

The Philosophy of Humor

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Philosophy is an unusual field of study, in that it does not concern any particular subject matter (as do, for example, fields like biology or Russian literature), but rather consists in a kind of activity. Philosophy is the activity of reflective critical thought, applied to fundamental concepts and systems of thought and behavior. Individual philosophers pursue this activity while drawing on distinctive views of human beings and the natural world, as well as certain beliefs about the nature of human beings, their ideas and values, their social existence, and the world. The primary goal of this activity is simply to gain a better understanding of us and the world around us. A life lived in engagement with this kind of activity is something the ancient Greek philosopher Plato called the "examined life." The idea that living such a life is valuable in itself is shared by all those with an interest in philosophy. It is natural, therefore, that so many great philosophers have taken an interest in a phenomenon so pervasive and distinctively human as humor.

It is often said that nothing ruins a joke so much as the attempt to explain it. Despite this danger, a number of well-known figures from the history of philosophy have proposed theories of humor. That is to say, they have offered explanations of the nature of humor and the causes of the particular sort of amusement associated with humor. (One can be "amused" in non-humorous ways, as when "amused" is used to refer to the opposite of "bored." Throughout this chapter, "amusement" will refer specifically to the amusement we experience in response to a situation or event we find humorous or comic.) Humor is a general term that (in its usual sense) refers either to something intended to cause amusement or to whatever quality makes something amusing. The (intended) presence of humorous content explains what makes a literary or theatrical presentation a comedy; humor is the quality that is the common element in farces, satires, absurdities, jokes, witticisms, and anything else that may be found to be amusing. Humor and laughter is universal to human cultures. But what is humor? What is it that humorous or comic

events have in common that makes them humorous or comic? Major philosophers have offered a surprising diversity of theories of humor. In his *Argument of Laughter*, D.H. Monro sorted these individual theories into three categories, corresponding to three basic views about humor. Following some contemporary philosophers, we shall call these the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory, and the Relief Theory. In the upcoming section of this chapter we shall discuss the views of key historical figures about humor, starting with those theories that fall under the Superiority Theory, then moving on to the Incongruity Theory, and finishing with the Relief Theory. In the last section we shall examine some recent and contemporary attempts to explain the nature of humor.

Historical Theories of Humor

The Superiority Theory is the theory that the humor we find in comedy and in life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior. A number of major philosophers have expressed a view like this one. In Plato's dialogue *Philebus*, Socrates (Plato's teacher, who frequently appears as a character in Plato's works) takes a negative view of comedy and amusement along these lines. (Excerpts of Plato's work on humor, as well as excerpts of work by many of the figures mentioned in this chapter are collected and discussed in John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*.) He explains that the object of laughter in comedy is the "ridiculous." The ridiculous, more specifically, is the self-ignorance of others when they falsely believe that they possess wisdom. In other words, laughter results from a feeling of pleasure at seeing others suffer the misfortune of being deluded about their own wisdom. Socrates argues, however, that the soul experiences both "pleasure and pain" when amused by the ridiculous portrayed in comedy: one can feel pleasure and laugh when presented by such fools in comedy, but to feel pleasure at others' misfortunes is to feel malice, which he considers a "pain of the soul." The laughter and pleasure, then, that we experience when enjoying comedy is mixed with malice and pain.

There is another important negative thesis about comedy expressed by Plato in his most famous dialogue, the *Republic*. In this dialogue Plato (through Socrates again) describes the education of an ideal caretaker class—the "guardians"—for the ideal society. The most important criterion for being a guardian is that one be ruled by reason, and so be in control of

one's base desires and emotions. When those who hold power in society are ruled by base desire and emotion, they will make bad decisions and be tempted to abuse power. Socrates describes amusement leading to laughter as an emotion that leads to other violent emotions and loss of control over oneself. Therefore he maintains that guardians should not be 'lovers of laughter.' In the ideal society, then, any story or theatrical portrayal of persons or gods as "overcome by laughter" should be suppressed. This will prevent the young from thinking that losing control of one's emotions is a good thing.

Plato's student Aristotle maintains a similar line about amusement and laughter. In his dissertation on drama, the *Poetics*, he describes comedy as "an imitation of people who are worse than the average." The ridiculous portrayed in comedy, he continues, is a kind of ugliness at which we laugh derisively. Like Plato, Aristotle thinks of the amusement of comedy as essentially derisive: when enjoying comedy, we laugh at ugliness (if that ugliness is not painful or destructive to us in the given context). But his assessment of such amusement appears to be similar to Plato's: amusement is the malicious or derisive enjoyment of others' shortcomings, and indicates a baseness of the soul.

Aristotle also agrees with Plato about the possible drawbacks of excessive indulgence in humor. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he explains that the best life is lived when one is ruled by reason. He does consider "relaxation and amusement as a necessary element in life," but carrying humor to excess is vulgar and improper. "A joke is a kind of abuse," and only jokes that abuse what is itself improper (i.e., satirical humor directed at irrationality) gain Aristotle's acceptance. Humor not in service to reason is of negative value: he who enjoys humor excessively is a "slave" to it. Persons rather ought to be in control of themselves and guide their behavior by reason.

Plato and Aristotle, while disagreeing on some issues, agree that virtue and the best kind of life come from being ruled by reason rather than by emotion and desire. They also agree that to indulge excessively in the enjoyment of humor is to be carried away by emotion at the mistakes of others. This emotion may seem pleasant, but really involves a kind of slavishness to certain baser parts of oneself. As a result we lose the ability to exercise rational control over our behavior. Twentieth century philosopher of humor John Morreall calls this the "Irrationality Objection" to humor ("The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," *Philosophy East and West*). But he responds that amusement does not usually lead to a loss of control, as violent

emotions like anger or fear can. There may be some temporary physical loss of control associated with great amusement, but such amusement does not incline one to act in particular ways, other than to laugh and relax.

The philosopher often regarded as making the strongest statement of the Superiority Theory is the seventeenth century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. He observes that those who laugh often are the same as those who are “greedy of applause from every thing they do well” (*Human Nature*). He sees laughter as arising from joy, primarily from the feeling of one’s own achievement or the realization of one’s own ability. The realization of one’s own superiority can be sparked by the presentation of the failings of others; when others are seen to be grossly incapable, one’s own self-image is enhanced by comparison. For this reason we become joyous and are moved to laugh at the infirmities and absurdities of others.

This picture of humor seems justified when we consider that many examples of comic characters are objects of ridicule. Consider Aristophanes’ “Socrates” in *The Clouds*, Shakespeare’s Falstaff, or the Three Stooges. Our amusement in response to these characters seems to derive from their high degrees of incompetence, villainy, and/or emotional immaturity.

Hobbes concludes that “the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves.” Like Plato and Aristotle, then, Hobbes thinks that amusement is found primarily in that which is inferior to us; he adds that the joy we find in such evidence of others’ weaknesses derives from the assurance we thereby receive regarding our own relative superiority. Like Plato and Aristotle, his view of humor is negative: he characterizes the experience of amusement as base and, further, unlikely to be conducive to social unity.

Hobbes’ view of the primary cause of amused laughter receives support from C.R. Gruner’s speculation about the physiological origin of the phenomenon of laughter (*Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor*). As Jon Roেকেlein explains in *The Psychology of Humor*, Gruner imagines that our early ancestors, after defeating an opponent in violent combat, would bare their teeth and pump their shoulders (as a dominance display), and chop up their breath into grunts (thereby facilitating a return to homeostasis after exertion). If this sort of behavior is the ancestral origin of laughter, it would not be surprising to find that the essential object of humor is the inferiority of others, and the source of joy a sense of one’s own

supremacy. There is, after all, a great deal more laughter in the locker room of the victorious team than in that of the losers.

A number of theorists, however, have noted a serious weakness of the Superiority Theory: there seem to be many experiences that might make us feel superior but are not amusing. Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher and minister Francis Hutcheson observed that witnessing someone in pain puts us in “greater danger of weeping than laughing” (*Reflections upon Laughter*). Human suffering and degradation, mishaps and accidents are often anything but amusing. Furthermore, it is debatable that Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes are right that humor in comedy is always, or even primarily, directed at the negative traits of others. There are many instances of humor that have nothing to do with the follies of others. The presence of some perceived inferiority, then, seems neither necessary nor sufficient for humor. So it has seemed to many that superiority theorists have missed the main issue in amused laughter, and are focusing instead on an incidental characteristic of some humorous situations.

Partly in response to the Superiority Theory, some philosophers have proposed a radically different account of the comic. According to this theory, humor is found primarily in an intellectual recognition of an absurd incongruity between conflicting ideas or experiences. The Incongruity Theory has been embraced in different forms by Hutcheson, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and Luigi Pirandello.

In support of his critique of Hobbes, Hutcheson offers a number of examples of situations that, while humorous, give rise to no feelings of superiority in ourselves. We might find amusing, for example, the following fanciful explanation of a pistol’s failure to fire:

But Pallas came in shape of rust,
And ‘twixt the spring and hammer thrust
Her Gorgon shield, and made the cock
Stand stiff, as ‘twere transformed to stock.

He notes that simply stating that the pistol was too rusty to fire would not have been particularly amusing, even though this plain statement would give as much a feeling of superiority over the foiled assassin as the colorful description above. So some other quality of this description must be responsible for its humorousness. Hutcheson adds that we can also be made merry by observing “some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts,” yet he can find no account whereupon this sort of merriment derives from some conclusion regarding superiority or inferiority.

He goes on to say that most situations in which others suffer mishap or inability to cope are not considered humorous. “The enormous crime or grievous calamity of another” does not usually give rise to mirth. He concludes that it is not the inferiority of others, or our perceived superiority, that we find comic. According to Hutcheson, amusement derives from the intellectual recognition of an incongruity: “the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea.” An incongruity is some sort of unusual or unexpected juxtaposition of events, objects, or ideas. The “greatest part” of humor is founded on the contrast of ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, and the like with the experience of meanness and baseness. What amuses is the incongruity, rather than any incidental degradation of the object of amusement. This is evident when we consider examples in which there is humor based on wordplay or creative imagery, with no evidence of human inferiority. Even when we are amused by human folly or mishap, the true object of humor is not the inferiority of the victim. We may laugh at seeing a person of great gravity and dignity take a fall, but our enjoyment (insofar as we find the situation humorous) derives not from a resulting sense of our own superiority, but from the contrast between the victim’s demeanor and his or her situation. The humor that is occasionally found in human error derives not from our sense of others’ inferiority, but rather from our high opinion of humans as possessing wisdom that separates them from the animals: this opinion provides the contrast when mistakes are made. The laughter of ridicule is just one sub-species of laughter (and a low one at that).

Empirical evidence gives a lot of support to the view that humor and comedy derive from incongruity. Contemporary British scientist and humor theorist Richard Wiseman has been studying the psychology of jokes (Tad Friend, “What’s So Funny?”, in *The New Yorker*). His work has included collecting and studying tens of thousands of jokes, and has even extended to competitions for the best joke ever created. He describes the four joke themes or archetypes that keep recurring: “There seem to be only about four jokes that come up all the time: someone trying to look clever and taking a pratfall; husbands and wives not being loving; doctors being insensitive about imminent death; and God making a mistake.” What is striking about this list is that each joke archetype is based on an incongruity between expectation and reality.

But what is enjoyable about such contrasts? Hutcheson suggests that incongruity provides enjoyment because it distracts from negative emotions, but beyond that he says little about the

reason why there is humor in incongruity. The great eighteenth century Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Judgment*) agrees with Hutcheson that humor derives from an intellectual recognition of incongruity, but adds a curious physiological theory as to why we have a pleasant reaction to that intellectual recognition. According to Kant, we laugh at absurdities not because the intellect itself finds pleasure in that which frustrates it, but because the intellect's attempt to reconcile an absurd conjunction of ideas causes a physical response that we find pleasant. Kant focuses on jests as paradigm cases of humor, and explains the response to the punchline:

It is remarkable that in all such cases the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation...to this sudden transposition of the mind, now to one now to another standpoint in order to contemplate its object, may correspond an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines which communicates itself to the diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel). In connection with this the lungs expel the air at rapidly succeeding intervals, and thus bring about a movement beneficial to health; which alone, and not what precedes it in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing.

A disturbance in our gut mirrors our intellectual confusion when we are confronted with irresolvable absurdity; this, of course, is laughter. We gain a pleasant feeling not from the intellectual confusion itself but from the physical motion it causes (as we might from vigorous exercise, or a massage). This feeling is amusement.

A recent offering from a neuroscientist suggests an evolutionary explanation for laughter that would support the Incongruity Theory. V.S. Ramachandran (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*) has theorized that laughter developed to indicate spurious threats. One part of the brain detects some anomaly, while another processes it and (when no threat is present) communicates back a "no threat" signal associated with laughter: "The main purpose of laughter may be to allow the individual to alert others in the social group (usually kin) that the detected anomaly is trivial, nothing to worry about."

The nineteenth century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Idea*) also embraces the idea that humor lies in incongruity and frustrated intellectual expectation; however, he has a quite different explanation for the pleasure derived from absurdities. It is his view that we have two ways of grasping things: through abstract concepts and through sense-perception. He finds that amusement derives from a perceived conflict

between thought and perception. In particular, laughter is the expression of the realization of an incongruity between one's intellectual expectation and what is perceived by the senses to be the case. He cites as an example the following epitaph of a doctor: "Here lies he like a hero, and those he has slain lie around him." The humor in this case arises from an incongruity between one's conception of a doctor as a preserver of life and the evidence that this doctor was responsible for the reverse. There is another incongruity between the concept of a hero as we understand it, and the reality of this case: in this case, someone fits the description of an epic hero like Achilles, Beowulf, or Roland (someone who finally succumbs, having slain many), but the attempt to apply the concept of a hero to this person is frustrated by other perceived facts of the situation (the person in question was a doctor, and his patients the victims).

Schopenhauer's theory as to why incongruity is often found pleasant diverges from Kant's in an important respect. According to Kant, there is no pleasure to be found in the contradiction of intellectual expectation itself: only intellectual frustration could result, and frustration is not a pleasant state in itself. Schopenhauer argues that, on some subconscious level, we are resentful of our higher intellectual faculties, so we are pleased when they are frustrated: laughter is the expression of a kind of pleasure that derives from seeing thought frustrated by perception when expectation is contradicted by reality. Why would this be pleasurable? Sense-perception is the medium of the present moment and of "direct satisfaction." Thought is the medium of concern for the past and future, and so is the vehicle for conscience, caution, and fear. Thought often opposes the senses by denying them the gratification of our immediate desires. For this reason, we are secretly delighted to see our intellect get its comeuppance when the intellect's expectations are frustrated by reality. In this way Schopenhauer ingeniously finds a cause of pleasure in the experience of absurdity itself, rather than in the physiological reaction to that experience.

The Incongruity Theory, in any of the above forms, has been subject to certain objections. Twentieth century philosopher George Santayana (*The Sense of Beauty*) notes that we laugh in situations that don't involve incongruity: we laugh in victory, in sympathy with others, or just at being tickled. He concludes that absurdity or conceptual contradiction is not a necessary element in amusement. Is incongruity a sufficient condition of amusement? Nineteenth century Scottish psychologist and philosopher Alexander Bain (*The Emotions and the Will*) produces an impressive list of incongruities that are not amusing:

A decrepit man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfit and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything in the nature of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of the vanities given by Solomon, are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth.

Nineteenth century philosopher, social reformer, and biological theorist Herbert Spencer (*The Physiology of Humor*) cites Bain as an influence in spurring his own theory of humor, the Relief Theory. This theory—the last of the three major historical theories of humor—was thus developed in response to the Incongruity Theory. The Relief Theory is the view that humorous laughter is a manifestation of the release of nervous excitement or emotional tension. In making his case, Spencer focuses on an account of the physiological basis for the phenomenon of laughter. He notes a wide variety of ways in which the body stores excess nervous energy, and releases it through physical activity. When we feel intense pain, an affected limb may move involuntarily, as the face contorts and we may vocalize our anguish. Joy and fear also are manifested physically. He argues that, in a similar way, laughter is a physical manifestation of the release of nervous energy.

He agrees that laughter often occurs in contexts involving some humiliation of others, or upon experiencing some absurd incongruity. But, he claims, what characterizes all situations resulting in laughter is the release of some nervousness or emotion. He discusses the reaction of a theater audience watching an absorbing dramatic play. A climax is reached, in which the sympathetic hero and heroine have achieved a reconciliation after a painful misunderstanding; at this moment a tame kid goat wanders onto the stage, walks up to the lovers, and sniffs them as they embrace. The audience roars with laughter. While the actors are, in a way, put out by the incident, and there is a certain incongruity in having the goat on stage, Spencer argues that the audience's response is inexplicable on the hypothesis that amusement arises from witnessing the humiliation of others, or from an escape from intellectual order. Rather, what has happened here has to do with the nervous energy that has been built up by the drama. The energy has been channeled into a buildup of emotion, but now the arrival of the goat has checked the movement of energy by suddenly taking the audience out of its immersion in the drama. The audience's emotional energy has nowhere to go, so it is released in muscular movements. The release of

tension tends to be pleasurable, so this muscular release is pleasant. Humiliation or incongruity may be occasions for laughter, but the release of nervous energy is the cause both of laughter and of the pleasant feeling accompanying it which we call amusement.

Bain had claimed that laughter is release from the serious: life in general is fraught with tension, fear, and negative emotion. Contact with triviality or vulgarity gives moments of relief from the chronic strain, thereby causing pleasure. The outpouring of built-up tension, Spencer adds, is the explanation for the physical phenomenon of laughter that accompanies such relief.

Sigmund Freud, the famous father of psychoanalysis, argues for a thesis about humor similar to that of Spencer (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, and “Humor”). Freud distinguishes “humor” (joking) from the “comic” (the absurd situation): when we laugh at the comic we are releasing pent-up energy that was summoned in order to do some cognitive processing of the situation. When we recognize the absurdity, we realize the energy summoned for the sake of understanding the situation is unnecessary, and so we release it in laughter. As in Spencer, the saving of energy is the direct cause of the pleasant feeling associated with the comic. For Freud, the pleasure associated with the comic comes from the saving of energy required for thought. The pleasure associated with humor, on the other hand, arises from a saving of psychic energy that otherwise would have been spent either in emotion or the repressing of emotion. He describes the origin of the pleasure caused when one man hears another tell a joke:

He sees the other person in a situation which leads him to anticipate that the victim will show signs of some affect: he will get angry, complain, manifest pain, fear, horror, possibly even despair. The person who is watching or listening is prepared to follow his lead, and to call up the same emotions. But his anticipations are deceived; the other man does not display any affect—he makes a joke. It is from the saving of expenditure in feeling that the hearer derives the humorous satisfaction.

The most interesting question for Freud, however, is the question of why we come up with humor in the first place—why, in other words, there exists the “humorous attitude.” Just as Bain had claimed, the answer is that we make jokes to avoid or redirect negative feelings deriving from the harsh reality of life. Humor is attractive to us because it represents

the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.

His extreme example of the generation of humor in order to deflect suffering is the comment on the part of the prisoner being led to the gallows on a Monday, who observes: “Well, this is a good beginning to the week.” According to Freud’s theory of the unconscious, the impulse to create humor derives from “the pleasure principle,” the primitive psychic mechanism that directs us to avoid or repress negative feelings and pursue pleasure. Since life is full of opportunities for suffering, the impulse to make jokes out of fear, conflict, or unhappiness is universal. In other words, for Freud all humor is, to some extent, “gallows humor.”

Modern evolutionary theory might offer some support to the Relief Theory. If humor functions as a relief valve for excess energy or negative emotions, it might provide a significant survival advantage. Human beings are usually safer and more prosperous in stable communities than when isolated. Yet human beings also have a tendency to anger and aggression. The Relief Theory argues that humor lessens tension levels; if so, individuals with an appreciation for humor have an advantage over those who don’t, in that it will be easier for them to maintain community membership (Herbert Lefcourt, *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*). As systems of mutual cooperation and coordination of activities, communities confer a survival advantage on their members. So a good sense of humor is survival-enhancing. The theory of natural selection would then predict that such a trait is likely to be pervasive among human beings.

Humor also can enhance community cohesion by functioning as an invitation to social interaction (Lefcourt). It can enhance community by acting as a binding agent: playful engagement in humorous activities is pleasant; so individuals who engage in these mutually pleasant activities will associate social interaction with pleasure, and hence be encouraged to spend more time together with others in their group. As Herbert Lefcourt points out, Charles Darwin (*The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*), in fact, viewed humor primarily as a form of social communication.

If we conclude that a tendency to enjoy humor and comedy is a binding force for a society, then group-selection theory also provides an evolutionary explanation for the persistence of humor in human society. Group-selection theory (a variation on natural selection theory) is the theory that natural selection functions at the level of communities. A more unified community is more likely to coordinate activities and prosper, so that community is more likely to survive and grow. If humor functions as a relief-valve for negative emotions and makes communities more

stable, group-selection theory would predict the persistence of humor as a social and cultural aspect of human communities. In conjunction with group-selection theory, the Relief Theory would imply that, over time, we should expect an increase in both the distribution and population of communities with a good collective sense of humor.

Recent and Contemporary Theories of Humor

Some twentieth century and contemporary philosophers have offered thought-provoking updates on the major historical theories of humor. In this section we shall examine a few of the most compelling and influential.

Henri Bergson presents the Superiority Theory in a rather different light from that of his predecessors in his influential essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Bergson focuses on the social function of laughter and comedy. He thinks that there is one characteristic that all comic situations all have in common: people are found to be comic, or in a comic situation, when they experience a sudden downfall, caused by their own “mechanical inelasticity.” By this term Bergson means a certain rigidity of thought or habit, which exposes one to errors of behavior or mishaps. Laughter, he argues, is a kind of corrective to ways of thinking and acting detrimental to the greater good: we laugh at “a certain rigidity of body, mind, and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability.” One example of the comic he discusses is that of a person running along a street who trips and falls. The fall, he says, is the result of “absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy.” He adds that, similarly, victims of practical jokes are funny because they approach a situation with certain expectations that are not subsequently met; again, a kind of inflexibility or force of habit leads them to a mishap. He also observes that comedies often play off the automatism of persons in the grip of a particular emotion, like jealousy. Echoing Plato in the *Philebus*, Bergson claims that “a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself.” Think of the proverbial person who is walking around with (unbeknownst to him) toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoe. Or—more directly to Bergson’s point—consider Molière’s miser, Harpagon, who doesn’t realize that his obsession with wealth has drawbacks for him and others. Why does mechanical inflexibility and self-ignorance make a person an object of laughter? Bergson’s answer is that flexibility of

mind is required to live a successful life, and society is threatened by persons who lack the willingness to continually adapt to each other as members of a community. The derisive laughter of others is painful, and so serves as a spur to change one's attitude. In this way, "laughter pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement."

Bergson's theory is often regarded as falling under the Superiority Theory category, in that he agrees that amusement and laughter are primarily derisive and usually are directed at persons demonstrating a certain kind of inferiority. However, his view is rather more upbeat with regard to the practice of appreciating the comic, since for him laughter and derision actually serve a positive societal purpose. For this reason he does not devalue or reject humor and laughter as Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes do.

Another interesting aspect of his theory is the representation of amusement as a cognitive state, rather than as an emotional state: he states specifically that "the comic comes into being when people concentrate on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence." This represents another significant break from other proponents of the Superiority Theory, who represent the response to the comic as an emotional state. By representing amusement as a cognitive state, Bergson's theory has this much in common with most versions of the Incongruity Theory.

The claim that humor has to do with the development of a certain cognitive flexibility is also central to contemporary American philosopher John Morreall's theory of humor ("A New Theory of Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*), even though Morreall's theory is actually a development of the Incongruity Theory. He notes that superiority theories like those of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes can't handle many cases of amused laughter: babies laugh at peek-a-boo, and adults might laugh at a magic trick, or upon unexpectedly running into an old friend. Puns and sight gags "in which a physical law is apparently broken" give rise to amused laughter without inciting any feelings of "sudden glory" or superiority. So evidence of others' inferiority is not at all necessary for amused laughter. While a certain flexibility of thought is necessary to handle all these absurd or surprising situations with good humor, these kinds of situations do not necessarily involve some mechanical attitude or inflexibility on the part of the object of laughter. Thus Bergson's theory seems to fall short in accounting for many cases of humor as well.

The various versions of the Relief Theory fare no better, according to Morreall. Consider the quip, “My car can stop on a dime—and leave a nickel change.” There are no negative feelings to be suppressed here, and no buildup of nervous tension, emotion, or intellectual energy that requires release. Many instances of joking or humorous experiences are like this—especially with regard to “one-liners,” which can be effective even when they have no buildup at all. We might add that, to respond that we laugh in general to relieve our everyday pain and suffering is not too convincing in light of the fact that very young children do more laughing than anyone, even though they usually have the least tension to release. While laughter can result in some stress relief, one might argue that adults tend to laugh more when they are relaxed. This is fundamentally inconsistent with what would be predicted by Bain, Spencer, and the Relief Theory.

Morreall favors, with some small refinement, the theory that says that the cause of “humorous amusement” is incongruity. He claims instances of humor tend to involve some “cognitive shift,” or psychological re-orientation. Just as several proponents of the Incongruity Theory describe, such shifts take place when some intellectual expectation is frustrated by reality, or upon some unexpected or absurd juxtaposition of ideas and experiences. To be amusing, the shift itself needs to take place in a context that is not somehow threatening or painful to the amused person. Morreall’s theory is that humorous amusement is the enjoyment of a pleasant cognitive shift, though this amusement is often boosted by a simultaneous affective pleasure (i.e., a pleasure deriving from a positive emotion). As he suggests, one advantage of his theory is that it would explain why children are so prone to laughter: for children, almost everything is new and unexpected.

Morreall needs to answer three questions in order to make this theory plausible:

- Why are some incongruous situations not amusing?
- How should we account for the fact that we sometimes do laugh for other reasons, such as triumph or relief?
- What explains our disposition to feel pleasure upon experiencing cognitive shifts?

Many situations that require a cognitive shift are not amusing because they are accompanied by negative emotions. As Morreall says, “if I opened my bathroom door to find a pumpkin in the bathtub, for example, I would probably laugh. But if I found a cougar in the tub, I would not laugh.” Both situations involve incongruity, but one would not find the second pleasant if it gave rise to fear. We might laugh at the latter situation, however, if it was presented

in a film, since there is no danger to the audience, and no real danger to the actors. Bain had noted that, for example, a “corpse at a feast” and “parental cruelty” involve incongruity, but give rise to negative feelings instead of amusement. But this is perfectly consistent, Morreall would say, with the notion that incongruity gives rise to pleasant cognitive shifts that can at the same time be quite drowned out by negative emotion. Even a corpse at a feast, or parental cruelty, can be found humorous when presented in a non-threatening light (such humor is sometimes referred to as “dark” or “black” humor): a corpse at a feast was a source of humor in “The Rocky Horror Picture Show,” and violence directed toward an abandoned child was the central theme of the “Home Alone” movies. These situations are presented without negative consequences for the viewer, and in each case the presentation is such that negative emotions (such as fear or pity) are not aroused.

Morreall is the first to agree that we may laugh out of triumph, and that we may laugh upon experiencing relief from powerful emotion. But it is a big jump, he says, to conclude that laughter just expresses derision or the release of nervous energy. Even when we laugh under such circumstances, the situation in question usually includes a sudden cognitive shift of some kind. Given that all instances of humor do seem to involve such a sudden intellectual re-orientation, he thinks it is more plausible to say that humor is the enjoyment of the cognitive shift, which can be greatly enhanced by a pleasant affective shift. He offers as an example someone laughing upon seeing a character in a film accidentally lean against the lever of a slot machine and hit the jackpot; he observes that one’s laughter would likely be greatly enhanced if one were to do the same thing oneself. But in the latter case the laughter is merely enhanced by the accompanying feelings; the absurdity of accidentally achieving something so unlikely remains the real object of humorous amusement.

Another example of laughter is mean, barking, derisive laughter over the broken body of a beaten enemy (a paradigm case of laughter for Hobbes). Perhaps this should not be called “laughter” at all, but rather a vocalization similar to laughter, meant to communicate dominance. What about the laughter of relief or release? Laughter purely from relief (say, after finding out one is being released from prison), would appear to derive from a release of nervous tension of some kind, but it wouldn’t really be directed at anything that is actually found humorous. So such laughter is not really related to amusement.

As to why the cognitive response to absurdity or incongruity might be pleasurable, Morreall has his own evolutionary account (“Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*). Understanding incongruity as “deviations from the way things are supposed to be,” Morreall argues that there are several responses to incongruity that are survival-enhancing. Negative emotion, like fear or distress, is an appropriate response to situations in which a sudden danger or pain disrupts the normal order of things. Without this response, we would be much more likely to succumb to threats to our continued existence. Puzzlement at the strange, or “reality assimilation,” is an appropriate response to other, non-threatening, anomalous situations since it spurs us to orient ourselves in ways that are likely to help us pursue our goals more effectively. Our curiosity impels us to solve puzzles about our experience; this leads to a better understanding of the world around us, thereby putting us in a better position to satisfy our needs. In practice this impulsion is applied to many areas of life (and sometimes even can be dangerous), but its survival-enhancing effects are clear.

Both the negative affective response to dangerous or painful situations and the puzzled response to unfamiliar situations contribute to the resolution of anomalous situations, usually to our benefit. Morreall thinks that the amusement we often find in incongruity is explained by the benefits of anomaly-resolution:

The survival value of our seeking variety in our cognitive input is that it makes us curious, exploring creatures, and thus motivates us to know our environment better. Improved knowledge of our environment, of course, enhances our ability to cope with it and so to survive.

So creatures who naturally take pleasure in trivial novelties, anomalies, and incongruities, and who thus crave varied, non-threatening stimulation, have a survival advantage: they thereby will tend to be more adaptable in non-trivial anomalous circumstances that threaten survival or procreation. The young of many species of animals engage in play-fighting and play-hunting; this prepares them for more serious challenges ahead. The situation is much the same, according to Morreall, with regard to the appreciation of humor in human beings. Humor is explained by human beings’ special conceptual abilities. The pursuit of humor represents a kind of play that contributes to conceptual flexibility. The feeling of enjoyment associated with this kind of play is amusement.

This explains why Morreall (“The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought”) disputes the Irrationality Objection to humor associated with Plato and Aristotle. Not only does indulgence in

humor not lead to irrational behavior, it actually helps sharpen our ability to respond to cognitively challenging situations. This would also explain why adults tend to demand more clever and subtle humor than children do: one needs humor of increasing subtlety and complexity in order to challenge one's cognitive flexibility, and humor can only be funny when it does this.

Morreall's view of the benefits (and the harmlessness) of a good sense of humor also explains his rejection of what he calls the "Irresponsibility Objection" to humor in Western thought ("The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought"). He sees a strong line of thought in the Western tradition rejecting indulgence in humor as ethically objectionable. The ancients thought a tendency to indulge in humor is a negative characteristic because it is a non-serious attitude, which is not conducive to solving problems. When confronted with a problem, laughing at it is not going to contribute to solving it, and so indulgence in amusement might be thought to be irresponsible. As Morreall notes, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition rejects a non-serious, jocular attitude: the Bible says, "The fool lifts up his voice with laughter, but the wise man scarcely smiles a little" (Ecclesiastes). It is possible that the Christian rejection of humor arises from the ascetic and puritan elements of that tradition; these elements regard with antipathy any form of physical arousal. Morreall, however, considers humor harmless in most cases and beneficial to problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, the kind of arousal (on his view) essential to humor is cognitive, not physical.

This theory incorporates an important idea of Bergson's: namely, that humor has to do with the development of a kind of cognitive flexibility. Morreall claims, however, that the Survival and Relief Theories focus on incidental benefits of the enjoyment of humorous situations. Sometimes there are personal emotional and social benefits of expressing superiority over others. The individual may receive an emotional boost, and may also gain in social status in some circumstances. There may be some benefit to society from the tendency to laugh at others' inflexibility. Laughter certainly can serve to relieve nervous tension as well. The tendency to enjoy humor can confer a survival advantage by checking anger and aggression and enhancing social communication. These advantages give the human tendency to laughter a boost; however, if Morreall is right, they represent occasional side-benefits of humor rather than the real explanation of it.

While Morreall's update of the Incongruity Theory is probably the most successful (or the least flawed) theory of humor to date, it still falls far short of giving a complete explanation of the phenomenon. As any struggling standup comedian knows, so many cognitively incongruous statements and experiences, even though they do not give rise to negative emotions, are merely puzzling, confusing, nonsensical, or just not funny. Why are some incongruous experiences amusing and not others? A recent offering by philosopher of aesthetics Ted Cohen addresses this question ("Humor," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*). He agrees with the Incongruity Theory, and adds his own view of why incongruity should be humorous: his is a kind of double-aspect theory that relates experiences of incongruity to feelings of power and to feelings of powerlessness. According to Cohen "anomalous" experiences (unexpected experiences of absurdly incongruous juxtapositions of events, things, or ideas) can be pleasant in two respects. Anomaly is pleasant when it provides a sense of power and freedom. It also can be pleasant when it inspires a mood of willing acceptance of one's own powerlessness. Amusement, according to Cohen, can represent either of these two kinds of pleasant response to incongruity.

When does humor give one a sense of power? Wordplay and wit, for example, provide a sense of having "the power to free oneself from the normal strictures of language." Other varieties of humor involve analogous declarations of independence:

More generally, the humor of anomaly regularly involves the placement and action of things—including people—in circumstances not regularly permitted by society or by nature. This is, perhaps, the humor of *freedom*. It is our freedom, at least in imagination, from the linguistic, social, cultural and natural constraints that are the inhibitions of our normal lives.

In a certain respect this conception of humor echoes that of Schopenhauer: Schopenhauer argued that amusement is the rebellious pleasure of the perceptive, instinctive part of our psyche when the rational and controlling part of the psyche is frustrated by incongruous experience. While Schopenhauer claimed that humor is a rebellion against internal constraint, Cohen finds that humor can be a kind of rebellion against external constraints.

Cohen adds that there is another important kind of humor. When a situation is so extreme as to be incomprehensible, one can find a different humor in the resulting sense of powerlessness. One can experience "a mood of acceptance, of willing acknowledgement of those aspects of life that can be neither subdued nor fully comprehended." His double-aspect theory of humor makes it both "the province of the powerful and of the powerless." It also explains why it

is so hard to predict what is funny: while humor arises from incongruity, it can reflect either a sense of strength or of weakness.

Cohen's theory that a large part of humor is essentially tied to a sense of freedom approaches very closely some of Morreall's comments: for Morreall ("The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought"), humor is "conceptually liberating" because it frees us from established ways of thinking. Further, humor for Morreall is "practically liberating," in that it gives us a sense of distance from worldly concerns. He discusses the characteristic humor of Zen Buddhism, and argues that its role is to foster a sense of disengagement—to "liberate ourselves from attachment."

Although his theory focuses on humor as a response to anomaly or incongruity, Cohen's theory of humor could be extended to accommodate some of the themes of the Superiority and Relief theories. As he notes, his view that the humorous response can derive from a feeling of power to free oneself from constraint isn't too far from Hobbes' view that humor usually involves a feeling of power over another. The release of nervous tension could also result in a certain feeling of freedom from that tension; from this perspective, the Relief Theory also relates humor to a feeling of freedom.

Cohen's theory thus provides a thought-provoking twist on the Incongruity Theory of humor, while partly incorporating aspects of the Superiority and Relief theories as well. Another interesting observation about his theory is that, if he is right that humor is tied essentially either to a feeling of freedom from external constraint or to a good-natured acceptance of powerlessness, then the humor of traditionally oppressed communities might be considered paradigm manifestations of humor. Jewish humor, for example, is widely considered a genre of humor unto itself, and is associated with a religious and cultural tradition that has historically suffered a great deal of persecution. As an extreme example of humor in the face of powerlessness, consider the following example of WWII-era Jewish humor:

Two Jews meet in Warsaw and one of them is eating perfumed soap. The other asks: "Moyshe, why are you eating soap with such a scent?" He answers: "If they turn me into soap, I might as well smell nice." (Ostrower, *Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust*)

For a striking example of humor used literally in a rebellion against constraint, consider sociologist Anton Obrdlik's description of the resistance of native Czechoslovakians during the Nazi occupation ("'Gallows Humor:' A Sociological Phenomenon," in *American Journal of*

Sociology). Czechs began surreptitiously painting walls with jokes directed at the occupiers. Despite their attempts to erase the graffiti and suppress the practice, the Nazis were demoralized while the Czechs experienced a significant boost in morale (Lefcourt, *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*). If Cohen is right, these are not just examples of humor, but indeed examples of the employment of humor in its truest form.

Any theory of humor is bound to be general, since it must incorporate a wide variety of phenomena under one theory. There are still a number of situations involving laughter that are not captured by any theory described above, such as laughter at being tickled or the objectless laughter of a lunatic. But we don't tend to call these instances of laughter in response to humor. Only some of the theories discussed above seem general enough to explain our responses to many or most situations we commonly call "humorous." However, each of the theories we have discussed is at least a thought-provoking contribution to our understanding of some puzzling and important human behavior.

There is still a lot of room for a better understanding of humor. It remains unclear whether any existing theory—or combination of theories—can adequately explain all instances of humor. Humor theory is an interdisciplinary field that demands contributions from cultural studies, history, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology, among others. The complexity of the problem makes philosophy an ideal locus for the study of humor. Philosophy is inherently interdisciplinary, since it is by definition simply the activity of critical reflection on what we know and on the meanings of the concepts we use. Philosophy serves as an incubator for theories of humor, working with input from all kinds of sources. Receptive to data of all kinds, philosophers critically examine and interpret what we learn in light of their particular reflections on some of the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of being human.

Acknowledgments:

My thanks to Ralph Kennedy of Wake Forest University for his helpful comments. John Morreall's published commentaries on many of the historical figures discussed in this chapter were influential in understanding their views. The humor of Murray Siegel was an inspiration to some of the examples discussed in this chapter.

Suggestions for further reading:

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