of the predicament is disclosed to the target, (ii) the agent intends the transition from setup to reveal to produce a gestalt shift in the target's understanding of the situation — from taking the predicament as genuine to recognizing it as manufactured, and (iii) the agent intends this gestalt shift to be experienced by the target, the agent, or onlookers as a source of amusement or satisfaction.

This concept is engineered for humor theory and the philosophy of mind. Humor theorists working in the incongruity-resolution tradition (Suls, Forabosco, and others) have argued that humor arises from the detection and resolution of incongruity — the perception of a mismatch between expectation and reality, followed by a reinterpretation that makes sense of the mismatch. REVELATORY SETUP captures the specific temporal and phenomenological structure through which practical jokes instantiate this pattern. What is distinctive about the practical joke, on this analysis, is not the deception, not the social dynamics, and not even the experiential predicament, but the *two-phase temporal architecture* and the *gestalt shift* that bridges the phases. The whoopee cushion, the fake letter, the collapsing chair, and the elaborate long-con hoax all share this structure: there is a phase in which the target inhabits a false experiential reality, and a phase in which the falsity is revealed, and the humor (if any arises) is generated by the cognitive and affective transition between the two.

The costs of REVELATORY SETUP are notable. It excludes practical jokes that are never revealed — cases where the perpetrator sets up a predicament but the target never learns it was contrived. If someone secretly replaces all the sugar in a colleague's kitchen with salt, and the colleague spends weeks baffled by the taste of their coffee without ever discovering the substitution, ordinary speakers might well call this a practical joke (albeit a mean or incomplete one), but it fails condition (i)'s requirement of a reveal phase. One might respond that the agent *intends* eventual revelation even if it never arrives, and conditions (i) through (iii) could be read as specifying intended structure rather than realized structure. But this creates a different problem: if the agent never intends to reveal the contrivance — if the entire point is the secret pleasure of watching the target's bafflement — then on REVELATORY SETUP's terms this is not a practical joke at all, which is at best a contestable verdict. The concept also produces counterintuitive results in cases of *failed* practical jokes: a setup that is detected by the target before the intended reveal phase ("Nice try — I can see the bucket above the door") arguably still counts as a practical joke, albeit a failed one, but it does not produce the gestalt shift specified in condition (ii), and so it falls outside the extension of REVELATORY SETUP.

What REVELATORY SETUP reveals about the original concept is perhaps the most structurally illuminating insight of the four successor concepts. It makes explicit that PRACTICAL JOKE is, at its core, a *dramaturgical* concept — it picks out a class of actions that have the temporal

structure of a narrative, with a setup, a crisis, and a dénouement. The practical joke is a tiny play, authored and directed by the joker, in which the target is an unwitting actor. The humor of the practical joke is inseparable from this narrative structure: it is the humor of the reveal, of the moment when the target's experienced reality is reframed as a fiction. This is why practical jokes that are never revealed feel *incomplete* — not because revelation is an external normative requirement, but because without revelation the narrative arc is truncated, and the experiential structure that generates the distinctive humor of the practical joke is never realized. It is also why merely startling someone (jumping out from behind a door and shouting "Boo!") sits uneasily at the border of the concept: the startle produces a kind of experiential disruption, but there is no rich setup-phase, no sustained false reality, and so the gestalt shift is thin. The degree to which we are inclined to call a startle a "practical joke" tracks, I suggest, the degree to which we perceive a narratively structured setup behind it.

Assessment: The Most Philosophically Illuminating Successor

Of these four successor concepts, REVELATORY SETUP is, I believe, the most philosophically illuminating — not because it is the most useful for any single practical purpose (LUDIC AMBUSH is more useful for regulation, STATUS INVERSION for sociology), but because it isolates a feature that does more unacknowledged structural work in our folk categorizations than any of the others.

Consider how ordinary speakers adjudicate borderline cases. Is it a practical joke to secretly move someone's car to a different parking spot? Most speakers say yes — and note that the case has a clear two-phase structure: the target searches in confusion (setup phase); eventually someone reveals what happened (reveal phase); laughter ensues. Is it a practical joke to poison someone's food as a "prank"? Emphatically no — and among the many reasons, one is that no reveal could convert the target's suffering into a gestalt shift productive of amusement; the narrative arc cannot resolve in the right way. Is it a practical joke to trick someone into believing they have won the lottery? Speakers hesitate — and I submit that their hesitation tracks uncertainty about the reveal phase. If the fake ticket is revealed within minutes, producing a gestalt shift from elation to sheepish recognition, most speakers say yes. If the deception is maintained for days, causing the target to quit their job and make financial commitments, the case slides toward fraud, and the reason is that the setup phase has become so consequentially

entangled with the target's real life that no reveal can produce the clean gestalt shift that the concept requires. The narrative has become too real to be reframed as fiction.

This suggests that what unifies the folk extension of PRACTICAL JOKE more than any other single feature — more than deception, more than humor, more than the target's unwittingness — is the implicit requirement of a *narratively coherent two-phase structure* terminating in a gestalt shift. We categorize actions as practical jokes to the extent that we can perceive in them the architecture of setup and reveal; we refuse the categorization to the extent that this architecture is absent, truncated, or overwhelmed by real-world consequences that resist reframing. The folk concept is, in this light, a covert narratological category masquerading as a descriptive one — and it is REVELATORY SETUP, among the four successor concepts, that brings this hidden architecture most fully into view.

This finding also explains, at a deeper level, why the folk concept resists classical analysis. Narrative coherence is not a property that admits of sharp necessary and sufficient conditions. Whether a given sequence of events constitutes a well-formed story with a setup and a satisfying reveal is a matter of degree, sensitive to context, audience expectations, and interpretive framing. The concept PRACTICAL JOKE inherits this gradability from its covert narrative structure, and no amount of condition-adding can convert a fundamentally gradient narratological judgment into a crisp set of classical conditions. The resistance to classical analysis is not, in the end, a deficiency of the analyst's ingenuity; it is a consequence of the concept's deep structure.

7. Conclusion

Conclusion

The twelve rounds of analysis pursued in this paper have revealed that PRACTICAL JOKE, despite its apparent ordinariness, possesses a layered internal structure that resists complete reduction to necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. The iterative process identified several conditions that are genuinely necessary — deliberate contrivance, an unwitting target, a predicament that is experiential rather than merely intellectual, an intention oriented toward amusement — and each of these emerged not from armchair stipulation but from the pressure of specific counterexamples that forced real distinctions. The *War of the Worlds* broadcast showed

that not all amusing deceptions are practical jokes; the accidental plumber showed that contrivance matters; the cruel trap showed that the concept carries normative freight that a purely structural definition cannot capture. Yet the analysis also uncovered a persistent difficulty: the concept PREDICAMENT, which does the heaviest definitional work, functions as what I have called an evaluative placeholder, absorbing contextual and normative judgments that cannot be specified in non-circular terms without either collapsing the definition into triviality or inflating it beyond recognition. The comparison with dictionary definitions confirmed that this is not merely an artifact of philosophical over-refinement; lexicographers face the same difficulty, variously gesturing toward "tricks," "embarrassment," "physical discomfort," and "looking foolish" without achieving a unified criterion. And the conceptual engineering exercise showed that the folk concept's ambiguity is not a defect to be repaired but a functional feature: PRACTICAL JOKE does its characteristic social work — the simultaneous acknowledgment and mitigation of transgression — precisely because it straddles the boundary between the harmful and the playful without fully resolving the tension.

What does this teach us about conceptual analysis more generally? The lesson is not the familiar deflationary one that concepts resist definition and we should abandon the enterprise. It is rather that the method of iterative counterexample is a powerful instrument of *discovery* even when it fails as a method of *definition*. Each round of revision identified a genuine structural feature of the concept — a joint at which it carves — and the cumulative effect of twelve rounds is a detailed map of the concept's internal architecture: its necessary conditions, its central and peripheral instances, its points of contact with neighboring concepts like PRANK, HOAX, TRICK, and TRAP, and the normative pressures that shape its boundaries. This is substantial philosophical knowledge, and it is knowledge that neither prototype theory nor family-resemblance skepticism can deliver on their own, because those frameworks tell us *that* a concept lacks sharp boundaries without telling us *where* the boundaries blur and *why*. The pattern of failure in a sustained analysis is diagnostic: it shows us exactly which features of a concept resist formalization, and this in turn reveals something important about the concept's function. In the case of PRACTICAL JOKE, the irreducible evaluative component in the predicament condition reflects the fact that the concept exists to perform a normative task — the social negotiation of when deception and discomfort cross the line from play into harm — and a

concept designed for normative negotiation will inevitably resist the fixity that a classical analysis demands.

The deeper moral, then, is that the relationship between conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering is not one of failure followed by rescue, but of complementary inquiry. Analysis reveals the structure of our existing concepts, including the points at which that structure is essentially contestable; engineering takes up where analysis leaves off, asking whether concepts with different structures might serve particular purposes better. Neither enterprise is complete without the other. A philosopher who only analyzes will be left with an accurate but frustrating map of a concept's indeterminacies; a philosopher who only engineers will lack the detailed understanding of existing conceptual structure needed to know what is being replaced and why. The practical joke, of all things, turns out to illustrate this complementarity with unexpected clarity. It is a concept whose folk deployment is sophisticated, whose internal structure is rich, whose resistance to definition is principled rather than accidental, and whose examination rewards the philosopher who is willing to take ordinary concepts seriously — not because they yield to the method of analysis, but because the specific ways in which they resist it are among the most revealing things we can learn.